

The First Californians: Native Cultures

California has a greater variety of geographical regions, landforms, and climates than any area of comparable size in what is now the United States. Likewise, an extraordinary cultural diversity prevailed among the Indian people of California. Styles of housing, dress, and transportation varied from one region to the other. Kinship systems and forms of political organization differed throughout the state, as did religious beliefs and practices.

In an effort to describe the great diversity of California Native communities, scholars have divided the state into six geographically distinct "culture areas." The residents of each culture area shared many common traits, such as dress, housing, manufacturing methods, and other routine activities.

A Diverse People in a Diverse Land



California has a greater variety of geographical regions, landforms, and climates than any area of comparable size in what is now the United States. Likewise, an extraordinary cultural diversity prevailed among the Indian people of California.

Styles of housing, dress, and transportation varied from one region to the other. Kinship systems and forms of political organization differed throughout the state, as did religious beliefs and practices.

Origins and Antiquity

According to the traditional beliefs of California Indians, they are a people who were created here and who have lived forever in their ancestral homelands. Each culture has its own creation story. Widely differing versions of creation flourish even within individual communities. The Native people recognize the unlikelihood of agreement on matters of such importance: "This is how we tell it; they tell it differently." Most anthropologists believe that the aboriginal population of California descended from ancient people who crossed into North America from Asia over the land bridge connecting the

two continents during the glaciations of the late Pleistocene Epoch.

No one knows when those first people reached California, but it is likely that Native Americans were living here for fifteen thousand years before European explorers first sailed along the California coast in the sixteenth century.

Food and Population

Most California Indians lived entirely by hunting and gathering the abundant resources provided by nature. Yet these hunter-gatherers engaged in an array of sophisticated practices to manage their resources and enhance the yield of potential food sources. They pruned plants and trees, culled animal and insect populations, and practiced periodic burning

of groundcover to replenish the soil. The Cahuilla, whose homeland includes the northern Colorado Desert, also practiced agriculture. In areas where water was scarce, the Cahuilla dug deep wells in the desert sand. By banking the sand around the wells, they created small pools. They used the water to grow corn, squash, beans, and melons. Likewise, the Mojaves

and the Yumas planted seeds of corn, bean, and pumpkins in the mud left by the annual floodwaters along the lower Colorado. The staple throughout much of California was the acorn, a nutritious food source that has a higher caloric content than wheat. Several species of oaks in central California annually produce more than a million tons of acorns, far more than could be gathered or consumed. Large game--including deer, antelope, elk, sheep, and bear--were present over more than half of the state. Fish were abundant in the many streams and rivers. The actual number of persons supported by these various activities, before the coming of Europeans, can never be precisely determined.

According to the most reliable contemporary estimates, the indigenous population of California was at least 300,000. This means that the Native population in California before

European contact was much greater than the average for other areas in what is now the United States.

Languages and Tribes

The Indians of California spoke perhaps as many as one hundred different languages. Seventy percent of these sounded as different from each other as English and Cantonese.

No area of comparable size in North America, or perhaps in the world, contained a greater variety of Native languages and cultures than did aboriginal California.

Anthropologists and linguists classify the California Native languages into seven stocks--Hokan, Penutian, Utian, Algic, Na-Dene, Uto-Aztecan, and Yukian. Each of these stocks includes several language families that are further divided into individual languages. Within the Pomoan family, for instance, are seven distinct languages--Northern,

Northeastern, Eastern, Central, Southeastern, Southern, and Kashaya Pomo. In many areas, the languages were spoken in different regional dialects. About half of the state's Native languages are no longer spoken. Most of the languages still in use today are spoken fluently by only a handful of elders. California's Native people, however, are

increasingly active in a wide range of activities to revive and preserve their traditional languages. Anthropologists have attempted various definitions of the "tribe" in California. It may be considered a body of people who occupied a distinct territory and shared a similar culture. On this basis, there were more than one hundred such tribes. The tribes themselves were divided into smaller "tribelets," groups of several neighboring villages, perhaps with a principal village and three or four smaller ones. As many as five hundred of these autonomous land-owning communities flourished in California.



