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The Journal of California Anthropology

Title

Achumawi Sketches

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/77q2199b>

Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 1(1)

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Publication Date

1974-07-01

Peer reviewed

Achumawi Sketches

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*PUBLISHER'S NOTE: Jaime de Angulo (1886-1950) contributed a number of important early papers to the field of California ethnology. At the urging of two close friends, Franz Boas and Paul Radin, de Angulo formally began his academic career in northern California in the mid-twenties. As de Angulo had already met a number of Achumawi (Pit River) Indians at his ranch up in Alturas, he naturally chose Pit River culture as his primary area of concentration. In 1928 de Angulo's valuable introduction to Pit River religion, *La Psychologie religieuse des Achumawi*, was published in the French journal, *Anthropos*. Two years later the author's study of Pit River grammar, *The Achumawi Language*, was published by Boas in his *International Journal of American Linguistics*. The*

*following excerpts have been drawn, almost at random, from a third and final previously unpublished paper in this series, *The Achumawi: A Primitive Tribe of Northern California*. A more open and less technical study than the two previous works, the paper provides early evidence of the good humor, rich insight, and irrepressible rambling narrative style that characterize the author's later classics, *Indians in Overalls* and *Indian Tales*. The full paper, I should also add, will be published for the first time as a part of our nine-volume selected works of Jaime de Angulo series.*

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ACHUMAWI society presents a completely different picture from those societies which have clans or "totems." In a society with clans, the affiliation with the clan is also based on blood relationships, but it is usually one-sided, either through the father or through the mother. One half of all a person's blood relatives are thus excluded. Besides, in such a society, each clan has a treasure of secret traditions and rites, of a more or less religious nature, which binds all the members of the clan much more closely together.

In general, it may be said that totems and clans are absent in northern California. Among the tribes of central California, however, there are religious rites and ceremonies

which are more or less mixed up with "secret societies" and initiation of members. But even that is totally lacking among the Achumawi. There is not a trace of a religious cult. There are no ceremonies and no priests. This does not mean that one does not find the religious spirit among the Achumawi. If by "religious spirit" one means the spirit of wonder, the feeling for the mysterious element in life and nature, then on the contrary one may say that Achumawi life is permeated through and through with religion. But it is not organized religion. It is left to the individual—each man is his own priest, each man is left to find his own "power," and each man will find it in his own way.

Considering the village as a social unit, the question will naturally be asked: was there a chief in each village? The answer will be yes, or no, according to what we mean by chief. We are accustomed to think of a chief as a man with definite authority. Usually we think of this authority as hereditary, and of the chief as formally invested at the death of his predecessor. There were such chiefs in California among many of the tribes, but certainly not with the Achumawi. In each community there was usually a *wehelu*. Sometimes there were more than one. A *wehelu* (leader, rather than chief, would be a better translation) is a man on the other side of middle age who has just the right mixture of decision, of character, and of prudence. He does not become a *wehelu* by investiture. He does not become a *wehelu* by heredity. He becomes a *wehelu* by growing into it. And it takes him a long time to achieve recognition by common consent as a leader.

Let us imagine some occurrence which requires common harmonious action from all the members of the small community. For instance, the roof of the winter-house is becoming rotten. At least some people think so, and say so. They say it is dangerous to spend another winter there. If there should be a heavy fall of snow it may crash down and bury everybody. Other people say no. They say the two main ridge-poles are still sound. They have not been there more than ten years. There is a confusion of opinions.

Now to build a winter-house is no small undertaking. Two large pine trees are required for the main ridge-poles. There were no axes. To cut them down a fire is built all around the trunk. Green wood does not burn by itself. When a layer about an inch thick has been charred, it is knocked off with elkhorn wedges, and a little more of the next layer of green wood is teased into shreds. That will help it to burn. It requires about a week of continual work to fell a tree. The branches do

not have to be burnt off because there were no branches, only trees with a long naked trunk being chosen for ridge-poles. And when once felled, the trunk is easily burnt in two at the required place.

But it will require the help of every man and woman to drag each tree to the newly chosen site which may be quite a distance from the forest. Then there will be the center-post. And the rafters. And the making of mats for sheathing. In short, it is no wonder if many people prefer to take a chance and postpone all this labor for another year.

And so they quarrel and argue. Now this is where the chief comes in. He does not say anything, but he listens to all the talk. Finally the people will say: "Well now, we have talked enough about it. Let So-and-So decide. He is chief. It is for him to say." If So-and-So is accepted by everybody as indisputably a chief, well and good. But it may also happen that many people will retort: "Why, So-and-So is no chief at all! Who says he is a chief? Maybe he thinks he is chief, but that doesn't make him one!" If a chief feels that there is too much division of opinion, and if he is wise, he will keep apart from the controversy and refuse to express an opinion. In other words, what the chief really does is to formulate the will of the majority. There may be several chiefs in one place. Usually they are brothers. They will always consult together before giving an opinion. In the routine of everyday life the chief is not accorded any outward marks of respect. From the Achumawi point of view, he is no more entitled to formal consideration than any other old person.



