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The Spirit of the Dream Dance

Watching my traditions change

Mabel McKay was Pomo, from eastern Lake County. The Pomo are known as the world's finest basket makers, and Mabel was among the best of them. All of her baskets were derived from her dreams—she was a Dreamer. She was also a “sucking doctor,” traditionally considered by California Indians the most powerful and, hence, most valued of medicine people. When she passed away in 1993, she was the last of these doctors.

Ten years earlier, I accompanied her to a celebration of California Indian culture sponsored by a local community college. It was a spring day, and everywhere booths displayed books and crafts, advertising and selling just about anything to do with Indians. People milled about, but I noticed that most of the crowd had gathered around a group of dancers. I could hear the clapper sticks and singing. Mabel and I edged our way forward so that we could see. But just then, everything stopped. The dancers in their turkey-feather skirts and imitation flicker-feather headbands had grown still, the singers with their clappers silent. In a split second, they turned in the opposite

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direction and disappeared behind the onlookers. I'm sure the crowd was confused—but not Mabel. Chuckling, she said to me, "They think I'm going to hoodoo them."

Later, on the way home, or at her kitchen table—we often talked at her kitchen table—she said, "They're doing it wrong. They're singing Essie's songs and they're not supposed to. They ain't following the rules. They don't know the rules." Mabel was referring to her longtime friend, Essie Parrish, a renowned Dreamer and prophet of the Kashaya Pomo, who had left Mabel detailed instructions before her death on what to do with her Dream songs and dances—what was to be discontinued, what could live on, and, accordingly, the rules for whatever action was taken. Mabel, staring into the distance as if she were seeing Essie, said, "Essie told me—she told me, 'the false people will come out after I die.'"

"She wanted to make sure you knew what to do," I said, attempting to appear smart. Certainly, I'd heard as much before.

"Them people," Mabel said, "they know I know the rules. They know what Essie said."

"But you wouldn't poison them."

I used the word "poison," the term often used for casting of spells—harmful spells.

Once more came Mabel's inimitable chuckle. "No," she said. "But I don't know what the Spirit will do."

I feel old, or like I'm getting old. I find myself saying, "They're doing it wrong." Mostly to myself, luckily. Growing up in and around Indian homes, I heard about cures and spells—poisoning—even before I met Mabel. It was something I didn't talk about, particularly among non-Indians,

probably because I didn't understand it, but also because I didn't want people to think I was strange, believing in as much. Mabel warned against touching things, for instance, picking up a stone that might catch my attention, because "You don't know what spirit it is, or who put it there." But then what do you think after you've seen her suck a tadpole-like creature out of a woman's eye? Or when she sucks from each of your temples a pint of fluid that cures your allergies?

Spells and curses as I've described them—even cures—might upset the general, and often stereotyped, picture of the California Indian as peaceful, nature-loving. Any attempt on my part to discuss California Indian religion, much less criticize those who might practice it, without thinking about the larger history out of which it comes, would not only put me at odds with that history, but in all likelihood with the religions themselves.

It is impossible to generalize: there are over one hundred tribes in California today, each with its own language and particular history. All of the language families found in the New World are represented in one or more languages in California. The California landscape out of which these languages and respective cultures emerged is itself equally diverse. Ethnographers often divide the Native population into three cultural groups or categories: the northwestern tribes, including the Hupa and Yurok, who had stratified societies; the central tribes, including the Maidu and Wintun of the central valley, as well as my tribes, the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok in the coastal region north of present day San Francisco, who were egalitarian, and organized around a number of secret societies; and finally the southwestern tribes, such as the Chumash of the Santa Barbara

coast and the inland-desert Cahuilla, who, similar to the central tribes, belonged to secret societies, but in some cases planted and harvested crops. Still, these divisions are arbitrary, limiting in significant ways what we might understand about a particular people.

