

Article

Gift Giving, Reciprocity and Community Survival among Central Alaskan Indigenous Peoples [†]

Guy Lanoue

Département d'Anthropologie, Université de Montréal, Montreal, QC H3C 3J7, Canada; guy.lanoue@umontreal.ca

[†] This article is based on research partly funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Ethics certificate (CERSC-2019-015-D) obtained in 2019. I declare no conflict of interest.

Abstract: Inspired by a traditional ritual, the potlatch, Indigenous Dene communities in central-northern Alaska have developed new forms of reciprocity as a response to exogenous political threats to their autonomy. The potlatch involved the ritualized gifting of food and other items to selected guests as a means of creating political equilibrium by inculcating a sense of obligatory reciprocity. Today, people are reluctant to leave their communities and have begun shipping bush food from one community to the next instead of receiving gifts of food as invited guests. This new development is in response to a perceived threat to community survival. Since the 1990s, the Alaskan state government has been threatening to close schools with fewer than 20 students. This would affect most Native communities in the region, which generally have under 200 residents and correspondingly small schools. Closures would force people to move to larger villages with functioning schools or abandon their communities and move to a larger city (Fairbanks, in this case). While the government proposal to close smaller schools has yet to be implemented, it remains a constant threat (it was last revived in 2018). The new form of food redistribution allows people to stay and reaffirm their ties to their communities while reinforcing social ties to people of other communities.

Keywords: Alaska; indigenous people; potlatch; ritual; tradition; politics



Citation: Lanoue, G. Gift Giving, Reciprocity and Community Survival among Central Alaskan Indigenous Peoples. *Humans* **2023**, *3*, 47–59. <https://doi.org/10.3390/humans3010006>

Academic Editor: Maximilian C. Forte

Received: 14 January 2023

Revised: 1 February 2023

Accepted: 8 February 2023

Published: 6 March 2023



Copyright: © 2023 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Reciprocity has been a key concept in anthropology since the publication of Marcel Mauss' *The Gift* at the beginning of the 20th century [1]. The essay's importance is unmatched, since Mauss was the first to theorize how so-called 'primitive' economies functioned without the driving force of capitalist self-interest and gain. He attempted to analyze what motivated delayed exchange and gift giving in non-monetized societies that were reputedly more homogenous than the individualistic, competitive and market-oriented States that in the post-Darwin west were increasingly accepted as natural. Essentially, Mauss argued that every gift contained within it the 'spirit' of reciprocity (a more accurate translation from the French '*esprit*' would be 'essence'). A gift automatically puts the receiver in a position of owing a counter-gift. The value of the gift was determined by the nature of the relationship between the giver and receiver, not by its intrinsic usefulness or market demand. He also recognized that reciprocity could be delayed and not be commensurate as in trade or barter, which was coherent with his idea that value was not necessarily calculated in terms of economic benefits. Later refinements of this position acknowledged that the gift to one individual could be considered as given to a pool of recognized stakeholders (generalized or indirect reciprocity, in Sahlins' words [2]), any one of which could repay the gift at a later date by giving into the pool of acknowledged donors rather than to the individual gift-giver.

Although the idea that reciprocity was somehow contained in the gift itself was somewhat tautological and essentialist (though no more so than Adam Smith's seminal notion of the 'invisible hand of god' acting through self-interest to regulate the economy [3]), it was

nonetheless an advance in understanding non-Western societies, given that anthropologists at the time were still perplexed by the lack of economic calculation and by purported altruism in these societies. Most economic theories of the time, and even later with Keynesian and neo-liberal economic theories that survive to this day, assumed people would only be motivated by self-interest. For Western analysts, a zero-sum game meant that individual gains came at the expense of another person's loss, whereas in tribal societies, it meant that individual gain was at least in part measured against the social cost of upsetting normalized and embedded social relationships. The quantity of work to produce an item as a measure of its worth did not enter into this social calculus.

It is today generally accepted that in many non-Western societies, reciprocity, whether direct or generalized, can be understood and measured in terms of investment in social and not economic capital. People invest in the well-being of others to help themselves, either for security, the acknowledgement of prestige, or simple survival. Conversely, people may invest in themselves the better to help others. For example, among northern hunting societies, men seek to become better hunters with the help of tutelary spirit helpers, but they are expected to be more generous as a way of paying back the spirits who enabled them to be successful. Nowhere is this more apparent than in some Indigenous North American societies, where reciprocity has been formalized and ritualized, as in the Canadian West Coast and among the Athapaskan-speaking Dene ('people', 'human being') of interior Alaska.

The peoples of both regions were known for their gift-giving ceremony, the potlatch. Often dismissed as mere tradition by some, reciprocity in these societies is a tool of community and individual survival that is just as relevant today as it was when Native societies were still relatively untouched by Western civilization. Faced with economic and political disenfranchisement at the hands of the Alaskan state government, this article will examine some data (collected during a brief research stay in October 2019) that suggest the Dene of north-central Alaska have developed new forms of reciprocity to affirm their survival as a people.

Even today, potlatch feasts are held in which food and other gifts are offered to guests to repay social debts and as a message to the outside world to establish the authenticity of contemporary Native culture by way of a direct link to tradition. In the historical past, however, the generosity of the hosts was also a direct sign of their ability to coordinate the gathering and storage of food and was, therefore, a sign of their power. It was understood that the richer the hosts, the stronger they were in potential military power. The goal was to thwart potential violence by creating reciprocal, publicly acknowledged obligations. Often, this resulted in a spiral of competing claims to strength and prestige that were measured by the amount and quality of food and goods given away at these feasts. As long as each group signaled it could continue to give and repay gifts, the cycle of giving and reciprocity maintained a regional system of checks and balances despite the tension the system generated.

