



Unfortunately, pioneers' misperceptions regarding California's original peoples have continued to influence popular attitudes, as well as those of some later historians. Many observers persist in seeing them as the most primitive of North American Indians, devoid of culture, and less evolved than the agriculturalists of the Southwest or the mounted warriors of the Great Plains. This lack of respect explains why Native cemeteries have been desecrated and converted into parking lots, ancient village shell mounds excavated and used to pave streets, priceless archaeological sites plundered and vandalized, and unique rock carvings and paintings defaced with graffiti. Until recently, many historical restorations and published popular works, including public school textbooks, ignored

or trivialized California's early peoples, depicting them with such loaded adjectives as "prehistoric," "primitive," "savage," and "Stone Age." More importantly, these treatments dismiss Indians as quaint oddities irrelevant to the flow of California history.

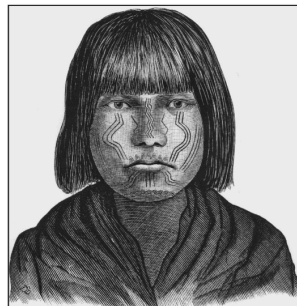
In recent decades, however, anthropologists have developed more sophisticated theories and methods for understanding Indigenous peoples. They have amassed new archeological evidence with new methods, analyzed oral traditions among surviving individuals, and read historical documents objectively. California's Indians are now among the best studied and discussed Native Americans in the world. Alfred L. Kroeber, Robert F. Heizer, Lowell J. Bean, Michael J. Moratto, and others have demonstrated that the early people's cultures were complex and dynamic. Before and since the invasions of Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans, California's first residents and their descendants have shaped California's land and history.

Native Origins, Languages, and Populations

California's Indians have been popularly viewed as static remnants of ancient Stone-Age peoples. Nothing could be further from the truth. Although the pace of change was relatively slow, local cultures changed and adapted to shifting social and ecological conditions, both before and after strangers arrived in their lands.

Sometime between 50,000 and 15,000 BCE, human groups began to migrate eastward across the Bering Strait between Asia and North America, where the Ice Age had opened a dry land route. Migrating quickly southward in pursuit of large, now-extinct game animals such as the bison, mammoth, and giant sloth, the newcomers had penetrated most of North and South America by 12,000 BCE. By the beginning of the Holocene, or "Human" era, roughly 10,000 BCE, offshoots of these original peoples had made their way to California. Living in small nomadic groups, they hunted large game with spears, sharing a common nomadic lifestyle and a limited material culture.

Between 15,000 and 10,000 BCE, the Ice Age ended. Temperatures rose, rainfall decreased, lush vegetation receded, and huge game animals died out. Humans adapted successfully to the changing California environment, and over the centuries their economies expanded to include hunting small and large animals, fishing, and harvesting wild plants. With more diverse and stable food supplies, Native populations grew. They settled in villages, adapted to their varying ecosystems,



Tattooed Yuki Indian

The first systematic attempt to gather information about the California Indians was made by Stephen Powers in *Tribes of California* (1877). This is one of the volume's many vivid illustrations of Native life at a time when it was rapidly disappearing. From Stephen Powers, *Tribes of California*, Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1877.

and developed more elaborate arts, religions, and social systems. By 1000 BCE, complex cultures similar to those that European explorers encountered after 1542 were firmly established. Over thousands of years, California's original settlers had transformed themselves from nomadic hunters into one of the most complex hunter-gatherer civilizations in human history.

California was originally settled by fragments of many North American cultural groups. Each adjusted to sharply different climates and resources and thus developed distinctive local and regional cultures. Natural barriers, the difficulty of travel, and limited contact with outside cultures reinforced these local differences. By the onset of European colonization, California Indians had divided and subdivided into many small, independent groups. More than 100 different tribes had emerged, each with distinctive economies, technology, arts, religion, and social systems. They spoke between 64 and 80 different languages deriving from most of the major North American language families. Hundreds of local dialects made them virtually unintelligible to



others, even those speaking the same basic language. For its diversity of language and culture, California was unmatched in all of North America.

Also unmatched was California's population. Demographers estimate that, on the eve of European contact, between 300,000 and one million individuals inhabited California. Population was sparse and scattered in most desert and mountain environments, but dense among valley and coastal tribes. Yokuts of San Joaquin Valley and Santa Barbara's Chumash lived in communities in excess of 1,000 individuals, with densities of ten to 20 persons per square mile.

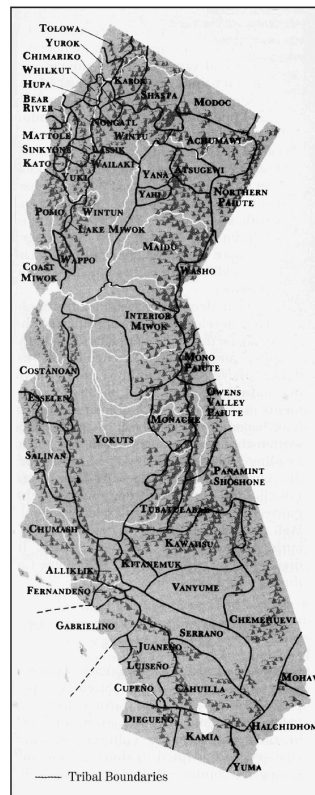
The size and density of California populations refutes early European claims of bringing civilization to a vast, unused wilderness. With an average of one-half person per square mile, California was one of the most densely populated regions north of Mexico. At a fundamental level, the European colonization of California was less a conquest of land than it was of peoples.

