Central California Native Americans

By: Janessa Boom, Matthew Navarrette, Angel Villa, Michael Ruiz, Alejandro Montiel, Jessica Jauregui, Nicholas Hardyman
Settlement Patterns

Central California was a densely populated cultural area with vast amounts of natural resources at hand. Taking advantage of central California’s various ecotones, the people exploited a plethora of resources using their ingenious technological and cultural expertise. As a general rule of thumb, the various tribes of central California organized themselves according to the availability of resources, i.e., if resources were found to be more densely packed within a given tribal area, one could expect to find a direct correlation in the tribe’s settlement pattern.

A. Washoe Tribe- Located in the eastern part of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, the Washoe Tribal settlements could typically be found 4-5,000 ft above the resource-rich Carson and Truckee river systems. Utilizing their short distance from the water, the Washoe tribe always had an abundant amount of food due to hunting both the fish swimming in the river, and the large game that came to the water to drink.

B. Nisenan Tribe- Much like their Washoe neighbors in the east, the Nisenan Tribe preferred to live above rivers that stemmed from the Sierra Nevada Mountain range (Yuba, Bear, and American Rivers). Despite their similarities to the Washoe, the Nisenan also inhabited the valleys just north of Sacramento. While communities living above rivers tended to small, those located in the central valley could have as many as 500 inhabitants.

C. Yana Tribe- While both the Nisenan and Washoe tribes utilized river systems within their tribal areas, the Yana lacked such large rivers. Instead, the Yana made use of various small tributaries stemming from Mt. Lassen in the uppermost portion of central California. Perhaps the most hostile of the central California tribes, the settlement territory of the Yana was severely limited by conflicts with the Maidu, Wintu, and Achumawi.
Housing and Buildings

A. Washoe Tribe - There were two primary types of shelters for the Washoe people:

- Summer Houses (Gadu) - Summer shelters consisted of practically whatever materials the Washoe could find (typically willow from the river). These summer shelters could best be understood as the modern-day equivalent of pitching a tent in the woods. They weren't meant to be permanent homes, rather, they were merely meant to protect from the wind.

- Winter Houses (Galais Dungal) - While summer shelters were easily constructed, winter shelters for the Washoe were not. Built in a conical shape, the Galais Dungal was constructed using several layers of sturdy bark. Once the frame was erected, poles and brush were then used as insulation against the cold. Finally, with the frame in place and the insulation set, most of the Washoe would then create a small fireplace in the center of the shelter.

  *Note: their doors would always face the east in order to receive the first light of day.*

B. Nisenan Tribe - The Nisenan Tribe utilized a simple layout when it came to constructing their villages. First and foremost there was the typical home (Hu), then came the village’s ceremonial house (kum).

- Typical Shelter (Hu) - Dome in its shape, the Hu was constructed in a 10-15 diameter. Consisting of a pole frame, the Nisenan then covered the shelter with brush or tules and earth.

- Ceremonial House (Kum) - Much larger than the Hu was the Nisenan’s ceremonial house, or Kum. Utilizing the same brush, tule, and earth as their typical shelters, the ceremonial house differed in that it was built 3-4 ft underground with the added material of large beams to account for the structure’s size.

- Sweathouse (?) - Although not an archetype for the Nisenan Tribe, sweathouses were also present in some villages.
C. Yana Tribe- Despite being confined to such a small area, the Yana actually maintained two distinct types of shelters depending on the geographic location of the village.

- **Northern/Central Yana** - The people living near the northern/central parts of the Yana’s territory created large earth-covered houses in which several families would live. Crafted with a post in the center, the entrance to the shelter was through a smoke hole in the roof. Once the outer frame was constructed, the central/northern Yana would then place bark and reeds over the frame. With the bark and reeds put in place, they would then cover the shelter with earth for the finishing touch.

- **Southern Yana** - The people living in the southern part of the Yana’s territory utilized a much different type of shelter than their neighbors in the north. Characterized by a much smaller, cone-shaped shelter, the southern Yana’s shelters contained only one family per dwelling. Constructed out of a frame of poles, they would then use long slabs of cedar or pine bark to cover the frame. Dirt was only added to the lower part of the shelter to keep water from coming through the bottom.
Population

Using Yokuts for example

1770

- Had about 18,000 people
- One of the largest tribes in the San Joaquin Valley
- Territory was the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta to Bakersfield
Population

1910

- The population was reduced down by 93% to a shocking 533.
- This was due to the sudden growth in California once it entered the Union in 1850.
- Settlers made life harder for the Yokuts.
- Diseases such as Malaria and Smallpox also wiped out a lot of the population
Population

2010

- This is the most recent estimate on population for the Yokuts and the population has grown to approximately 6,200.
- Now they’re a federally recognized tribe.
Artwork

Common Central California theme:
● Death is necessary in the process of rebirth.
● Represents “Hunter” and “Hunt Shamans.
● Ritual in order to ensure a fruitful hunt.
Artwork

Maidu:

- Religious Petroglyphs.
- Left by “Maker”
- One day he will return to his people.
- Seems to be a hush amongst the elders about what they mean.
Gender Roles

The roles that were expected of men and women in their tribes were generally similar between the various Central American groups.

