

BUTTON BLANKETS AS SYMBOLS OF CULTURAL DECLINE

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As a summary of my thoughts concerning button blankets, I will present in this paper, button blankets made by aboriginal Northwest Coast peoples, as symbols of their cultural decline. Being an artist who makes blankets, of which the materials are acquired through economic trade, I have a strong personal identification with the objects known collectively as button blankets. Further, with the current destruction of the natural world and threat of nuclear holocaust, I feel direct empathy to the Northwest Coast peoples experience of cultural and environmental destruction. As an artist who is involved in what I believe to be a culture in collapse, it is relevant to examine those historic objects which are, at least partially, the result and embodiment of cultural change and decline. While my own blankets and the Button Blankets of the Northwest Coast contain various pictorial images which carry personal and social symbolic content, they are both made from forces and materials that are economically and industrially dependent. It is from this personal involvement with the blanket format, and identification with the forces allowing creation of Button Blankets and their symbolic content of cultural decline, that I find here reason to write.

Button Blankets, while containing great power, mystery, and novel use of materials, are the direct result of contact and consequent trade with white immigrants to the Northwest Coast of the North American Continent. The plentiful natural resources of this geographical area, (roughly defined as the Coastal area extending from Southeastern Alaska south to Puget Sound) made trade with white outsiders lucrative. As a result, the native population of this area was able to acquire large amounts of imported trade

goods, a large percentage of these goods being Hudson's Bay Blankets and buttons. Originally forms of trade currency, these blankets and buttons were soon exploited for use in the creation of objects significant to the native population.

With white contact, starting in the late eighteenth century through traders and missionaries from America, England, France, and Russia, Northwest tribal groups were placed in competition with these outside forces for the obtainment of needed natural resources. Prior to white contact, Northwest Coast peoples were self-sufficient; capable of producing and manufacturing, from their environment, all goods and services needed for the maintenance and proliferation of their culture. White contact, while bringing in trade and new forms of material wealth, placed high demands on the areas natural resources and the native population itself. Also, white contact brought disease and wage/labor employment to the area. Each of these influences literally decimated the native Northwest Coast population; "In one case on Prince of Wales Island a small pox epidemic in 1836 dropped the native population of this area from 10,000 to about 6,000."¹ No longer having unlimited access to the natural environment or having an abundance of resources in those areas remaining accessible, and from the loss of population necessary to produce from this natural environment, the native population could no longer continue a semblance of pre-white existence. Essentially dependent on white trade goods and employment, the native population could no longer compete with a white culture that was quickly becoming dominant. It is within these conditions that the Button Blanket is born and it is from this that I feel the Button Blanket symbolizes cultural

1. Aurel Krause, The Tlingit Indians (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1956), page 43.

decline.

Before white contact and existing up through the 1920's, there were three methods for the distribution of goods and services for the Northwest Tribal groups (the fundamental activity here is the transfer of ownership); these methods are, "1) Those connected with the sharing of the collectively produced product, 2) The institutions of exchange, and 3) The system of economic rights and privileges."² Of concern here, and having relevance to the creation, use and redistribution of Button Blankets are the institutions of exchange and the system of economic rights and privileges, both of which are determined and given form during the Potlatch ceremony.

"The term Potlatch comes from the Chinook jargon introduced by traders along the Northwest Coast. Its primary function revolved around the rights, obligations, and privileges of chieftainship. A living chief gave a potlatch to mourn the death of the old and to establish his own claim to the inheritance. A potlatch could also commemorate a fearless deed, or the construction by a lesser or greater chief of a new house, the elaborateness of the party usually being commensurate with the status of the chief."³ "In its simplest form the potlatch might be described as a payment party, elaborately trimmed with feasting, singing, dancing, and social conviviality, called for the purpose of distributing gifts of value for services rendered."⁴ In the potlatch, opposite clans (wolf and raven for example) work for each other and from this labor, payment is given in the form of blankets, copper, and other objects of value. "Such labor was deemed a

2. Kalervo Oberg, The Social Economy of the Tlingit Indians (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1973), page 5.

