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Dressing the Part: A Brief Look at the Development of Stereotypical Indian Clothing Among Native Peoples in the Far West

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THE stereotyped picture of the American Indian as a homogenous group of people living in tipis, wearing war bonnets, and swooping down on stagecoaches while riding pinto ponies is a familiar one. Not a new image, it was well established by the turn of the century, fortified and strengthened by wild west shows, paintings, dime novels, postcards, cigar store Indians, advertising materials, and later, motion pictures. By the 1920s native Californians who participated in pageants and other celebrations had begun to develop their own style of costuming, based on the romantic Indian image, apparently to satisfy the request of Anglo-Americans who needed Indians to look as they thought Indians should.

This paper will attempt to bring together available data on the acquisition, manufacture, and use of stereotypical Indian clothing among native Californians. It will briefly describe clothing at the time of contact with non-indigenous peoples and discuss the reasons that caused native people to adopt this new style of dress for public presentations.

DEVELOPMENT OF STEREOTYPICAL INDIAN CLOTHING

Clothing among most groups in California and Nevada was scant. In pre-contact times, a

skirt, in one or two pieces, was worn by women. Undecorated aprons of sagebrush bark were used by some of the Paiute people, while others made of buckskin and decorated with shells and beads were reserved for ceremonial occasions by many northern California people; in nearly all cases the torso was left bare. At dances women would don yards of beads, made of clamshell, pine nuts, or other materials; the quantity of beads often indicating the affluence of the wearer. Headwear differed from one group to the next; some northern groups using basketry caps, others having a great range of styles from feather topknots to elaborate forehead bands of fur or those woven of cordage and small feathers. Each of these items had its place within the traditional ceremonial regalia of the people, with different objects reserved for specific ritual functions (Kroeber 1925).

Men's clothing was sparse: a simple buckskin breechcloth or nothing but a thong about the waist from which to hang snares, pouches, and other items. Ceremonial gear was extremely elaborate, with a variety of clothing styles involving extensive use of various feathers. With these feathers and other natural materials, a wide range of headpieces, cloaks, and other objects was created. Most dances in central California were secular by nature, and often were given at specific times of the year. Thus, regalia was stored out of sight and

brought out only on ritual occasions (Kroeber 1925; Bates n.d.).

Buckskin clothing, in the form of shirts, leggings and dresses, had only begun to penetrate California from the north by the end of the 19th century. The Klamath, in southern Oregon, had begun to adopt certain characteristics of Plains culture, such as parfleches, by the time of contact (Kroeber 1925: 339). Klamath dresses resemble those of the Blackfeet in having alternate colored lanes of lazy stitched beadwork across the breast (Spier 1930: 212). The use of buckskin shirts by the Klamath is also thought to be a relatively recent practice (Spier 1930: 207). Apparently, these influences had come down from the Columbia River area, being assimilated by the Klamath and, in turn, passed on by them to the neighboring Modoc and thence to the Achomawi and Shasta (Kroeber 1925:334).

Shasta clothing was often fringed and ornamented with beads. Shirts were apparently a poncho-like affair, with women wearing skirts with a poncho top (Dixon 1907: 407-411; Silver 1978: 216; Kroeber 1925: 292). The Achomawi seem to have copied this type of clothing, occasionally ornamenting it with crude quillwork in an undetermined technique (Kroeber 1925: 311). The Atsugewi, immediately to the south of the Achomawi, also acquired certain Plains-type clothing including a one-piece woman's gown and a man's buckskin shirt with a triangular bib below the neck, both rather recently (Garth 1953:145). These clothing styles seem to have disappeared early on, and costumes made by the Atsugewi in the 1930s do not appear to be based on these models.

With the exception of ceremonial regalia among certain groups, the abandonment of traditional garb came early in California. The Sierra Miwok, whose intensive contact with Anglo-Americans did not begin until 1848 and the Gold Rush, began to wear cloth

clothing at that time. Photographs taken in the 1850s and 1870s show cloth dresses worn by the women and pants and shirts worn by the men (Bates 1978: Plates 1-2; Bradley and Rulofson 1873:30; Palmquist 1979:93, 105, 110). Acculturation was rapid, and by 1900 it is doubtful that anyone but a handful of older people wore native clothing on a daily basis. The teachings of various Christian missionaries and pressure from Anglo residents resulted in the instilling of Victorian values of modesty among most Californian peoples.