What all tribes share is a tie to a specific landscape and a brutal European colonization that worked to break that tie. What can be pieced together from early Franciscan journals, ethnographic descriptions, and indigenous lore that has been handed down by the likes of Mabel herself, is that the religion—and in turn culture—created and maintained for its practitioners a sustainable relationship with not just the landscape, but also with neighboring peoples for eons.

Ethnographers have long asked how so many different people speaking so many different languages and having different customs lived together peacefully for thousands of years. Indeed, at the time of contact, California was more densely populated than anywhere else in the New World, except for the Aztec capital in what is now Mexico City. Some Franciscan padres wondered if the California Indians, seeming to them so simple-minded, were human enough to baptize. Early Americans considered them the most primitive of Indians, because the California Indians, unlike those of the Plains, did not display organized warfare—not at first anyway.

In my region, just north of San Francisco, approximately 20,000 Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok lived in nation villages of 150 to 500 individuals. The Penutian languages of the Coast Miwok in the southern part of the region were as different from the Hokan spoken by the Pomo in the north as English is to Cantonese. Tribal territories were small, often no more than twenty square miles, and while people might speak several languages and trade often with neighbors, it wasn't uncommon to spend one's life never having traveled more than thirty miles from the home village.

There were chiefs or headmen, sometimes headwomen, but of equal importance and influence were the spiritual advisors who would inform the chief from their dreams or visions, of the approach of salmon, say, so that he or she might order the people to ready their nets. There were organized ceremonies, dances called by the headman, marking the seasons, for example. Ever present in the minds of villagers were the secret societies.

There were many secret societies or cults, often associated with animals—grizzly bears, birds, snakes—and sometimes

with certain places, a cave, maybe a spring, or some other body of water. Societies were often gender-based. Women's bear cults were considered among the most powerful. Sometimes the societies were inter-tribal, members from one village recruiting potential initiates from neighbors. Always the societies were private, and membership a secret. Who knew that your sister donned a bear skin at night and traveled for distances to locate food, or perhaps to avenge an enemy? Further, it was assumed that regardless of one's cult status, everyone possessed some protection in the form of a special spirit or song, maybe a secret amulet. People were reminded in this way that they didn't know everything about others; they were reminded, in fact, of what they didn't know. Ethnographers have said the cultures were predicated on black magic and fear. But might we not see it differently, predicated not so much on fear, but on respect, even reverence? Regardless of your unique powers, you were reminded of others, that you were never alone, and certainly that you weren't in any way all powerful. Physical warfare would be considered the lowest form of warfare. If you had to strike or stab someone, you would only be demonstrating your lack of spiritual power. Anyone could poison you without retribution.

All of the natural world was likewise imbued with special power and, thus, demanded the same reverence. A small stone, no different from the mighty grizzly, might share a song with you. Disrespected, misused, the stone could cause harm, bad luck. When I asked a Kashaya Pomo elder why the Europeans were referred to as *pala-cha*, miracles, she told me: Instead of being punished for killing people and animals, chopping down trees, damming and dredging the waterways, more of them kept coming. If that elder were alive and could see the state of the Earth today, might she not rethink the moniker?

As with many California Indian tribes, the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok saw Coyote as the creator of the universe. Coyote was a magical figure from a time before the present when all animals were human, and he possessed characteristics, both good and bad, associated with human beings. He was smart, creative, and a good storyteller, but he was prone to pride and avarice, which usually got him into trouble. In fact, much of creation resulted from his foolhardy behavior. His greed caused the yellow jacket to grow a stinger. His vanity gave rise to death. The California Indian world then, unlike the traditions of Judaism and



Christianity with their benevolent almighty creator and Great Chain of Being, is one made by the most human of individuals, where all life is on equal footing in terms of power and importance, requiring constant attention, an engagement with it that is dynamic and dialogical. Features of the landscape—an outcropping of rocks, the shape and size of a pond—become mnemonic pegs on which hang the stories of creation, as well as other stories, that ask us to remember and reflect. The landscape, thus, is the Native’s text. Congruous with what secret societies remind us, the world is complex and nothing in it can be taken at face value.