Today, threats to Indigenous survival in Alaska do not come from Native rivals but from the colonial policies of largely White governments, despite the latter's recent adoption of socially inclusive rhetoric that allegedly shows support for Indigenous people. This has pushed Native people to strengthen inter-community ties that also allow them to affirm the importance of their attachment to their lands. In addition to traditional ritual feasts, which are still held though perhaps less frequently than before, in which hosts offered lavish feasts to guests, today people remain in their communities and circulate bush food as a way of strengthening regional, pan-Indian identity. Despite the widespread acceptance of White food in daily life and in potlatch ceremonies, bush food retains its traditional symbolic value [4].

2. The Historical Background

Compared to other states, White intrusion in Alaska was relatively minor until the last four or five decades. Before oil became the most sought-after resource in the 1970s,

White people sought gold, which was generally mined by individuals using simple, non-disruptive technology. Mutual adaptation and accommodation seem to have dominated political dynamics between White and Indigenous people in the Doyon Corporation region, one of thirteen Alaskan entities created in the 1970s as a result of an agreement with the federal government. The Doyon Corporation includes most of central Alaska. The main city is Fairbanks, and the corporation unites 34 villages whose inhabitants speak English and Tanacross-Dene (a minority language) and closely related (and mutually intelligible) Koyukon-Dene [5].

Alaska is generally portrayed in the media as an unspoiled wilderness where people give free rein to their individuality by testing themselves against an unforgiving climate and harsh landscape (State motto: “The Last Frontier”). This emphasis on allegedly unspoiled nature and its challenges has, in a sense, validated European and American expropriation of its resources, at least in the eyes of many White Alaskans. Mainstream discourses in schools in speeches have relegated Indigenous societies to embodying so-called ‘traditional’ and ‘spiritual’ traits while denying them any say in managing resources since, of course, they had no use for gold or oil in their traditional economies. Until the 1970s, most of the State was the home to roughly 50k Indigenous people: Iñupiat, Yupik (sometimes called ‘Eskimo’); Aleut (split between Alaska and Siberia, whose language is related to Inuit); Eyak (related to the Dene); Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian (whose heartlands are on the West Coast), and a number of Northern Athabaskan (Dene) cultures in the interior and eastern parts of the State. Although indigenous people were in the majority until recently, popular narratives in the media have retconned them into an exotic backdrop to highlight tales of White survival, courage, and determination against Alaska’s fierce environment [6].

In the 1970s, most of the 300k White people lived in major (by Alaskan standards) cities such as Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau. Today, roughly 500k of Alaska’s 750k residents are urban. One major change between the 1970s and today is that while almost no First Nations people lived in Alaskan cities before 1970, it is now (2010 census) estimated that nearly 44% of a total of 120k Indigenous people live in urban areas; this figure is now approaching 50%. This means that approximately 65k Indigenous people live in roughly 200 small communities, homesteads, and unincorporated hamlets scattered over 1.7 million square kilometers—easily one of the lowest population densities on the continent.

The trend towards urbanization of the Indigenous population has left the rest of the state an empty wasteland in the eyes of many White people and certainly according to major resource extraction companies. While Native depopulation in the 19th century was accomplished by force and by epidemics, the last five decades have seen a shift as Western states increasingly rely on soft power, such as the notion that government policies allegedly favour individualism and liberty, while containing no subtext that reproduces unequal power relations. While Alaskan Native people have been spared the massacres of Indigenous people that accompanied White expansion into the American west, they have nonetheless suffered as domination has become normalized through the notion of ‘rational’ governance. In a word, White hegemony is exercised despite an alleged concern for Indigenous rights, political power sharing, environmental protection, and a rhetoric of tolerance.

Since the time of Russian occupation (1760s–1867) and then American exploration in the 19th century, Indigenous people have adapted and adjusted their patterns of movement and resource exploitation to accommodate the interlopers [7]. In the past, Native Alaskans and White people were using, sharing, or competing for the same resources on a more equal playing field. While some analysts emphasize the disruptive aspects of contact with Europeans (including Russians) [8], power relations were very different. By and large, Dene could choose to collaborate or not with White people. There was no central government that set policies aimed at expropriating native claims, only individuals and small trading companies. While history books emphasize that the ‘opening’ and ‘exploring’ of the territory was spurred by the search for gold by White people, this would not have been possible without Native acquiescence and collaboration. Miners needed food, which

was often freely provided by Natives, according to their logic of generosity as a means of creating social ties and long-term reciprocity [9]. Riverboats that served mining settlements needed wood for fuel, and Indigenous people quickly adapted to working for wages. Most prospectors did not strike it rich. They often turned to hunting and trapping to survive, and some (in the Tanana area around Fairbanks I am describing) married Native women ‘in the manner of the country’, as these unions were sometimes called in White history books. These had been contracted to facilitate access to hunting and trapping territories [10] and were often not formalized or were dissolved when the White man left the territory [11]. Trade and accommodation between White people and Natives were possible and even normal, at least till the Second World War, when many communities were disrupted by the thousands of servicemen who were brought in to the construction of the Alaska Highway from Dawson Creek, British Columbia, to Delta Junction, Alaska, about 100km south of Fairbanks.

Some histories now acknowledge this period of collaboration and accommodation between White and Native people, even if local ideologues, politicians, and popular media insist on the tropes of White exploration, conquest, and progress. For example, Wikipedia lists 44 television shows set in Alaska, all of them with frontier themes [12]. This is not to say there were no tensions, since White people arrived not in a trickle but in sporadic waves as they chased down rumours of gold in one region or another. This sometimes led to undue and unforeseen pressure on local resources, including Indigenous women [13]. On the other hand, there are recorded instances when White people brought some relief to ailing or distressed Natives [14], just as many Natives helped White people. Tanana-Koyukon Dene adapted quickly to the White economy and, since the 1850s, began purchasing ever-increasing amounts of American goods [6].

