The potlatch is a traditional gathering held by many of the coastal aboriginal groups. The word itself (may be derived from the “Nootka” word pachitle) is a “Chinook”word that means "to give".

*Nootka = Nuu-chah-nulth (Captain Cook met with them in 1778)*

*Chinook = trade jargon used between the First Nations people and the European fur traders in the 1800's*

* *Cultus Lake….cultus means bad*
* *Skookumchuck…Skookum means strong…chuck means water*
* *Hyack Festival in New Westminster…Hyack mean be quick, hurry*

The Gitskan today call the same event *The Feast*, and the Cowichan know it as the *Great Deed*. The different names of the potlatch reflect both the different languages and cultures which share this tradition, as well as indicating some of the different occasions for which a potlatch is held.

A potlatch was the primary means for the Pacific Coast peoples to bear witness, a means of confirming in public any changes in status such as marriages, birth, death, and coming of age.

The potlatch was a primary means of distributing wealth. The ceremony culminated with the host presenting gifts to every guest which strictly corresponded with each individual's social rank. Gifts could include canoes, slaves, carved dishes and eulachon oil.

The more wealth distributed the higher the prestige conferred upon the host. In return, the higher status guests were expected to hold their own potlatches where they would give even more lavishly. Thus, even if an individual hosting a potlatch completely impoverished himself, he could expect the return of wealth when he attended subsequent potlatches as a guest.

The federal government outlawed potlatches in 1884 but the ceremony continued in many communities, and in 1951 the law was deleted from the revised Indian Act.

<https://royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/exhibits/bc-archives-time-machine/galler07/frames/potlatch.htm>