Economy: Foods

California's flourishing population was made possible by a relatively reliable resource base. Most of the small groups practiced a subsistence economy based on hunting and gathering. Blinded by cultural biases, early Europeans saw the absence of agriculture as a sign of racial inferiority. Early Californians, outsiders assumed, were so primitive and unintelligent that they could not grow their own food, as their neighbors to the southeast did. Instead, the Californians were lazy, just wandering about aimlessly, picking up whatever food nature happened to provide.

In reality, local weather patterns would have made agriculture difficult. The hunting-and-gathering economies that flourished in the drought-prone region were entirely rational. For many groups, hunting and gathering yielded a greater, more dependable standard of living than would have been possible with farming. Native peoples harvested hundreds of varieties of plants, animals, and minerals, their staple foods varying from group to group according to local resources and shifting water supply. Most groups lived where they had access to water, fuel, and several different ecosystems, which usually ensured variety as well as abundance, and they moved when resources failed to support them.

A region with such varied resources as California naturally gave birth to very different cultures. There were numerous "ecological types" of Indian cultures, which are classified according to the ways they exploited California's local climates, topographies, and flora and



California Indian Tribal Boundaries

Tribes of California drawn by A. L. Kroeber. Reprinted in Robert F. Heizer and Albert B. Elsasser, *The Natural World of the California Indians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 5.

fauna: coastal tideland collectors; sea hunters and fishers; riverine fishers; lakeshore fishers, hunters, and gatherers; valley and plains gatherers; foothill hunters and gatherers; desert hunters and collectors; and desert agriculturists. Some language groups included several of these ecological types.

Even Indians who organized their lifeways around a specific resource—water, for example—developed cultures that distinguished them from other water-dependent groups. With buoyant tule canoes, the Costanoan, or Ohlone, gathered shellfish and other salt-marsh foods in tidelands along Monterey and San Francisco bays. The Chumash invented long ocean-going plank canoes, and harvested fish, seals, sea otter, and beached whales along the coast, offshore islands, and in the kelp beds of the Santa Barbara Channel. The affluent Chumash built large, well-ordered towns, and made sophisticated baskets, jewelry, stone sculptures, and pictographs. Locating their villages along the rivers of the northern coast, the Yurok and Karok preyed on the salmon as it swam to and from its upstream spawning grounds. On elevated riverbanks in the northern San Joaquin Valley, the Yokuts enjoyed river salmon and fine oak groves, an abundant source of acorns and other foods. They established large villages and a social order that nearly rivaled that of the prosperous Chumash.

Different cultures arose from still other resource bases. In the Sierra Nevada, the Mivok relied on pine nuts; in southern deserts, the Cahuilla harvested the mesquite and screw bean. In especially harsh environments, groups such as the Yuma and Mohave of the Colorado River, the Cahuilla of the Palm Springs area, and the Paiute of the Owens Valley developed agriculture.

California offered a broad array of vegetable staples, including seeds, nuts, roots, stems, and leaves from a multitude of grasses, shrubs, and trees. Like acorns, these products often required special processing. With ingenious snares, weapons, decoys, and trickery, Indigenous peoples also hunted rodents, reptiles, birds, deer and elk, and insects. Only the powerful grizzly, the Indians' major foraging competitor, and some sacred animals such as the coyote, managed to avoid cooking baskets.

But California was not the earthly paradise early experts once assumed. Alfred Kroeber and others attributed early Californians' apparent lack of agriculture, monumental architecture, or complex sociopolitical organization to the region's mild climate and rich plant and animal resources. Abundance, they theorized, made life "too easy" for early peoples, resulting in only rudimentary levels of cultural development. In the late twentieth century, a new generation of anthropologists

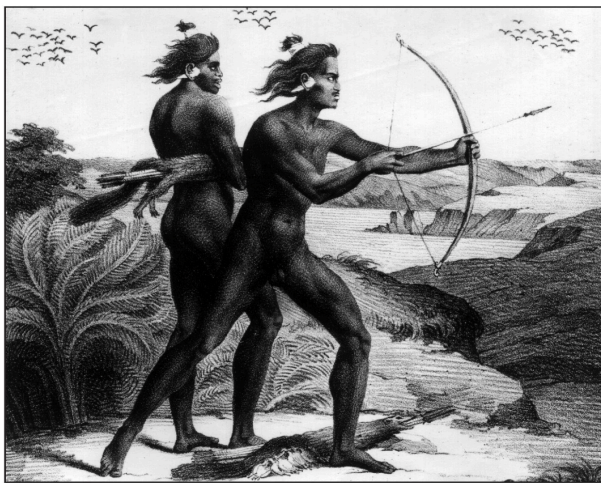
rejected Kroeber's environmental determinism. Responding to the growing field of ecology, R. L. Kelly and others argued instead that hunter-gatherers were more intimately connected to the natural world than the residents of modern urban-industrial societies, attaining relative abundance by understanding and living harmoniously with nature, while also modifying it when needing to.