Today, however, White people do not need Native-supplied resources to meet their infrastructural and domestic needs, and a state government has unilaterally declared its sovereign right to exploit resources that Natives are powerless to stop. This has led to an ever-widening rift. White people and Natives share one geographic space but now live in two separate political and economic realities, with a very different structure of power relations compared to that of the early contact situation. Today, the Dene are not dominated by the facts of demography but by neoliberal-inspired government policies that tacitly favour individuality, e.g., contract law, and undermine community solidarity. The situation has deteriorated for Indigenous populations because Euro-Americans are now appropriating Native Alaskan tokens of cultural autonomy, such as conservation, devotion to tradition, and respect for animals (among other things), as a rhetorical shield that reinforces their claims to sovereignty, since Euro-Americans now claim to be custodians of the land and its history [15]. Despite the depopulation of the countryside, Native people, according to Smith, do not have a sense that they form a diaspora as in other parts of the United States [15], in large part because they were not militarily conquered nor colonized to the same extent as the southern 48 states. White domination is thus relatively invisible, especially since it is exercised through constitutional arrangements in which Natives have no say and by soft power that pays lip service to Indigenous ‘rights’. Although formal declarations by Alaskan institutions acknowledge Native prior occupation, this shift to using soft power has made asserting Indigenous autonomy much more difficult. In brief, White power is not overt but is felt as an embedded feature of the geographic and political landscapes.

3. The Political Framework

Alaska became a state only in 1958 and obtained title to 100+ million acres of land (about 405,000 square kilometers), which the new government promptly began alienating with no regard to Native claims. In 1971, the American Congress passed ANCSA (Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act) and created 13 regional corporations that administered (and extinguished) land claims from nearly 200 Native corporations, each one more or less corresponding to a local band, tribe or village. ANCSA, according to Smith, has made

the village the basic political and economic unit in central-northern Alaska [9], though villages have been somewhat depopulated as people have moved to cities for reasons I will mention below. Nearly 175,000 square kilometers and USD 900 million were given to the corporations to extinguish their claims, although a general statement of stewardship of Native welfare was also incorporated into the law (see Simeone's excellent summary [16] (pp. 43–48). The result was a complicated ensemble of conflicting jurisdictions and claims of sovereign ownership of land that are unresolved.

Far from being motivated by a sense of social justice, the US government was preparing the legal grounds for exploiting the recently discovered (1968) North Slope oil fields, to date the largest deposit in the US. The state population jumped from 300k in 1969 to 740k today. The Native population was 51k in 1970 and 125 k today (estimated). Although the ratio of Natives to White people has remained more or less unchanged since the 1960s, income disparity has grown dramatically. While not all White people work in the oil industry, the average income in that field is 135k\$/year. The average total income (White and Natives in all sectors) is more or less one-half that number [17]. Native income is roughly one-fourth of workers in the oil sector and one-half of the State average, which is slightly higher than the 2016 US average of 57.6k\$/year. The average US Native household income (including Alaska) in that same year was 39.7k\$ [18]. Exact income figures, however, are not a reliable guide to wealth in Alaska, since many people, rich and poor, White and Native, have access to considerable quantities of bush food. Alaska's western and central river systems have salmon, and moose and caribou are relatively abundant in the interior.

State law distinguishes subsistence hunting from sport hunting. Areas designated for subsistence hunting are accessible to all residents "regardless of ethnicity" [19]. Sport hunting is regulated for White people and Natives alike. There are two crucial differences, however. Native Alaskans almost never participate in sport hunting. Only White people seem to have developed a culture of individualism and rugged independence around the taking of bush food. Second, White Alaskans do not share bush food in wide-ranging networks and certainly do not use bush food to create such networks. Native Alaskans do both. Sharing has become a rallying point for resistance to White people in the last decade.

Native communities face a dilemma: the new market-driven sensibilities that dominate public culture at the state level have normalized an accounting mentality. For lawmakers in Juneau, either people are income-producing units or they are consumers of public resources. Alaskan Natives score low on the first dimension and high on the second. For example, in 1998, a law was proposed to cut funding to schools with fewer than ten students. In 2012–2013, there were 131.5k students in 509 schools. Nearly 23.5% are Native Alaskan; nearly one-third are rural schools, compared to the 18.7% national average [20]. These closures would have affected mostly small Native communities, about 60 schools, nearly one-third of the approximately 185 rural schools, to save USD 7 million, "less than 1%" of the state's total education budget" [21]. As a result, parents of school-age children faced three equally bad choices: they would have been forced to move to a community with a functioning school, send their children away and continue living in the moribund community, or move to the city. This is a particularly poignant dilemma, since obtaining the right to education for Alaskan natives was a hard-fought battle. Education for Natives only became widespread in the 1970s and 1980s [21], though earlier, many Natives resisted the government-backed missionary insistence on the schooling of Indigenous children because they would be unable to learn the bush skills necessary to their survival as a people [4] (pp. 80–81).

To put this in context, if this measure were adopted the estimated USD 7 million in annual savings (calculated in 2018) can be compared to the approximately USD 4m royalties (average: 15% of each barrel, though on a sliding scale) paid by British Petroleum for one day's production of approximately 518,000 bbl (December 2019; 1988 production was approximately 2m bbl./day), at an average price of 60 \$/bbl [22] (figures are rounded). In other words, closing one-third of rural schools, which serve mostly Native populations, would save the State annually an amount equivalent to less than two days' oil royalties.

This seems as good an indicator as any of White attitudes towards Natives, despite the flowery rhetoric of respect for Natives that permeates much official discourse. Native people are being asked to choose between staying in their communities to uphold an albeit tenuous claim to tradition (which is a term defined by White people; before, Indigenous societies did not have to be concerned with ‘tradition’ as a political technology), or gamble away their future by not sending their children to school (which is in any case illegal). The result is that the Native population is growing, but the number and size of Native communities are shrinking, which exacerbates the problem of funding schools with small enrolments. As it turns out, the proposal to cut funding to small schools was not enacted, and the number of schools has remained more or less constant from 2018 to 2021, even though the number of students (K–12) dropped slightly. In fact, the teacher–student ratio improved slightly. The data are only for the years 2018–2021, since the 1998 proposal was once again bruited about in 2018, according to people with whom I spoke. The data are drawn from [23]:

Year	No. of Students (K–12), Fairbanks District	No. of Schools, Fairbanks District	Teacher–Student Ratio, Fairbanks District
2018–2019	13,373	35	17.20
2019–2020	13,351	36	n.d.
2020–2021	11,402	36	15.96
2021–2022	12,437	35	n.d.

