

CEREMONIES OF THE POMO INDIANS

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Ceremonies of the Pomo Indians by S. A. Barrett

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THE POMO INDIANS**

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S. A. BARRETT

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INTRODUCTION

It has been at least twenty years since the last of the Pomo ceremonies was held in a truly aboriginal fashion. Elaborate ceremonies of a more recently introduced "Messiah" cult were held as late as perhaps fifteen years ago, but these "Messiah" ceremonies contain only a few features common to the indigenous tribal observances.

Dances are even yet to be seen in connection with some celebrations, principally on the Fourth of July, but there now remains so little that is really primitive about these that they are virtually worthless to the student. Information obtained through direct observation is at present, therefore, impossible, and we must depend for our knowledge of Pomo ceremonies and ceremonial organization upon the statements of the older men, and particularly those concerned with such matters in former days. From such sources rather full information concerning some of the ceremonies and dances is obtainable, but, under the circumstances, it is impossible to secure exhaustive data concerning all of them. In many instances informants recall only a few of the details of a given ceremony or dance. Sometimes only its name is remembered. Doubtless even the recollection of some ceremonies and dances has been lost.

During a residence in the Pomo region from 1892 to 1904 the existing vestiges of some of these Pomo ceremonies were observed whenever possible, but no attempt at a systematic collection of data on the subject was made until 1903 and 1904, when this work was undertaken in conjunction with the collection of Pomo myths, as part of the investigations of the Ethnological and Archaeological Survey of California, maintained by the Department of Anthropology of the University of California through the generosity of Mrs. Phoebe A. Hearst. This information was obtained from informants of three Pomo dialects—Northern, Central, and Eastern. Where a native term is used in the following pages, therefore, the dialect is indicated by N, C, or E, in parentheses directly after it. The phonetic system employed is fully explained in "The Ethno-Geography of the Pomo Indians."¹

CEREMONIAL ORGANIZATION

The ceremonial organization of the Pomo was very loose. There was no secret society of importance, as there was among the Maidu and presumably among the neighboring Wintun, and no organized priesthood vested with control over ceremonies. The ordinary chiefs, however (or "captains," as they are more often called), were prominently concerned with all ceremonies, and there were other officials in charge of particular rites. We may begin therefore by mentioning the various officials in the order of their importance.

¹ Present series, VI, pp. 51-54.

OFFICIALS

As has been elsewhere pointed out,² the social organization of the Pomo is based primarily upon blood relationship, the blood relatives who resided in a definite village grouping themselves into a political unit under the leadership of an hereditary "captain." Usually several of these consanguineal units comprise a village, and their captains form its governing body. From among these the people elect a head captain. Not even the head captain has absolute authority, nor has any captain important judicial power, or power to inflict punishment. In short, the function of the captain is primarily that of adviser to the group. The special duties of the head captain in olden times were to welcome and entertain visitors from other villages, and to meet in council with the other captains concerning matters of general public welfare, and to arrange for and preside over ceremonies.

What may be termed an honorary captainship was accorded any man who, through his wealth or his prowess as a hunter, made himself very popular by providing large quantities of food and numerous feasts for the people. A similar honorary office, that of female captain, *da' xalik* (E), was based upon a woman's popularity, which depended in turn on her good-heartedness and her fame as a cook. Neither of these honorary offices, however, was hereditary. In spite of the ambiguous nature of the office, incumbents were accorded great respect at ceremonies and other public functions.

The other officials had duties almost, if not quite, exclusively connected with ceremonies and had nothing directly to do with governmental affairs. We may recognize the fire-tenders, the head singers, the chorus singers, the drummers, and the masters of ceremonies. Such offices were considered very honorable and were, as a rule, hereditary. This was particularly true of the offices of fire-tender, head singer, and drummer, in which the succession followed precisely the same rules as did the chieftainship.

The fire-tenders, called *me'dze* (N) and *la'imoc* (E), were officials of very great importance. Connected with each of the large, semi-subterranean "dance-houses"³ there were two fire-tenders, who saw to all matters concerning the fire and the preparation of the dance-house except actually procuring the firewood. All the men

² "The Ethno-Geography of the Pomo and Neighboring Indians," present series, vi, pp. 15-17.