New archaeological tools, including radio-carbon dating, have helped to reframe the debate yet further, by calling two long-standing assumptions about California Native Americans into question. First, California's famously benign climate failed periodically, especially during the great mega-drought, roughly 800 to 1350 C.E. Rising temperatures and prolonged drought produced an environmental disaster for many foraging and farming California groups. Archaeological evidence demonstrates that temperature and rainfall fluctuations undercut food sources in many areas, forcing people to abandon once-productive regions, which in turn disrupted long-standing trade and cultural relationships and increased inter-personal and inter-group violence.

Second, California Indians may have been somewhat less eco-friendly than previously imagined. In the San Francisco Bay Area, for example, hunters appear to have over-hunted large, hoofed grazers such as deer, elk, and bighorn sheep, whose numbers dropped over time compared to smaller game. Studies of sea-mammal remains along the Oregon and California coasts similarly reveal that large, land-breeding species also diminished slowly, leading hunters to shift to smaller, more elusive aquatic-breeding varieties, and as well as to move elsewhere. In many areas, after generations in one place, growing villages had to move because they had exhausted easily gathered resources, including local wood for fuel and construction, and middens (trash mounds) were clogging their sites.

Oral traditions among Indigenous Californians confirm that periods of extreme drought and poor hunting brought about social disruption. For example, Maria Oscarpiia (Salinan) told an ethnographer in 1918 that her people recalled a great famine, when

there was no rain and no food. They ate bleached bones pounded in the mortar, and acorn mush made of manzanitas. There were no deer and no meat. . . . One old woman killed and roasted and ate her son. . . . Then her brother came and killed her with three arrows because she had eaten her child. . . . But the people who lived on the shore did not die because they ate abalones. But even they were thin. . . .



Indians Hunting Near San Francisco Bay

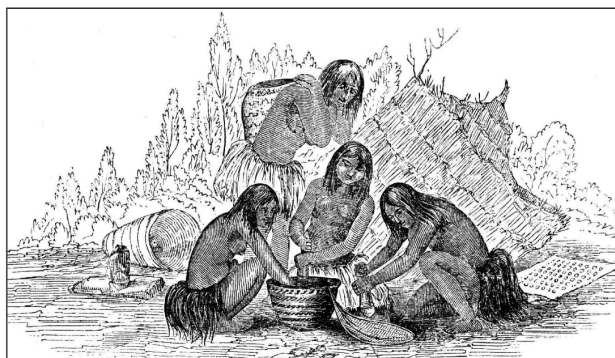
Visiting artist Louis Choris depicted hunters belonging to San Francisco Bay or San Joaquin Valley tribes in 1816. Strong and flexible, Indian bows were constructed especially for hunting small game at short or medium distances. Bowmen took great pride in their skills. *The Huntington Library, San Marino, California.*

One truth remains clear: the human landscape of Native California was anything but static and placid.

Switching to the acorn as a more reliable food staple was but one of many examples of human adaptability in overcoming resource shortages. Prolific over many local climatic regions, California's 15 native species of oak offered an abundant supply of fall acorns. Households or kin groups usually cooperated to harvest acorns in oak groves near or distant from their camps, knocking nuts from the trees or collecting those already fallen. One tree might provide 55 pounds of acorns for one day's labor. In nine to ten days, an individual could gather a year's supply of acorns, roughly 500 pounds per person. Relatively non-perishable, dry acorns could be stored for up to two years, providing some insurance against scant rain and other calamities.

When the acorns were needed, women husked and ground them in mortars to produce a fine meal. Grinding was time-consuming, perhaps as much as three hours for six pounds of finished meal. The meal was spread out in lined earthen pits, or layered in finely sewn baskets, then washed with both warm and cold water to leach out toxins. The water had to be heated by placing hot stones in baskets of water, adding to the already-difficult task. When finished, the meal could be consumed as mush, baked into cakes, or added to other foods.

Scholars have long assumed that acorn consumption was widespread and longstanding in some regions, beginning perhaps as early as 5000 BCE. But more recent analysis and dating of grinding tools excavated in ancient middens, suggests that intensive acorn use for some groups was more recent cultural adaptation,



Women Processing Acorns in the Sacramento Valley, ca. 1840

Acorn processing was a constant task for tribeswomen with oak groves in their territories. Along with other strenuous female responsibilities, this practice led early American observers to jump to the false conclusion that Indian women were oppressed by their men. “On the women, all the drudgery seems to be thrown,” observed Charles Wilkes, the American military officer in charge of the expedition that produced this illustration. Actually, all tribal members worked hard for the welfare of the group, and responsibility for acorn processing and plant gathering, vital to tribal survival, earned women respect and status within Indian communities. Illustration from Charles Wilkes, *Narrative of the United States Exploring Expedition during the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, and 1842* (1845). Courtesy of the California History Room, California State Library, Sacramento, California.

rather than traditional over thousands of years. Moreover, these acorn economies appeared at different times in different regions—around 4000 BCE in the San Francisco Bay area, 2800 BCE in the Central Valley and Delta, and 1000 BCE in the central and southern Sierra Nevada. The slow adoption of acorn processing technologies suggests that Californians originally preferred other foods, presumably those requiring less effort. A combination of factors, including environmental changes, a shrinking resource base, population growth, migration, and spreading culture might explain the later adoption of the acorn as a food staple.

