Kwakiutl

North American Indians who traditionally lived in what is now British Columbia, Canada, along the shores of the waterways between Vancouver Island and the mainland. Their name for themselves means “those who speak Kwakwala.” Although the name Kwakiutl is often applied to all the peoples of that group, it is the name of only one band of Kwakwaka’wakw. They speak a Wakashan language that includes three major dialects: Haisla, spoken on the Gardner Canal and Douglas Channel; Heiltsuq, spoken from Gardner Canal to Rivers Inlet; and southern Kwakiutl, spoken from Rivers Inlet to Cape Mudge on the mainland and on the northern end of Vancouver Island. The Kwakiutl are culturally and linguistically related to the Nuu-chah-nulth. In 2014 the 15 nations and bands that compose the Kwakwaka’wakw numbered about 7,700.

The Kwakiutl contributed extensively to the early development of anthropology as the subjects of ethnographic studies by pioneering scholar Franz Boas. In more than 5,000 pages written over almost half a century, Boas described and analyzed nearly every aspect of Kwakiutl culture and its
relationships to other Northwest Coast Indians with whom the tribe shared general features of technology, economy, art, myths, and religion.

Traditionally, the Kwakiutl subsisted mainly by fishing and had a technology based on woodworking. Their society was stratified by rank, which was determined primarily by the inheritance of names and privileges; the latter could include the right to sing certain songs, use certain crests, and wear particular ceremonial masks.

The potlatch, a ceremonial distribution of property and gifts unique to Northwest Coast peoples, was elaborately developed by the southern Kwakiutl. Their potlatches were often combined with performances by dancing societies, each society having a series of dances that dramatized ancestral interactions with supernatural beings. Those beings were portrayed as giving gifts of ceremonial prerogatives such as songs, dances, and names, which became hereditary property.