The Southern Culture Area

Some of the most populous tribes in California were located in the southern culture area. Villages along the southern coast, sustained by the great abundance of sea life, contained as many as two thousand residents each.



Among the many tribes in the southern culture area are the Kumeyaay (Diegueno), Cahuilla, Tongva (Gabrielino), and Chumash.

Kumeyaay (Diegueno)



The territory of the Kumeyaay extended over much of extreme southern California and the northern parts of the Baja California peninsula. Their homeland included coastal, mountain, and desert regions.

Like many of their southern California neighbors, the Kumeyaay seasonally exploited various ecological niches. Each village community engaged in an annual migration, following the ripening of major plants within their territory. In the spring, the Kumeyaay gathered budding plants and small game in the canyons and lower foothills. In the early summer they harvested and dried ripening cactus fruits for winter storage. In July and

August they moved into the higher elevations to gather ripening seeds, wild plums, and other fruits. They harvested acorns and piñon nuts in the fall before returning to their winter villages.

The Tongva (Gabrielino)

The homeland of the Tongva included all of present-day Los Angeles and much of neighboring Orange County as well as parts of the offshore islands of San Clemente, Santa Catalina, and San Nicolas.



Tongva society was divided into distinct social classes. The elite included the families of the headmen and other wealthy individuals. The remainder of the population was divided between a middle class of affluent families and a lower class of families of more modest means.

Marriage among the Tongva was generally between individuals from the same social class. On her wedding day, a Tongva bride was adorned with beads, skins, paint, and flowers. She was carried halfway to her future husband's home by her family and friends who danced and sang along the way. The groom's relatives met the entourage and carried the bride the rest of the way. They placed the bride beside the groom and poured baskets of seeds over their heads to ensure a rich and bountiful life together.

Cahuilla

The Cahuilla occupied a diverse territory of canyons, mountain passes, and windswept deserts that stretched from the Chocolate Mountains in the south to the San Bernardino Mountains in the north.

The Cahuilla supplemented traditional hunting and gathering activities with some limited agriculture. Hunters shot rabbits and other small game with bows and arrows, killed them with throwing sticks, or captured them with nets and snares. Women gathered acorns, mesquite pods, piñon nuts, and the fruit of various species of cacti. When water supplies were sufficient, the Cahuilla planted crops of corn, beans, squash, and melons.

Like other peoples of the American Southwest, the Cahuilla produced both pottery and basketry. They fashioned their pottery by coiling narrow ropes of clay and smoothing the sides with a rounded stone and wooden paddle. The finished product, usually thin and brittle, was painted or incised with geometric designs.

The Chumash

The Chumash occupied an expansive territory along the southern California coast, from Malibu Canyon in the south to Estero Bay in the north, and as far inland as the western San Joaquin Valley. Also included in Chumash territory were the large offshore islands--San Miguel, Santa Rosa, Santa Cruz, and Anacapa.



Chumash villages were among the largest in California, some containing as many as two thousands residents. Their homes were made of poles driven into the ground and arched into the center, overlaid with a thatch of interwoven grasses, tules, and ferns. In addition to family homes, the typical Chumash village also included a storehouse, sweathouse, cemetery, ceremonial enclosure, and playing field.

The Chumash also produced some of the most colorful and spectacular rock paintings in North America. The extant paintings, found in caves and on rock outcroppings throughout southern California, are almost always abstract in design; even when life forms are depicted they are highly stylized and imaginative.

Central California Culture Area

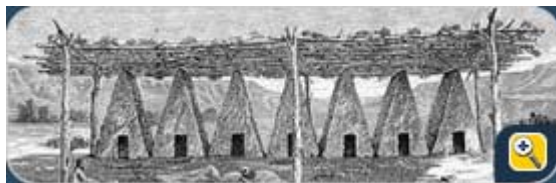
The central culture area covered about half the present territory of California and included three-fifths of all the Native people.

Along the central coast and throughout the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys the climate was mild, and plant and animal life was abundant. Tribal dress and housing reflected the mild climate, and both were often minimal. Material-culture items, such as weapons and tools, were generally simple and unornamented, but in basketry the people of the central area exceeded all others in skill and accomplishment.



