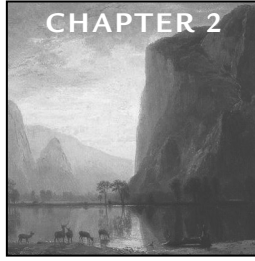


## CHAPTER 2



# The Original Californians

“In the beginning there was no sun, no moon, no stars. All was dark, and everywhere there was only water.” So begins a creation story told by the Maidu Indians of California.

According to the traditional beliefs of many of the state’s native people, the California Indians were created and have lived forever in their ancestral homeland. Anthropologists, however, believe that the aboriginal population of California descended from ancient peoples who crossed into North America from Asia over the land bridge connecting the two continents during the glaciations of the late Pleistocene Epoch. Archaeologists estimate that human beings have been living in California for at least 12,000 years—and, perhaps for 15,000 years or more.

Whatever the origins of the first Californians, the archaeological record reveals a process of dynamic change and adaptation during thousands of years of human occupation. At the time of the first European contact in the sixteenth century, native people were living in each of the diverse regions of California. Every part of the landscape was imbued with human meaning; each mountain and river had a name. What the earliest European explorers labeled “wilderness” was a human homeland—a land abounding with sacred sites, work areas, trails, villages, favored gathering and hunting grounds.

Because their technology did not include metal implements, the California Indians represented a survival of the Stone Age. But the causes and the meaning of this fact have been much misunderstood, largely because of the persistence of rather primitive ideas about the nature of primitive people and, particularly, the persistence of *racism*—the belief that some races are biologically, morally, and intellectually inferior to others. Among competent ethnologists, the race theories underlying this pattern of thought have long been discredited. Indeed, the very notion of race is now understood to be a social and cultural concept rather than a biological one. Scientists have found that the differences between people of the same racial group are often greater than those between members of different groups. All persons everywhere

share 99.9 percent of their genetic code. “Most scholars today would agree that what ‘race’ signifies is changeable,” historian Sucheng Chan has noted, “and is socially constructed and historically determined.”

The survival of a Stone Age culture in California was not the result of any hereditary biological limitations on the potential of the Indians as a race; rather, they had been geographically isolated. The vast expanse of oceans, mountains, and deserts had sheltered California from foreign stimulation as well as from foreign conquest, and even within California the Indian groups were so settled that they had little contact with each other. On the positive side, California supported a much larger number of Indians than did any other region of comparable size in North America north of Mexico. The California Indians had made a successful adaptation to their environment, and they had learned to live without destroying each other.

## Food and Population

The Indians of California had a vast knowledge and understanding of natural resources. This knowledge was absolutely essential to the Indians’ survival and was passed down, amended, and then passed down again, generation after generation. Each regional economy depended on the use of hundreds of individual species of plants and animals. Coinciding with the seasonal availability of specific resources, the native people followed annual rounds of hunting and gathering.

Until recently, anthropologists tended to categorize the Indians of California as either hunter-gatherers or agriculturalists. According to this scheme, the Mojaves and the Yumas practiced agriculture to the extent of planting corn, bean, and squash seeds in the mud left by the annual floodwaters of the lower Colorado River; farther west, agriculture also existed among the Cahuilla. All other tribes in California were lumped together as hunter-gatherers. Contemporary scholars have come to understand that both categories are simply opposite ends of a continuum of human interaction with the natural environment.

We now realize that California Indians engaged in a wide variety of practices to manage their land and enhance its yield. They practiced burning of ground cover to replenish the soil, pruned plants and trees, engaged in hand-weeding, and culled animal and insect populations. They amplified the biological diversity of California through various means, including the transplanting of preferred species of animals and plants. Field biologists have noted the repeated appearance of native tobacco plants, elderberry shrubs, jimsonweed, and black walnut trees near ancient village sites. Geographer William Preston recently characterized California as “one of the most altered precolonial landscapes in the Americas.”