Again Mabel’s admonition: “You don’t know what spirit it is or who put it there.” If an ancient sensibility informed Mabel’s words—indeed, her religion—so too must have the history she shared with all California Indians, which began 250 years ago with the arrival of the first Europeans. The Spanish, in a movement spearheaded by Father Junipero Serra, began marching north in the middle part of the eighteenth century, going from San Diego to the far reaches of Sonoma and Mendocino Counties on the coast and as far inland as the Sierra Foothills, claiming land for Spain and souls for a Christian God. They established a string of missions, which simultaneously served as military outposts, where Natives, often having been forcibly removed from their native villages, were made to labor and to adopt a lifestyle and religion that was completely bewildering and, in the end, devastating. Tens of thousands died from European diseases. A rich and varied native diet was replaced by a bowl of wheat or corn. After the Mexican Revolution in 1823, the Mexican government secularized the missions. Large tracts

of land, referred to as *ranchos*, were given to Mexican generals along with their friends and relatives. The Natives who survived the missions fared no better on the *ranchos*, again being forced to labor, and subject to rape and other abuses from which they had no recourse. The first piece of legislation that California enacted as a state in 1850 was the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, which gave landowners jurisdiction over Indians residing on their property, essentially rendering the Indians slaves. The law was not repealed until 1868, three years after the end of the Civil War.

By this time, barely 10 percent of the indigenous population in many regions had survived. They were literally decimated. They worked more or less as indentured servants for landowners who would give them a home and a modicum of protection—they were not US citizens and, like all other American Indians, would not be until 1924.

After several years of working in the central valley, sometime in late 1868, perhaps early 1869, an Eastern Pomo, referred to in ethnographies only as Lame Bill, returned to Lake County with a Dream. He was told in his Dream that a great flood would clean the land of white people, and if the faithful Indians gathered in seven roundhouses on the eastern shores of Clear Lake, they would be saved, alive to witness the return of the ancestors and all of the animals, in essence the world as it had been. Mabel told me that Lame Bill was otherwise known as Richard Taylor, and that he was her great-uncle, her grandmother’s brother. While in the Central Valley, he’d met a disciple—perhaps the son—of Wovoka, the Paiute visionary who in the following years preached the revivalistic Ghost Dance religion to Plains tribes.

One cannot say conclusively if Richard Taylor was influenced by the man he met. Without a doubt, his Dream was one of hope. In the winter of 1870–1871, nearly two thousand survivors from the coast region and the Central Valley met and gathered in the roundhouses. It rained for four days and nights. The lake rose. On the fifth morning, the believers discovered not a renewed world, but instead two hundred US Cavalry with guns drawn. The Natives, suspected of an uprising, were quickly dispersed. Though disheartened, they took with them the spirit of revitalization, which in local roundhouses morphed into an impassioned nationalism led by a single Dreamer, often a woman, who organized her entire tribe, sometimes now only a mere handful of survivors, around her Dreams. Co-opting tenets of Victorian ideology, the Dreamer forbade drinking, gambling, and extramarital sex. Long dresses—with long sleeves—had to be worn at all times by women in the roundhouses.

The religion became known among the Pomo as *Bole Maru*, or Dream Dance; in the central valley, tribes such as the Wintun, called it *Bole Hesi*, or Spirit Dance. The religion contained elements of older beliefs and ceremonies, but increasingly put more stress on the afterlife. Interaction with white people, outside of necessary work-related situations, was forbidden, and might cost you reunification with ancestors after death. Ethnographers argue that the religion paved the way for Christianity and further cultural demise. Others, myself included, point out that it helped fortify family structure. Individuals with knowledge of secret societies renewed their practices; there would now be a younger generation of potential initiates. What seems most significant here, though, is the transition from a “we” worldview to an “us-them” worldview. You now have an enemy, a devil, pure and simple.

