

CARRIER BAL-HATS

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Luksilyou:
Frog

Tse Kal Keyah

DeneYaz

Grand Trunk

Kwun Ba Whut'en

Dulhts'ehyou: Yah Whut Dut'an
Caribou
Tsay Ba'yah

Yah Tsa hol'gus

Tsumusyo:

Tsayoo

Beaver
Dunee

Atah'

Dumdenyoo:

Shas

Bear
Sus

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The Origin of the Bal-Hats

The bahlats has its roots in the distant past. A time when our Carrier ancestors lived in large family groupings, scattered throughout the winter or summer fish camps and hunting territories, where they could survive.

Our ancestors saw that when two or more families together "There were problems, sometimes they did not get along..."

If there was a dispute between families, it didn't take much, if one or two people talk about each other. Then there was a problem, if that happens, where were they going to go?

The people felt the need of a system whereby they could settle disputes and reconcile antagonistic families.

In particular, they wished to avoid the customary practice of exiling those who had broken rules and had hurt other families.

According to the Elders, the very first Bal-hats was called by the culture hero Ustas.

Ustas wanted to help settle the people on their land. The families were scattered across the Carrier territory, they established their homes at rivers, lakeshore and creek sides.

Each family was given a fair portion of the land and each family was told to look after it and to work on the land, the land included hunting land.

They were told to take care of the fish and the animals; to always leave enough of each species to provide for the next generation to come.

They did not allow fires, if they burned their land, and the animals went elsewhere, what would they do? So they were careful to prevent forest fires, as it will kill all the inhabitants for one whole generation. People cannot survive on burned areas.

In the beginning, at the time of Ustas, the Bal-hats was not yet known by this name.

Instead, the people spoke of a "big gathering" du'ghe'hu'telh-dulh, to describe the congregation of several families at an important meeting. Where you were given food and afterwards they would have talks to settle problems in the village.

The du'ghe'hu'telh-dulh became the way to settle important disputes between the families. That's how they governed the people and the land.

If there was any dispute with one another in that group, this head person settles it.

If someone commits murder then this spokesman was the one to deal with it. It was up to this head person to find out why it happened.

Even how poor we were, we take care of whatever belongs to us. Whatever we lost, we could not replace right away, and things were scarce.

That is the sentence they received, just to leave everything behind and walk away in any direction. Not to come back and not be amongst people anymore.

Whatever was left behind was distributed to the family he had hurt. That person had to suffer hard to make up for what he left behind, to suffer, and to start all over again.

Stealing is next to murder, so they got a big penalty for it. The whole family could starve during the winter, stealing winter food is worse than killing one person.

As well as the "government for it was the time for the leaders to make plans for the people as well as to "put up a big give away."

The leaders were known as the "first persons." However, a "first persons" de tso'shu dilh zulh-un. Was not a chief in the way, one can be a hereditary or elected chief today.

Rather, the detso'whudilhzulh-un was a spokesperson or headman of a small settlement or village.

How the first person came to be selected for this position is not clear, beyond the knowledge that each de tso'shu dilh zulh-un would be the head of the family, which was in charge of each settlement.

However, it is also said that each family had two "bosses," the clan mother and the clan father.

There is no clear history of how the Du'ghe'hu'telh-dulh became the Bal-hats as it is known to have been practiced in the recent past and as it is carried on today.

What is clear is that the Bal-hats and before it the Deghedu'telh-dulh was the "government of the people.

A system from the far distant past when the first people settled in this area and established the du ghe hu'telh-dulh, it seems that the clan system may be more recent.

However, today it's through the clans that the business of the bal-hats is conducted.

The Bal-Hats Today

Today the bal-hats is known as the potlatch, giveaway, payout, or party. It is held on two occasions, several months following a funeral to pay the funeral expenses and a year following the death to raise the tombstone. It could be held as well to allow someone to take an important name.

The Bal-hats is planned by the clan leader with the help of other notable members in discussion with the bereaved family.

The clans are matrilineal, that is everyone belongs to her/his mother's clan, unless she/he pays a large sum of money to "cross the table to the opposite clan."

When in trouble or when a death has occurred in the person's clan she/he turns to the opposite clan, the father's clan for help.

Also, it is the father's clan, which "buys the seat a person takes when initiated into clan membership. All money and goods paid out by the opposite clan must be returned with interest. It is the duty of the person's own clan to help raise the return payment. This help has "no return" that is, it is not repaid.

The Funeral Bal-Hats

The funeral bal-hats is the most common payout. It is held right after the burial or a few months after the funeral, as soon as the bereaved family and clan can pay the funeral expenses, which includes paying the funeral workers.

