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THE WASHO

THE Washo controlled all the territory about Lake Tahoe.[1] Their western border, from Honey lake in Lassen county to the eastern end of Calaveras county, and their southern boundary, extending through the Blue lakes and Silver mountain in Alpine county to the headwaters of Walker river at the site of Coleville in Mono county, lay entirely in California. In Nevada they held the western foothills of the Pine Nut range, extending northward on Truckee river to a point five miles above Wadsworth.

About equally divided between California and Nevada, Washo territory in the latter state included the valleys of Carson and Truckee rivers, and in California the eastern slope of the Sierra Nevada, together with the extreme headwaters of the westward-flowing American, Cosumnes, Mokelumne, Calaveras, and Stanislaus rivers, where they held the edge of the oak groves. The mountains were their summer hunting-and fishing-grounds. An extremely heavy annual snowfall rendered this region uninhabitable during a long winter season, which they therefore spent in the valleys.

The western portion of this area presents the characteristic sierra topography of high mountains, glacial lakes and gorges, dense forests of conifers, such as the digger, sugar, and yellow pine, spruce, hemlock, fir, cedar, and juniper, and groves of oaks. The eastern portion is typical of the Great Basin, of which it forms the western edge, consisting of arid plains with sagebrush, greasewood, and bunch-grass vegetation, and low mountains either unforested or clothed with dark green, nut-bearing piñons. It would be difficult to say whether Washo culture more strongly resembles the California or the Basin type. Their conical slab houses and their use of acorns relate them to the California tribes, but their dependence on rabbits and piñons is a Great Basin characteristic.

The original form of the word Washo is Wáshiu, the tribal self-name. The Mono and the Paviotso call them Wásiu. Until recently they were known to the Pyramid Lake Paviotso as Mána'ts. The Washo were regarded as a distinct linguistic stock, but Dixon and Kroeber

1 From Washo *táô*, lake

are inclined to classify them as members of the Hokan family, which includes such well-known groups as Shasta, Karok, Yana, and Pomo.[2] They themselves recognize three geographical divisions of the tribe: the Hánalelti ("Southerners"), in Alpine county, California; the Páwalu (*Páu*, Carson valley), in Carson valley, Nevada; and the Wélmelti ("northerners"), in Truckee valley, Nevada. Their western neighbors were the Maidu, whom they call Tánniu. On the west and south were the Miwok, or Teubímmus; southeastward the Mono, and on the east and north the Paviotso, both of which tribes they call Páliu.

Although there was a constant state of hostility between the Washo and the Paviotso over the question of trespass, there never was organized warfare between them. The feeling of enmity, however, is still strong, with the result that drunken brawls between those who meet in the towns are not uncommon.[3]

Many generations ago a large number of northeastern Maidu attacked a Washo camp while the men were fishing in Truckee river below the site of Reno. They killed an old woman, and the others ran to apprise the men at the river, who pursued the retreating enemy. In Sierra valley, Plumas and Sierra counties, California, a heavy snowstorm overwhelmed the invaders, and almost all of them were frozen to death in the caves in which they took refuge.

About the year 1835 a party of Miwok invaded the Washo country west of Lake Tahoe in order to hunt deer. They were driven out, and in a fight about twenty miles from the lake a few were killed.

2 "Since Dr. Lehmann first observed the remarkable analogy between the nominal *d*-prefix of Subtiaba and that of Washo, Dixon and Kroeber, J.P. Harrington, and the writer have been led, independently of each other, to affiliate Washo with the Hokan group." Edward Sapir, The Hokan Affinity of Subtiaba in Nicaragua, *American Anthropologist, N.S,* Vol. 27, No 3, page 403, July, 1925.

3 Henshaw, in Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico, quotes Mooney to the effect that "about 1860-62 the Paiute conquered the Washo in a contest over the site of Carson and forbade them thenceforth to own horses." In the present investigation several Washo and more Paviotso old enough to recall incidents so recent have been questioned without confirmation of the statement. It should be noted that the settlement of Carson valley began in 1851, and the famous Comstock lode was discovered in 1859.

The first white men in Washo territory were the trappers under Jedediah S. Smith, who passed through on their way to California in 1825. Explorers, trappers, and finally gold-seekers and colonists came in growing numbers. In 1846 the Donner party, bound for Sacramento valley, attempted to cross the mountains too late in the season and became snowbound at a small lake northwest of Tahoe.

The father and the grandfather of the present Washo informant used to fish every year in Donner lake. One spring when they went there as usual, they were astonished to see a group of log huts. On the walls were guns and clothing. The use of these things they did not know. Outside were many corpses. Some of the bones seemed to have been sawed, and evidently cannibalism had been practised. They reported the discovery to their people, and with a larger party returned to the place. They saw where limbs thirty feet from the ground had been cut off for fuel during the winter, the deep snow having raised the prevailing level that distance.