The basic unit of political organization was the village community, or tribelet, comprising several small villages with an area of two hundred to three hundred square miles. The acknowledged leader or chief of a tribelet customarily resided in the community's principal village. There was a strong sense of territoriality among the various tribes of the central area, and trespassing was often met by forceful opposition. Warfare, however, was rare and usually limited to small conflicts with few casualties.

The Yokuts



The Yokuts occupied the San Joaquin Valley from the Kern Lake area in the south to the mouth of the San Joaquin River in the north. Within this vast territory were three distinct cultural groups: the Southern Valley, Northern Valley, and Foothill Yokuts.

The southern San Joaquin Valley once was filled with tule-covered wetlands, an area teeming with aquatic birds, migrating ducks and geese, schools of trout and perch, and great herds of tule elk and pronghorn



antelope. The Southern Valley Yokuts fished from canoe-shaped rafts or balsas made of dried tules lashed together.

The Northern Valley Yokuts relied heavily on salmon and acorns for subsistence. Using harpoons and dragnets, they caught spawning salmon in the fall and spring. From the groves of valley oaks, they gathered great quantities of acorns that were ground into meal and cooked as a thick soup or gruel.

The mountainous territory of the Foothill Yokuts supplied them with a wide variety of food resources: deer, quail, acorns, mussels, trout, ducks, wild oats, manzanita berries, pine nuts, rabbits, and ground squirrels. The Foothill Yokuts developed several ingenious strategies for capturing game. They stalked their prey wearing disguises made of deer heads, antlers, and skins. They caught quail by constructing long fences with noose traps, powered by bent sticks under tension, set at openings every twenty to fifty feet.

The Miwok



The Miwok were one of the most populous groups in California, occupying areas from the Pacific Coast to the foothills of the Sierra Nevada. They included several major linguistic and cultural groups, each of which was further divided into distinct subgroups and numerous individual tribelets.

Variations in Miwok architecture reflected the great diversity of local conditions and materials within Miwok territory. Among the Miwok who lived in the Sacramento Valley, the more substantial families lived in semisubterranean earth-covered homes. In the upper foothills of the Sierra Nevada, houses were made of three or four layers of bark slabs. The homes of the Coast Miwok were built of interlocking poles of willow or driftwood to which were lashed horizontal poles. Bunches of grass or reeds were tied in rows of thatch on the pole frame.



The Maidu

The Maidu language was spoken by groups variously known as the Maidu, Konkow, and Nisenan. Each group spoke related but distinct forms of the Maidu language.

The usual settlement pattern among the Maidu was a cluster of three to five small villages around a more populous, centrally located village. Lands for hunting and fishing were held in common by the tribelet or village-community. Each tribelet was an autonomous entity and served as the primary unit of political organization. The leader played a fairly

minor role in the day-to-day affairs of the community and served primarily during times of war or in negotiations for peace.

The Pomo



The northern California people known collectively as the Pomo were actually seven different cultural groups, each speaking distinctly different languages within the Hokan linguistic family.

Their territory centered on the valley of the Russian River and covered nearly all of the river's draining basin. The most remarkable technological achievement of the Pomo was their basketry. The baskets of California Indians are generally of the highest quality, and the Pomo are the best known of the California basketmakers.

Pomo baskets, including both twined and coiled ware, were executed in a great variety of shapes from flat plate styles to nearly perfect spheres. Intricate geometrical and banded patterns were often outlined with brightly colored feathers, plumes, beads, and shells.

The Northwestern Culture Area

The northwestern culture area was part of the larger North Pacific Coast culture that extended from California to Alaska. Northwestern California is an area with a bold and craggy coastline and dense woodlands of towering coast redwoods. Rainfall here is far greater than elsewhere in the state.

One of the distinctive features of the northwestern culture area was the great value placed upon the accumulation of material wealth. A family's social status was determined by its possession of conspicuous objects of wealth, such as woodpecker scalps, large obsidian blades, white deerskins, or strips of the tubular mollusk shells known as dentalia. Political leadership in the northwest rested upon the richest men, who surrounded themselves with their relatives.