The natural sources of food in California were remarkably diverse and often ingeniously obtained. The greatest staple was the acorn, which because of its high fat content has a higher caloric value than wheat. When washed free of tannic acid, acorn flour was made into porridge or bread. In many desert areas, mesquite pods took the place of acorns. Deer and small game were generally available. Insects

were a widely accepted source of nourishment. Fish were abundant in the streams, notably salmon in the northwest. Fish and meat were often dried. Along the coast, shellfish were consumed in quantities, and many shell mounds as much as 30 feet high, which accumulated as heaps of kitchen refuse over periods of 3000 years, provide important archaeological clues to Indian life.

The most distinctive method used in preparing food was the process of leaching the tannic acid from acorn flour. The flour, produced by pounding husked acorns with a stone mortar and pestle, was winnowed by tossing it in a shallow basket. Then it was spread out in a sandy, shallow depression or basin and repeatedly doused with water to wash away the acid. Bread might then be baked in an earthen oven, but much more commonly the flour was placed in a basket with water brought to a boil by hot stones. The stones were heated in a nearby fire, lifted by tongs, dipped in a rinse basket, placed into the cooking basket, and then carefully stirred to ensure that the mixture was evenly cooked. This produced a gruel or porridge, which was eaten either plain or flavored with berries, grass seeds, nuts, or bits of meat or fish.

The cooking basket might be caulked with pitch or tar, but it was often so tightly woven that it would hold boiling water without caulking. As this suggests, the California Indians were remarkably skilled in basketmaking. In this art they had no equals anywhere in the world, either in the utility of the product or in the beauty of the designs. They had developed basketry to such a point that pottery making was hardly necessary and was confined mainly to the southern region, which was influenced by southwestern Indian culture.

Hunting was mainly with the bow, which was often backed with sinew for extra strength. Arrows were cleverly feathered, and the heads were made of obsidian, which is sharper than flint and more readily shaped by flaking. Knives were also of obsidian. Fishing was done with nets or hooks; with harpoons, particularly for salmon; or with poison, accomplished by throwing buckeyes, or horse chestnuts, into small pools at the edge of a stream.

The hunting and fishing were done mainly by men, the gathering of plant foods and the cooking by women. Work activities, however, occasionally overlapped. Men sometimes aided in the collecting of plant foods (such as knocking acorns from oak limbs), and women hunted and trapped small game. In general, everyone worked hard, and the division of labor was fair and effective. The picture of the Indians as lazy is the result of the demoralization that set in after the coming of the white man, who treated Indians as if they were inferior beings and seemed intent on proving that they were.

The term "Digger" as applied to the California Indians is a pejorative misnomer, based on the mistaken idea that they lived largely by grubbing up roots. American pioneer immigrants, seeing Indian women busy with digging sticks, were unaware that they wanted root fibers for basketmaking more often than for food. The diet of the California tribes did include certain roots and bulbs, but perhaps the real reason the Digger legend persisted was that it was easier to deprive the Indians of their lands and their lives if it could be believed that they were only miserable and subhuman creatures anyway. Racism has many insidious uses.



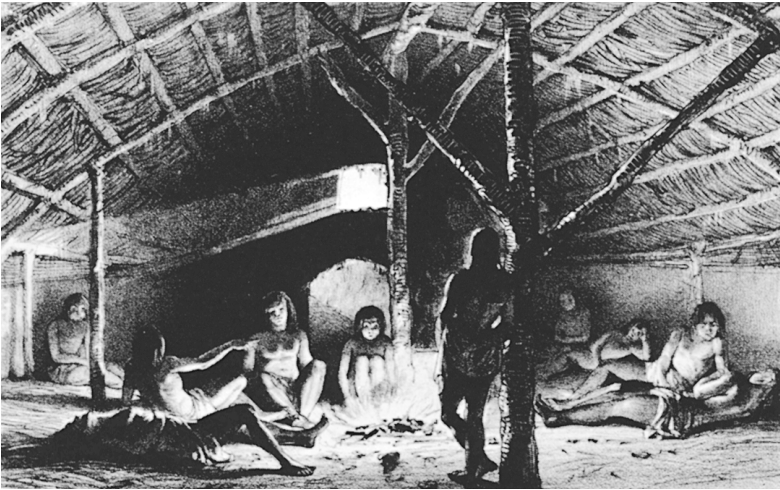
A Pomo gift basket, decorated with shell disks and covered with yellow, green, blue, white, and red feathers in a geometric design. (*Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution.*)

