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Jewell: *Indians of the Feather River: Tales and Legends of Concow Maidu of California*

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REVIEWS

Indians of the Feather River: Tales and Legends of Concow Maidu of California.

Donald P. Jewell. Menlo Park: Ballena Press, 1987, vi + 184 pp., \$12.95 (paper).

Reviewed by:

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In its appeal to both the lay public and students and scholars of Maidu culture, the account of the oral traditions of the Concow Maidu by Jewell fills a vacuum in the literature of the region. His book can find a welcome place on the bookshelves of the university and recreational reader.

From a compendium of his published newspaper feature articles and personal tapes, Jewell relates the myths and tales of the Concow Maidu. Jewell, like other scholars before him, has salvaged what he could from the collective memories of those who recalled traditional customs and legends second- and third-hand. The excerpts presented in the volume represent a fraction of the published material on Maidu lore, as the author is clear to point out. Dixon (1902) and others (Shipley 1963) have presented more complete compilations of Maidu mythology. But unlike the oral traditions solicited within the conventional "anthropologist-informant" format and conveyed in the formal ethnographic literature, Jewell has developed rich anthropological relationships with Maidu elders that evolved into long-term friendships. The warmth, trust, and confidence engendered by these friendships is expressed in the conversational style of the writing, so different than the sterile text presentations to which the researcher of oral tradition has become accustomed.

Apart from the lay audience, his book is of

value to the local ethnohistorical researcher in its reference to historic Euroamerican personalities who influenced the lives of many Concow Maidu. It also is of relevance to the archaeologist, with its descriptions of the physical landmarks of ethnic significance that remain a part of the contemporary landscape. The photographs and drawings of points of "petromythological" interest alert the field archaeologist conducting local cultural resource inventories to the subtlety of these locales, that easily could go undetected without first contacting the local native American community or consulting a secondary source such as this book.

The map on the cover of the book provides the necessary general orientation to the reader. But a more precise map that details the placenames featured in the tales, without violating the confidentiality of the site locations, would be helpful. The suggestion to develop a "guidebook" to Concow country, with an emphasis upon respecting and preserving the antiquities visited on the tour, is a good one. The book has succeeded in sparking my interest to depart on an excursion through the beautiful Feather River country and relocate highlighted points of Maidu mythology—the Maidu fertility rock, the Bed of Wonomi the Creator, the place where Old Man Coyote Lies Sleeping, and others.

Jewell obviously is aware of the fact that myths cannot be treated as independent creations of fancy, as mythic ideas are embodied in ritual, architecture, and social organization, as well as in stories. An item once removed from its social context and published in that way deprives both the scientific folklorist and the popular reader of an opportunity to understand why the particular item was used in the specific

situation to meet the particular need. In his attention to the cultural context that embeds Concow oral traditions, the book is as much a description of Maidu cultural practices as it is an account of their tales and legends. As such, Jewell describes many important traditional Concow customs, such as the burning ceremony and doctoring techniques. He discusses also the inevitable aspects of Maidu transition to the dominant white society, as reflected in the Concow reservation and rancheria era, in mortality and population figures, in Maidu retribution for perceived crimes against Concow society, in their employment by whites in gold mining and ranching, and in the Americanization process of Indian schools.

The treatment by Jewell of the Concow Maidu oral tradition deals largely with the materials of folklore and not with folkloristics and the theoretical concepts of origin, function, form, and transmission. He does, however, hint at problems of origin and function but, unfortunately, does not satisfactorily complete his thoughts on these important concepts. By further broaching some of these theoretical principles, his discussion of the texts would have been strengthened and his presentation would have been more well-rounded.

For example, recurrent themes throughout native North American legends are specifically illustrated by some of the Concow tales contained in the book: the tale of the theft of light; the role of Earth Diver in the creation episode; and the disrespectful behavior of the trickster Coyote. Had Jewell briefly explored the provocative question of origins—as to why these and other folklore motifs appear at more than one time and place—the reader would have been made aware of the wider context of Maidu mythology. Are such coincidences due to historic origins and the processes of genesis and diffusion, or does the

duplication of human fantasy find its origins in the common psyche and irrational and symbolic workings of the mind?