These workers are selected from the opposite clan at the time of the death to carry out the necessary work during the wake and burial.

Workers are selected by the dead person's family with the help of the clan leader and other prominent members of the clan. When the necessary goods have been raised the family approaches the clan leader and asks her to arrange the payout.

A date is decided and notices are posted through out the village informing every one of the time and place. If there has been more than one death in the recent months. Two or more payouts may be held at one time.

The payouts are held in the community hall, after the funeral or late in the afternoon. Early in the day a chosen member of the host clan. That is of the dead person's clan, goes throughout the village stopping at every house to invite everyone.

The invitation is given with solemn formality. A cane is carried and is tapped on the ground at the door as the announcement is made. When the guests arrive at the hall they remain at the door until invited in by the clan leader. The clan leader announces each guest as she or he arrives and takes each person to the correct seat.

The guest sits on one side of the hall, on the bench, according to the status. Important persons or those known as duneza', tse'keza' and skeza', sit in the centre of the bench while less important persons are seated at the ends. Occasionally the women and men of the guest clan are separated, but this is not always the case.

The workers sit on individual chairs at the front of the hall and to their left the members of the host clan gather. In front of the workers and other visitors a white sheet of paper is placed and on this the food and payout goods will be placed before the guests.

From a table at the centre of the hall the host family conducts the business of the Bal-hats.

The clan leader acts as the speaker for the family. She or he announces the contributions of the host clan members to the payout as members of the family record the money. While this takes place, the other clan members distribute the payout goods to the guest. Distribution involves clan members of all ages.

The Elders guide the younger clan members in the protocol of the distribution and young children are also taught how to serve the soup and tea. To carefully distribute the goods and it is important to serve without spilling the soup or tea and to distribute without any error.

Should food be spilt on a person or a visitor be missed from the food distribution, the host clan could be required to raise money to pay for the mistake. While children are told of the consequences of these mistakes, in fact paying money for them is not common.

As the distribution process the host clan come to the speaker with their contribution of money to pay the funeral expenses. The name of each contributor and amount paid the speaker announces out.

The family then counts the money and allots it first to the workers, then to other funeral expenses leaving smaller sums to cover the cost of using the hall and small items. When the counting is finished, the money is passed to the speaker who calls out the amount, the name of the worker to be paid and the type of work done.

In honour of their work the workers receive the money, the goods given to the other guests and as well other gifts which are commonly household items such as linens or personal items including luggage and clothing.

Following the funeral payout other clan and personal business takes place. Personal debts for services are paid. These services might include work done on a gravestone, the placing of photographs or other items to honour a dead person, as well as a wide range of other services.

Clan business frequently involves the payment of seats for recently initiated members. Members buy the seat of the opposite clan, and the return payout including interest, is put up at a funeral or tombstone Bal-hats.

A separate potlatch is not held for initiations. In many ways the Bal-hats of today is similar to those Elders recall from their childhood and to those the old timers spoke of during the present elder's childhood.

In the past, as today, the food of a funeral potlatch was simple; soup, tea, biscuits or bannock. The payout goods used to be fur, moose hides and moccasins.

Today, household linen and yard goods have been substituted. Food was also distributed and that practice continues today as large amounts of purchased food is the major item of the giveaway.

The Bal-hats has changed, of course, over the years because repressive laws were made against it and the church and government imposed new systems of leadership, often selecting as leaders, men who would have been prominent in the clans and Bal-hats.

In this way, the church and government persuaded traditional leaders to speak against the Bal-hats.

The Tombstone Payout

The tombstone payout is not held as frequently as the funeral payout. If the tombstone payout is held, it is usually put up approximately one year following the death. This is not always the case, however.

The form of the tombstone payout follows that of the funeral Bal-hats in several respects. The family arranges it through the clan leaders.

The family and its clan members raise the money to repay the opposite clan for the tombstone expenses and the work of putting it up. As with the funeral payout, food is served although now there may be more food including desserts and dried or fresh berries.

The ceremony of paying out and distribution are the same. The differences lie in the inclusion of singing and dancing. Both of which are forbidden at the funeral payout, and the ceremony of erecting the stone.

The close family members put up most of the tombstone cost and the payout goods including food, clothes, and cash and household linens. The clan adds to this and receives no return for their contributions.

Respect is shown to members of the opposite clan by asking them if they wish to buy part of the tombstone. The payback is given with interest to show respect and will include money, food and a wide range of household and personal items.

The tombstone used to be carried to the cemetery on a wagon, but now it is put on planks of wood. The deceased's clan pulls with ropes from the back of the wagon, while the opposite party pulls the wagon toward the cemetery.

This process is "like a tug of war." The family members sit on the wagon to steady the stone.