The urbanization of the Native population is reflected in figures on the annual subsistence harvest of land mammals in the interior region, one of six sampling nits in the State: “An estimated 36.9 million pounds of wild foods are harvested annually by rural subsistence users. Residents of more populated urban areas harvest about 13.4 million pounds of wild food under subsistence, personal use, and sport regulations” [24]. This is an average of 67.5 lbs per capita for 2018. In 1982 (the first year for which figures are available), the average number of pounds of bush meat per capita was 162.5 lbs for all four communities that were sampled in that year, while 537.2 lbs of fish per person were consumed. In 2015 (the last year for which figures are available), that number was 22.85 lbs of land mammals per person for all four communities in the interior that were sampled, while only 53.6 lbs of fish per capita were caught [18]. All available indications suggest that it is not the number of land mammals and the quantity of fish that have diminished, but that fewer people are harvesting bush food for subsistence [25].

By analyzing data from rural stores since 1850, Heaton concludes that Alaskan Natives have participated in the market economy long before ANCSA [6]. This implies that Native People were willing to supplement bush food with ‘White’ purchases such as sugar, butter, soup base, flour, and bacon, before ANCSA. Though the evidence for Native shopping seems irrefutable, Heaton does not consider how the political situation that favours urban migration after ANCSA has reduced the number of people who are participating in the bush economy. The same trend is present in the other five sampling regions, though not everywhere to the same degree since most of the other sampling regions closer to the coast have greater access to marine food resources, which of course are absent in the interior. The figures for avian bush food (ducks and geese) seem slightly higher in the interior than for coastal regions, as could be expected given the migratory pattern of these birds. I think, however, that the figures are probably grossly underreported: the smaller the animal, the greater the margin of error when hunters report their kills. People, in other words, are more apt to remember the number of moose they killed than the number of ducks. Fish weights are more accurate because standard totes containing dozens of fish are weighed. Individual salmon vary from 5 lbs to 90 lbs (see [25]). In fact, the greater availability of marine and avian resources in the other regions covers up the losses experienced by rural people in the interior-northern region around the Fairbanks district. Bush food is no longer

the basis of the Indigenous diet in urban areas but is consumed as a supplement and as a symbol of tradition, and out of a desire for some measure of symbolic autonomy [26].

There is another dynamic at play. American government-subsidized health care only targets seniors and other fragile categories. The majority of Alaskan Natives no longer live on reserves (these were eliminated by ANCSA), and medical services are increasingly centralized in larger cities: “IHS [Indian Health Service]-funded, tribally managed hospitals are located in Anchorage, Barrow, Bethel, Dillingham, Kotzebue, Nome and Sitka. There are 58 tribal health centers, 160 tribal community health aide clinics and five residential substance abuse treatment centers” [27], with Native corporation-sponsored clinics and old age residences. Most Native communities are too small to have regular health services. Old and sick people migrate to (or are brought to) cities for a wide range of medical services offered by the Fairbanks Native Association Community Services [28]. When old and ailing people leave a community to receive care in a city, younger, able-bodied kin often accompany them. Because of high mobility rates between village and city (aided by cheap airfares in the highly privatized Alaskan airspace), these moves are not always permanent and are hard to profile with statistics, but it seems that the implementation of modern medical services contributes to shrinking Native communities.

In summary, three factors threaten Native communities: the centralization of health services in cities; the elimination of schools; and the reduction in hunting by Indigenous populations. The first is an ongoing phenomenon; the second is a policy that authorities have threatened to put into action since 1998; the third has many probable causes that cannot be explored here. All three factors push people to choose between migrating as a family to cities or sending their children and their elders away. There is, however, another option: some communities seem to have chosen to stay and homeschool their children. I was told this by Native informants but cannot confirm the extent to which this compromise has been enacted; unfortunately, I was unable to return to the region because of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic to do further research. In addition, I noted indications (empirically and from conversations) that Native people are increasingly shipping bush food from one village to another and to people in their networks who live in Fairbanks (the major urban centre in the north-central interior) who no longer have direct access to bush food. In the latter case, the bush food often goes to Native people in old age residences and in medical care facilities. This is an inversion of the spirit of traditional rituals of gift giving to invited guests, especially the potlatch ceremony, which strengthened local boundaries by emphasizing to non-local guests that food was locally produced. Now, people stay home, either in the community or in the city, while bush food ‘moves’.

4. The Potlatch

Since the 19th century, the potlatch is generally defined by researchers as a gift-giving ceremony practised by the Northwest Coast peoples (from northern Oregon to southern Alaska), as well as by some Dene peoples of the Alaskan interior and Inuit people of the central and northern Alaskan coasts. The word potlatch derives from Chinook jargon, a trade pidgin once spoken by many people on the West Coast, though not in central Alaska, where each tribal group has its own word to designate the gift-giving ceremony [16] p. 130. Today, all central Alaskan Native people use the word potlatch, since the word has passed into English, which is generally their first or main language. The most studied examples of the ritual are from the West Coast, especially among the Southern Kwakiutl (Kwakwaka’wakw). Intensely studied by Franz Boas at the beginning of the 20th century [29], his detailed portrait has become engrained in the collective anthropological consciousness by its appearance in dozens of textbooks and, undoubtedly, in thousands of classroom mentions and viewings of at least one iconic film [30].

