



[First Peoples Menu](#)
[The Canada Site.com](#)
[Boer War Museum](#)
[Coming Back Alive](#)
[Goldi Productions Ltd](#)
[The Store](#)
[Email Us](#)

[First Peoples](#)
[Contact & Conflict](#)
[Treaties & Change](#)
[The Metis & Rebellion](#)
[Production Credits](#)

Northwest Coastal People

- | | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|
| Groups in this Region | Environment / Housing | Food / Hunting / Tools | Transportation / Migration | Religion / Ceremonies / Art / Clothing | Tribal Relations / War |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|

The Northwest Coastal People lived on the west coast of Canada, occupying the western shore and the islands of British Columbia, and reaching up into the Yukon.

Family

- In Northwest Coast culture, there were specific roles for both the men and women.
- Men were responsible for all the hunting and fishing.
- Men also did all the building (longhouses) and carving (canoes, totem poles).
- Women stayed near the home, doing work on land.
- The women were responsible for all of the chores related to keeping the home: they cleaned, cooked, and looked after the children.
- Women dug for clams and shellfish, and collected berries from nearby forests.
- The women also pounded and softened cedar bark for weaving and making clothes.
- Marriages were always between people from different clans. When a man decided to marry a woman, he paid her father an agreed amount before the wedding.
- After the birth of the couple's first child (born into the mother's clan), the wife's clan paid her husband an amount equal to the initial wedding payment. After the payment, then the marriage was annulled and the woman could chose to stay with her hussband or leave him.



Men did all the carving



Haida woman weaving



Tsimshian children



Kwakwak'wakw wedding party

Social Structure / Leadership

- The Northwest Coast people never developed a democracy. Instead, their society was ruled by wealth. The wealthiest clan had the most power.
- Their society included different classes: nobles, commoners, and slaves (acquired through War or purchase).
- Northwest Coast groups were divided into basic social units: extended families with a common ancestor. In these family groups, the oldest and highest ranking individual (closest link to the common ancestor) was named the Chief of the family. Then within each family, a person's rank was determined by their relationship with the Chief.
- Chiefs were responsible for distributing wealth amongst the people. Those who had a higher social status received more, all the way down to the lowest ranked individual.
- Groups of families lived together, forming larger villages. Within each village, families were also ranked. The Chief of the most powerful family also became the village Chief.
- Village Chief displayed his family's crest on the village totem poles.
- All of the groups of Northwest Coast people are divided into two or more family 'clans'. The Tlingit and Haida, for example, had two clans: the Raven and the Eagle clans, while the Tsimshian had four: the Raven, Wolf, Eagle, and Killer Whale.
- Clan membership was always inherited through the mother's side of the family.
- A person always married outside of their own clan.
- Membership was proclaimed through: crests, totem poles, canoes, cedar boxes, masks.



Tsimshian high class individuals

- One thing that set the Northwest Coast people apart from other First Peoples groups was their recognized ownership of land and property. Families claimed sites for fishing and gathering, and owned land. The amount of property that a family owned further contributed to their amassed wealth.



Northwest Coast Chief



Raven clan totem



Masset, Haida village



Crest of Haida Raven clan

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Environment / Housing

Food / Hunting / Tools

Transportation / Migration

Religion / Ceremonies / Art / Clothing

Tribal Relations / War

[Back to the top](#)

[Back to Canada's First Peoples Menu](#)

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