Economy: Industry and Trade

California’s regions offered varied local surpluses and shortages of foods and raw materials. As groups grew in population and complexity, some individuals began to specialize in harvesting and processing surplus items and trading for other necessities among

themselves and with outsiders. Some mined for rare minerals such as volcanic black obsidian, a valuable trade commodity ideal for arrow and spear points, cutting edges, and scraping tools. Others quarried granite for mortars and the softer steatite to be carved into bowls and sculpted figures. Salt was another valuable commodity, harvested for seasoning and preserving, as was tar for caulking and gluing, and shells for jewelry or currency. The Costanoan cinnabar mine near New Almaden was one of the region’s largest and most organized Indian mining operations, producing a brilliant red pigment prized and exchanged throughout western North America. Other artisans—sometimes entire tribes—specialized in manufacturing goods, everything from redwood dugout canoes and arrows, to tools, shell money, and baskets. Emerging thousands of years ago, these forms of industry and commerce expanded in production and geographic outreach with each passing century.

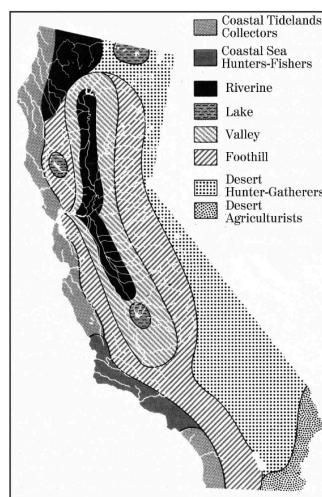
Elaborate systems developed to organize and regulate the specialized economies, complete with fairs, treaties, merchant classes, regional marketing centers, trade organizations, and fixed-value currencies. Trade linked tribes of various environments, languages, and cultures in networks that stretched inland from the coast, sometimes far beyond California's current borders. Expanding industry and commerce broadened each tribe's resource base, produced a higher and more secure standard of living, and promoted cultural change and diversity within tribes. By spreading resources (especially in times of shortage) trade networks served to increase security, to encourage coexistence among groups of different cultures, and thereby to reduce intertribal conflict.

Plentiful and varied foods, temperate climate, and trade made the early Californians prosperous compared to many hunter-gatherer societies elsewhere. Contrary to perceptions of white pioneers who did not understand their economies, Native peoples had a well-developed work ethic. While labor was rarely grueling, it was constant and carefully planned. Drudgery was lightened because men, women, and children often worked in groups, with plenty of lively music and gossip. Except in times of extreme environmental collapse, their diets were relatively dependable, varied, and high in protein and vitamins. It was probably nutritionally superior to that of the average European at the time of colonization, and certainly superior to the diet of Indians living in the Spanish missions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Science, Ecology, and Agriculture

The hunter-gatherer cultures that Europeans first encountered in sixteenth-century California flourished through human skill and resourcefulness. Over many centuries, early peoples experimented with animals, plants, and minerals, developing tools that allowed their efficient use. Lacking written languages and books, they collected the ancestral knowledge of their families and tribes, built on it, and transmitted it orally to succeeding generations. Eventually, Indians evolved an understanding of their immediate world that was as sophisticated as that of most Europeans in the era of colonization, if not more so.

Native Californians classified plants and animals into categories similar to those of modern botany and zoology. They learned the habits of creatures, discovered food chains and other relationships among living beings, and perceived the environmental factors that caused organisms to thrive or decline. Methodically,



Indian Ecological Zones

From Robert F. Heizer and Albert B. Elsasser, *The Natural World of the California Indians* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 60.

they also followed the celestial movements of the planets and stars as part of their religious rites. The Chumash and others built observatories and marked and predicted the summer solstice, allowing them to keep track of the seasons.

Like other North American groups, early Californians detected and exploited the chemical properties of certain plants, extracting medicines from seeds, roots, bark, and leaves that relieved pain, battled infection, and promoted healing. In the process, early residents discovered many of the chemical agents that are now the basis of modern medicines. Natives also set broken bones, performed surgeries, and practiced basic psychotherapy. Throughout the region, shamans served as religious specialists who used medicines and magic to heal

sickness and deflect evil spirits. Given the superstition, brutality, and quackery that dominated contemporary European medicine, the medical practices of early Californians were at least as effective as those of their conquerors. Indeed, Spanish and later Mexican settlers often sought cures for their illnesses and injuries from Native American healers.

Early Californians did not simply react passively to their environment. They applied their acquired knowledge to reshape nature and increase its harvest. To ease the intense labor of gathering, they sowed wild seeds and transplanted wild plants closer to their villages for ready access to materials used for food, rituals, healing, or basket making. To increase the productivity of oak, mesquite, and other trees and shrubs, they pruned away dead and nonbearing branches, thinning for optimum exposure to water, sunlight, and nutrients.

The major environmental manipulation was controlled burning. After observing that natural fires reduced underbrush, attracted game, and made valuable seed grasses lush the following year, Indians began systematically burning valleys, foothills, and mountain meadows in the autumn or spring. Over the centuries, regular human-set fires dramatically reshaped the flora and fauna of heavily settled regions, maximizing grasslands and the growth of pines, acorn-bearing oaks, and other large trees, increasing the population of grazers, driving back chaparral, and investing the landscape with the tended, park-like quality that amazed early explorers. Over wide stretches of more populated areas, Native burning established the distribution, populations, and relationships of plants, and some animals, that early European settlers mistook for "natural." Modern experts have only recently rediscovered Indigenous methods of controlled burning for forest and grasslands management.