There was a debate on whether the efficacy of the potlatch as a means of lessening inter-regional tension was the result of fear induced by the display of wealth or whether the redistribution of wealth lessened the need to attack others [31]. If wealth is shared, the argument runs, there is no need for warfare. Fast-flowing rivers running from the interior

mountains to the ocean create river valleys and fjords with distinct micro-environments. Rivers and especially river mouths were a source of wealth, as several species of salmon made their way to inland ponds to spawn. Salmon were caught during these intermittent upriver runs (each species comes at a specific time of year) and preserved (dried, smoked, and kept in fish oil to retard spoilage). Highly localized resources led to significant variations from one region to another and from downriver villages, with first access to migrating salmon, and upriver villages. Rich communities and their stores of salmon were tempting targets, just as poor communities were seen as easy pickings by powerful neighbours. In brief, these people were not averse to war, as attested by their often-palisaded villages, body armour and arms. Potlatching was a way of dissuading neighbours from attacking by an ostentatious display of wealth embodied by inviting guests to generous feasts. A pantagruelian abundance of food was a clear sign of a group's available manpower, including the number of slaves in the village. Since slaves were war captives or had to be bought from the Oregonian Chinook, who obtained them from the interior, they were clearly another sign of might. It has even been reported that occasionally the hosts killed a slave as a way to signal their power to their guests—they were so rich that they could afford to eliminate a valuable worker [32,33].

It is the ostentatious late 19th-century versions of the potlatch studied by Franz Boas and others that cemented the ceremony in the anthropological imagination. This, however, was probably a historical aberration. Since potlatches were tied to the status system—the wealthier an individual, the more largess had to be given, and the more guests had to be invited—a series of disastrous epidemics starting with European contact in the 18th century thinned the political ranks and allowed lower ranked people to lay claim to higher status by throwing ever more elaborate potlatches [14] p. 81. These grandiose affairs were fueled by inflation caused by the influx of western goods, as traders came by sea and overland in search of furs—beaver in the interior and sea otter on the coast—though there is little doubt that the ritual, until the latter half of the 19th century, was largely centered on food and not merchandise [34]. As a result of epidemics and the arrival of White people and their goods, fewer people shared more wealth, leading to an intensification of the ceremony (increased frequency and a greater quantity of gifts) just as modern anthropological studies were getting underway. This skewed the vision of the potlatch from a ritual in which food giving was clearly a sign of local power that dissuaded sneak attacks from neighbours, into a ritual of 'redistribution' and status grabbing.

The potlatch of the interior Alaskans differs slightly from the Northwest Coast ceremony, though the basic logic underlying the practice is identical. Villages are autonomous on the Northwest Coast, with clearly indicated hinterlands around each. Villages in north-central Alaska have larger hinterlands, since they depend more on hunting than on salmon. "In the local view [of residents of Nenana village, Upper Tanana region], the contemporary resource use area is bounded relative to other modern (1984) villages, just as band territories were bounded in the past" [24]. In other words, it was expected that access to resources in each band's catchment area was limited to members of the band. Boundaries were not always clear, however, and local scarcity could push people into neighbouring territories, especially since the game animals they depended on, caribou and moose, were mobile. Potlatches lessened tensions while affirming social boundaries. Potlatches in the region brought people together from other communities; as one Tanacross elder said, "However, there's a lot of people from all over. If we make potlatch here in Tanacross, people from Fairbanks, Minto, Stevens Village, all the way down the Copper River, Tetlin, Northway, Fairbanks, Nenana, all will come" [35] (see Figure 1). In a large potlatch, guests could come from very far away, as in the historic 1927 potlatch held at Healy Lake, which hosted people from "Northway, Tanacross, Nenana, Fairbanks, Tazlina, Copper Center, and Dot Lake", among others [36]. Seventy-five guests were feted for 5 days and, besides copious meals, received 500 blankets and 50 guns [14] p. 65.

