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## Review Essay

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### **Kroeber's *Yurok Myths*: A Comparative Re-Evaluation**

**Richard Keeling**

**Yurok Myths.** By A. L. Kroeber. Foreword by Theodora Kroeber. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976. xi + 488 pp. \$18.50 cloth, \$6.95 paper.

In a prefatory essay to this volume entitled "Kroeber and the Yurok, 1900-1908," Timothy H. H. Thoresen describes some of the circumstances surrounding the collection of the narratives in *Yurok Myths*. In this brief historical sketch, with hardly an ounce of overt criticism, Thoresen quietly dissolves any illusions which a reader may have had concerning the humanistic intentions of turn-of-the-century anthropology. We are told that Kroeber first visited Yurok territory as a museum ethnologist, when he was only twenty-four years old and had just completed graduate study under Franz Boas at Columbia. His task was to collect things: not only material specimens but also linguistic and mythological evidence:

Within the ethnological theory of the day, ethnology in practice meant everything and anything that could be *collected* [Thoresen's emphasis] as illustrative of the life and nature of the Indian—from baskets and mortars to measurements of crania to vocabulary lists to texts of mythological material. (Thoresen, 1976: xx-xxi)

Narratives such as the ones which would find their way into *Yurok Myths* were not only analyzed for linguistic content but also studied as evidence of indigenous lifestyle and belief. They were analyzed for patterns of what Kroeber and his peers understood as "ethnic psychology." Basically, then, Thoresen describes a situation in which cultural and religious materials were wrested from one cultural milieu and interpreted from the viewpoint of a materially dominant civilization.

Even considering the important background information which it provides, it is curious that Thoresen's essay should have been included in this volume. It raises sensitive issues in a posthumous and celebratory book that is otherwise presented in the

spirit of a monument to Kroeber (1876–1960), considered by many as the dean of American anthropologists and probably the last in that field whose interests and contributions ranged over the whole array of anthropological subjects.

In her "Foreward," Theodora Kroeber expresses "immense gratitude and respect" to Alan Dundes for the "Folkloristic Commentary" which he provided to this volume and to Grace Buzaljko, the editor who brought Kroeber's typescripts to camera-ready completion, but she has no thanks for Thoresen. Similarly, in a review which appeared in the *American Anthropologist* (1978 (80): 456–7), Joseph G. Jorgensen issues congratulations to all the contributors—except for Thoresen. There are some Yurok Indians surviving up on the Klamath River who would take grim delight that someone should cast even this subtle shadow over the proceedings, and I would like to try and explain why.

Yuroks generally resent the way they have been depicted in the literature of anthropology, and—whether he deserves it or not—they focus their bitterness on Kroeber. The Indians tend to feel that their traditional spirituality has not been appreciated. The first thing that an elderly Yurok or Hupa Indian wants to impress on an outsider is that "For the old-time Indians, everything used to be religious."

According to pre-contact Yurok belief, the world that the Indians knew and all of their customs were inherited from members of a pre-human race known to them as *wahgey*. Traditionally, the Indians strove to imitate the actions of these beings in great detail, out of a conviction that departure from the *wahgey* life-style caused a "rotteness" or "pollution" to develop. To live like the *wahgey* called for sexual abstinence and avoidance of other impure contacts. The aristocratic Indian prayed ecstatically as a means of purifying himself. Through intense and hysterical medicine-making he strove to transcend the intrinsic contamination of the human condition. Correct living also required that household etiquette and all sorts of seemingly practical activities were highly ritualized. Thus the Indian of substance strove to ensure his good fortune by staying "clean." Commoners who could not attain to these standards of religious observance were thought of as degenerates for whom luck and sickness were virtually congenital.

Far from appreciating this pervasive spirituality (or the magical practices associated with it) in its own terms, modern scholarly writers have, for the most part, tried to explain Yurok religion in terms of our own cosmopolitan and secular world-view.

The disparity between Yurok self-image and their portrayal in modern academic writing has had considerable influence on the editorial shaping of *Yurok Myths*, and it is of central importance for any evaluation of what the narratives in this volume represent or what the reader can expect from them. To understand how this gap first developed, then grew increasingly wider and wider, we must go back to the early period when the narratives were first collected.