The actual number of persons supported by the resources of California, before the coming of the Spaniards, can never be precisely determined, but a reasonable estimate is that there were at least 300,000 Indians within the present boundaries of the state when the first Spanish settlement was founded in 1769. Some scholars suggest a population range between 310,000 and 325,000. Unquestionably, the Indian population density in California before European contact was much greater than the average for other areas in what is now the United States.

### Aspects of Material Culture

Dwellings were generally simple, often conical or dome shaped, except in the northwest, where they were often solid-frame structures built of redwood planks and in rectangular form. In central California, poles and brush were the most common building materials, and many houses were built partly underground or banked with earth for insulation.

The sweathouse was a distinctive institution, and its use was generally confined to men. (Anthropologists formerly used the term *temescal* for this California institution, but the word is derived from the Náhuatl language, spoken by the Aztecs of central Mexico, and has no association with the Indians of California.) An open fire, not steam, was used to produce heat, and as the upper part of the sweathouse filled with smoke, the men would lie on the floor. Then, while still perspiring freely, they



Interior of a sweathouse in central California. (Courtesy of the Bancroft Library.)

would rush to a nearby stream or lake and plunge into the water. In central California this was done as a means of keeping clean as well as healthy—a ritually purifying act. Women and children generally were expected to do their bathing less ceremoniously, and in the early morning before the men were awake. The sweat-house also had some of the aspects of a men’s club, and in some tribes the older boys and men customarily gambled, worked, and slept there.

The most common type of boat was the tule balsa, a raft made of reeds bound into a boatlike shape. Seagoing dugout canoes, carved from half a redwood trunk, were used in the northwest; the Chumash of the Santa Barbara Channel region also made seaworthy canoes, though of plank rather than dugout construction.

Men ordinarily wore no clothing at all; the standard garment for women was a knee-length skirt made of plant fibers, or skins with the lower part slit into fringes for decoration and freedom of movement. Women also wore beautifully decorated round basketry caps. When the weather demanded a degree of protection from cold, both sexes wore blankets and robes made of furs. The sea otter was most prized, but deer and rabbit skins were more common. Foul-weather gear also included short trousers, buckskin shirts, and jackets. Ritual costumes, worn only on special occasions, were elaborately constructed and included feather headdresses, feathered capes, shell necklaces, and earrings. Body painting and tattooing also were practiced by many California Indians.

### **Location, Linguistic Groups, Tribes**

The pattern of availability of plant and animal foods, and the complete reliance on them, tended to determine not only the number of people in a community but also its location. Most California Indians lived in settled villages of about 100 to

500 inhabitants, usually groups of kindred families; the location of these communities was determined very precisely by the availability of food and water.

Another culture-determining factor was the variety of languages. Language barriers, combined with the localized nature of food supplies, intensified isolation and provincialism. Of the five main language stocks in California, four were common to other parts of North America, suggesting that there had been a vast jumble of migrations in very ancient times, before the mixture hardened. These five main stocks were subdivided into 21 language families, which in turn were subdivided into at least 100 mutually unintelligible languages. Indian California was the region of greatest linguistic diversity in the world, excepting, according to some scholars, only the Sudan and New Guinea.