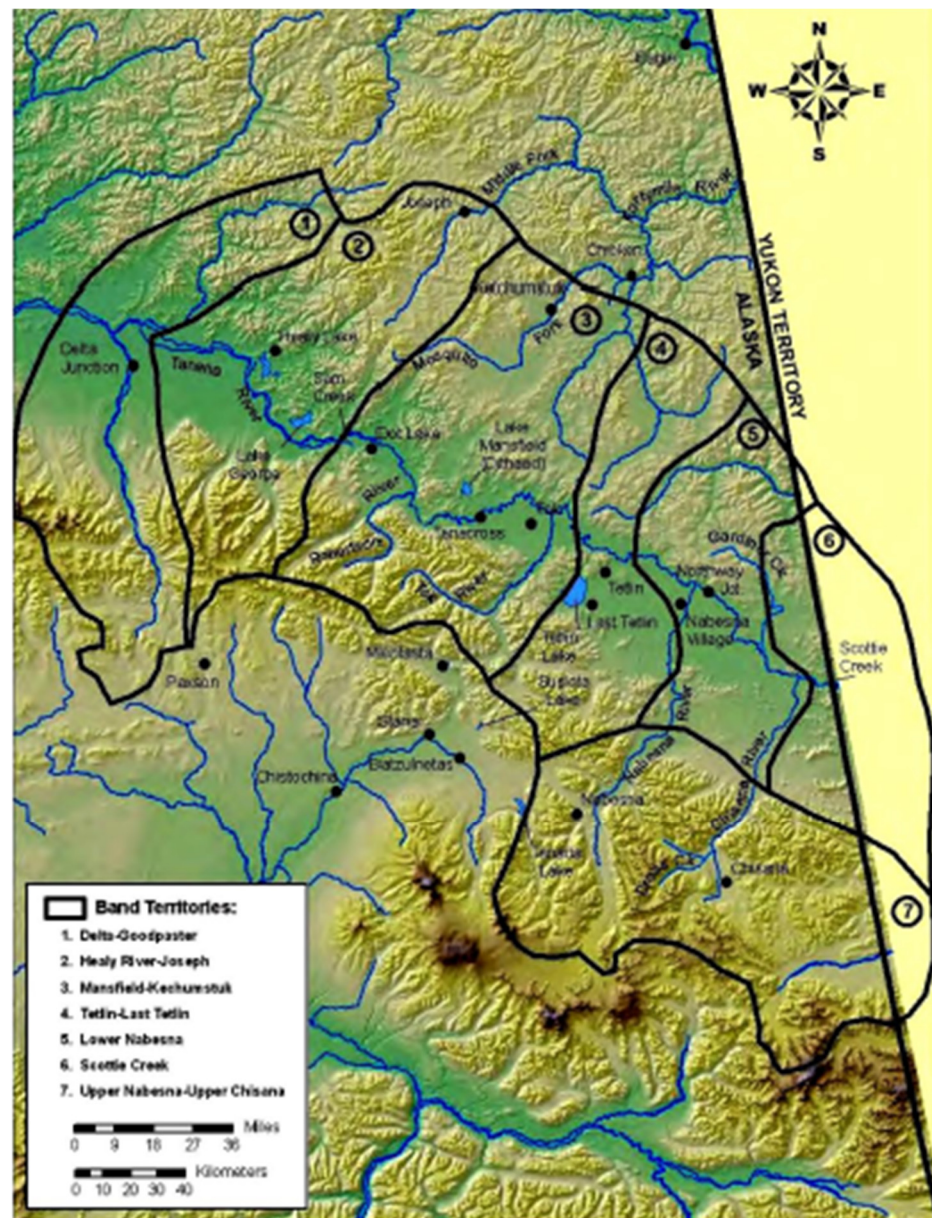


Figure 1. Upper-Tanana band territories.

From AAVV, “Healy Lake Community Plan 2018”, 2018, p. 11. <http://www.tananachiefs.org/uploads/2022/04> (accessed on 25 October 2022). Healy Lake is no. 2, to the north. Difficult terrain and permafrost meant that traditional travel (before air transport) tended to follow river routes.

The central Alaskan potlatch is more clearly linked to ceremonies that commemorate the dead [27], though early anthropologists and observers were unanimous that prestige was also a motive [37]. Potlatches could be held anytime there was a debt to be repaid, but the largest was in midwinter, to commemorate the people who had died in the past year. This seems almost equivalent to the Midwinter Ceremonial that is practiced on the West Coast. Tanana (central Alaskan) potlatches were often held in winter because travel between communities was easier [37], though one casual traveler through the area reports that Tanana has a large annual potlatch in June [38]. Feasts for the dead and potlatches are, in fact, almost indistinguishable, since goods and money are accumulated (which became increasingly possible in the second half of the 19th century with the influx of White people and their merchandise), sometimes for long periods to ensure an impressive

ceremony [39] (pp. 64–66). These were then redistributed by one moiety to members of another in accordance with a principle of repayment for ‘services’ that the clan member had rendered to others during his and sometimes her lifetime [15] p. 135, [40]. This was considered quittance from one moiety to another for the ‘loan’ of a person who married into the other moiety (marriage was and is moiety-exogamous) [39]. During a person’s lifetime, a man’s work for his children, who belonged to his wife’s moiety, is a ‘gift’ that has to be repaid by his widow’s moiety at his death. Members of a woman’s moiety are not repaid by the widower’s moiety when the woman dies, since in this matrilineal society she and her moiety already ‘own’ the woman’s children. Non-related people, including non-Natives, may also be rewarded if they have contributed to the funeral services by digging the grave or simply by paying their respects. Ritual gift giving is therefore linked to the status of a person, and status is accumulated by gift giving, whether of people as ‘gifts’, merchandise, or services rendered [13]. Despite this accent on a memorial potlatch to repay one’s opposite moiety for the ‘loan’ of a person during their lifetime, other occasions for gift giving include constructing a chief’s house, adoption, commemorating a child’s first kill, settlement of a dispute, or recovery from illness [16]. These latter ceremonies, however, are far from elaborate and may only involve a few people. It should also be noted that potential tensions arising from indebtedness are partially attenuated by the fact that guests offer songs and dances as a form of immediate repayment [10].

Since marriage is in theory and often in practice moiety-exogamous, and marriages in the recent past generally tended toward matrilocal residence (the future husband living with his future in-laws and working for them until his young bride was mature enough for marriage) [10] (pp. 118–119), many guests at commemorative potlatches came from the deceased man’s village of origin. Given the mobility of most people over their lifetime, however, guests may come from many villages: “There were many comings and goings between the different bands but they were mostly directed by kinship ties” [10] p. 149 ... “Today (1969), a serious potlach [*sic*] includes guests from at least all Upper Tanana groups” [10] p. 207. All observers (Guédon, McKennan, and Simeone) concur that people from far and wide may be invited despite not being related to the deceased. In brief, the geographical dimension of potlatches—traditionally reinforcing frontiers and today uniting divided communities—is at least as important as prestige and status.

Potlatches could not be held at the whim of a status-hungry individual wishing to establish his claims to power. McKennan describes [37] (pp. 137–138), there was a series of post-potlatch taboos that seem designed to impose strict limitations on a man’s sense of power and hence social advancement: for 100 days, no intercourse was permitted, special mittens were worn, food taboos were observed, and interdictions were imposed on some movements that in effect hobbled the person. Many of these restrictions resemble those traditionally imposed on menstruating women by West Coast peoples. If aggrandizing individual status were the only motivation, there would be less intra-moiety help given to the person holding the potlatch.

Some people distinguish between funeral potlatches, memorial potlatches, and honorary potlatches [35] (pp. 145–146, 156). In all cases, however, potlatches include communal feasting, sometimes over several days or even weeks, and singing and dancing. As I suggested above, the anthropological emphasis on the gift-giving aspect of the potlatch at the expense of feasting seems a one-sided view caused by the extraordinary circumstances of the 19th century on the West Coast. Observations of the central Alaskan potlatch bear this out, since the main feature seems to have been the availability of food and a host’s ability to cache and offer impressive quantities of food. Gifts were indeed given out and were certainly important in calculating prestige, but only at the end of the ceremony, when the food had run out [37]. Offering certain types of food, such as wolverine and bear, seems to have been more important than other types in conferring prestige upon the host, possibly because the first is relatively rare and the second relatively dangerous and considered to be the most spiritually potent animal (some animals are believed to confer power upon men who seek it in a vision quest). In fact, killing a wolverine sets off an elaborate ceremony,

and bears are given “a potlatchlike feast” when they are killed [16] p. 20. Sharing food, therefore, seems to have been the key element of the potlatch. While gifts such as guns and blankets are usually purchased by an individual, moiety mates often help by donating food and by cooking. It seems that keeping the peace by means of sharing was paramount, though the status and autonomy of the basic social unit, the village, was strengthened through the ceremony. It is noteworthy that even access to land could be gifted through a potlatch in an effort to avoid disputes [9,39] (pp. 81–83), and potlatches could be offered as compensation for murder in order to avoid blood feuds [10] (pp. 17, 22–23).