As the iconoclastic Thoresen points out in another essay (Thoresen, 1973), one problem with analyzing oral narratives for patterns of "ethnic psychology" was that the resulting characterization was apt to be much influenced by the personality of the analyst. The subjective factor becomes evident by comparing Kroeber's portrayal of the Yurok in the opening chapters of the *Handbook of the Indians of California* with Pliny Earle Goddard's *Life and Culture of the Hupa* which describes a neighboring group that is quite similar in ethnographic profile, though linguistically distinct.

Firstly, Kroeber portrays the Yuroks as they must have lived in the years before 1850, when the elderly individuals he interviewed were quite young, and he omits mention of the genocide and cultural devastation which occurred in the latter nineteenth century. In 1919, when he deposited this manuscript with the Smithsonian Institution, he wrote the following prefatory comment as an explanation for having tried to describe the Yurok lifestyle as it must have been more than fifty years before he visited among these Indians:

After some hesitation I have omitted all directly historical treatment in the ordinary sense; that is, accounts of the relations of the natives with the whites and of the events befalling them after such contact was established. It is not that this subject is unimportant or uninteresting, but I am not in a position to treat it adequately. It is also a matter that has comparatively slight relation to the aboriginal civilization. It presupposes, indeed, some understanding of that civilization, but it requires also a thorough knowledge of the local history as well as of the institutions of the superior race. (Kroeber, 1925: vi)

Goddard, on the other hand, describes the deplorable contemporary context of his work quite candidly, and he also relates the account of a lawyer from Eureka that by 1871 the Indians

on the reservation in Hoopa Valley had been reduced to the stature of "the most degraded slaves. . . poor, miserable, vicious, degraded, dirty, diseased, and ill-fed" (Goddard 1903: 10-11)

The tone of Kroeber's chapters on the Yurok was authoritative—as if he comprehended them implicitly. Goddard, by way of comparison, adopts a more restrained attitude, reporting on Hupa belief and custom as if he were still trying to grasp, in the writing, what elderly Indians had just explained to him.

But Kroeber clearly responded to the Indians in a most subjective way. For example, in a very early essay he described the Yurok preoccupation with wealth as follows:

The acquisition and retention of wealth are the chief aim in life of the Indians of this region, and connected with this are a mercenary temper and a lack of truthfulness shown by the tribes of the Pacific Northwest northward. (Kroeber, 1904: 88)

Accordingly, Kroeber's portrayal placed much emphasis on the Yurok quest for wealth and on their anarchic form of "law" by revenge and "blood money" settlement. In a more balanced characterization, it might have been noted that Indian shell money and other treasures had considerable religious significance. A more sympathetic reporter might have emphasized that wealth was taken as a sign of correct living, spiritually. Indeed, Indian treasures were thought to have feelings and a will; they would leave the house of a degenerate. Moreover, to pray for "money" or for "luck" was a basic part of the men's sweathouse activities. Making medicine to obtain these things was virtually inseparable from the men's efforts at purification.

Although he reports on the important rituals that the Yuroks used to renew the earth, Kroeber takes an almost Victorian attitude towards many aspects of the spiritual life. He describes "taboos," sexual restrictions, the black magic of "Indian Devils," and the intense and hysterical nature of men's medicine-making as if he were trying to satisfy an appetite for the weird or curious. He makes no special effort to understand or explain the larger context of belief in which these institutions become meaningful.

Goddard, on the other hand, seems to have tried to express the things his informants wanted to say about themselves. On the subject of Indian piety, for example, he wrote:

The trails were sacred. "Just the same as people," one old man said. It was wrong to step out of them without some good reason. There were established resting places and places of offering among them where a prayer was made. (Goddard, 1903: 88)

In sum, Goddard made repeated efforts to describe things from an Indian perspective. Kroeber rarely did so, but rather he tended to sit in judgment and describe things as they appeared to him. One advantage of Goddard's methods was that his writing actually captured the tone with which elderly Indians tend to describe their own traditions. It is true that their concern with appearing reverent and industrious probably reflects a healthy measure of Christian influence, but at least Goddard's style captured the flavor of something that actually existed in his time and continues to exist today. Kroeber's writing may indeed convey more detailed information about pre-contact culture, and he does succeed in expressing his vision of this unusual civilization in all its remoteness. But like many a good writer he succeeded by being highly selective and by bringing his personal vision into sharp focus.

