

*The Social Organization of the Tlingit and Its Integration into Daily Life*

Abstract: This academic paper was written for Seminar in Social Science Research, SOOSC 2395.

In this paper, I use a case study of the Tlingit people to highlight the integration of social organization into other aspects of their society. The first pages serve as an introduction to the Tlingit people as well as an explanation of what exactly defines their social organization.

However, after explaining the basic aspects of both their society and social organization, the paper moves on to show the actual intermixture of social organization into other aspects of their society.

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Instructor: Gary Sturmer

Social organization is a fundamental part of each and every society, in that it creates social distinctions between members, creating a social background in which every day life has a frame of reference for social situations. Although culture is like a clock in that it has many moving parts that affect one another and as a result no aspect of culture has sole influence, social organization can be seen throughout society as a driving factor in almost all social interactions. So, in order to further emphasize the importance of social organization, this research paper will use a case study of the historic Tlingit people and the signs of the integration of social structure in other aspects of their society.

Historically, the Tlingit mainly occupied the mainland and islands of the southeastern Alaska panhandle which spans the entirety of six hundred miles from Portland Canal to the Copper River delta, and includes the Alexander Archipelago and the Kayak, Wingham, Kanak and Martin Islands in Controller Bay (Figure I). Traditionally, the Tlingit are considered to be a part of the Northwest Coast culture area. Geographically, the Tlingit can be split into the Coastal and Inland Tlingit, although this research paper focuses solely on the Coastal Tlingit. However, culturally it can be split into three major groups; the Northern Tlingit, the Southern Tlingit and the Tlingit of the Gulf Coast. It is important to note that the Tlingit have undoubtedly never formed a true cohesive political unit, rather they recognize that there is a shared aspect of common language and customs and instead choose to regard themselves as a nationality (De Laguna 1990, 203).

The Tlingit are hunter/gatherers and were typically matrilineal in terms of tracing their descent, due to the fact the women were in control over the main processing of salmon, which was a definite staple food in the Tlingit diet, and as such were given higher status. However, political leadership was still mainly dominated by men. Politically, the Tlingit were typically

chiefdoms due to the multiple elements of social stratification made evident in their distinct hierarchy of classes consisting of the nobility, the commoners, and slaves. Membership in any class was dictated by one's matrilineal heritage, and as such, reinforced kin ties with blood relatives.

Most of the research done on the historic Coastal Tlingit was from around 1940 to 1980 although some was done much earlier, and as such the ethnographic present for this research paper is around 1950.

### **Social Organization**

Tlingit social structure consisted of a multiple-leveled hierarchy based upon both the general number and distribution of the members, yet all are (for the most part) equally important in determining one's place in Tlingit society (Figure II). Membership in any level of the hierarchy is matrilineal, which basically means that the Tlingit traced their lineage through their mother and other maternal ancestors, and therefore places a higher emphasis on women as a means of establishing one's status (Kan 1989, 23). One of the fundamental units of Tlingit society and the highest level of the structural hierarchy was the two moieties. Fundamentally, the two Tlingit moieties were simply a halving of the society into two distinct social categories based upon their matrilineal heritage. Although certainly inclusive, the moieties actually focused more on exclusivity or who was not included. The two moieties were consistently present throughout the entirety of the Tlingit "territory". Sometimes they even grew to encompass other local cultures as well in order to broaden the available gene pool due to the fact that the moieties were exogamous, in that one was only allowed to marry members outside of one's particular moiety.

Every individual, other than a slave of foreign origin, belonged to one of the two moieties: Raven and Wolf (which is sometimes referred to as Eagle in the North), making the moiety as a social unit one of the largest, most wide-spread organizational factors in Tlingit social structure (De Laguna 1990, 212). Yet, their importance was undeniable in terms of not only daily life but also in determining ceremonial hierarchy and establishing funeral duties. However, it is important to note that although moieties are a social group, they don't take an active role in society either by creating new rules, standards, etc. Rather, they act simply as a divisive factor in society that carries with it predetermined, culturally-ingrained standards as to potential marriage partners and burial rites. Also, the moiety itself definitely had no organization of its own, because members never cooperated together as a cohesive unit; rather it functioned more as a social institution that regulated the relationships between the members of the society. For example, moieties arranged individuals and clans/matrilines/lineages into opposites that could intermarry and would assume responsibility for performing social and ceremonial services for one another.