As early as the 1880s Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, a Northern Paiute, created a costume for her lecture series where she exposed the outrageous treatment of Nevada Indian people by the federal government and spoke on traditional Paiute life. While she was lecturing in San Francisco the local newspaper, the *San Francisco Call* of October 18,



Fig. 1. Florence Summerville, "Queen White Fawn," at the Indian Field Days, Yosemite Valley, 1929. Note the netted beadwork. Standard Oil supplied the public address system and an announcer. Negative number 2126, courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.

1883, described her as wearing "... dressed deerskin, buff colored and heavily fringed with beads, reaching a little below her knees, and displaying her legs encased in red leather leggings and a pair of moccasins trimmed to match her dress. Pendant at her side was a handsomely embroidered pouch" (Heizer 1960:3). Apparently, Sarah created a memorable image, no doubt effective in her campaign.

By the turn of the century Americans at large had developed a romantic picture of the Great American West. Promoted by such notables as George Wharton James and Charles Lummis, as well as others, people longed to visit the home of the "Noble Red Man." America's jump into the automobile age made this within reach for many. By the 1920s the completion of major highways throughout the west brought scores of people to California. There they visited Hollywood, and such natural wonders as Yosemite Valley. With this great influx of tourists, the development of pageants flourished, inducing more and more people to visit the "Sunshine State." Of course, "Indians" were an indispensable part of such romantic presentations.

The promoters of such events realized that the California Indians did not fit the stereotyped image, in their minds, of what Indians should look like. What were the native Californians to do? Many decided that, since the Anglos seemed neither to know or care about what was worn in old times, they would create clothing and dances to suit them. Often working with non-Indian promoters, they set about making an "acceptable" Indian image for the public.

Typical of such pageants was the "Indian Field Days" held in Yosemite Valley in the summer of 1916 and a number of other years until 1929 (Figs. 1-3). A mixture of rodeo and fair, it included such events as horse racing, the best beadwork, and "best Indian costume." In the late 1920s, the National



Fig. 2. Chris Brown, "Chief Lemee," with friend at Indian Field Days, Yosemite Valley, 1929. Note Sioux vest, Plains moccasins, and Chimayo or Mexican weaving for clout. Negative number 2138, courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.

Park Service and the Yosemite Park and Curry Company erected pseudo-Indian "wigwams" of pine poles and canvas, while encouraging local native Californians to "dress up" for the event. New clothing styles flourished, some women created unique dresses, others obtained Sioux beadwork, and some integrated articles of Miwok ceremonial regalia with these. This blending resulted in an unmistakable "Indian" atmosphere.

At the same time, Indian people of California were beginning to unify politically, and often donned "Indian clothes" to help



Fig. 3. A dance at the Indian Field Days, Yosemite Valley, 1920s. Note the wide range of costuming styles. Left to right, Wesley Wilson, unidentified, Chris Brown, unidentified, unidentified, Mary Wilson, and Maggie Howard. Negative number 2120, courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.

publicize their efforts. Chief William Fuller, Central Miwok from Tuolumne County, borrowed a war bonnet and a buckskin suit for such occasions from Benjamin W. Hathaway, curator of the State Indian Museum in Sacramento (Fig. 4). Hathaway, a non-Indian, was apparently instrumental in creating Indian regalia for many of these people involved with such presentations. He made dresses and other objects for Indian people to use at such meetings, as well as for women to wear while demonstrating basketry at the State Indian Museum. Drawing from his own extensive collection of Indian material, he made objects not representative of any one group, but still unmistakably Indian (J. Dyson and L. Dyson, personal communications 1974-1980; B. Bernstein, personal communi-

cation 1979). Plains style cloth leggings were decorated with drops of Pomo clamshell disc beads and abalone pendants; chokers were made of Yurok pine-nut beads and clam shells; pseudo-Plains dresses were festooned with strings of glass beads, abalone pendants, small *Glycymeris* shells, and designs outlined in dentalium.

Chris Brown, "Chief Lemee" of the Southern Miwok of Yosemite Valley, was a close friend of Hathaway (Fig. 5). He borrowed objects from Hathaway to use in programs he gave in Yosemite and throughout California while on speaking tours (J. Dyson and L. Dyson, personal communication). Hathaway was made a Miwok by Lemee in a ceremony held at Sacramento's Capital Park in November of 1930 during which they both



Fig. 4. Group of Native Californians at a meeting, possible one of those of the Federated Indians of California (ca. late 1940s). Left, Chief William Fuller; right, Marie Potts, others unidentified. The dresses worn by the women were made by B. W. Hathaway. Note the wide range of material cultures represented in moccasins, vests, and cradle—none of which is Californian. Courtesy of Dorothy Stanley.

wore Sioux war bonnets and beaded vests (Lord 1930). Lemee was descended from a family of hereditary leaders and was well acquainted with Miwok ritual and religion. Born around 1900, by the late 1920s he was employed by the National Park Service to demonstrate dances and traditional Miwok skills to the public. He often wore his favorite Sioux war bonnet and fully beaded vest, sometimes mixing Plains and California regalia to create a suitable image (Fig. 6).