Included among the people of the northwestern cultural area were the Yurok ,Hupa , and Shasta .

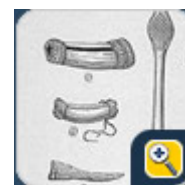
The Yurok



The Yurok lived on the Pacific coast of northwestern California. Many of their villages were either on lagoons or at the mouths of streams; others were along the lower course of the Klamath River.

The Yurok placed a great emphasis on accumulating wealth and asserting status. The wealthiest members of Yurok society owned multiple sets of dance regalia and served as hosts for ceremonial gatherings. They wore distinctive clothing, such as highly decorative basketry caps, as a means of displaying their wealth. Even their style of speech was more elaborate than the contracted version spoken by commoners.

The natural resources of northwestern California were abundant, permitting the Yurok to live in permanent, year-round villages. They harvested salmon, sturgeon, eel, surf fish, shellfish, sea lions, deer, elk, and acorns. Dense redwood forests provided the Yurok with wood for their distinctive split-plank houses, constructed with either single-pitched or double-pitched roofs. Redwood also was used for the manufacture of a variety of household items, such as wooden stools, storage boxes, and cooking implements. Using stone adzes and wedges, Yurok craftsmen carved blunt-ended dugout canoes from large redwood logs.



The Hupa

The traditional territory of the Hupa people centers on the Hoopa Valley of northwestern California and includes all of the lower course of the Trinity River.

Social rank among the Hupa was calculated almost exclusively upon the basis of wealth. Wealthy families retained their privileged positions by passing on their fortunes from one generation to the next.

The most important items in Hupa diet were salmon and acorns. The salmon were caught in the spring and fall as they returned to the Trinity River to spawn.

Hupa religious practice included world-renewal rituals known as the White Deerskin and Jumping Dances. These ceremonies were performed each year, during the late summer or early fall, to renew the world, and to ward off disease, famine, or other disasters in the coming year. These annual events included elaborate dance regalia, the display of wealth objects, and the recitation of long narratives.



The Shasta

The Shasta people of northwestern California occupied a rugged mountain area. Their villages were mainly in river valleys, often at the mouths of creeks flowing into larger rivers.

Individual families within a typical Shasta village owned their own hunting and fishing grounds, tobacco plots, and oak trees. Real estate was passed on from generation to

generation along the male line. The medium of exchange for bridal purchases and other transactions was money in the form of clamshell disks and dentalia.

The Shasta participated in extensive trade with their neighbors who traveled to Shasta territory along trails that crossed northwestern California. They obtained pine nut necklaces from their southern neighbors, the Wintu, and unworked obsidian from the Achumawi, their neighbors to the east. The main trading partners for the Shasta were the Karok, Hupa, and Yurok from whom they obtained baskets, dentalia, abalone, and other shells in exchange for obsidian blades, juniper beads, and Wintu pine nut beads.

The Northeastern Culture Area

Anthropologists generally consider the northeastern culture area of California to be part of the periphery of the Columbia-Fraser Plateau culture area that extends far to the north

Conditions in northeastern California varied considerably. A few tribes lived in richly endowed lands and enjoyed a way of life similar to that of their northwest neighbors. Most, however, subsisted in more desolate areas where food was often scarce and the people had to spend a large portion of their time hunting small game and gathering seeds and roots. In contrast to the densely populated heartland of central California, much of the northeastern corner of the state was only thinly settled.

Among the people of the northeastern culture area were the Achumawi and Atsugewi.

The Achumawi

The territory of the Achumawi included nearly all of the lands along the westward-flowing Pit River.

Early European American settlers in northeastern California noted numerous pitfalls along animal trails in the area. From these pitfalls, dug by the Indians to trap deer, the settlers named the Pit river and subsequently called the Achumawi the Pit River Indians. Deer were abundant in northeastern California and provided the Achumawi with a plentiful supply of venison as well as deerskin for the manufacture of quivers, caps, capes, skirts, belts, moccasins, and leggings.