The arrival of settlers was followed by the usual depredations and reprisals. The Washo however did not fall victims to organized warfare.

Although no general reservation has ever been assigned them, in 1892 they received allotments in severalty. A few were fortunate enough to obtain tracts in the foothills where small areas can be cultivated, but many were assigned to barren slopes on the western side of Pine Nut range, a hopeless region which they have never occupied. The land is leased to sheep-raisers and returns a pitiful annual amount varying from few cents to several dollars per family. The allotment of the Pine Nut lands is said to have resulted from misunderstanding on the part of an interpreter. The spokesman for the Washo requested protection of the piñons, not allotment of the land.

In 1916 Congress appropriated ten thousand dollars for the purchase of land and water for the Washo, and five thousand dollars for their support and civilization. Five separate tracts aggregating 236 acres were purchased. The largest, consisting of 119 acres of sandy sagebrush land with little water, was occupied by three families in 1924. Twenty acres of rocky ground near Reno, costing six thousand dollars, was the home of a small number of Washo and Paviotso. On a tract of about forty acres five miles from Gardnerville a dozen families have erected cabins. But since a single well is the only source of water, successful tillage is out of the question. One man has sowed a plot of wheat about

his house, desiring not only food for his family but fodder for his horses and a lawn to please the eye. He carries water in buckets from the well. Such ambition would seem to deserve better opportunities.

The present numerical strength of the Washo is not known with any accuracy, because they are not concentrated on reservations. The Census of 1910 enumerated eight hundred, of whom about six hundred were of unmixed blood. They reside principally about Reno and Carson and in the intervening country. Many of them work on ranches, and some regularly visit Lake Tahoe in summer, where the men serve as boatmen for sporting fishermen, and the women make baskets for sale to tourists.

Like the tribes of central California the Washo exhibit in connection with a general paucity and simplicity of manufactured objects a high degree of skill and artistic taste in basketry. The two processes of coiling and twining are employed, and the product of the former method especially is of excellent quality and much in demand.

The materials are willow rods and bark, bracken-root fibres, and redbud-bark. Willow rods form the radiating elements, or warp, in twined baskets, and the coiled elements, or foundation, in coiled baskets. The inner bark of the willow, in its natural state of whiteness or browned by exposure to sunlight, is the weft material in twined baskets, and the sewing, or wrapping, material in coiled work. Redbud-bark, purchased from the Miwok, and black fibres from the roots of bracken, are used as weft and sewing material for the production of geometrical designs.

Twined basketry takes the form of the conical burden-basket, which is large and coarsely woven for acorns, pine-cones, and fuel, or small and closely woven for grass-seeds; the cradle-basket, consisting of longitudinal willow rods and widely separated rows of bark twining, with separate and detachable convex sun-shade ornamented with phallic designs; the fan-shape, concave winnowing-basket, either open-mesh or closely woven, some of the latter kind, with numerous transverse bands of fine, geometrical figures, strongly resembling a beautifully banded shell; the nearly cylindrical cooking-vessel; the elliptical, open-mesh seed-beater; and the conical fish-trap.

Coiled baskets are used for cooking and serving food, and as containers of small possessions, such as beads; and many are now made simply as art objects for sale. Food vessels usually take the form of a

bowl or a truncated cone, and ornamental ones more frequently approach the globose.

For shooting at marks and small game the Washo used wooden-pointed arrows made of rose-shoots. The arrow for large game and for war was tipped with flint or obsidian, which was attached with sinew wrapping directly to the shaft or to a short foreshaft. The points of war-arrows were poisoned. A deer liver repeatedly bitten by a rattlesnake was dried and pulverized, and a small portion was mixed with water in the hollow of a stone kept for this purpose. Such arrows were used also in attacking grizzly-bear. All arrows were triply feathered, and were carried in quivers of the skin of a coyote or of young deer or antelope with the hair inside. The shafts were smoothed by means of a flat pumice abrader, and straightened by bending between the teeth.

Obsidian blades served as knives.

For pulverizing nuts and seeds the Washo used both the bowlder mortar and water-worn pestle of northern California culture, and the flat stone metate and oblong muller of the desert tribes. The implement used for brushing back the scattered meal into the mortar, as well as for dressing the hair, was a bunch of soap-plant fibres, which were purchased from the Miwok.

Acorns, pine-nuts, and grass-seeds were stored in pits lined with wild oats and cedar-bark.

Cord made of *Asclepias* fibres was used principally in tying fish-nets, which were of the bow-and-arrow type familiar to California culture. Other fishing devices were the hook, which was a straight bone lashed to a wooden or bone shank; the single- or double-pointed gig used on a spear-shaft; and the weir. The weir was made by driving into the bed of a creek a row of closely set stakes and reinforcing them with stones. This part of the structure was called *pakótsal.* On the down-stream side the workmen attached transversely a trough-like apron of poles and bark twining, which they called *pekméyet,* and at each end of the trough conical trap, *pakámat,* with the point down-stream and the opening directly connected with the trough. Fish swimming down-stream were carried over the weir into the trough, and, attempting to escape, swam into the traps.