The atmosphere is one of "high spiritedness" with the two clans acting as "friendly rivals."

Following the erection of the tombstone, everyone returns to the community hall for the payout.

Here the rope, which was sectioned by knots, then cut at the knots, is given as part of the payout, as a "sort of souvenir" which is kept to show respect for the dead person and for the payout.

After the payout distribution is completed, the clan songs are sung. Each clan has its own drum with clan crest. The drum is tossed from person to person to lead the singing and dancing.

In the past only a clan member could use the clan drum. But today "people aren't so fussy" and a drum is shared across the clans.

Also the drum is no longer just used on these important clan events but is also used for social occasions such as workshops and dance practices.

Clan songs are as precious as the clan drum, but again are no longer just used by clan members. Some are sung at the dance practices and other social occasions that are not strictly clan business.

Paying For A Chair

A person is "seated" when the opposite party buys her/him the chair

The opposite party, that is the person's father's clan, announces that they will seat the person and begin to collect money and goods.

The seating is done with great respect. The person being seated is seated on a blanket on her/his chair and is made a formal member of the clan. It is up to this person to raise the payback with interest.

Her/his clan helps but does not receive a "return" for the payout. The new clan member will now be available to help the clan on all its business. When a chair is paid for there can be singing and dancing except if this takes place at a funeral payout.

Very young children may be sat down if they are going to take someone's place, often a grandparent.

When being seated at a payout the young are seated to the right of the person whose seat they will take.

If someone has not taken a chair when a child, it is the practice to buy them a chair when they get married.

Crossing The Table

Sometimes a person "crosses the table" to join the opposite party.

This is known as being "bought back by the father's clan.

It cost a great deal of money and goods.

It happens with the duneza and tse'keza who wish to take the place of their father or to taken an important name in the father's family.

It also occurs if two members of the same clan are to be married and when a clan needs women or members who aren't commoners.

Other Business Of Respect

Special jobs which honour the dead such as maintaining or repairing tombstones, placing photographs in a relative's house, or making items to honour the dead are paid for at potlatches.

As always, the family arranges their business with the clan leader who acts as their speaker. If the payment for these services does not take place at a payout, it is done at a dinner to which witnesses are invited.

Taking A Name

Important names are expensive, they are taken only by persons who have character and personality of the last holder of the name and who have shown that they are worthy of it.

Descendents of the name holder take special responsibility for helping the successor pay for the name. No return is given for this payout.

The heads of the clans decide who is entitled to take a name and try to settle any disputes. However, disputes over names can carry on for years, and some disputes may never be settled. Payouts for the tse'keza and duneza who are taking a name are big splurges, at which the person shows she/he is a "big shot."

A payout for the tse'keza and duneza means that the person will wear a blanket - decorated either in a west coast style or art or with rows of beads, ribbons and shells.

The blanket has the initiate's clan crest on the back and is made by a member of the opposite clan.

People who wear a blanket have a Carrier name or title. Their own crest, song, dances and drum. It is for these that they pay so much. The name is precious and is accorded great respect.

To insult the holder of the name means to insult the name and such insults are paid for in public, that is at a payout. The payout for the name is made without a return payment. The initiated puts up most of the payout and is helped by her/his close family. The clan he/she is joining does not help.

This payout is more extensive and more closely follows tradition than the funeral payout, according to some elders.

In addition, to giving out money, bought food, household items, and personal gifts, traditional gifts of dried food bear, beaver, moose, deer, and berries are also distributed.

Certain parts of the beaver, particularly the tail are reserved for the tse'keza and duneza, while berries are passed with great ceremony from clan leader to clan leader.

The berries are held high above the head when passed while the clan leaders sing their clan songs. The payout for the duneza and tse'keza is much larger affair than other forms of the Bal-hats.

Guests from all Carrier reserves and from the Gitksan are invited. Invitations are extended to members of all parties and even the commoners can expect to receive large amounts of payout.

Hiring Workers

Workers who are hired to assist at a wake or funeral are persons of high standing with potlatch seats.

The workers are selected by the family with the guidance of the clan leader and members of the duneza and tse'keza.

They should be invited to a dinner where it is announced that they have been chosen for this work and where their various jobs are assigned.

No one without a potlatch seat should be hired but this sometimes happens. They must always be members of the opposite clan.

Shame

A family is shamed if they do not hold a funeral payout. Sometimes, some families wish too. But could not afford to pay back funeral costs.

The family could be scorned by the community and when the family has a second death, the clan does not help with the funeral; the family will be shamed by having the dead person's brother dig the grave.

When the clan arranges for a multiple payout it is able to wipe out this shame on behalf of the family.