The life cycle of the Achumawi included an elaborate puberty ceremony for girls and a somewhat more modest affair for boys. Marriage was accompanied by an exchange of gifts between the two families, regarded as a form of mutual purchase. Death was the occasion of great mourning. Close relatives of the deceased shaved their hair and covered their heads with pitch. The body and all the personal property of the dead were burned.

Shamans played a key role in Achumawi culture. They obtained their healing ability from their tamakomi, variously translated as "medicine" or "power." About half of all Achumawi shamans were women.

The Atsugewi

The homeland of the Atsugewi included the rugged valleys north of Mount Lassen and the barren plains to the east. Perhaps because of their difficult environment, the Atsugewi placed a high value on hard work. Parents taught their children to avoid laziness. The man who worked hard and became rich was considered the social ideal.

The diet of the Atsugewi included a wide variety of plants and animals. Trout and other fish were gathered in baskets and nets in the rivers and lakes of Atsugewi territory. Small game such as rabbits often were hunted in groups. Larger game, such as deer and antelope, usually were hunted by individual hunters who turned over their kill to the village headman for general distribution.

The rhythm of Atsugewi life included ample opportunities for play and celebration. Every sixth day usually was set aside as a time of rest. The great celebration of the year was the autumnal pakapi, or "big time," called by a village headman when he felt that sufficient food had been accumulated for the coming winter months. Invitations were sent to the people of neighboring villages to come and share in the festivities.

The Great Basin

The Great Basin culture area of California included most of the lands along the present eastern border of the state and the eastern deserts of southern California. This area is at the western periphery of a much larger culture area that extends across Nevada and Utah. Food and even water are scarce in much of the area.

To sustain themselves, many groups in the Great Basin had to move frequently in search of such game as desert rats and rabbits. Included in the Great Basin culture area are the Tubatulabal and the Owens Valley Paiute.

The Tubatulabal

The homeland of the Tubatulabal was the southern foothills of the Sierra Nevada, especially that part drained by the upper Kern River. The Tubatulabal were divided into three distinct bands, each of which spoke a different version of the Tubatulabal language.

Each of the Tubatulabal bands had a high level of internal unity and was led by a headman or timiwal. The timiwal was appointed by a council of elders and usually served a life term. His powers were limited, however, and he functioned primarily as a counselor and arbitrator. The timiwal helped to settle disputes within the band and served as the band's representative in dealing with neighboring groups.

The staples of the Tubatulabal diet were acorns, gathered in the early fall from six different species of oaks, and piñon nuts, gathered in the late fall from trees on the eastern slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Various small seeds, berries, and tubers were gathered throughout the year. Also important were the fish caught in the mountain streams and

rivers of Tubatulabal territory. The major game animals were deer, bear, mountain lion, mountain sheep, and antelope.

The Owens Valley Paiute

The homeland of the Owens Valley Paiute, also known as the Mono Paiute, is a territory with very little rainfall. Many short rivers flow eastward from the Sierra Nevada, but much of the water evaporates soon after reaching the valley floor. Vegetation is scarce in the lowlands and scattered growths of trees in the higher mountains are characteristic.

The Owens Valley Paiute were divided into relatively small bands. Of necessity, the bands were migratory, frequently shifting from place to place in search of water and food. The men hunted animals of all sizes, and the women gathered seeds, nuts, and fruits. The Paiute also developed a distinctive form of agriculture based on communal labor. They constructed ditches and dams to irrigate various wild plants, thus increasing their productivity.



The Colorado River Culture Area

The Colorado River culture area of California was on the western periphery of the greater Southwest culture area. Like other peoples of the Southwest, the California Indians along the Colorado River supplemented their hunting and gathering activities with agriculture. They cultivated crops of corn, beans, and pumpkins in the fertile flood plains along the river.

The tribes of this area regarded themselves more as national entities, unlike the village- or tribelet-oriented people elsewhere in the state. The people of the Colorado River area also traveled extensively outside of their own territory, carrying trade goods to the coast and into the southern San Joaquin Valley.

The peoples of the Colorado River culture area include the Quechan (Yuma), Halchidhoma, and Mohave.