Bone awls, wooden fire-drills, and snowshoes were like those found in northern California. Split-stick batons of elder or willow were used in marking rhythm, and the shaman's rattle was made by attach-

ing several willow-galls to a handle.

Wedges of horn or bone, drums, and flutes were not made by the Washo. Canoes also were unknown, but they made limited use of rafts.

Both sexes wore a short kilt of deerskin or groundhog-skin, and, when protection was required, knee-length leggings and moccasins of deerskin. The women had also shirts of deerskin. These statements probably refer to comparatively recent times. Everyone possessed a garment made of strips of rabbit-fur with cord twining and used both as a robe and as a blanket. The hair generally hung loose, but men sometimes tied it in a knot at the back of the head. For personal adornment clam-shell beads were obtained from the western tribes in exchange for eagle-feathers, skins, and bows. Tattooing is a modern acquisition.

The house was a simple conical structure consisting of a willow-pole frame thatched with wild-oat grass, tules, cattail leaves, or cedar-bark slabs. The door was on the eastern side, because the winds seldom blew from that direction. In summer rude brush shelters sufficed.

The sweat-house was an earth-covered, conical hut over a shallow excavation. Three forked posts, set respectively in the centre and near the front and the rear of the pit, supported a two-piece ridge-pole, against which willow poles and slabs of bark were leaned. Heat was generated directly by fire. The sweat-bath, instead of being a regularly recurring event, was employed only to relieve actual physical ills.

The most important vegetal foods were pine-nuts, especially those of *Pinus monophylla,* or piñon, and sunflower-seeds. The nuts are still harvested, and each autumn the people reestablish their camps at certain places in the hills. The cones are plucked by means of a pole with an angular wooden hook lashed to the end, and are roasted in order to open the scales. The kernels are frequently eaten without preparation, but usually they are ground and made into mush. Nuts of the digger and the sugar pine were obtained in the Sierras, and acorns were harvested in the groves at the head of American, Cosumnes, Mokelumne, Calaveras, and Stanislaus rivers, or secured from the Maidu and Miwok in exchange for piñon-nuts. Besides sunflower-seeds, the seeds of various grasses and other plants, especially wild oats, were of importance. Edible fruits included service-berries, plums, grapes, elderberries, chokecherries, huckleberries, and manzanita-berries, the last purchased from the Miwok.

Deer and antelope were killed as required, and the meat was seldom dried. Deer were usually run down by a party of four or five men. These animals when pursued follow a certain route, and as the Indians knew just what direction the quarry would take, some of the party followed the track while others took a short-cut and lay in wait. Disguises were employed for stalking deer, the natural horns and entire skin being utilized. While one of the hunters acted as a decoy, several others lay in ambush, and when a buck, perceiving the decoy, came to fight his supposed rival, they let fly their arrows. Not infrequently the stalker had to throw off the disguise in order to avoid an actual attack by the infuriated animal.

The most important game animal was not the deer nor the antelope, but the lowly rabbit, which was very plentiful and easily captured. The method of hunting was the same as that employed by the Paviotso, namely, to drive the animals into the meshes of a long net. The kill, whether of deer or rabbits, was divided among the people of the camp.

Fish were a prominent item in the diet of the Washo. They passed their summer at Lake Tahoe, fishing, not in the lake, but in the affluent streams where the trout spawn from the first of May until June or July. So jealous of their rich fishing-grounds were the Washo that when other Indians came to trade for dried fish they were permitted to remain only one night. The fish were dried in smoke, but few were carried over into the winter. At the end of the fishing season the people made preparations for moving to the piñon hills of Nevada, taking a moderate supply of dried trout.

There were considerable number of Washo villages, which were politically and socially independent of one another. Each community had its head-man, whose function was to convene the people on public occasions, and to look after their affairs in fatherly fashion. There was also a hunt-chief, whose authority was considerable. Each year about the month of September, when the pine-nuts were ripe and the deer season was beginning, he sent runners with knotted cords summoning all the people to an appointed place in the pine country, there to participate in feasting on nuts, venison, and fish, in dancing, contests of football, and the hand-game. The assembly usually lasted three or four days. After the last night's dancing, when the chief had finished his speech exhorting the people to treat the children and the aged

with kindness, and to avoid cruelty to any animal, everybody, even the children, went to the stream and bathed. Then they scattered to the work of gathering the winter's supply of nuts. The hunt-chief also had charge of the communal rabbit-drives, which could not be held without his consent and direction.