In brief, potlatches clear debts but incur new ones. By linking the ceremony to important episodes in the life cycle (West Coast: birth and death; Alaska: death; a child's first kill; other reasons cited by Guédon: to honour someone, to celebrate the return or recovery of a loved one, as payment for an offense to a member of the opposite phratry [10] (pp. 204–205)), prestige is limited not only in the number of potlatches that a person can give in one's lifetime (rarely more than ten, says McKennan), but is also countered by the sadness of death. Its highly ritualized aspect thus normalizes and limits past and future tensions. I am not suggesting that personal prestige was not involved in the Alaskan potlatch. It undoubtedly was. What makes the ritual so important, however, is not the manner in which individual status and prestige are strengthened. As Guédon concluded, based on an informant's comment, “Dancing, eating and feasting do not define a potlatch [*sic*], and Upper Tanana natives frown upon the so-called ‘potlatches’ organized in Fairbanks, for instance. ‘That's not really potlatch [*sic*], they just eat big meal’” [10] p. 204. Gift giving creates social ties by playing on the notion of long-term reciprocity among the participants. It is obligatory reciprocity that distinguishes potlatches from ‘big meals’ and attempts to impress others. In this sense, there is no substantial difference between the forms of central Alaska potlatch and the ‘classic’ potlatch of the Northwest Coast, though they differ substantially in terms of frequency (much higher on the Northwest Coast) and quantity of gifts given (again, higher among the people of the Northwest Coast). In both cases, however, there was until recently a sense of tension between people in different localities: “Any intruders or strangers were potential enemies” [10] p. 156 . . . “Caution was to be used not only with strangers but also with members of one's band who were not relatives . . . ” [10] p. 159. Tension was normalized by inviting guests to one's home village to consume local food. Whether one stresses gift giving or prestige, what seems to define a potlatch is that tension is ritualized and contained by reciprocity [16] (pp. 128–129).

Today, people increasingly stay in their villages while food is shipped by air from one village to another. There are three small air carriers based in Fairbanks, of which the largest (Warbelow's Air Ventures) serves over a dozen villages in the area. Some employees and residents of two villages, as well as a representative of a regional cultural association, confirmed that food was regularly shipped between communities. Unfortunately, the 2020 pandemic prevented me from getting more precise information in the field, though on one flight (October 2019) from Fairbanks, we did unload about 300 lbs of salmon and moose meat in Minto and loaded a similar amount for destinations beyond (Manley Hot Springs and Rampart). In other words, this is a system of food circulation and not food redistribution. If the potlatch system distributed food to guests who were bound to reciprocate to acquit their debts to their hosts, in the new system, reciprocity means circulating bush food in a network.

5. Conclusions

Today, new forms of social action are emerging in central Alaska, as a response to new soft power threats as global capital flows and investment patterns have encouraged new technologies that allow rapid entrepreneurial adjustments of production in response to shifting resource and consumer markets. For the Dene of central Alaska, the rapidity of constant capitalist reorganization is not really the issue. The ANCSA agreement has disguised state power by creating, ostensibly, a parallel Native power structure that can only operate in the domains of distributing services to its members, mostly in the health

domain. For the Dene, the issue is relatively simple and obvious: legislation inspired by neo-liberal and Weberian ideologies in which they have, allegedly, a democratic voice but little real power directly threatens the survival of their communities. While Native regional corporations lobby state institutions, there are limits to their influence. They are now subject to the same neo-liberal calculus as any other disenfranchised and marginalized groups: they face threats that the schools in their small communities will be closed because they are ‘uneconomic’, which would destroy these small communities.

Since the State government has appropriated many of the rhetorical and cultural rallying points that animate local Indigenous politics, such as protection of the environment, respect of elders, community engagement, etc., people have been obliged to develop political tools that White people have not (or dare not) yet encroached upon. Hence, some central Alaskan Indigenous communities have reworked a traditional ritual that once reinforced but contained regional divisiveness so that today its outcomes produce unity and reinforce ties. In brief, in the past, people visited other communities and were fed local food, which became a token of the host’s status and power. Generosity was aimed at ritualizing and containing tension, but the obligation to reciprocate was itself a source of tension. Failure to impress one’s neighbours could lead to people encroaching on a weak group’s territorial boundaries and exploiting its resources. In brief, while tension between communities was not lessened, it was ritualized and normalized.

Today, however, people seem to be putting in place a system of food redistribution where local feasts are animated by food produced elsewhere. Reciprocity is no longer calculated in terms of personalized obligations but as a system of generalized redistribution. To be clear, Indigenous people in central Alaska have not abandoned the potlatch. For example, Doyon Ltd. (the Fairbanks-area regional association created by ANCSA) celebrated its 50th anniversary (26 June 2022) with a potlatch held on the campus of the University of Alaska, Fairbanks [41]. They have, however, reworked gift giving to create a system of generalized reciprocity, where people who have received gifts from elsewhere give their food to other communities. In so doing, they can stay in their home communities and send a message to the world that they are still very much tied to their land despite pressures to abandon the bush and move to larger cities.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