The second tier of the Tlingit social structure hierarchy is the clan (which is sometimes referred to as a sib in ethnographic literature). Typically, a clan consisted of multiple lineages and can spread from different settlements to entirely different cultures as well as being restricted to a single settlement. In fact, the Tlingit tended to conceptualize any foreign group or culture as a clan in itself, regardless of its actual internal structure; and as such, they could assign it a place in the Tlingit social world (De Laguna 1972, 405-b). Rank was especially important among the clans in that the most prestigious lineage (whether its nobility or one of their immediate relatives) was often awarded the responsibility and title of clan leader and, as a result, was able to assign hunting/fishing spots, decided the length and availability of the hunting season, could

order the death of a foreigner, etc. Also, the highest ranking member of the highest ranking clan in a particular settlement would then become the chief of the settlement. The clan as a whole owned property and possessed territories, including fishing/hunting rights along with trade routes and water rights (among other things), and therefore was responsible for maintaining boundaries and keeping non-clan members out of clan territory (Olson 1967, 38a).

Each clan had a crest which represented their totems that is; a particular animal, a heavenly body or even a prominent landmark, and sometimes an ancestral hero or certain supernatural being that was associated with their clan. For example, some of the crests of clans associated with the Raven moiety are Ocean, Moon, and Big Dipper whereas some of the crests of the clans associated with the Wolf moiety are Petrel, Killer Whale, and Eagle (De Laguna 1990, 212) (Figure III). Crests can assume many different forms including hats, totem poles, canoes, feast dishes, armor, pipes, etc. Basically, crests were employed as a means of symbolizing either membership in a clan or to signify lineage, and as such created visible differences between social strata thereby reinforcing social structure/hierarchy while strengthening bonds between clan/family members.

Also, crests themselves have rules and regulations about etiquette for displaying them particularly whenever another moiety is present due to the fact that wearing one's crest was much like demanding both recognition and respect from the rest of society. So, by wearing a crest in front of another clan or moiety member, it represented the right of the clan to claim members and property, the right to associate themselves with whatever the clan crest represents (i.e. the connection between the eagle and the Eagle Clan), and the right for the clan to exist in the first place.

One thing to keep in mind is that crests and totems for that matter are not simply an emblem or a beautiful representation of an animal; rather, they represent a connection between a clan or lineage and its natural counterpart, symbolizing a kinship bond through the use of proper kin terms. Crests even affected the way that members and outsiders viewed one another in that it dictated how a non-clan member should refer to a clan member. However, although totems and crests are definitely a major part of the Tlingit social and even moral world, it should be pointed out that they were not worshipped in any capacity (Olson 1967, 117-118).

It is important to note though that all clan property, which included land, songs, heirlooms or even crests themselves are alienable and as such can be sold or possibly given as a gift, a reparation for injuries, an offering for peace or can even be taken as plunder during war. However, if a crest was taken during a dispute between clans, the “original owners would feel under an absolute obligation to redeem it, just as they would if one of their nobles had been captured” (Olson 1967, 72).

The third and final level of Tlingit social organization is lineages (which are sometimes referred to as houses). Typically, a lineage was usually small enough that members believed that they could trace their genealogical relations back to not only each other, but also to some founding ancestor. However, some lineages were simply remnants of old clans long forgotten while others were a faction or splinter of a particular clan that was experiencing an influx of members, while even others eventually grew to be so large that they morphed into clans themselves (De Laguna 1990, 213). Rank was important in lineages as well, in that those who supposedly had the closest ties to the lineage were higher ranking or even headmen of the lineage whereas commoners of lower rank were more distant in their genetic ties. There was also a house or lineage leader, who was typically the highest ranking member of the lineage. Usually, the

eldest of a set of brothers was the highest ranked and as a result became the chief of the lineage and assumed all the responsibilities as the leader (Olson 1967, 5a). Also, there can be crests or even less commonly songs specifically reserved for lineages, however there was not an associated etiquette as there was with clan-level crests. Another interesting feature of lineages was that in some cases members of the same lineage often lived in the same longhouse, therefore creating a sense of unity among what is usually family members (even if sometimes distant in terms of genetic ties).