³ An article by the present writer called "Pomo Buildings," in the *Holmes Memorial Volume*, fully describes these structures, which were erected especially for ceremonial purposes and which formed the religious centers of Pomo villages.

participating in the ceremony were supposed to bring wood, which they placed just outside the dance-house. One of the fire-tenders then carried it up and dropped it through the smoke-hole, while the other stacked it in racks in the proper places within the house. As remuneration for their labor, they received the beads which were thrown at the dancers⁴ by the people during the ceremony and which were swept up when the dance-house was cleaned.

The head singer, called *ke' kai tea* (C) and *ke' ūya* (E), was a man of great importance in ceremonies, though he was very inconspicuous. It was his duty to plan previously the proper sequence of the dances and songs, and it was also his duty to start all songs and to carry the air. The head singer had to possess a very good voice, and had to make it his business to know the songs for the various ceremonies. Now and then he was at a loss for the proper song for a particular occasion. He was allowed to consult some other singer, or, upon occasion, he might ask for suggestions from the audience. Any one who knew a song which fitted the occasion might come to the head singer and sing it for him in an undertone, until he caught it and was ready to lead in the singing. As a rule he kept time with a split-stick rattle, or a rattle made of cocoons.

The chorus or burden-singers, called *skam* (E), gave volume to the music and marked time with their split-stick rattles, *hai mitamitaka* (N). Their usual burden was "he, he, he, he, . . ." sung in a heavy monotone.

The drummers, called *tsīlo' gaūk* (E), *tsīlo' tea* (C), and *tsīlo' matūtsī* (E), were always two in number, and as a rule they took turns in playing the large wooden drum which was set in the ground at the rear of the dance-house, and which was beaten by the stamping of the feet. The office of drummer was considered one of the most important, and second only to that of fire-tender.

The master of ceremonies, called *xabē' dima* (E), *xabē' gaūk* (E), and *he'lima* (C), started and stopped all songs and dances by certain signals. The participants in the dance usually maintained certain positions, but the master of ceremonies ran about from place to place supervising the activities and giving directions as required. His

⁴The reason for the throwing of the beads is as follows: Pomo custom prescribes a period of mourning lasting one year. If a dancer so far forgets his sorrow as actively to participate in a ceremony of this kind before the expiration of the prescribed mourning period after the death of a friend or relative some atonement is required. It is customary under such circumstances for some one in the audience to throw some loose shell-beads at the dancer, these being evidently intended as an offering to the spirits and having nothing directly to do with the dancer himself.

presence was absolutely necessary at all ceremonies, and without him a dance could not proceed. He acted under the general direction of the head captain, but that official himself never served as master of ceremonies. Very rarely did the same individual serve as master of ceremonies and head singer. While as a rule the drummers and the singers wore no special dress for ceremonial occasions, the masters of ceremonies were almost always painted and dressed according to different requirements for each ceremony (see below). They were usually among the dancers who impersonated supernatural beings.

GENERAL FEATURES OF POMO CEREMONIES

A ceremony always centered about the dance-house,⁵ and lasted four nights, or some multiple of four, beginning usually soon after sunset. In the case of the "ghost ceremony," which began at sunrise, the preceding night was spent in performing other dances. Such ceremonies were made up of a varying number of dances.

There was usually no prescribed sequence, but the ceremony took the name of the dance which was its special feature, though this need not necessarily open the ceremony. In a few instances it was recognized that certain dances should be performed together.

A ceremony consisted of (1) an introductory procedure, accompanied by more or less ritual, such as the initiation of the children through the *gū'ksū* ceremony (see below, p. 425); (2) a series of dances; (3) a series of speeches by officials and men of importance concerning the religious life or other matters of public interest; (4) a final purification rite; and (5) various feasts, particularly one held in the morning after the final night of the ceremony.

There were certain special ceremonies, such as the *gū'ksū* ceremony, in which a definite opening procedure was required, but after this almost any desired dance might be held at any time, day or night, throughout the duration of the ceremonial period. The procedure of the final night of the ceremony was also usually fixed.

