

A.L. Kroeber

HANDBOOK OF THE INDIANS OF CALIFORNIA



With 419 Illustrations and 40 Maps

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HANDBOOK
of the
INDIANS OF CALIFORNIA

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CHAPTER 26.

THE WINTUN: KUKSU CULT.

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THE CENTRAL CALIFORNIA KUKSU CULT.

Among the Wintun, or more specifically in the Patwin half of the Wintun stock, appears to be found the hotbed of the central Californian cult system based on a secret society and characterized by the Kuksu or "big-head" dances. It happens that the Wintun practices in connection with this organization are rather less known than those of their neighbors the Pomo and the Maidu; but as all indications point to their having exercised the most prominent influence in the shaping of this system, it is advisable to consider its general features here.

It must be clearly understood that "Wintun" in connection with Kuksu cult means Patwin only. Few if any non-Patwin Wintun followed this religion until after the white man came.

DISTINCTIVE TRAITS.

The presence of a male secret society must be taken as the first test character of the central Californian religious cult. This means that there is a set of esoteric rites participated in only by those who, usually as boys, have been initiated and instructed.

Hand in hand with secret societies in many parts of the world goes the use of masks and disguises, both traits springing from the same impulse toward concealment. True masks have not been reported anywhere in California; but it is clear that wherever the secret society prevails at least some of its members have their identity concealed during dances. This is accomplished either by crude and heavy coats of paint, or by face curtains of feathers, down, grass, or shredded rushes. As almost everywhere else, these disguised dancers of central California represent spirits or deities, in

fact are believed to be such by the uninitiated children and younger women. The lack of an actual mask, in the form of a false face, is probably the result of the much weaker technical inclinations of the Californians than of other nations given to secret associations.

A certain type of place of assembly is a nearly constant feature of this cult: the large earth-covered house, approximately circular, with its domed roof resting on posts and beam logs. Structures of this general type are widespread: the Plains earth lodge—of which the Sun-dance lodge is only the unroofed and unwallled skeleton—the winter house of the interior Salish, of the Modoc on the California border, are all similar in fundamental plan. But these are dwellings. In central California the structure is a ceremonial chamber.

It is true that the living houses of some of the tribes that possessed the Kuksu society were often made like their dance houses, except that they were smaller. It is also true that several of the groups adjoining them on the north, such as the Wailaki, Yana, northeastern Maidu, and Achomawi, built the same kind of structure without devoting it to the uses of a society. But in general, the geographical correspondence of the two traits is close. The Wiyot, Chimariko, and Shasta, who are all but a short distance north beyond the confines of the secret society area, did without the earth lodge. To the south, again, the earth lodge has not been reported from the Yokuts, who had no secret society. They did construct sweat houses covered with soil; in fact, such structures prevail south practically to the limits of the State; but these were comparatively small buildings, devoted to sweating and sleeping, and not employed for dances, initiations, or assemblies. Again, an earth-covered house appears in much of southern California; but this is the living house, and ceremonials are held outdoors.

In the main, then, the spread of the earth house as a ritualistic chamber coincides with that of the Kuksu cult, except toward the north. So far as the correspondence fails in details, the variance can be corrected by consideration of an accessory, the foot drum. This is a large, hollowed slab, 6, 8, or 10 feet long, placed with its convex side up, above a shallow excavation in the rear of the dance house, and stamped on by the dancers. So far as available information goes, this drum is used only by secret society tribes.

The earth-roofed ceremonial chamber is frequently called a sweat house. It is this, at times, though smaller structures, used only for sweating, stood by its side. In uncomfortable weather it probably served as a lounging place for men. It seems sometimes to have been inhabited, sometimes, like the Yurok sweat house, to have