Since the publication of the *Handbook*, several studies of the Yurok have been based on the highly personalized image of the Indians which Kroeber had largely created, rather than on original fieldwork. Most influential was a series of psychoanalytic studies which described the themes of "anxiety and deviance" (Valory, 1970) reflected in Yurok culture. Much of this literature was based on Kroeber's research, and the genre begins with Erik H. Erikson's essay, "Observations on the Yurok: Childhood and World Image" (1943). Subsequently, Roheim (1950), Posinsky (1954, 1956, and 1957), and Valory (1970) continued in this tradition, viewing Yurok life in the terms of Freudian psychoanalysis. None of these writers spent more than a short time with Yurok Indians, and it is not clear whether Roheim or Posinsky ever visited northwestern California. Toward the end of his life, Kroeber himself seems to have been caught up in this analytical riptide. The closing paragraphs of his late essay entitled "Yurok National Character" find him debating with himself whether the Yurok manifest an "anal temperament" or an oral type, or, indeed, whether these personality components are mutually exclusive, necessarily.

I have long thought and still believe that the Yurok adhere to the classical anal temperament first recognized by Freud. My friend Erikson diagnoses rather an anal type of personality. . . . As for the oral constituents, there is no doubt that the Yurok wealth-acquiring behavior connected with the sweathouse strongly enacts infantile attitude and behavior. . . . And a good deal of the. . . magic is at least puerile in the symbolic confusion of cause and effect. I do not therefore see any quarrel between recognition of anal and oral components of Yurok personality. Each is presumably true on its own level and degree. (Kroeber, 1959: 310)

It should not surprise us that the fascinating world of Yurok medicine-making is dismissed as "infantile" or "puerile," since Kroeber so embodied the scientific positivism of his era. A later generation would be less self-confident and more inclined to seek out the sacred than to demonstrate the pathological. Auto-suggestion, psychosomatics, mind over matter, studies of "consciousness". . . all these things would become more fashionable as the twentieth century made us all wonder about scientific progress.

What is surprising is the extent to which these interpretations of Yurok culture have achieved a palpability of their own—apart from the concrete and empirical realities which (at least in their titles) they claim to describe. In *Psychology of Science* (1966) and other works, Abraham Maslow has attempted to describe the psychology and the motivations behind such thinking, and for Maslow this reductionism is symptomatic of more general pathological trends within our own modern civilization:

This artificial trend of abstraction, or working with reductive elements, has worked so well and has become so engrained a habit that the abstractors and reducers are apt to be amazed at anyone who denies the empirical or phenomenal validity of these habits. By smooth stages they convince themselves that this is the way in which the world is actually constructed. (Maslow, 1966:4)

The prospective reader should be warned that there is an insularity about Yurok Myths that limits what the volume can provide. The "Yurok" of the Anthropology library are much

more prominent here than the Indians of the same name who live on the lower reaches of the Klamath River. All this has had considerable impact on the editorial shaping of the book. For example, the analytic attitude so dominates here that it becomes necessary for Alan Dundes to contribute a "Folkloristic Commentary" introducing Yurok cosmology, as Dundes understands it, and placing the Yurok in psychoanalytic and folkloristic perspective. Dundes himself has no first-hand knowledge of the Yuroks, but in all fairness it must be noted that he is a teacher and a scholar of the highest stature. If it were not for the fact of his position being intrinsically untenable, one would have to say that he acquitted himself brilliantly—not only providing an overview of relevant folkloristics but even adding his own more up-to-date perceptions regarding Yurok "cognitive and symbolic categories." (Kroeber, 1976: xxxvi)

Still, this is one of the books that any student of California Indians ought to own, and it could be an important book for the generalist as well, especially if such a reader prepares himself by studying the chapters on the Yurok in Kroeber's *Handbook*.

As a scholarly documentation *Yurok Myths* bears comparison with Goddard's *Hupa Texts*. The latter is less extensive, but for each narrative Goddard includes a phonetic transcription of the spoken Hupa, an interlinear translation which follows the Hupa syntax, and a free translation in English. Thus, the Goddard collection provides rich evidence for future interpreters of Hupa culture. Moreover, the book has potential value to the Hupa tribe because it could be used in Indian language classes and other projects aimed at cultural retention.

In *Yurok Myths*, however, we have only the free translations juxtaposed with Kroeber's editorial comments and footnotes. One should not lose sight of whose viewpoint is being expressed, but even the most informed specialist will be grateful to have Alfred Kroeber guide him personally through these narratives. There is greater detail and more sheer mass of information concerning Yurok geography and culture than even the *Handbook* chapters provide.

