
BLACKLINE MASTER 3-7

Potlatch for a Naming Ceremony

The events at a potlatch occur in a strict sequence, which varies greatly between nations and also depends on the type of potlatch. The following order is from a Naming Ceremony from the Tse-shaht people of the Nuu-chah-nulth Nation.

- 1. Sing-along Song** An entertainment song sung outside the hall before the host family enters.
- 2. Entry Song** A happy song sung to the guests as the singers, drummers, dancers, and host family dance into the hall. The song says, "Stay, be seated while I entertain you."
- 3. Supper Song** A song sung before the meal is served. Every First Nation owns its own song. It is said that this song is sung to help the food go down your throat easily and to ensure that the food is good.
- 4. Feed the People** After the people are fed, it is customary that everyone packs up the extra food to take home with them.
- 5. Welcome Song** Long ago guests were greeted with this song upon arriving at a village beach. Today this song is danced in front of guests to make them feel welcome.
- 6. Speaker of the House** The Speaker speaks for the host. He/She explains what is going to happen, entertains the guests with history and humour, introduces speakers, singers, and dancers, and thanks the people for attending.
- 7. Floor is Open to Guests** Each tribal group or family dances and gives gifts to the host family.
- 8. Chant/Headdress** The host family brings out their sacred headdress dancers. A chant must always be sung before this dance.
- 9. Name-Giving** The history of names is announced and the chosen names are given to the appropriate people.
- 10. Gift Giving** The host family gives gifts to everyone present for their role in witnessing the event.

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Key Participants at a Potlatch or Feast

To make a potlatch successful, the host family or nation works very long, tireless hours, months, and sometimes years to make all the arrangements. The following are key participants in a potlatch.

The Host: Is the person who, after deciding to hold the feast, gathers everyone together to organize the potlatch. The host confers with other family members and asks for advice from the Elders on all matters. At the time of the feast, the host sits humbly in the background while other participants work in the foreground. This act of humility is given the utmost respect by everyone.

Family of the Host: The extended family—aunts, uncles, cousins, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, grandmothers, grandfathers—are obligated to help the host. They may contribute time, energy, money, or gifts. This is an important way of strengthening family ties.

Speaker of the House: Is the person chosen to speak to the guests throughout the feast. This person, usually a man, has to possess at least two qualifications: be an eloquent speaker and a knowledgeable historian, especially concerning the host family's history.

Watchmen: There are usually four watchmen, but this depends on how large the crowd is and how many entrances the hall has. These men wear blankets or cedar bark pieces over their chests, and sometimes also cedar bark headbands. This identifies them as watchmen. Their job is to seat the people in arranged places, make sure guests (especially children) don't disrupt the proceedings, run errands in the hall, and hand out gifts to the guests. At the end of the potlatch they are always recognized by receiving gifts and blankets.

Dancers: The dancers are from the host family or nation. Long ago there were enough dancers and songs from each family to entertain throughout a long potlatch. The dancers must prepare the regalia (shawls, drums, dresses, rattles, headdresses, masks, etc.) and start practising on a weekly basis long before the potlatch. A dancer

must know the words and the drum beat to all the songs that will be used.

Drama has always played an important role in First Nations culture, with themes drawn from the animals, birds, sea life, and the spiritual realm (such as the thunderbird, lightning serpent, and sea serpent). Dancers are required to know to perfection every movement of the animals they portray. They are masters of illusion, creating suspense, fear, and laughter.

Singers: The singers are from the host nation. The singers gather weekly on their own time to learn the songs or practise them while the dancers dance. They practise the same song over and over because the rewards of performing well make the practising worthwhile.

Elders/Advisers: This is a group of highly respected Elders who possess extensive knowledge of the particular potlatch being held. They act as an advisory council as to what should take place and in what order. In return, they are given special potlatch gifts.

Witnesses:

Invited guests are strategically seated according to family or rank. They are paid to acknowledge and witness the work that is being done during the potlatch. The witnesses become the oral record of the event.

Kitchen Help: The host family may appoint kitchen help or family members may volunteer. They must gather all the food and ensure that there will be enough. The oldest helper is usually the kitchen boss. She coordinates the cooks, cleaners, and servers. The servers also attend to the Elders, making sure they are warm and have enough food and water.

Set-up and clean-up are the responsibility of the host families.