Likewise, Maggie “Tabuce” Howard, a Mono Lake Paiute woman, was only one of many women in the Yosemite region that made Indian-style dresses of their own design for use on festive occasions (Fig. 7). She, like Chris Brown, was employed to demonstrate

native skills to park visitors during the 1920-1940 era. Photographs taken during that time show her wearing a variety of dresses. Other women, such as the sisters Alice James Willson and Lucy Parker Telles created similar outfits, destined to become treasured heirlooms in their families (Figs. 8-10).

To the north in California, the Atsugewi developed Indian-type clothing seemingly not based on their earlier styles. One dress, made by an Atsugewi woman in Goose Valley, California, was fashioned with sleeves, oblique rows of thick fringes sewn on, and a row of large beads strung on fringes at the collar (Garth 1953: Plate 12). Likewise, in the 1930s Louise Bone, an Atsugewi woman, wore a similar dress ornamented with wide



Fig. 5. Chris Brown, "Chief Lemee," July 16, 1934. Note Sioux vest, pseudo-Plains leggings, and Californian beaded band around throat. Negative number 2037, courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.

fringes and rows of abalone pendants and beads (Fig. 11). More recently, the late Salina LaMarr made and used a similar dress, less the abalone and beads, while she demonstrated basketry at Lassen National Park (Fig. 12).

Similar dresses, designed and made by Benjiman Hathaway, were used by many central Californian women. The late Marie Potts, a Maidu leader, wore Hathaway's dresses, and then later developed dresses, possibly based on this style for use by her family and



Fig. 6. Chris Brown, "Chief Lemee," July 1950. Note Sioux vest and moccasins mixed with items of traditional Miwok dress. The use of the flicker quill band (this one of Maidu or Patwin origin) as a chest ornament was apparently Chris Brown's own idea. Courtesy, National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.

others in presenting dances for the public. Today her granddaughter-in-law, along with other relatives and acquaintances use dresses made in this same style (Figs. 13-14).

It seems apparent that these dresses and similar clothes, while based superficially on Plains-style garments, were created primarily to "look Indian." Today, some of these items—such as hide dresses—have been accepted into the traditional clothing repertoire of certain native groups, while other native people call these items those of the "Hollywood Indians." Gatherings held in California today for political awareness seldom need the participants to wear war bonnets in order to