The principal ceremonies of the Pomo were:

The *xahlū'gax xaikilgaiagība*⁶ (the "ghost" or "devil" ceremony).

The *kalimatōtō xaikilgaiagība* (the thunder ceremony).

The *gū'ksū xaikilgaiagība*.

The *da'ma xaikilgaiagība*.

⁵ For a description of this large semi-subterranean structure see "Pomo Buildings," by the present author in the *Holmes Anniversary Volume*.

⁶ These words are in the Eastern Pomo dialect.

INVITATIONS TO CEREMONIES

The captains of the village discussed with other important men the question of holding a ceremony, just as they discussed other matters relating to the general public good. Having agreed upon the date and other details, the head captain usually walked through the village delivering an oration, as was customary upon occasions of importance, in which he announced to the people the decision of their captains. This oration might, however, be delivered as he stood before the door of his own house or before the door of the dance-house.

Invitations were then sent to the people of other villages to attend the ceremony. This was done by means of a special invitation string. Wormwood or willow sticks about two inches in length were tied, each separately, into a short string, the number of sticks being equal, according to some informants, to the number of days intervening before the ceremony was to begin, usually not fewer than two or more than eight. Other informants stated that this number was equal to these intervening days plus the number of days during which the ceremony was to be held. For instance, if a four-day ceremony was to begin four days hence, these being the usual numbers in both instances, eight sticks were tied into the invitation string. According to another informant, if the number of sticks was from two to five, the guests were invited for the first of two or more ceremonies. If six or more sticks were present, they were to come for a later ceremony. This latter, however, seems to be rather improbable. To one end of the string was tied, as an ornament, a small section of forehead-band made of yellow-hammer feathers. This string might be presented as such, but frequently it was tied to the end of a wand about two feet long. Its general name among the Central Pomo was *haidel*. Before sending, it was called *ha'iebü*; after it had been sent out, it was termed *ha'idakaü*.

A messenger took this string or wand to the captain of the village invited and, if it was necessary for him to make a journey of any considerable length, he broke off a stick for each day of his journey. According to most informants, he simply delivered the string to the head captain of the invited village and immediately returned home with the message of acceptance from that village. According to one informant, however, he remained as the guest of the head captain, and himself broke a stick each day from the invitation string and finally conducted the visitors to the ceremony.

As a rule, visitors arrived at least one day before the ceremony

began, but they never entered the village itself until the morning of the first ceremonial day, making camp meanwhile at some convenient spot within a short distance. The visitors collected a present of a considerable number of shell beads, which was carried by their head captain as he led them into the village. Some, at least, of the younger men among the visitors attired themselves in their dance costumes and danced into the village, usually following a little apart from the rest of their people.

As soon as the visitors appeared in sight, a watchman, stationed on the roof of the dance-house, gave notice to the head captain, who was inside. He at once came out and, taking a position directly in front of the dance-house, delivered a short oration inviting the visitors to enter and making them welcome. As the visitors entered each group was assigned to its particular position in the dance-house, and all seated themselves with their head captain, captains, fire-tenders, and other officials in front. When the head captain of the host village finally entered the dance-house, which was not until after all the visitors had taken their seats, he was called by the visiting head captain to their position. The visiting head captain then made a short speech of presentation and gave the beads to the host head captain, who made, in return, a second and more lengthy speech of welcome. He then took these beads to his own house, and they were later divided among his people. A present of equal value was returned to the visitors, either immediately or at some time before the close of the ceremony.

This formality of welcome over, some dance might be held at once or the guests and hosts might enjoy a general visit. If one of the secret ceremonies was to be held, all the women and children and the uninitiated men retired from the dance-house before it commenced.

THE GHOST OR DEVIL CEREMONY

This ceremony was perhaps the most important of the four-day ceremonies of the Pomo. It was usually held in the spring and was witnessed only by properly initiated men, never by women or children. The uninitiated men, as well as the women and children, were much afraid of these dancers and kept a very respectful distance when they entered the village. This was due to the belief that to approach closely would produce serious illness.

Such esoteric ceremonies are unusual among the Pomo, though