- The Yana, Yokut, Central Pomo, Nisenan, Miwok, Washoe, and Ohlone tribes among others all expected male adults to hunt and gather while women were generally given the responsibility of raising children, collecting shellfish or plant foods.
  - Men would also make their own weapons from wood, bone, or stone and weave their own fishing nets; while women would make baskets and tule mats; having very elaborate basketry making practices such as in Pomo tribes.

- Central American tribes would also have mostly patrilineal marriage and inheritance traditions, and would customarily involve the husband’s parents offering gifts to the bride’s family; but there were exceptions, such as the Washoe tribe which had bilineal lineage traditions and didn’t usually involve gift exchange for marriage.
  - Mother-in-law taboos existed where mother of husband’s wife was expected not have any relationship with the husband or even look at him during their marriage.

- Women were usually given more elaborate puberty rites of passage ceremonies involving tattoos or dancing and singing rituals; while men’s right of passage usually involved success in hunting; such as Washoe boys killing their first full-grown buck.
  - With exceptions, such as adult status being given to adolescent males and females in the Yokut tribe by family and neighbors attending a special ceremony.
Age-based Roles

Elder men and women were usually regarded with greater respect and significance in most Central American tribes. Men and women elders, though usually not as active as the younger men and women providing and governing their communities, had generally strong voices in community affairs and older men and women in some tribes had significant authority in agriculture or certain cultural affairs based on age.

- In various Washoe tribes, elders were regarded as the "keepers of fire" because of their wisdom and their ability to pass on past Washoe stories and traditions; and elders were generally first to eat at gatherings.
Political Organizations

Base Form of Government for Central CA:

- “Triblet”
- One central village surrounded by smaller villages.
- The leader would live in the central village.
- Treasured natural communities surround villages as well.
- With the use of controlled burnings and plant/animal control. Boundaries were created.
Leadership

- No “Big Men” leadership. (Wealth)
- Position was acquired by heredity.
- Social Prestige based off of his individual authoritative office.
- Lead Village ceremonies, as well as settled interpersonal and inter village conflicts.
Leadership cont...

Miwok:

- Follows the basic structure.
- Name for Lineage: *Nena*.
- Not only Patriarchal lineage, but also of land.
- Influences the name of that lineage.
  1. Wet = Frog.
  2. Dry = Bear.
Religion and Spirituality

Tricksters
- A legendary supernatural creature featured in Native American stories myths and legends
- Usually includes coyotes, spider, ram, hare and raven.
- The Trickster is often confusing, a deceiver, plays tricks and is a shape shifter.
- Example: The coyote, who is affiliated with many tribes. The coyote is a shape shifter and a clown in all Native American trickster type stories.

What we call the soul, the Maidu called the heart.
The religious or spiritual idea that all things in the universe that are natural objects have souls or spirits.

Souls exist in not just humans, but also animals, plants and even rocks.

Thunderstorms, rain, and rivers have souls.
Ceremonies

Central Californian Native Americans hold ceremonies for the acorn harvest, the arrival of the first salmon, initiations and mourning.
The Ghost Dance of 1890

- A new religious movement throughout Native American culture.
- It was believed that proper practice of the dance would result in the living reuniting with the dead.
- It was believed to bring peace, prosperity and unity to Native Americans that practiced it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UoMW37xfMRw
The Maidu speak a type of Penutian Linguistic…

- Maidu language
- Nisenan language
- Konkow language

- All three are generally considered distinct but many elders still speak them so often they are considered together.
Native Women of Central California

Girls Adolescence Ceremony

- The ritual consisted of five nights of singing and the Maidu dance *wulu*.
- The girl was painted with five vertical lines on her face, erasing one each morning.
- Two girls with their heads covered with a cloth were set in a ring of pine needles set on fire and were told to escape.
- After this, the women bathed them in sand pits used for leaching acorns.
- The men danced the *wulu* and older women would sing all night with strings of beads around their arms.
Currency

Many central California natives used the *Olivella biplicata* shell as currency for at least 9,000 years.

Around 1500 CE and into the 19th century, the Coast Miwok, Ohlone, Patwin, Pomo, and Wappo used the *Saxidomus* marine bivalve as shell money.
Many Yosemite natives would use Acorn Granaries to store their gathered acorns.