Typically, California Indians knew that they had been born and would die in a little town on the bank of a certain stream and that the land in the immediate vicinity belonged to their people. Just across certain hills, on another stream, were other people whom they might visit and with whom, if they could converse, they might intermarry but on whose proprietary rights they should not infringe. Trade routes crisscrossed California, and the exchange of goods was common. Inland tribes, for instance, traded obsidian and deerskins to coast dwellers for shell beads, dried fish, and sea otter pelts.

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; based on this, there are over 100 such tribes. Anthropologist Lowell J. Bean has described them as “non-political, ethnic nationalities.” California tribes did not generally have centralized governmental structures but, rather, consisted of several independent units often identified as “tribelets.” Each tribelet included a group of neighboring villages, perhaps with a principal village and three or four smaller ones. Tribelet populations ranged from several hundred to several thousand individuals; territorial boundaries were vigorously defended.

Elsewhere in North America, a tribe was ordinarily a nation with a strong and militant national consciousness. With the exception of the Mojaves and the Yumas on the southeastern margin, no such breadth of organization or political consciousness existed among the California Indians. The village community was usually the highest political unit. Within that unit, the primary duty of the chief or headman was overseeing the production and distribution of resources. Most such leaders were males, but exceptions did occur. “Leadership was primarily local,” anthropologist William Simmons has concluded, “without formally structured political alliances like the famous League of the Iroquois.” It is easy to see why the California Indians found it difficult to organize a coordinated resistance to a handful of Spaniards, let alone to a horde of Anglo-Americans.

## Social Culture

The most extraordinary diversity prevailed not only among the languages spoken but also in nearly all other aspects of culture. Elements of culture occurring only in part of California, most of them only in a small part, greatly outnumbered those that

were universal. Scholars have divided California into six major geographically distinct *culture areas*, within which residents shared common traits, such as dress, housing, manufacturing methods, and other routine activities. (Although culture-area classification has passed out of fashion among contemporary anthropologists, the system remains useful for summarizing the regional diversity of California cultures.) These six areas are commonly identified as the southern, central, northwestern, northeastern, Great Basin, and Colorado River culture areas. Even within these broad subdivisions, there was great diversity. Meaningful generalizations can be made about California Indian culture only if it is understood that there were exceptions to almost every general statement.

Except for the tribes along the Colorado River, the California Indians generally were peaceable and unaggressive. Yet, ethnographic and historic resources indicate that tribal groups often viewed one another with suspicion and that wars were not uncommon. The causes of armed conflict included trespassing, poaching, the abduction of women, and competition for rare resources. Wars seldom were very lengthy, but they could be deadly. When an intertribal offense led to a battle, one side would often pay the other to prevent further attacks. If a series of reprisals occurred, it might end with each side compensating the other for the damages.

Social classes hardly existed, except in the northwest, where there was the greatest interest in acquiring wealth and personal property and where slavery, based on debt, was commonly practiced. Indians in other areas were not uninterested in wealth, however. Gambling was widespread. Money was in the form of strings of beads made of dentalia or clam shells.

The family was by far the most important social institution and, in general, a highly effective one. Marriage was a formal and honored institution that established a lifelong relationship of mutual commitment; divorce was often difficult and prostitution was unknown. In the central region, a kinship taboo forbade conversation with one's mother-in-law. One interpretation sometimes placed on this custom, however, is erroneous: It actually resulted not from a fear of meddling by the spouse's parents but, rather, from great respect for them.

Women played an essential role in all native cultures. Female elders passed on knowledge, both practical and esoteric, that was necessary for the continued functioning of the tribal unit. In addition to gathering and processing much of the food supply, women were responsible for constructing and maintaining storage facilities. Women also participated in ritual activities and could gain status through their skill in dancing and singing. Among the Cupeño of the southern region, women sang "enemy songs" in which they chastised villagers who were not conforming to group norms. Along the southern coast, Chumash women often ruled one or more villages. In the northwestern culture area, women served as spiritual leaders.