### **Feasts**

Another aspect of Tlingit social organization is evident in their feasts and ceremonies. For the Tlingit, there were three major feasts/ceremonies; the memorial potlatch, the funeral feast, and a feast for the children (De Laguna 1972, 450a). The funeral feast followed the death of a clan member and the mourning period (at least officially) typically lasted around eight days. Firstly, the deceased's clan mates sang four mourning songs and began to collect money in order to pay for the funeral. Only members of the opposite moiety could attend to the corpse and perform all the services in connection with both the funeral and the erection of a memorial primarily due to the Tlingit belief that danger and pollution emanated from a corpse. So, by serving as a mediator between them and their dead relative, the other moiety was actually serving as a mediator between pollution and purity as well as life and death (Kan 1989, 152). Each and every day, morning and evening, the bereaved sang four clan songs while following strict dietary, clothing and even work restrictions. On the evening of the deceased's cremation, which was most typically the fourth day although sometimes a corpse of a great leader might be kept for a little bit longer, after the funeral itself had taken place, the funeral feast was given to the mourner's opposites as a way of temporarily paying the other moiety for their work during the

funeral rites and ceremonies. Then, after all the guest had been fed exorbitant amounts of food (which could vary from fresh cranberries to bear meat soaked in tallow) and some had participated in eating contests, the host delivered a eulogy and sang four more clan mourning songs all the while doling out gifts of wealth and blankets to guests. Those last songs and gifts signified the end of the feast and also the mourning period for the clan (De Laguna 1972, 627a). This was typically done so as to appease the opposite moiety members who had worked so diligently on the grave and funerary rights until they would be paid in full at a later, separate potlatch.

The memorial potlatch consisted of what was known as four “joy feasts” and usually lasted around four to eight days, but the true climax of focus of the potlatch was the potlatch proper in which the host clan repaid in full the members of the opposite moiety for their services during the funeral feast in order to properly honor their deceased relatives. It’s important to note that although only a wealthy man (or woman for that matter) could host a potlatch, the setting provided an opportunity for the poorer members of the clan to pay off their own funeral debts as well while contributing wealth towards the potlatch itself. So, in a way, a single ceremony was turned into a conclusion of the rites for several deceased relatives in the same clan. After everyone’s debts had been fulfilled, the host would then receive all of his new titles and crests, while usually doting on a few junior clan members and doling out gifts. Thus, “while the potlatch was primarily to honor the dead it also served the prestige of the living...” (De Laguna 1990, 220). At the same time, the feasts often retained some sort of entertainment factor with guest clans trying to out-glutton one another in order to best honor their hosts, kids exchanging jokes and other members performing dances in the background. On the last day, the house owner recites the clan history, calls on each clan member to sing a mourning song and to dole out more



gifts to those who had worked on the funeral. Also, at this time, the visiting guests paid their host to validate their display of their clan crests because if ever a member of an opposite moiety views the crest, the wearer must pay them a sort of reparation (Figure IV). The Tlingit often tend to think of the potlatch more as an investment, similar to that of putting money into a bank, rather than chore, “because in the long run such wealth would be returned, and the original gift insured an honored reputation” (De Laguna 1990, 221).

Nearly all of the Tlingit’s feasts and potlatches were given either as a way to memorialize or even to gain respect for the host’s deceased (Olson 1967, 68). Typically, this was true whether or not there was the grandeur of a ceremonial totem pole erection or a simple sharing of ceremonial tobacco. However, one of the ceremonies that breaks the cycle of this sort of cult of the dead is the feast for the children that was only given when a very wealthy chief, who had inherited the right, gives a potlatch to ennoble his own children (Olson 1967, 68-69). Interestingly enough, even if the child had some aspect of actual nobility or reputable lineage, they were not considered to be a member of the highest caste unless one or more of these particular ceremonies were given for them. Even the structure is different from other potlatches in that they invite the members of the same moiety (rather than the opposite moiety) and members of opposite clans. Although the right to give a feast for the children usually had to be inherited, in that one of the host’s ancestors in his particular lineage must have given a feast for the children in the past, there were a few exceptions. For example, whenever a wealthy chief died before giving one even though their lineage gave them the opportunity to do so, the chain of the continual ennoblement of children was broken. However, as long as one doesn’t claim some sort of hereditary right, they are not openly ridiculed. After several days of feasting, the children’s ears were pierced and sometimes the girls’ hands or the boys’ chests were tattooed.