Still, this collection is apt to be disappointing to the general reader because the intent of the narratives was so remote from modern concepts of story-telling or literature. Kroeber himself criticizes the story-tellers for their repetitiveness (1976: 466) and lack of plot development (1976: 17). I have known several people



who purchased the handsome volume expecting to be entertained or edified, but these Yuroks had something different in mind from the story-tellers of, for example, Herskovits's *Dahomean Narrative*.

Yurok Indians of the pre-contact period seem to have invested specific features of their landscape with spiritual interpretations. Simply to mention the name of such a place seems to have conjured the essence of it. The local landscape was viewed in mythical terms because it was thought still to be inhabited by the *wahgey*. Not only did the Indians strive to imitate the *wahgey*, but they felt that by reciting *wahgey* deeds they could influence current events. Thus, many of the stories were vehicles for making medicine.\* All of the stories relate to such specific characters and places that they have little meaning for the outsider. As Kroeber explains:

A surprising proportion of their traditional knowledge, myths as well as formulas, is nothing more than a recital of their own customs thinly cloaked in narrative. Some nameless individual of the generic *woge* first did something—sometimes on the first trial, sometimes only after repeated attempts—that the Yurok do now. Thereby the practice was established for all time. If the custom involves belief in magic or the supernatural, a recital of how this happened suffices, with the aid of a nominal offering and a few slight austerities, to bring about present results similar to those achieved in the first ancientness of time: We have a formula. If this practical application is missing, the story is a myth. (Kroeber, 1976: 17)

Whether or not oral-expressive magic was specifically involved, the spoken words seem to have been intended as a sort of invocation. The following quotation from Goddard perhaps conveys more of the spiritual dimensions of this aesthetic than Kroeber's cooler appraisal:

More powerful than any herb were the words recited over it before its use. These words were not prayers but accounts of a former cure. The repeating of the words has power to cure again. . . Equally powerful

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\* In a religious, spiritual, and magical, as well as medical and formulaic, sense [Ed.].

were evil wishes. To curse a man was a serious offense, because the words themselves had power to harm. (Goddard, 1903: 88)

I have devoted a chapter of my recent dissertation to "Use of Song and Spoken Medicine for Willing, Wishing, or Prayer" (Keeling, 1982, UCLA), but it hardly encompasses the subject of Yurok oral narrative with any completeness. The topic is certainly too complicated to address in this review. For the present, let it suffice to say that the general purpose of these narratives seems to have been evocative, hypnotic, and magical rather than artful, clever, inspiring, or didactic. The ordinary reader who expects plot, characterizations, or even a moral will probably be dissatisfied with *Yurok Myths*.

Although the narratives in this book have only a distant relation to contemporary (post-1900) Indian life, Kroeber's sketches of the narrators and some of his annotations do. They are casual and candid in tone, almost in the style of excerpts from a diary. Here we have accounts of some of the actual encounters and experiences that Kroeber omitted from the *Handbook*, and they are most interesting. While the *Handbook*, as we have noted, attempted to describe the Yuroks as they must have lived in the decades before 1850, Kroeber's writing in *Yurok Myths* pictures the mixture of dignity and meanness that developed as Yurok civilization was being pulled to its knees. His prose style is lean and precise, and the writing allows an intimate view of Kroeber's penetrating intellect in action—sensing the implications of things and expressing his personal reactions to them. Describing one of the story-tellers, for example, Kroeber remembers him in these words:

Born before the coming of the white man, he had remained a complete Indian at least in spirit, and still visited the sweathouse in spite of spending most of his time huddled over an iron store and sleeping in a bed in an American frame house, whose windows were nailed down and before which a fierce mastiff lay chained.

Here he lived out his blind and thick-chested age, flanked and partly controlled by a narrow-souled wife and a daughter-in-law who for sheer meanness and gratuitous hostility was one of the most extraordinary persons I have ever dealt with. (Kroeber, 1976: 162)

In closing, I would like to emphasize that, although Yurok culture was crippled by the genocide and disruption of the historic period, the Indians *have* survived. Along the lower reaches of the Klamath River there still exists a folklore that distinctly reflects the character of the place, but it is not to be found in *Yurok Myths*. For those who are interested in surviving traditions I would recommend *Lore and Legends of the Klamath River Indians* by Charles Graves and *Indian Lore of the North California Coast* by Austin D. Warburton and Joseph F. Endert. These are both informative and thoroughly enjoyable books, written by amateurs who probably did not know the meaning of "folkloristics." These authors simply did their best to convey something they knew first-hand.

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