The possession of agriculture is often taken as a milepost in culture, and quite rightly so. Certainly, the Achumawi were not

an agricultural people. They did not plant anything, not even tobacco. However, in saying that they were not agricultural, one must not lose sight of the fact that an intimate knowledge of wild plants was a strong element of their economy. One does not gather roots by simply digging into the ground anywhere at any time. Moreover "roots" is a very poor term. We do not say that we eat roots because we eat potatoes, onions, turnips, carrots, etc. Yet most of the so-called "roots" of the Indians are tubers quite comparable to our potatoes and turnips, except that they are not the product of artificial selection and therefore are small in comparison to ours. Each kind is ripe for gathering only at certain times of the year, and they are present in large quantities only in certain localities.

It would be useless for a woman to go out with her pack-basket and her digging stick to gather wild turnips in a field where each plant grows fifteen or twenty feet away from the next. In a whole day's work she would only get enough for one meal for herself; whereas she must in one day gather enough to be stored away for many suppers for her family during the next winter. In the same way, one does not gather juniper berries by going to any tree and shaking down the branches. There are certain individual trees here and there in the forest which bear especially good berries, not too bitter. All this knowledge might well be called agricultural knowledge. And a people whose main occupation all summer long is to go camping from one definite place to another, gathering the known products of the soil as provisions for the next winter, might as well be called an agricultural people, in a certain sense.



A word about music. Achumawi music is entirely vocal, since they had practically no

musical instruments. (To be accurate: they had the flute, the rattle, the clap-stick, and the drum.) Singing, however, is a fairly well developed art. But it is not at all singing of the kind to which we are accustomed. The throat is tightly constricted, making the voice sound flat and reedy. The song is very short and repeated endlessly without pause, like a run. Good singers learn to breathe in the middle of the phrase by dropping several of the notes and catching up again with the song. The rhythm is usually fast, sometimes complex, without marked accentuation. The pattern is at first elusive, so that the entire song appears made up of only one phrase. It is even difficult to tell where the song begins and ends. But on analysis one finds that the pattern is simple and usually consists of four phrases in some such order as A, B, A, C, or A, B, A, B, or A, B, B, C, etc. The difference between A, B, and C may be but a variation of two or three notes. The melody appears at first very strange, and one suspects quarter tones. But this is due only to unfamiliarity, and also to the fact that many singers have poor ears and flatten or sharpen regardlessly. As a matter of fact, semitones are rare. An analysis of some fifty songs has convinced me that there are three main types of scale: one type uses the fundamental, supertonic, mediant, and dominant (rarely the submediant); the second uses the fundamental, the diminished mediant, the subdominant, and dominant; the third scale uses the fundamental, the supertonic, the augmented mediant, and the dominant. Thus we see that the intervals are either of a full tone or a tone-and-a-half.

The number of these songs is enormous. A good singer knows easily two or three hundred songs. Some of the songs are war songs; others are puberty dance songs; others are medicine songs; the greater number are gambling songs; but there seem to be no love songs among the Achumawi. All of these types of songs are practically identical as far

as their musical character is concerned.

Not all Indians are musically inclined. I know many Achumawi who never sing at all. On the whole, however, the proportion of musically inclined people is much greater than among most European peoples. Achumawi women are as good singers as the men. The majority of Achumawi Indians I have known sing all the time, while traveling, or at work, or lying down in the sunshine, or sitting in a corner of the house. They sing for the fun of it. A man will repeat the same song endlessly for an hour. Sometimes a man will discover a new pleasing variation, and this becomes his own particular song. Such a song may become very popular in a short time. Older songs are being constantly forgotten. Many are remembered only by a few old people.

Very often a man will dream a new song in his sleep. Such a song may be charged with a particular emotion. It may be more or less associated in his mind with "power." He is very apt then to keep it secret for a long time, at least until he feels quite sure that his *tinihowi* is quite tame and could not be stolen from him by someone else singing that song which his *tinihowi* likes to hear. This is above all true of shamans.

In short, singing for the Achumawi runs all the way from mere esthetic pleasure to a means of mystical communion with the mysterious forces of life and the world. This is of course true of all peoples to a greater or lesser extent. But in the case of many cultures, music partakes of the same standardization and ritualism that marks other arts in relation to mysticism and religion. With the Achumawi, the relation seems more immediate, more personal, and at the same time more vague and diffused. The average Achumawi will not sing with the definite purpose of inducing a religious experience. Rather, he at certain times, feeling a vague and ill-defined sense of communion with the world at large, is impelled to sing. He may sing for hours and

gradually regain the sense of the reality of his own self. Or he may sink deeper and deeper into the world of mysticism, culminating in a religious experience. There are many degrees in between. There are also many degrees of temperament among the Achumawi, from the realistically inclined man to the dreaming, mystical type which produces shamans. But on the whole I should say that the cultural patterns of Achumawi society favor the development of the latter type. A very realistic and rational man would feel like a fish out of water in Achumawi society. He would find himself forever at odds with all the moral judgments of his people.