Where naturally occurring foods were deficient, some desert groups devised forms of agriculture suited to their particular environments. Southeastern Yuma, Mohave, and Halchidhoma desert-dwellers practiced floodplain farming, a system they adapted from the irrigation methods of agriculturalists farther east. In the fertile mud left by the annual spring flooding of the Colorado River, they planted maize, beans, pumpkins, and calabashes. In later centuries, they added a few European imports such as watermelon, oats, and wheat, whose seeds they received in trade from post-contact Mexican Native peoples. The Calnilla of the Salton Sink cultivated the damp soils found along streambeds, in the marshy areas surrounding natural oases, and wherever the underground water table came close to the surface. They sometimes dug wells or carried water

by hand to their thirsty crops. Preserved by the desert's desiccating heat, farm produce furnished nearly half of the food resources required by desert peoples.

The Owens Valley Paiute built the largest true irrigation works in the region. They dammed the streams flowing down the steep eastern face of the Sierra Nevada, dug grids of large canals, and irrigated wild grasses and tubers in fields that were sometimes several square miles in size. The Tipai and Ipai east of San Diego and a few other groups likely farmed as well. Most of Native California was probably familiar with agriculture through trade, observation, or communication with outsiders, but saw no need to adopt the practice. For most, hunting and gathering produced equally reliable lifeways.

Religion

Religion combined with economic necessity to reinforce ecological values. To early Californians, the close interaction of humans and environment was the scientific and spiritual theme. Appreciating their dependence on the natural world, Indians saw themselves as an integral part of it. Respect for nature permeated lifeways, economy, philosophy, and religion.

Like practically everything else, beliefs and rites differed greatly from group to group. Some tribes were monotheistic, believing in a single great deity that presided over all creation. Most groups, however, believed in spirits embodied in animals, places, and natural processes. Spirits, in turn, controlled the resources on which humans depended. To survive in such an animistic universe, early Californians took pains to appease the spirits, especially those thought to resent the misuse of plants, animals, and other valuable resources. All important human events—birth, puberty, marriage, sex, childbearing, hunting, gathering, sickness, and death—required certain rituals, offerings to the spirits by shamans and others to regulate the natural and supernatural world. Specific observances varied, of course, from the unadorned individual and family rituals of the semi-nomadic tribes to the complex, well-attended ceremonies of more settled groups.

Rituals, and even entire religious complexes, were based on environmental imperatives. Early Californians avoided overtaxing the carrying capacity of their territories by limiting population through marriage customs, sexual taboos, continence, abortion, and chemical contraceptives derived from plants to control conception. Yurok and Karok rites and inter-group

treaties discouraged overfishing of the salmon and contamination of the rivers on which they depended. The World Renewal ceremony of the northwestern salmon-fishing groups, the major annual religious gathering of riverside villages, redistributed resources to poorer tribal members. In the process, these ceremonies appeased supernatural forces in order to avert floods, earthquakes, and failure of the salmon run. Similar in intent was the elaborate yearly dance of the Kuksu Cult among the Pomo, Patwin, and Maidu. By countless simpler tribal and personal rituals, across California people expressed kinship with plants and animals, thanked spirits for past favors, and taught the respectful and orderly behavior deemed necessary for successful hunting, fishing, and gathering.

Earlier Californians had established the values and practices of environmental management long before Europeans began their conquest. As a result, dense populations had inhabited the region for millennia without substantially polluting soil and water, or annihilating entire plant and animal species. When the invaders arrived, California Native Americans were forced to relinquish a modified, but largely unspoiled land.

Politics and Society

For ecological, linguistic, and historical reasons, California Indians generally organized themselves into small political units. Many small offshoots of distinct language groups originally had settled the region and specialized further as different groups adapted to their local ecosystems. Geographical barriers isolated tribelets, and local food resources were usually insufficient to sustain large population concentrations. Oceans, mountains, and deserts insulated Californians from outside invaders who might have forced them to unite in their own defense.

Over much of the region, the word “tribe” itself must be applied with caution. Large groups of people with a related language and culture did inhabit a general area, but with little overall social or political organization, or even consciousness of a common identity. Across most of these broader cultural groupings, land ownership, sovereignty, and cohesive action resided in small, independent groups that have come to be called “tribelets.” Tribelets numbered from as few as 100 to as many as several thousand related persons, living in small groups of one or two camps or a dozen or more villages. Tribelet territories ranged from 50 square miles in relatively rich environments, to upwards of 6,000 square miles in barren ones. The Yokuts, for example, numbered at

least 25,000 persons and occupied 22,000 square miles of the San Joaquin Valley, but they were divided into more than 60 autonomous tribelets. Tribelets developed local economies, dialects, and religious practices that were variants of their larger tribal cultures.

A formal authority structure bound the people of a tribelet together. Usually inheriting their position within elite families, chiefs presided—assisted by family and ritual leaders—over the harvesting, storage, and exchange of resources. Their considerable power derived from their wealth, prestige, and ability to persuade, as well as the tradition of community consensus. Usually second in power to the chiefs, shamans served as the principal religious and medical authorities, and advised chiefs and family heads. Occasionally, women served as shamans, especially among the northwest and north-central tribes. More rarely, as among the Pomo, Chumash, and Miwok, women could be property owners and co-chiefs.