The wide interest today in Indian religion can be traced to the 1960s. Non-Indians disenchanted with established religions sought alternatives. Indians sought a reconnection with their traditions. Many were the children of a generation that attempted with varying degrees of success to assimilate, abandoning Indian lifeways—a generation often referred to as “the lost generation.” In large urban settings, most notably Los Angeles and the Bay Area, Indians from out of state renewed and practiced their religions; the American Indian Movement (AIM) offered Plains-style dancing, seen today at pow wows and elsewhere as part of a larger pan-Indian movement seeking to unify

American Indians as a political entity. California Indians, at first in the margins of the larger social movement, particularly in terms of any public display of their singing and dancing, now regularly perform their dances at pow wows and local functions, such as the one Mabel and I attended at the community college. A mandate of the *Bole Maru* religion is that while a Dreamer might be given certain songs and dances from her predecessor, her tradition—ceremonies, songs, dances—must be derived from her particular Dream, able to address challenges and preserve Indian identity in an ever-changing world. Mabel’s point of view regarding the dancers at the college must have had something to do with this mandate. The dancers were not using the songs of a living Dreamer; nor did Mabel believe Essie had given them permission to use hers.

In 1942, when Essie Parrish first took sway of the roundhouse on the Kashaya Reservation, American Indian men were for the first time drafted into the armed services. She gave each man a handkerchief designed from her Dream to wear in battle. His wife or mother was to dance with a matching handkerchief in the roundhouse. Forty men went to war; thirty-nine returned. They say the war victim’s mother was a “nonbeliever.” By this time, the *Bole Maru* religion was in great decline, having died out in most other Indian communities during the 1920s and 1930s. Many Indian people had converted or more fully accepted other religions, such as Catholicism. Essie dropped the strict isolationist policies of her predecessors, perhaps out of practical need. Already so many tribal citizens had attended boarding schools and lived in large cities to support the war effort. A majority of the young men had been to Europe or the South Pacific. She saw the advantages of public education both as a means to lift her people out of poverty and to protect their rights. Sadly, by the time of her death in 1979, the influence of Mormons and various Evangelicals, combined with existing tribal political tensions, resulted not just in a splintering of the tribe into factions, but even family member from family member.

Mabel was a Dreamer, but she did not have a roundhouse. Even when she met Essie in the early 1950s, she had few immediate relatives, hardly a tribe, and long before her death she was the last to speak her language. Essie took Mabel into the Kashaya roundhouse. She told Mabel, “my people will call you aunt.” Some of the dancers Mabel and I watched at the community college had turned away from Essie in the past. Watching them, did Mabel feel any animosity?



Most, if not all, of the major world religions today emerged in contexts of colonization, social strife, diaspora, often after people had been displaced from a native home. Think of the Israelites in the desert. The religions sought to provide answers, solace in a troubled world, not unlike the *Bole Maru*. Like the *Bole Maru*, they worked to forge unity and revitalize an older culture, often creating, even unwittingly, a nationalism not unlike the one to which they were reacting. Religious texts, in the most narrow of their readings, work to dissolve ambiguity. Here again, we might see a major difference between the *Bole Maru* and more ancient Indian religions. California Indian creation tales and secret societies worked to maintain ambiguity. Of course, people were safer then. They were already home.

More than in any recent past, California Indians today want to reclaim ancestral lands. We want to be home, but not just in terms of a particular landscape. We want to

reconnect with traditions that locate us culturally with the landscape. More than ever, Indians want to dance. It's not uncommon for multiple dance groups—all using the same songs—to perform at a single event. Dancers claim that what they are doing is pleasing to the Spirit. They say more songs and dances will come, or return. Who am I to say they are wrong? Just when I think their dancing is foolish, nothing more than an instance of final assimilation in the guise of feathers and songs rather than a reawakening to a radiant, awe-inspiring Earth, I spot a face I recognize and stop. Wasn't it that dancer's great-grandfather who poisoned my great-aunt? Was it Mabel McKay who told me? Never mind. Be respectful, I think. You don't know the whole story. **B**

Note

All photographs by Christine Cobaugh.