I would like to speak here about the subject of "creation myths." I have heard it said often that the creation myth is found in America only on the Pacific Coast. Ethnologists contrast creation myths with transformer myths and culture hero myths. In this sense I doubt very much whether there is a real creation myth on the Pacific Coast, except in a few restricted areas with a more sophisticated culture. I think that in most instances the creation will resolve itself, under careful study, into a re-creation, a re-making of the world.

Evidently, the way the problem presents itself to the Indian mind is not as a speculation concerning the origin of the world out of nothing, but rather as to how it happened that at one time the world was peopled by "men-animals" and later on these men-animals lost their humanhood and became mere animals, and real humans appeared on the earth.

There is thus a division between a mythical time and the present. The men-animals of the mythical days were supernatural. They could perform miracles at will. They could do things which today cannot be done by the

average man. Only the shamans can perform such miracles today, and the shamans derive their power through communication with some of the animals (or animal-spirits), whom they have been able to "catch" and tame.

This I think represents the inner spirit of the old myths and tales among a people like the Achumawi, although I have been obliged, in putting it into words, to give it a clarity which is quite foreign to Indian feeling. Indians do not think of those things consciously. It is, however, quite true that now and then one comes across a version of how the world was made which is a true creation *ab ortu*. Neither can one always put it down to contact with the whites. It is true that Indians have so often been asked by white people: Who made the world according to your religion? that they are bound (some of them at least) to begin to worry about it. This may explain some of the versions which give it a true creation. I think on the other hand that such a query is one that naturally arises in the mind of man sooner or later. It probably arose here and there among the California Indians. But I think it does not represent the general case.



There is one thing about Indian myths among a people like the Achumawi which must be made clear. When I first went among them I had expected to find an "orthodox" version. I had even been told that most Indians would refuse to tell a myth unless they knew it perfectly well, unless they knew it word by word, because the story must be told in just a certain way without missing a single word. This may be true of other tribes. I suspect it is quite true, for instance, of people like the Navajo and the Pueblos. I think it is also true of some parts of central California like the Pomo and the Wintun, where there was a definite ritual complex. But

it certainly is not true of the Achumawi. You hear any number of versions of the so-called creation myths. Some of them are patently incomplete and garbled. In recounting them there is not the slightest feeling of religious respect for a sacred document. It is merely a story like any other story. Some people are good raconteurs and tell the story with dramatic gusto. Others jumble it all up.

Those stories were usually told in winter time, I was almost going to say, in the long evenings of winter time. But for the Achumawi there was not much difference between daytime and nighttime in winter. Since there are no windows in the winter-house it was always dark except for the light of the fire. In winter there is nothing to do, except for an occasional hunt. The snow covers the ground. It is bitter cold outside. Most people had no clothing of any kind, not even the sandals and leggings of woven bulrushes without which it is almost unendurable to walk in the snow. The Indians may have been pretty tough, but I doubt if they went out of the winter-house except under absolute necessity. To lie down in semi-darkness day after day, with almost nothing to do except perhaps weave an occasional basket, would drive most of us to lunacy. But the Indians are different. They derive a very great pleasure from their ant-hill. It is a feeling of community, of being just one member in a horde. Such conditions must produce a remarkable freedom from the problems that face the individual who has to deal with his own ego, as happens in our society. It is difficult for us to visualize this winter life. Even if we are all kept in at home by the rain, still we preserve the orderly arrangement of daily routine. We eat our meals at fixed times, and at bedtime we retire to our separate rooms, and silence reigns in the house. I have never lived in an old-time winter-house, and so I am only reconstructing, but from what old Indians have told me, I can see that it was a continual murmur

and slow moving about, night and day. When anybody feels sleepy he simply dozes off. Such a life is naturally the best ground for the telling of long stories. Some old man starts telling a tale. The people who are gossiping more or less subdue their voices. The tale goes on and on. The repetition of details, which we find so irksome when we read a translation of an Indian tale, loses its monotony under such

conditions. It becomes pleasing, like the repetitions of the same phrases in a musical composition. All the episodes of the long tale are known to everybody, but still everybody listens, half-asleep, half-thinking other things. The imagination wanders. Coyote, Fox, Panther, Hawk, Quail, all the men-animals take strange forms, move about in a world like the fantastic world of dreams.