Afterwards, everyone received their gifts with the most going to those who actually tattooed/pierced the ears of the children.

### **Integration of Social Organization in Other Aspects of Society**

Although it's foolhardy to simply argue that one aspect of society influences all others without any sort of influence impacting it in return in regards to the fact that culture is integral, the social organization of Tlingit society definitely has some overarching effects on not just potlatching but other areas of social life as well, including body modifications, architectural structures and language.

First and foremost, body modification was a way of showing social rank and visibly reinforcing that rank through things like labret piercings (Figure V). Originally worn only by high class women, labrets were a visible representation of social distinction. According to Tlingit' oral tradition, the custom was supposed to have started as a cultural force to curb gossip due to the fact that the labret hindered speech and therefore hindered noble women's propensity to chat (Olson 1967, 444b). However, at the time of research, the tradition had expanded to all girls after reaching the end of their first menstrual cycle. In fact, after a girls scheduled seclusion during her menstrual cycle that often varied in length depending upon her rank, she was dressed in festival clothes and a small band of family and guests gathered together for a minor feast (Emmons and De Laguna 1991, 245). Towards the end of the feast, her lower lip was pierced and a stud was embedded into the cut (Laguna 1990, 217). At the same time, the use and type of the labret also highlights the distinction between different classes of women. Married women typically had a wooden labret, whereas unmarried women simply had a copper stick or needle (Emmons and De Laguna 1991, 245). Also, noble women typically had labrets made out of more exceptional material such as bone or even ornamental stones and often strived to wear as large a

labret as humanly possible in order to further distinguish themselves from other women of lower classes.

Secondly, architectural structures (although not necessarily modified) were created with the mindset of being able to accommodate large gatherings if necessary while also being able to display crests as a means of reinforcing social standing. For example, the temporary screen that often displayed the crest of the owner and typically partitioned off the family sleeping places could be taken down to convert the house into an amphitheater of sorts (Emmons and De Laguna 1991, 1-2). Even the structure of the house itself reinforced the idea of social organization based on rank by reserving the rooms at the back of the house for the owner and his close kin and separating them from others with the use of crest symbols. Whereas, slaves often held sleeping quarters closer to the front of the house indicating their obviously dismal social status. Not only was the inside structured around societal constraints/expectations but the outside too was often painted with crests designs along with surrounding totem poles, house screens and posts. In fact, the four main house posts themselves along with totem poles and screens were given their own personal names, associated with the totemic decorations, and as such were displayed as possessions that were owned exclusively by the owner's lineage or clan (De Laguna 1990, 207).

Thirdly the language itself has incorporated a sense of social organization in both the use of kinship terms and the distinctions made between different social groups using different suffixes. The Tlingit kinship terms are bifurcate collateral in that they use different names to distinguish their parents from their aunts and uncles along with differentiating the aunts and uncles themselves (father's sister, mother's brother, etc.), in the first ascending generation. However, what's truly interesting is the fact that the terms for parents' brothers and sisters were extended to the parents' clan mates as well (De Laguna 1990, 216). This just further reinforces

clan unity while also promoting a sense of true family just through the use of kinship terms. Another aspect of Tlingit language is that it had distinctions for the different social groups and organizations. For example, rather than referring to a clan as a geographical group, one would use the suffix *na* in comparison with the suffix *qwan*. There are even specific distinctions for villages (*'an*) and houses (otherwise known as lineages-*hIt*) (Olson 1967, 212b). These specific distinctions just further reinforce how the Tlingit differentiate geographical regions from social groups, underscoring that one didn't necessarily entail another.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the social structure of the Tlingit had ramifications in not only their everyday lives but also the way they perceived themselves and the world around them. A strong social base dependent on opposites, both taking care of each other while also providing an outlet for competitiveness, ultimately created social boundaries and expectations; such as, who someone should marry and who should take care of whose funerary rights. Although the rigid social structure allowed little room for upward mobility or any true switching of clans/moieties, the ultimate end all goal was to ground the Tlingit in both their daily lives consisting of societal interactions and influences and their cultural system as a whole.