Most groups were relatively affluent, avoiding violent conflict through frequent trade, intermarriage, and mediation. Nevertheless, all tribes maintained military organization to defend against encroachment. Armed conflict did sometimes erupt when outsiders stole property, attacked villages and travelers, murdered or practiced witchcraft against family members, or trespassed on prized hunting and gathering grounds. If peaceful resolution of grievances failed, warfare was the only means of compensation or revenge. Actual fighting, while sometimes vicious, was usually spontaneous and limited in scale. In the absence of large-scale military cooperation, conflicts rarely spread beyond a few villages. Occasionally, one group conquered another or subjected it to imperial tribute. The Mohave and the Yuma of the Colorado River, large and highly organized tribes, had the strongest tradition of militarism. These groups supported a class of professional warriors, boys reared from an early age in the skills of combat. Wars were typically waged to acquire and defend rich agricultural land, or simply for pleasure and glory. Influenced by the Colorado cultures, the Ipai and Tipai of the San Diego area were also particularly aggressive in protecting their borders against intruders, as early Spanish explorers and missionaries would discover.

Although few pioneer Europeans and Americans recognized its diversity, Native California was culturally complex and highly differentiated. The basic unit of southern and south central tribes, which delimited personal behavior and located the individual in the larger society, was the *lineage*, a large extended family of persons related to one another, usually, though not always, through the male

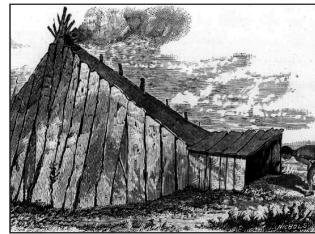
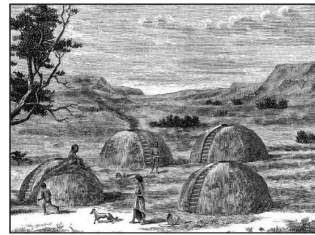
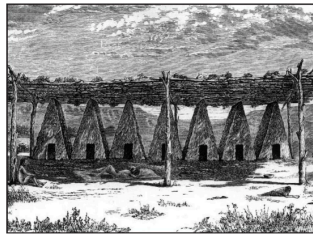
line. Several related lineages constituted a *clan*. Clans and lineages were structured and exerted great influence over members. In contrast, throughout most of northern and central California, membership in the community derived from simple residence, not lineage.

Families differed sharply in status and wealth, and individuals' places in the tribelet were usually marked from birth by their family. Generally, California families were divided into four classes: elites, commoners, vagabonds, and slaves. A small minority of elite families controlled property, trade, the observance of ritual, as well as the means of production, such as the best oak groves, fishing spots, and, in the case of the Chumash, the oceangoing boats that were essential to

a marine economy. Elites also furnished the important figures of the tribe: chiefs, diplomats, shamans, merchants, and craftsmen.

Most commoners were less affluent, traveled less, and spent most of their time in subsistence activities. Commoners supported elites through labor, taxes, fees, and gifts. In some areas, a small number of vagabonds lived on the fringes of legitimate society. Vagabonds were sometimes absorbed into tribes, where they started lower-status families. A few tribes also kept slaves, often war captives who were held for ransom or eventually assimilated into the victorious tribe.

California Indian societies were not democratic or egalitarian by modern standards. Individuals inherited



Indian Village Scenes

Differences in local climate and building materials contributed to variations in Indian architecture: (*upper left*) tule-thatch Yokuts houses protected from the hot San Joaquin Valley sun by a shade; (*upper right*) earth-covered Maidu lodges in the equally hot Sacramento Valley; (*lower left*) Miwok bark-slab lodge, Yosemite Valley; (*lower right*) Sierra Nevada bark-slab community house. From Stephen Powers, *Tribes of California*, Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1877.

unequal status, duties, and privileges from their ancestors. Most enjoyed only a slight opportunity for upward mobility, either through hard work or by acquired skills. Nevertheless, since most members sanctioned the class system, and since tribes often alleviated poverty by redistributing resources, there appears to have been little internal dissent. Force was not usually needed to maintain social order.

Sex roles were clearly drawn, though not inflexible. More flexible, the male sphere extended to politics, religion, and harvesting and processing of animal, rock, and wood products, as well as dealing with outside groups in trade, diplomacy, and warfare. Yet the burden of labor was distributed fairly evenly between men and women. Although gathering plant foods and preparation of food was mostly a female pursuit, there were exceptions. A study of 46 ethno-linguistic groups, for example, found that men and women, as well as older children and able older adults, cooperated to gather and store major staples such as pine nuts and acorns. Among the acorn- and agave-dependent Cahuilla, men and boys traveled in groups to harvest agave leaves, stalks, and flowers. Just as women were judged for their acorn-preparing skills, so men were judged for their skill in preparing and roasting the all-important agave plant.

Nor were men solely responsible for procuring essential animal foods. Shellfish, which could be conducted most times of the year along the coast, were gathered by those with limited mobility, including disabled persons, mothers, children, and the elderly. Women's shellfish collecting was especially essential to the group, just as was the hunting done by men. Among coastal tribelets, like those in other environments, women and men both harvested near and distant food supplies to create an optimal diet.