The chuckah was the Ahwahneechee’s pantry would could hold up to several hundred pounds of acorns

Women would have pounding rocks with different hole depths to accommodate different foods.
Tools (Continued)

- Obsidian was used for projectile points and was a major commodity in trade.
- Yokuts utilized tule weeds for baskets, mats, cradles and even canoe-shaped rafts.
- Wappo would shape rocks for tools like mauls and axes. Hunting tools were nooses of plant fiber and slingshots.
- Wappo also made baskets closely resembling those made by the Pomo.
Trade

Native Californians from various tribes would call Yosemite home. These tribes would trade valuable resources including shell beads (which were the measure of value), salt, acorns, dried nuts, obsidian, and alkali fly larva. (The fly larva was made into a high-protein flour)
There was a variety of food available to the many tribes that called California home, but the most common for all was that of the black oak acorn. Some tribes focused on another means of food like the Yokuts who fished year round or the Wappo who only snagged fish in the summer and feasted on available game like deer, rabbits, and water fowl. Other food sources include antelope, elk, quail, mussels, turtles, pigeons, squirrels and other rodents, clams, eels, and fish like lake trout, perch, and salmon. The Yokuts had another item and that was dogs, and they may have been the only early inhabitants to raise dogs for food. The plant foods include strawberry, blackberry, wild grape, sierra plum, seeds and roots from tule grass, buckeye nuts, clover, and wild honey.
Foods (Cont.)

- Buckeye Nuts
- California Mule Deer
- Sierra Plum
- Black Oak Acorns
- Lake Trout
- Quail
- Buckeye Nuts
- California Mule Deer
- Sierra Plum
- Black Oak Acorns
- Lake Trout
- Quail
Herbal Medicines

Yerba Santa: Leaves used to treat asthma and upper respiratory infections. Also used as a poultice for wounds, insect bites and broken bones.

Horse mint: Used to treat upset stomach, colds, neuralgia, and kidney disease.

Balsamroot: Roots used to treat colds. Also a food source.

Mule Ears: Treat sore throats and allergies.

California Laurel: Leaves used to cure headaches, toothaches, and earaches.
Clothing

(Miwok as example)

- Children did not wear clothing until they were around the age of 10.

- Men clothing consisted of a simple clout of buckskin, which showed as just a short apron at the front and the back.

- The women wore dresses that were made of buckskin as well, the skirt reached halfway below the knees that had a fringe which was several inches in length. Across the shoulders it was a oblique band of buckskin. Grass skirts were also worn from the waist to the knees, and others made of shredded tule fabric. Under the skirts they would wear buckskin clouts.
Clothing (Continued)

- When the weather became cooler, both males and females would wear blankets. These blankets were made out of skin from various animals such as deer, bear, mountain lion, coyote, buffalo and others. They would get a hold of these blankets through trade with the Washoe and Eastern Mono tribes. Blankets that they made themselves were made out of rabbit skin. They were made by winding narrow strips of rabbit skin and weaving them using plain cord. These blankets were loose but very warm.

- Both male and female would normally not wear anything on their feet except for moccasins. These were worn during the cold and when traveling on rough ground. These moccasins were made of buckskin that were lined with shredded cedar bark. They were sewn up with milkweed fiber thread.
Hair Style

(Miwok as example)

- The Miwok wore their hair long, up to the waist. They wore the hair loosely or tied up when the weather required it and for hunting. They would tie it up in a simple knot or gathered into a bun at the back of the head. Feather rope and a string called weka were used to tie the hair.

- Hair was only cut when someone died. It was a sign of mourning.
Body Adornments

(Miwok as example)

- Women and men would wear necklaces that were usually made out of shell beads.

- Men would wear feather belts. The belt was made out of buckskin and had the woodpecker scalp sewed on. They were fringed with olive shell disks. Other belts were also made out of shell beads.

- Both sexes would wear piercings. Nasal septums and ears were pierced during childhood. An earring was made of a small string of beads and shells. Ear plugs were made by burning the surface of a piece of young pine in four to seven inches in length. When the blackened part was rubbed down enough it would become shiny, and the ends were decorated with beads or shells and sometimes feathers from woodpeckers. The nose piercings were sticks made of bone and shell. These body ornaments were usually only worn by the wealthy and in special religious occasions.
Tattooing

(Miwok as example)

- Both male and female wore tattoos. The usual design began at the edge of the lower lip and extended to the lower stomach. The design was just a simple line that branches into three lines. Other designs were placed on the shoulders, arms, hands, chest, belly and thighs.

- The pigment they would use would come from the black ashes of the angelica root plant. The tool used was a sharp point of obsidian that was tied to the end of a stick.