Clans did not exist among the Washo, and totemic names were unknown. The name given to a child was generally the infant's ludicrous mispronunciation of a word, and it was never deliberately changed.

On the occasion of girl's first two menstruations there was a ceremony. During four days she fasted absolutely, drank warm water, and was led about by an attendant to perform various duties that involved walking, such as gathering nuts and seeds. All this was intended to make her active and strong. On the last day, accompanied by a girl companion, or by several, she started about the middle of the afternoon to climb to the top of mountain or lofty hill, building fires along the slope and finally on the peak. They returned to the village about dark. That night was spent in dancing, men and women holding hands and moving to the left in circle, and at some time during the dance the girl stood within the circle and held a basket above her head, a prize for the first male dancer who touched it. The intent of this feature was no doubt to overcome the natural timidity of young girl by having a throng of youths jostling about her, to arouse the sexual impulse by physical contact. Perhaps also there was a feeling that this in some occult way would predispose her to fecundity.

Just before sunrise her mother stood up beside her with a fine basket containing cold water. Circling it four times above the maiden's head, she expressed the wish that headache might never trouble her daughter and that she might always have good health, and then poured the water on her head and bathed her entire body. This was followed by ritualistic bath with warm water, and the basket was thrown eastward above the heads of the crowd as prize for anyone who could get it. Next, the girl's father, with perpendicular stripes of white clay on his face, took a red-banded elder stick and ran eastward with it, to hide it in some secret place; and returning with speed, he stood before the people and made a speech, expressing the hope that his daughter would always have good health and would run over the mountains like a deer, that she would have long, black hair until aged, and be a faithful wife and good mother of many children. Finally he thanked the people

for showing respect to his daughter by attending the ceremony. Many of the people then departed, others perhaps remaining to play football or to gamble.

All this was repeated at the second menstruation; and thereafter until, a month later, she participated in a feast of fish or venison, the girl ate no meat nor fresh fish. At the present time many elderly women refrain from meat for four to ten days after their periods. This puberty ceremony, T!ewéwe, is still religiously observed.

To arrange marriage, the parents of young man offered venison or deerskins to the parents of the desired bride, and acceptance signified acquiescence. After several exchanges of gifts, the two young people without formality made their beds together in the girl's house. After few weeks they usually became permanent members of the husband's family, but in many cases they lived alternately in both places. Polygyny was common, but by no means unexceptional, and a widow was bound to marry her husband's brother if he desired her.

The dead were cremated. A corpse was laid at length in the house, the personal possessions were disposed beside it, and fire was set to the dwelling. Nothing was kept that might remind the family of their loss. Mourning relatives cut the hair, but did not blacken the face.

Annually there was a memorial ceremony which appears to have closely paralleled the California rite. Objects were burned while the people wailed, and a feast was provided by the chief. Effigies of the lamented dead are said to have been burned, as in southern California; but since the statement came in answer to direct inquiry and no details were forthcoming, its truth cannot be accepted without further evidence.

The genuinely religious acts of the Washo appear to have been limited to addressing prayers to Ti-kâi ("my father"), who lived above, for food, health, long life, children, and other bounties.

Both shamans and herb doctors obtained their power and knowledge by dreaming. A shaman cured by sucking out the "poison blood" after period of incantation and shaking of rattles, and one suspected of having killed a person by projecting sickness into his body was likely to be slain by grieving relatives. There were a few female shamans. A herb doctor, dreaming that in a certain spot was an efficacious plant, visited the place, obtained the plant, and used it as his dream indicated it should be used.

Besides the puberty rite, the only pseudo-religious ceremonies are T!águm-lâs ("pine-nut dance"), Mállun-lâs ("acorn dance"), and Péleu-lâs ("jack-rabbit dance"), which vary only in the character of the songs employed, and are performed for the purpose of enhancing the supply of food. Men and women join hands in a circle and dance slowly to the left as in the puberty dance.

On the rare occasion of the departure of a war-party, the members of the expedition danced with young female relatives, who expressed the wish that the fighters might return safe and victorious.

Washo mythology has few features peculiar to itself. The world is accepted as an accomplished fact, and the creation of human beings is described as the work of Wolf, chief of the pseudo-human race that already existed but was destined to become animals of the lower orders. This he accomplished by placing cattail-down, seeds, and grass in a basket, whence in time faint humming issued. The sound increased in volume, and Wolf turned out the contents of the vessel the progenitors of Washo, Miwok, Maidu, and Paviotso. The typical California motive of an argumentative dispute between an elder and younger brother creator, here Wolf and Coyote, is embodied in the Washo myth. A favorite tale is based on the widespread Plains theme of two sisters marrying star-men; and another is palpably a variant of the Paviotso story concerning the wonderful adventures of two brothers. In short, Washo myths, like Washo material culture, appear to be about equally influenced by central California and the Great Basin.

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