3. Aurel Krause, The Tlingit Indians (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1956), page 62.

4. Polly Miller and Leon Gordon Miller, Lost Heritage of Alaska (New York, The World Publishing Company, 1967), page 6. This book is hereafter cited as Miller.

privilege. The payment, made in the pleasurable and festive form of a potlatch, was accepted as an expression of appreciation and thanks."⁵

Essentially it is the Potlatch ceremony which held the aboriginal Northwest Coast culture together and which Button Blankets were created for. Before white contact, the Potlatch served as a system which ensured adequate distribution of goods and services during both plentiful and impoverished periods. After white contact, the potlatch no longer served to redistribute goods through a stable cultural system. Rather, it becomes a ceremony symbolic of decline and desperation through imbalanced excess and poverty. White contact brought about an enormous influx of essentially unnecessary material wealth of goods from trade and resulted in the dramatic drop of the native population. The potlatch, after white intervention, was no longer a ceremony of cultural and environmental balance and relevance. No longer having the abundant natural resources of pre-white contact, nor the population necessary to continue utilizing and exploiting their environment, a magnification of these problems occurs both within the Button Blankets and the overall potlatch ceremony.

Attempting to regain the lost population of their tribe, clan and house groups through showing material wealth, remaining tribal members began acquiring larger and larger amounts of trade goods, of which blankets and buttons were an abundant part.

It is from surplus, caused by and symbolic of cultural decline and imbalance, that the material of the Button Blankets were made available. Carrying symbolic clan imagery, derivative of the indigenous Chilkat blankets (not actually a blanket, but a shawl-like robe) and other totemic objects, the applique and button work on Button Blankets symbolize the imbalance of

5. Miller, page 225.

excess and poverty. It is my contention that the applique work (normally red on black), with its characteristic economy and flatness symbolize a certain impoverishment. The buttons, of which there are typically hundreds on a blanket, symbolize, I think, the forces of excess and unnecessary material wealth. As conjecture, I also consider the colors of red and black to embody the emotional content of despair and decline. Furthermore, the impact of the populations decline and the loss of natural resources resulted in the replacement of the Chilkat blanket with the more easily made and numerous Button Blankets. The Chilkat blanket, considered by many to be equal to the best weaving of the ancient Peruvians and Mexicans, is no longer after white contact, the dominant ceremonial robe, but is replaced by the Button Blanket. As the Button Blankets are replacement for the indigenous and significant woven Chilkat blanket, this replacement magnifies the symbolic content of culture decline contained in Button Blankets.

In summary, it is from the result of white contact, which brought about new wealth, population decline and environment pressure to the native Northwest Coast peoples, that Button blankets are created. The increase of unnecessary material wealth, and the decimation of the native population from disease and wage/labor employment outside the village, were factors which signaled the decline of the native Northwest Coast people. While still maintaining the remnants of the native culture within the confines of western society the native people of the Northwest Coast continue to make Button Blankets and other ceremonial artifacts.

Being kept alive by a skeletal group of people, the tradition and the object of the Button Blanket continues to function as a symbol of cultural decline and destruction. Having once served to embody and carry the values and symbols of the native culture, Button Blankets today, also symbolize the

larger cultural collapse of western civilization. As with my own blankets, Button Blankets of today no longer serve in a larger ceremonial or ritual capacity and are essentially objects of personal involvement, adornment and enrichment. Although I would like to believe that Button Blankets carry the potential to bring about unity and new cultural harmony, the possibility for this hope seems unlikely. Being the result of the forces of decline, there is little likelihood of significant positive cultural change from Button Blankets. The power and domination of technology and rampant industrialization appear unaffected by the meaning and value contained in Button Blankets and the blankets I make as well. While the situation appears desperate, the act of making blankets, button or otherwise, certainly acts as commentary on the cultural decline and as making blankets is an example of a choice for living, there is in that choice some hope.

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