1. Mauss, M. «Essai sur le don: Forme et raison de l’échange dans les sociétés archaïques». In *Sociologie et Anthropologie 1*; Presses Universitaires de France: Paris, France, 1950.
2. Sahlins, M. *Stone Age Economics*; University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 1972.
3. Smith, A. *The Wealth of Nations*; Oxford Paperbacks: Oxford, UK, 2008.
4. Arundale, W.H.; Jones, E. Historic Land Use Processes in Alaska’s Koyukuk River Area. *Arctic* **1989**, *42*, 148–162. [CrossRef]
5. Available online: <https://www.doyon.com/> (accessed on 13 October 2022).
6. Heaton, J.W. Athabascans of the Interior: A New Perspective on Neglect in Alaska Historiography. *Pac. Northwest Q.* **2012**, *103*, 107–122.
7. Ganapathy, S. Imagining Alaska: Local and Translocal Engagements with Place. *Am. Anthropol.* **2013**, *115*, 96–111. [CrossRef]
8. Nicol, H.; Chater, A. Culture of the Arctic Borderlands. In *North America’s Arctic Borders: A World of Change*; Nicol, H., Chater, A., Eds.; University of Ottawa Press: Ottawa, ON, Canada, 2021; pp. 60–82.
9. Smith, G.M. *The Gift of the Middle Tanana: Dene Pre-Colonial History in the Alaskan Interior*; Lexington Books: Lanham, MD, USA, 2022; p. 17.
10. Guédon, M.-F. *People of Tetlin, Why Are You Singing?* National Museum of Man, Mercury Series, Ethnology Division: Ottawa, ON, Canada, 1974; p. 14.
11. Sniffen, M.; Carrington, T.S. *The Indians of the Yukon and Tanana Valleys, Alaska*; Indian Rights Association: Philadelphia, PL, USA, 1914; pp. 7–8.
12. Available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Television_shows_set_in_Alaska (accessed on 10 December 2022).

13. Kroul, M.V. Definitional Domains of the Koyukon Athapaskan Potlatch. *Arct. Anthropol.* **1974**, *11*, 39–47.
14. Ferguson, J. *Parallel Destinies: An Alaskan Odyssey*; Glas Publishing Co.: Big Delta, AL, USA, 2002; p. 42.
15. Ganapathy, S. Alaskan Neo-liberalism: Conservation, Development, and Native Land Rights. *Soc. Anal.* **2011**, *55*, 113–133. [CrossRef]
16. Simeone, W.E. *Ahtna: The People and Their History*; Ahtna Inc.: Glennallen, AK, USA, 2018; p. 130.
17. Available online: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/FedAidpdfs/RIR.4K.1994.04.pdf> (accessed on 4 January 2020).
18. Available online: <http://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=subsistence.main> (accessed on 29 December 2019).
19. Available online: <https://www.adfg.alaska.gov/index.cfm?adfg=subsistence.faqs#QA4> (accessed on 24 December 2019).
20. Williams, M.S.T. Neo-Colonial Melancholia: Alaska Native People, Education and Oil. *Counterpoints* **2011**, *379*, 189–196.
21. Available online: <https://www.akrdc.org/oil-and-gas> (accessed on 30 December 2019).
22. Available online: <https://www.adn.com/business-economy/energy/2018/02/18/share-of-alaskans-working-in-states-oil-industry-shrinks-to-lowest-in-decades/> (accessed on 14 December 2019).
23. Available online: <https://education.alaska.gov/data-center> (accessed on 7 September 2022).
24. Shinkwin, A.; Case, M. *Modern Foragers: Wild Resource Use in Nenana Village, Alaska*; Technical Paper no. 91; Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Division of Subsistence: Juneau, AK, USA, 1984; p. 11.
25. Available online: <https://www.adn.com/rural-alaska/article/processed-food-comes-diabetes-obesity-alaska-natives/2014/09/29/> (accessed on 11 January 2023).
26. Redwood, D.; Day, G.; Beans, J.; Hiratsuka, V.; Nash, S.; Howard, B.; Umans, J.; Koller, K. Alaska Native Traditional Food and Harvesting Activity Patterns over 10 Years of Follow-Up. *Curr. Dev. Nutr.* **2019**, *3*, nzz114. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
27. Available online: <https://www.gov.alaska/contactus/> (accessed on 30 December 2019).
28. Loyens, W.J. The Koyukon Feast for the Dead. *Arct. Anthropol.* **1964**, *2*, 133–148.
29. Boas, F. *Contributions to the Ethnology of the Kwakiutl, Columbia University Contributions to Anthropology*; Columbia University Press: New York, NY, USA, 1925; Volume 3.
30. Shandel, T.; U'mista Cultural Society. *Potlatch: A Strict Law Bids Us Dance*; U'mista Cultural Society: Alert Bay, BC, USA, 1975.
31. Piddocke, S. The Potlatch System of the Southern Kwakiutl: A New Perspective. *Southwest. J. Anthropol.* **1965**, *21*, 244–264. [CrossRef]
32. Donald, L. *Aboriginal Slavery on the Northwest Coast of North America*. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA, USA, 1997.
33. Archer, C. Review of Leland Donald. *BC Stud.* **1998**, *119*, 104–108.
34. Hayden, B. *The Power of Feast from Prehistory to the Present*; Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, UK, 2014.
35. Thomas, K. *Crow is My Boss: The Oral Life History of a Tanacross Athabaskan Elder*; University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, OK, USA, 2005; p. 136.
36. AAVV. “Healy Lake Community Plan 2018”, 2018, p. 11. Available online: <https://www.tananachiefs.org/2022/04/> (accessed on 25 October 2022).
37. McKennan, R.A. *The Upper Tanana Indians*; Yale University Publications in Anthropology: New Haven, CT, USA, 1959; pp. 134–135.
38. Maclean, D. *Paddling the Yukon River and Its Tributaries: A Guide to Paddling across Alaska and the Yukon Territory on the Yukon, Tanana, Porcupine, and Koyukuk Rivers Plus the Kuskokwim River*; Publication Consultants: Anchorage, AL, USA, 2005.
39. Nelson, R.K. *Make Prayers to the Raven: A Koyukon View of the Northern Forest*; The University of Chicago Press: Chicago, IL, USA, 1983; p. 151, 182.
40. Simeone, W.E. *Rifles, Blankets, and Beads: Identity, History, and the Northern Athapaskan Potlatch*; University of Oklahoma Press: Norman, OK, USA, 1995.
41. Available online: <https://www.doyon.com/anniversary-potlatch/> (accessed on 12 October 2022).

Disclaimer/Publisher’s Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.