Nevertheless, tradition did allow men greater role flexibility than women. With clearly lower status in families and tribelets, women were usually expected to move to the village of their husbands upon marriage. Although Indigenous peoples expected women to defer to fathers and husbands, and to male family and tribelet leaders, women were accorded great respect and, within their sphere, independence and autonomy. The work of women was central in an economy based largely on plant gathering. Thus, women were central to some of the most revolutionary cultural innovations derived from plants. It is likely, for example, that women first discovered new methods of exploiting and manipulating nature, including controlled burning, acorn processing, and using plant materials in medicine, the arts, and basket-making.

Gender roles were strongly sanctioned by group religious practices and were taught to children at an early age. Although gender roles in some ways resembled those of their European counterparts, there were also striking differences. Deeply ingrained ideas about proper sexual practices and gender roles complicated life for Natives at later Spanish missions. Especially troubling was the European insistence that men perform agricultural tasks: planting, tending, and harvesting crops. Many men resisted doing what they considered women's work. Such gender-based ideological differences intensified the conflict between colonizers and Indians.

The Arts

Native arts were an extension of Indian economic and religious life. Men dominated wood, bone, and stone carving and painting, music, and oral literature, all of which were closely associated with religion. While the fashioning of bone and stone effigies was nearly universal in California, rock carvings (petroglyphs) and rock paintings (pictographs) reached their highest development among southern tribes, particularly the Chumash. In order to honor the gods, bring success in hunting, and establish boundaries, artists engraved and pecked designs, often with recognizable animal and geometrical shapes, into the sides of boulders and the walls of caves. Chumash and southern Yokuts artists painted abstract pictographs—brilliant multi-colored arrangements of human, animal, celestial, and symbolic shapes—usually in remote caves. Pictographs evolved from the introduction of new religious cults, as well as rituals that included the use of hallucinogenic drugs.

Often passed on by elders in male sweathouses, the oral tradition was rich in symbolism, imagery, and poetic expression. Learned by rote and passed from generation to generation, this literature included myths, stories, prayers, songs, and epic poems that incorporated the accumulated philosophy, ethics, history, science, and folk traditions of the people. Common themes were the unity of the natural and the supernatural realms, the power of animal spirits, and the interdependence of human beings and nature.

Women dominated a highly creative form of California art—basketry. Woven from dozens of materials of various textures and colors, these light, portable baskets served an essential purpose for gathering economies. Women produced baskets in many shapes and sizes for all manner of uses, from gathering and processing to storage and cooking. Baskets were needed for ritual; the ceremonial

baskets of the Pomo, for example, were inlaid with feathers and mother-of-pearl. Baskets were also valuable trade items. Over thousands of years, tribes developed distinctive methods of basket construction and decorative styles, which skilled craftswomen further refined. The best baskets were beautifully decorated with woven geometrical, animal, and symbolic designs, and so finely stitched that they could hold water. California women developed the art of basketry to an extraordinarily high level.

On the Eve of European Colonization

The last thousand years before European invasion were especially dynamic for early Californians. Cultures were becoming more elaborate, societies more organized. Often driven by ecological stress, some groups migrated to new territories, sometimes driving out or absorbing earlier occupants. The cultures that the Europeans found were still taking shape.

Although, in most areas, the autonomous tribelet remained the primary unit of organization, broadening relationships knit these small groups together in ever more intricate patterns. Alliances transcending the tribelets developed, often linking groups of different languages and cultures. Increasing commerce gave rise to formalized inter-tribelet trade relationships and organizations. At the same time, new prophets began to preach novel religious ideas. With the expanded inter-tribal contacts fostered by commerce, these religious practices spread from group to group. Eventually, people from many tribelets shared allegiance to the new forms and began to gather for large, regional ceremonies.

Since kinship rules forced clans to seek partners outside of their lineage and tribelet, family alliances also evolved beyond the borders of tribelets. By European contact, lineages and clans in some regions had expanded to encompass numerous tribelets and even entire cultures. Some individuals traveled wider circuits,



"A Sweat and a Cold Plunge"

Male sweathouses were common among many California Native Americans. In these large buildings, adult men slept, socialized, and performed various rituals. For example, purification rites were performed before hunts to appease the animal spirits and to remove bodily scents that might alert game to the men's presence. After sweating before fires in the sealed buildings, the men plunged into cool water. The ritual was repeated until body and soul were cleansed. From Stephen Powers, *Tribes of California*, Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1877.

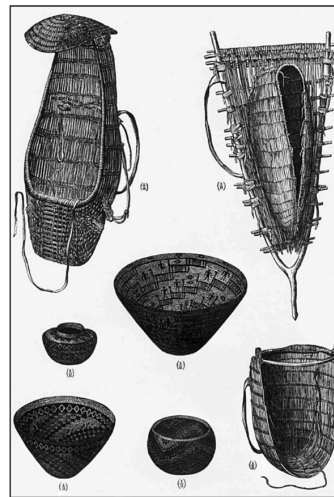
many residing in several locales over the course of their lives. In this way, many individuals became both multilingual and multicultural, and thus less insular and more aware of the world beyond their borders.