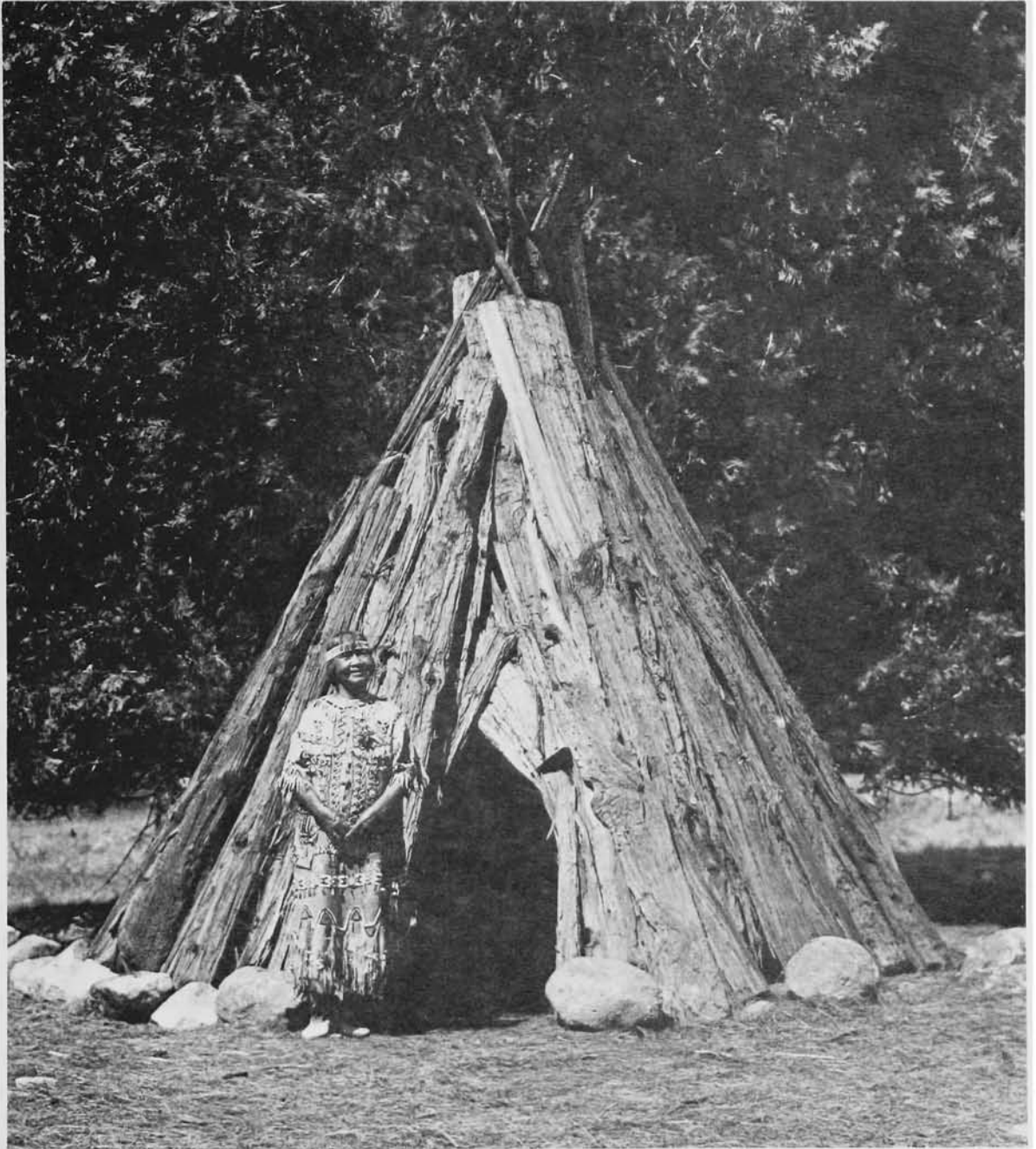


Fig. 7. Maggie "Tabuce" Howard, Mono Lake Paiute, ca. 1930s. Note heavily beaded buckskin dress using several different beadwork techniques. Courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.

draw attention to their cause. Some Californian people participate in pan-Indian pow-

wows where they dress in the most up-to-date, Oklahoma-style fashions. A few main-



Fig. 8. Alice Wilson and Carl Dondero, Yosemite Valley, June 10, 1933. Alice's distinctive dress and beaded chest ornament are both styles that she created herself. Note the Plains moccasins. Negative number 2107, courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.



Fig. 9. Lucy Telles, weaving a three-rod basket, Yosemite Valley, ca. late 1940s. Note the bead and abalone decorated buckskin dress and yarn stole, both of which she often wore while demonstrating basketry to park visitors. Negative number 2165, courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.

ous dances. In this way they can join with native peoples from different tribal groups at celebrations in major cities, while still retiring to secluded localities in their homeland to participate in older traditional religious dances.

Presently, one group of Central Miwok people that performs dances publicly uses war bonnets and stereotypical Indian-style clothing. Some of the participants reason that Miwok culture, like any other, is constantly changing by innovation and borrowing. They feel that if war bonnets were used by their relatives at public performances fifty years ago, then why not wear them today?

tain such outfits for pow-wows, while keeping their California regalia for use in their religi-



Fig. 10. Mary Wilson, Southern Miwok from Red Cloud/Merced Falls region of Mariposa County. Photograph taken on Indian Creek just below the Indian Village in Yosemite Valley during the late 1920s. The beaded cloth blanket is ornamented with a heavy fringe of glass "basket beads," the headband with limpet shells, the dress with seed beads, abalone pendants, and *Olivella* shells. Note the unique beaded wrist bands. Courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.

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Fig. 11. Louise Bone, Hat Creek (Atsugewi) 1936. Note the basketry cap ornamented with a cloth strip, feathers, beads, and abalone pendants. The dress is ornamented with similar beads and pendants. Photograph by Farmer. Courtesy National Park Service, Lassen National Park.



Fig. 12. Salina LaMarr, Atsugewi, 1960. Note dress made of commercial (chrome tanned) buckskin, machine sewn. Note also the fine Atsugewi baskets, those closest to Mrs. LaMarr apparently made by her. Coiled basket in left middle with ticked rim is a basketry hopper, a seldom collected form of Atsugewi weaving. Photo by Bacaracco, courtesy National Park Service, Lassen National Park.