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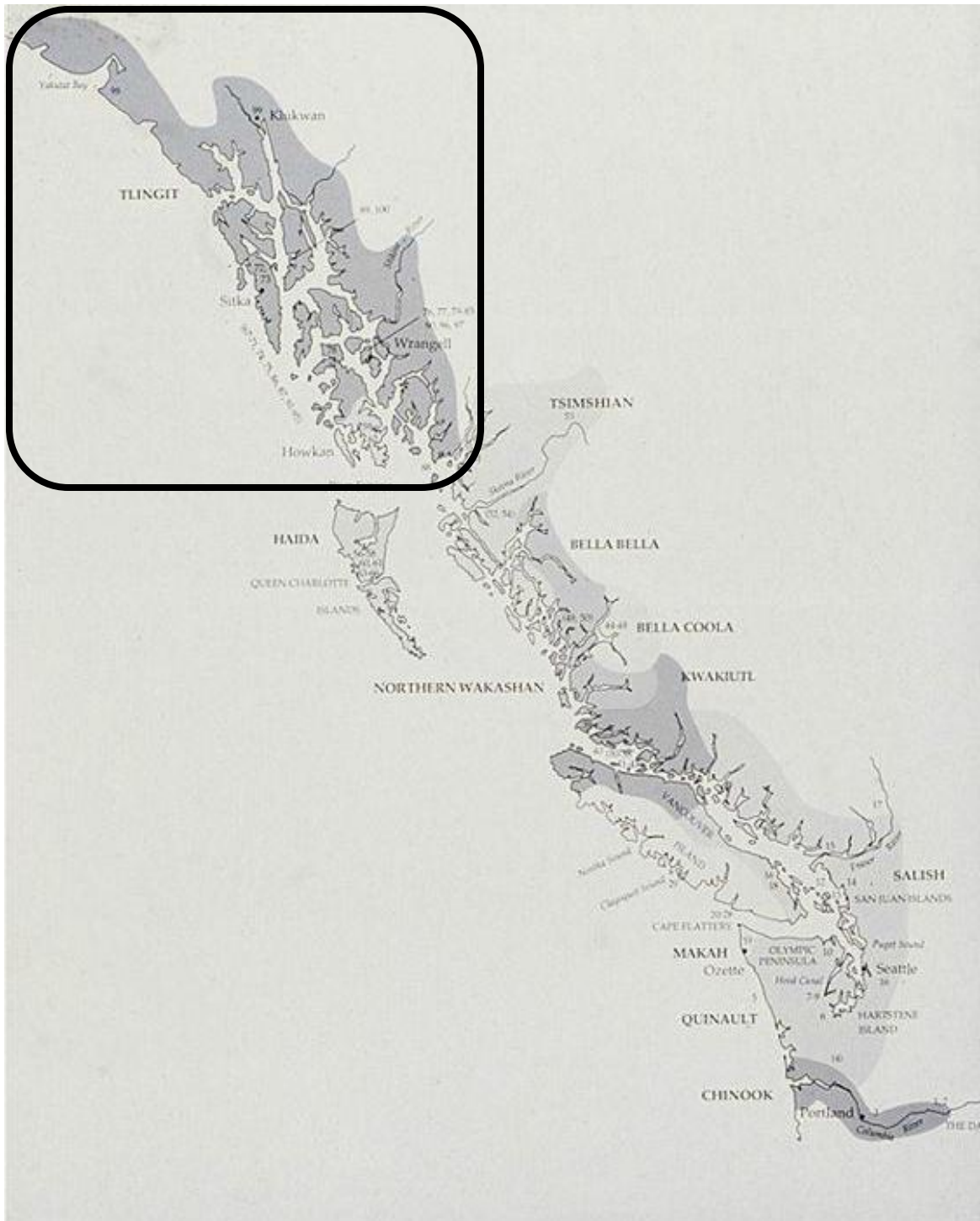
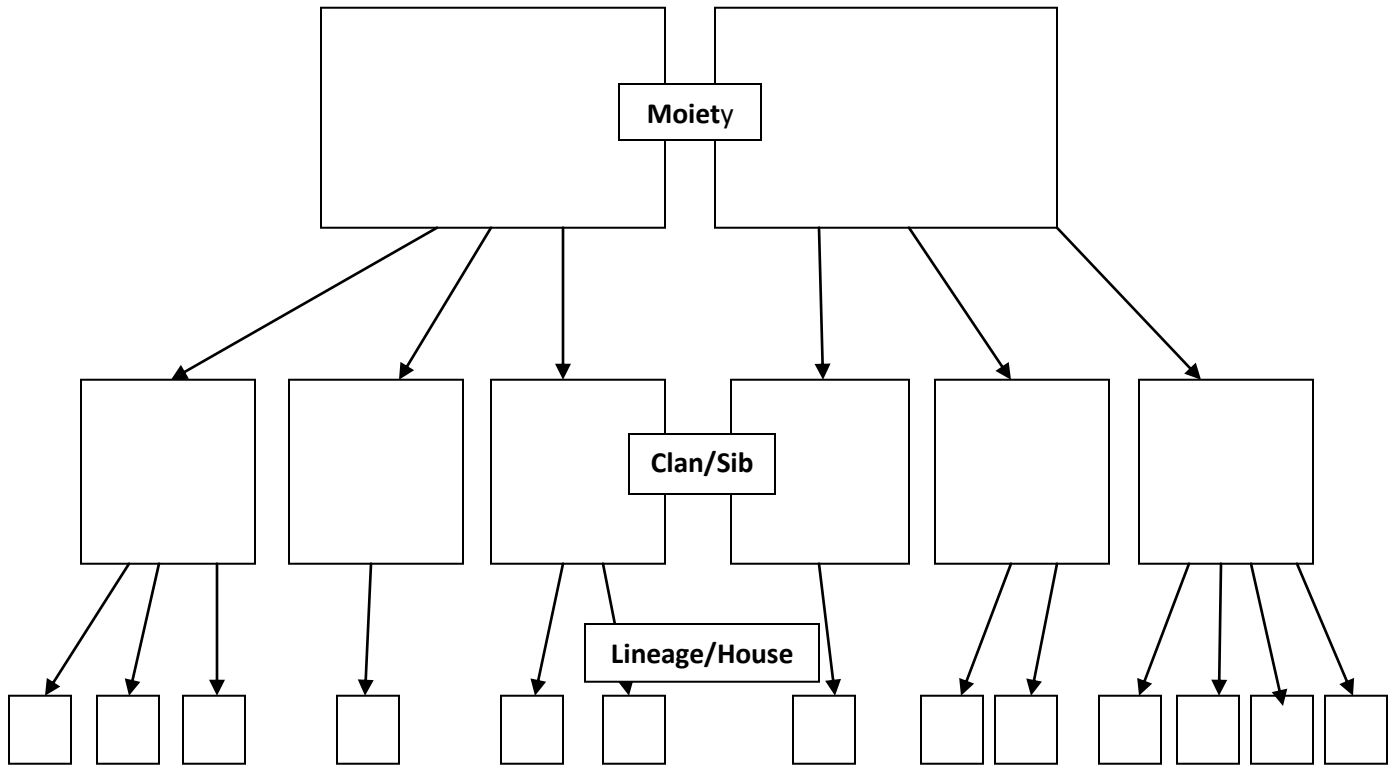


Figure I. Map of Northwest Coast Cultures.



**Figure II. Example of Tlingit Social Organization.**



Figure III. Tlingit Eagle War Helmet.





Figure IV. Example of Ceremonial Crest Wear- Frog Clan Hat.



**Figure V. Human Face Mask with Labret.**