Religious leadership was combined with the medical profession in the person of the *shaman*, who was believed to be in direct communication with the supernatural world. Illness was thought to be caused by foreign disease objects in the body, and the shaman claimed the power both to introduce such objects and to remove them, usually by sucking them out. Also included in the religious leadership of most tribes



The tribal boundaries within each of the culture areas changed over time. The boundaries depicted here are based on the earliest evidence available for each group. (From *Indians of California: The Changing Image*, by James J. Rawls, copyright 1984 by the University of Oklahoma Press; and *Tribal Areas of California map*, copyright 1996 by Pacific Western Traders, Folsom, California.)

were priests and ritualists. Priests maintained the balanced order of proper behavior and enjoyed considerable political, legal, and economic authority. Ritualists conducted the activities necessary for religious ceremonies. Ceremonial observances were everywhere associated with adolescence and with mourning, and there were many first-fruit, first-salmon, and acorn-harvest festivals.





A Hupa woman with shell necklace, apron, and basket hat, photographed near the Klamath River in the early 1900s. (This item is reproduced by permission of The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.)

There were widespread religious cults. The shamans did not usually dominate these loosely organized associations, although they might assume a certain degree of local leadership in explaining their rites. In the southern culture area, the *toloache*, or jimsonweed cult, was prevalent. A drink made from the narcotic jimsonweed (*Datura stramonium*) was used to induce sacred visions as part of the initiation ceremonies. Among the Gabrielino and Juaneño this cult was much elaborated, and it related to belief in a deity called Chinigchinich. In central California, the Kuksu cult placed more emphasis on esoteric rites that included dancers impersonating several deities. The “world-renewal” cult was a major aspect of religious life on the northwest coast. Its rites were designed to renew abundant food supplies and to prevent calamities.

California Indians believed that all of nature was interconnected and was suffused with a sacred power. Human beings were to respect that power by following carefully prescribed guidelines in even the most routine of daily activities. Killing an animal, drinking from a spring, or entering a cave was to be accompanied by a ritual act, however simple, as a sign of respect and acknowledgment. As Native American historian Edward D. Castillo (Cahuilla/Luiseño) has written, “The religious beliefs and traditions of the Indians of California teach that the blessings of a



Unidentified artist, *Painted Cave*, Santa Barbara County. The meaning of these abstract Chumash designs is unknown today; they may represent spirits or ideas associated with religious ritual. (Courtesy of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History. Photograph by George Stoll.)

rich land and a mild climate are gifts from the Creator. The Indians show their love and respect for the Creator—and for all of creation—by carefully managing the land for future generations and by living in harmony with the natural environment.”

It is difficult today to appreciate the sense of intimate connection that the ancient peoples of California felt with the natural world. They not only knew the sounds and appearance and habits of the wildlife around them, they also believed they could communicate with animals through speech and dreams. In countless stories, told by elders around flickering campfires on long winter nights, the people were warned of the dire consequences of disrespecting other life-forms. Human greed and wastefulness could cause the world to go out of balance; devastating catastrophes such as droughts and floods would follow.

The religious ideas of the California Indians were, and are, more elaborate than commonly supposed. Their view that the universe is diminishing in quality and quantity bears a striking similarity to the concept of entropy central to modern physics. Likewise, their belief that a prehuman race inhabited the earth is an interesting

foreshadowing of the idea of evolution. Some of the beliefs of the Spanish missionaries, such as the idea that human beings were sinful and fallen creatures, were essentially foreign to Indian religious beliefs.

The California Indians had no system of writing, beyond the use of designs and symbols in the decoration of rocks, or in groundpainting as a part of religious ceremony and instruction in the southern region. The highly stylized rock paintings of the Chumash were among the most spectacular and elaborate of any created in the United States. Yet the Indians of California were prehistoric in that they left no written records. This is why we speak of California history as beginning with the advent of European exploration.

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