In addition, Jewell might have further challenged his audience to consider some of the functions of folklore. What does folklore do for the folk—amuse and entertain, educate, sanction or censure actions, or maintain cultural stability? Maidu mythical figures were models for social action—in the reverse—in that these characters did the shocking or prohibited in daily life. The “gods” were credited with committing the worst crimes of mortals. For instance, Coyote is the personification of unbridled appetite and a conglomeration of all vices. In the Bald Rock country of Concow territory, the grotesque scene of Old Man Coyote having sexual intercourse with his mother-in-law is frozen in time in the form of a granitic dome. The Maidu who finds humor and amusement in this mythical situation must ironically, himself, observe a strict mother-in-law avoidance.

The absence of broadly stated theoretical principles does not in any way overshadow what Jewell has successfully accomplished, in conveying an understanding of the Maidu experience to popular readers in a modern world for which spirituality has all but vanished. Besides, Jewell makes it clear that his intent was not to cover this theoretical ground. But he does hint to the reader of the expanded research potential of his data base. By comparing the folklore that he collected within the past few decades with those recovered by others around the turn of the century, he has observed evidence of culture change in the retelling and redoing of Maidu traditions and tales. I encourage Jewell, perhaps in a forthcoming publication, to continue his research beyond what he was able to do within the scope of this current and more popularly oriented work. His long-term interest and expertise in the study of Concow

Maidu folklore and his ongoing rapport with surviving Maidu elders places him in an ideal position to make further contributions towards a better understanding of the process of Concow Maidu culture change.

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Visions of the Sky: Archaeological and Ethnological Studies of California Indian Astronomy. Robert A. Schiffman, ed. Salinas: Coyote Press Archives of California Prehistory No. 16, 1988, xiv + 171 pp., 84 figs., 13 tables, \$9.95 (paper).

Review by:

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Recent studies of the ethnographic record have demonstrated that native Californians had sophisticated knowledge of the celestial world and that certain of their rituals were related to astronomical beliefs and observations. *Visions of the Sky* compiles nine papers linked by an interest in this theme, with particular attention paid to the putative relationship between astronomical beliefs and practices and parietal art. The volume begins with a foreword by E. C. Krupp, who discusses some of the implications of hunter-gatherer calendrical systems in worldwide terms. He also makes an important cautionary point in stating that the significance of purported astronomical events *vis-à-vis* archaeological

sites, such as direct observational alignments or indirect illuminations of rock art panels during solstices, can only be established by contrasting such "special" phenomena with what happens at these sites at other times and seasons.

The nine papers consider California archaeoastronomy at three levels of analysis: syntheses, site reports, and special studies. Following a brief introduction by Schiffman, the first contribution is a paper by the late Travis Hudson, "The Nature of Native California Astronomy," which provides a general overview of native California knowledge about astronomy. This is complemented by a second synthetic work, also by Hudson, "The 'Classical Assumption' in Light of Chumash Astronomy." Here he shows that the traditional belief that the origins of astronomy and calendrics occurred only among food producers is no longer tenable, and uses the Chumash as an example of a foraging group that developed a sophisticated calendrical system and high level of astronomical knowledge.

A paper by Tom Hoskinson and R. M. Cooper concerns a rock art site in Chumash territory interpreted as Sapaksi (CA-SBa-502 and -526), the "House of the Sun," and introduces the second level of analysis presented in the volume, the "archaeoastronomical site report." These authors attempt to test the hypothesis that this site was the "House of the Sun" by establishing whether "features at the site might interact with the sun at the time of the December solstice" (p. 31). During the summer solstice they found that an "indirect event" occurs, with sunlight entering two apertures in the cave wall, forming beams that intersect at a man-made hole in the floor. During the winter solstice, by contrast, the hypothesized use of the site as a direct solstitial observatory could only be supported if observations of the sunrise were