



California State Parks Video Transcript



California State Indian Museum Orientation Video

Through music and song, the California Indian recalls a vital link to his past. If we could step back into the past, we would find a California far different from today.

On the prairies of the Modoc Plateau, a man wearing a deerskin headdress inches toward a curious herd of deer. He imitates the actions of the deer, in an effort to get within range for his bow and arrow. Deep in the redwood country of the Klamath River, a young man leaves his plank house to join other men at the banks of the river to fish for salmon. In the Great Valley, a group of women gather roots for baskets. As they move forward through a chest-high sea of grass, a herd of elk scatters before them. In the Sierra foothills, hunters fight a grizzly attracted to their game. If the great bear can be killed, its spirit will live in the hunter, who will gain power and the respect of his tribe. On the edge of San Francisco Bay, a man drags his tule boat into the water; he will spend much of the day fishing in the rich salt marshes. East of the Sierra Mountains, families, anxious to leave their winter homes in the desert, carry their heavy burdens toward cold alpine lakes and the promise of good fishing. At the edge of the Mojave Desert, a man and woman plant their corn, beans, and squash seeds in the fertile silt of the Colorado River. These are the images of California over two hundred years ago.

Within the boundaries of what we know as California lived an estimated three-hundred-thousand Indians, who spoke over one-hundred-and-twenty different languages. Even with such a population, California Indians lived in a land where people were few and animals were many. California Indians worshipped animal spirits, imitated animal motions in their dances, sought animal powers in their dreams, and saw themselves as belonging to clans with animals as their ancestors.

Hunting was often a spiritual event; it was among the most important things in a man's life. Animals were used with reverence for the animal and its place in nature. For the hunter, the deer was a spiritually powerful animal, and the hunt was surrounded at every step with forethought, dignity, and ritual. The sweat house was the center of this spiritual preparation for the hunt. Animals were caught in traps, netted, speared, and shot using bows and arrows. Great care went into the preparation of the obsidian points and the bow and arrow.

California's abundance and variety also supplied the materials for their houses of wood, earth, and brush, and for their clothes and baskets -- the fabric of their lives.

The sound of women preparing acorn meal for their foods--the rhythmic pounding is not an endless, unendurable task; it is a spiritual event, expressed in songs and legend. Among the five-hundred types of plant and animal foods available to California Indians are numerous roots and bulbs, nuts and seeds, vines and berries. For California Indians, one harvest followed

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another in an endless cycle. A series of ripenings and gatherings divided the year into different periods and gave Indian life its rhythm.

The rivers, the land, the sea, the sky, the rain and snow, wind and fog, the heat of summer, and the chill of winter--California Indians were a part of their environment. The tone of their lives was set by everything around them. From the forests of the Northwest, the Yurok drew from the spirit of the redwood to build their fine dugouts. From the abundant tules of the Great Valley marshes, the Yokuts wove their tule boats. The great pines and fir trees of the Sierra became strong dugouts for the whitewater, snow-fed mountain rivers.

Basket-making was one of the most important and routine tasks for California Indian women. The possibilities of baskets as utensils were exploited to the almost total neglect of wood and pottery. Baskets were used for carrying and storing both food and materials. They were cooking utensils, and the trays, plates, bowls, and cups of dining, and they were works of art, to be presented and cherished as gifts.

Trade was a part of the rhythm of life. Extensive trails and trade routes crisscrossed the state and extended into Oregon and Nevada. A friendly visit by a neighboring group or attendance at another tribe's ceremonies, was the opportunity to exchange raw materials, finished goods, and ideas.

Spiritualism, ritual, and ceremony--they were all entwined in every part of daily life. California Indians lived in a world of power and magic. Shamans could transform themselves into grizzly bears, or birds. Every object--the stars, a trail, a river, even a stone, had a spirit and force of its own. For them, magic was a fact of life. Power was everywhere, in everything, and every act was, therefore, religious.

For California Indians dancing was a passion. Every social gathering was an excuse for a dance. Families held special dances to honor their animal spirit ancestors. Dances also held religious meaning, like the Big Head Dance, Acorn Dances, the White Deerskin Dance of Northwestern California, and the Coming-of-Age Dance for girls and boys. Dances, songs, and rituals are rolled into the lives of California Indians like the sedge root is woven into a basket.

The world of the California Indian was one of balance; unchanging, cycle upon cycle, day into night, summer into fall, winter into spring, life into death . . . into life. In this world of balance, outside forces were to change the face of California and obliterate much of the old ways and a sizable portion of the people.

These outside forces came first in the form of early Spanish explorers, then Spanish missions to capture California's wealth of hides and tallow, and the souls of its native people. After the missions were secularized and taken over by an independent Mexican government, then came the large Mexican ranchos. Their cattle competed for the same vegetation sought by the dwindling herds of elk and antelope. The grizzly, once so common in California, became a threat to the cattlemen and their livestock, and were rapidly exterminated. Next came the Anglo era; Americans poured into California to draw new wealth of gold and then, later, agriculture.

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Each new wave of outsiders spelled more change and disaster for the Indian people and their culture. Murder, disease, and destruction of a way of life reduced the Indian population from a high in the hundreds of thousands to fewer than thirty-thousand in less than one-hundred-and-fifty years. Some groups were completely destroyed. Ishi, the very last survivor of the Yahi tribe, became famous. But Ishi was only one of many California Indians who saw their relatives, friends, and culture disappear.

The years of destruction and displacement shaped attitudes and impressions towards Indians which persist today. A widespread myth of the California Indian culture as poor and miserable may have somehow allowed non-Indians to feel an easier conscience about the taking of lands and lives.

Because of these ingrained attitudes and impressions, many Indian people, until recently, found it easier to associate with other cultural groups. But today California Indians are rediscovering and expressing a sense of pride in their heritage.

While many of the old ways have been lost forever, a significant portion of California culture survives. Today many practice the arts of basketry, dance, and song, and teach what remains of the old culture to the next generation.

It is frequently difficult for non-Indians to understand Indian culture. Museums can help toward some understanding. But have you ever considered what it would be like for someone many years in the future to try to learn about you from a few items out of your closet or from some of your kitchen appliances? It will be hard for them to really know you, to guess at your habits, your dreams, your talents, and a special personality. As you look at the exhibits in the Indian Museum, remember that all of these objects are left to us by real people. Just as it would be hard to know you from your possessions or tools, it takes a special effort to understand the people, the California Indians who first made and used these objects on display. The museum is more than just a storehouse of things; it's a bridge across time to other people.

Running Time: 12 minutes
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