As they became more organized, early Californians harvested, processed, and distributed resources more efficiently. Populations and settlement densities increased, particularly in the most favored environments. Urbanization occurred, as smaller villages waned in significance and people clustered around the most important ceremonial and trade centers. Greater productivity and population concentration encouraged specialization. More individuals focused their energies on particular tasks and obtained the necessities of life through purchase or barter.

Prosperity did not breed equality, however. Property-owning and merchant classes expanded, increased in power, and removed themselves further from commoners. Cemeteries used in the last centuries before the Spanish arrived testify to an increase in the wealth of some families, but also to growing segregation between the burials of rich and poor persons. Indian societies were becoming more hierarchical and interdependent in the centuries before European invasion. Although these changes came slowly, these traditions of adaptation provided alternatives in adjusting to the European presence.

Native California was thriving but fragile. The people were generally healthy, humane, and peaceful. They had achieved a remarkably productive relationship with nature, exploiting and manipulating its resources without damaging its delicate balances.

Yet, compared to Europeans, they were technologically and organizationally simple. They had no written languages, wheels, metal tools, or domesticated work animals. Their wood, sinew, and stone weapons were no match for European steel and firearms. More importantly, like their contemporaries throughout the western hemisphere, early Californians lacked immunities to Old World diseases. More complex organizational systems were beginning to emerge but, by and large, groups remained locally autonomous, with strong traditions of isolation and few mechanisms for broader cooperation in government and warfare. They were vulnerable to concerted challenge from aggressive outsiders, particularly those with sophisticated military technologies and even more deadly germs, as well as alien plant and animal species that undermined delicate ecological relationships on which the Native way of life depended. Not only would Spaniards and later-comers assault the people physically, they would also upset their equilibrium with nature, throwing whole cultures into disarray.



Sampler of Indian Baskets

The two baskets at the top of the illustration were used by women to carry infants. The others served diverse purposes. Although Indigenous peoples preferred baskets because they were portable and of greater use in a mobile, gathering way of life, some southern California tribes also made and used pottery or, like the Chumash, carved steatite bowls. From Stephen Powers, *Tribes of California* (1877). Courtesy of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

PART TWO

Europeans and Indians

The California Experience

Few eras of American history have been as romanticized as the period of Spanish and Mexican rule in California. Many popular writers and restored historic sites testify that a peaceful, harmonious, even glamorous lifestyle prevailed in California from the Serra-Portolá expedition of 1769 to the outbreak of war between Mexico and the United States in 1846. Central to the plot in this mythic story is the triumphant march of European civilization, conquering and colonizing a vast wilderness. The story's essential characters are heroic explorers, soldiers, missionaries, and ranchers, who came with sword, cross, and branding iron to transplant a Mediterranean world to the Pacific Coast frontier. The drama unfolds variously in a gold-lit setting of ornate Spanish missions, adorned with tall bell towers, red-tiled roofs, and gracefully arched verandas, or in tranquil feudal *ranchos* with *casas grandes* of whitewashed adobe and colorful gardens, serenaded by bubbling fountains, beautiful *señoritas*, and guitar-strumming *caballeros*. The land was benevolent and productive, the people graceful and honorable. Hispanic California, as popular legend would have it, was a languid Eden of simple ease and pleasure.

The elaborately restored missions today stand as colorful monuments to Spain's attempt to Christianize Native California, bringing the blessings of progress to its supposedly primitive, culture-deprived peoples. In a famous 1917 essay, the noted historian Herbert E. Bolton captures prevailing popular sentiment when he calls the missions "a force which made for the preservation of the Indians, as opposed to their destruction, so characteristic of the Anglo-American frontier." Unlike the English colonies, where "the only good Indians were dead Indians," he claims, in the Spanish colonies "it was thought worthwhile to improve the natives for this life as well as for the next." When the popular narrative focuses any attention on the Indians themselves, they often appear as peaceful, docile children of nature, backward remnants of the Stone Age, notable for sensibly accepting and thriving under the superior culture carried to them by kindly Franciscan missionaries. This pleasant idyll ended when racist Americans rudely pushed both Indians and Hispanics aside in the 1840s.

But as the following account of Estanislao's rebellion illustrates, the true story clashes starkly with the romantic legend. Far more complicated and influential in shaping the later state's future, the meeting of New and Old World peoples in California, as elsewhere, was dominated by confusion, misery, and conflict. The realities of settling a remote, thinly populated, semi-arid region repeatedly undermined the official colonization policies advanced by Spain and, later, by Mexico after it gained its independence. For the handful of Hispanic settlers clinging to the seacoast, California offered a frustrating mix of geographic, economic, administrative, and biological problems, both within and outside the colony. As late as the 1840s, after nearly a century of effort, the region's economy remained colonial, its institutions fragmented, its military power negligible, and its settlements small and scattered. The good life was indeed elusive in Hispanic California.

Native peoples were themselves a major hindrance to Spanish and Mexican success. Despite the calamities imposed by colonization, the region's diverse peoples proved remarkably resistant to efforts to assimilate and control them. Contact with the intruders greatly changed and threatened Indigenous cultures, but after the first shock of colonization, Indians adapted, reorganized, and reasserted their power of numbers and understanding of the land. Their resistance quickly undermined the colonial ambitions of outsiders. Far from being the bit parts allowed them in the romantic narrative, California's first peoples were lead actors. Their story, the titanic clash between the region's early peoples and the invaders who followed, is the central dramatic theme of Hispanic California.