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Fig. 13. Round Dance in Yosemite Valley, summer 1971. Alice Potts, Miwok, foreground, in buckskin dress. Her husband, Marvin Potts, Maidu, in center with back to the camera, is wearing hairpins and beaded sash. Alice's dress is of her own design, including the netting of the buckskin thongs for which her dress became well known. Photo courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.

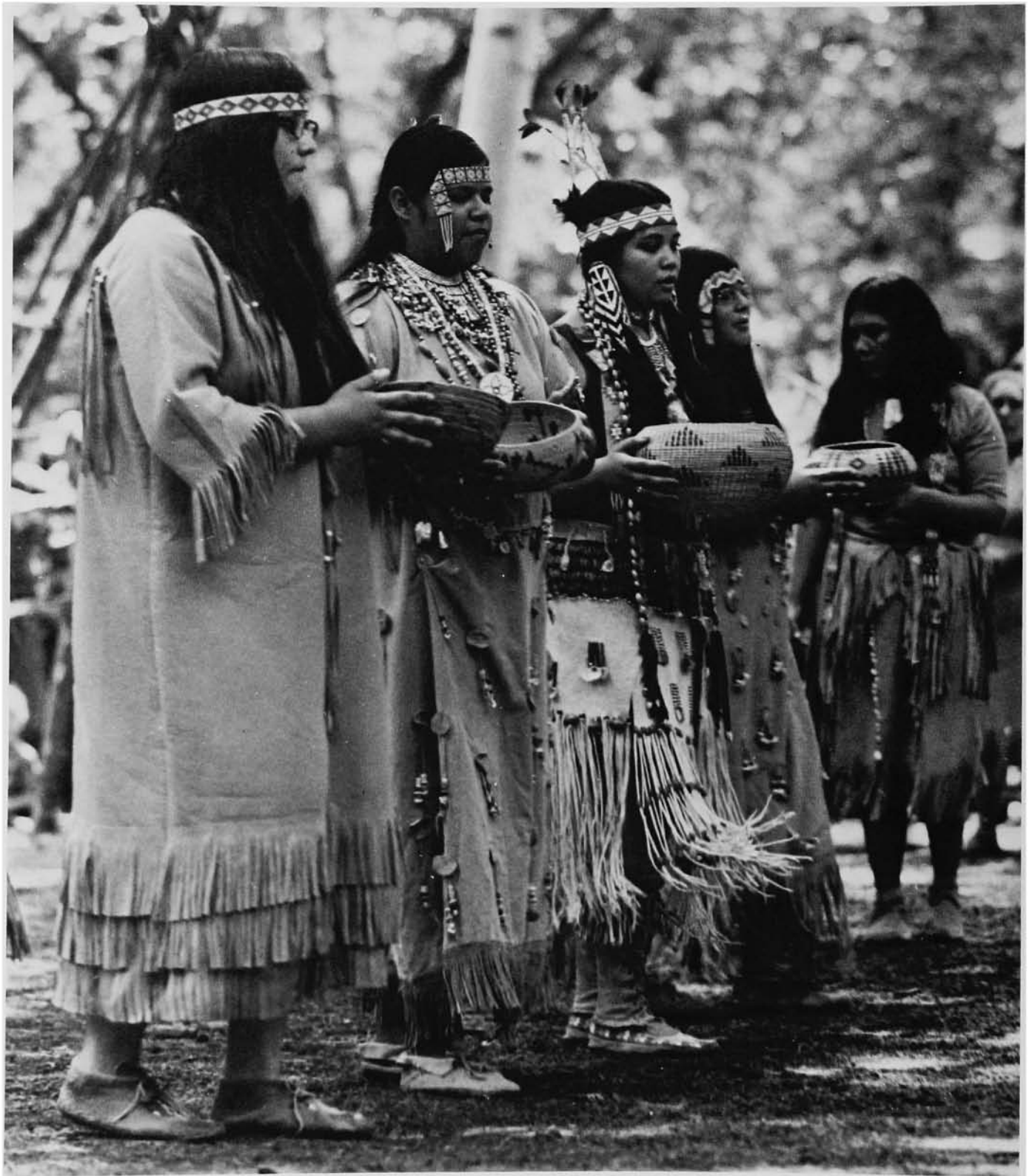


Fig. 14. Basket Dance in Yosemite Valley, summer 1973. Dancers left to right include: Renee Jo Wessell (Paiute/Miwok), Maggie Franklin (Miwok), Kimberly Bernice Stevenot (Miwok), Teresa Franklin (Miwok), Julia Parker (Pomo). Julia Parker and Kimberly Stevenot wear skirts and other ornaments based on old styles, adding cloth bodices. The others wear dresses of more recent design. Courtesy National Park Service, Yosemite Collections.