

MYTHS ABOUT MYTHS: CLUES TO THE TIME DEPTH OF CALIFORNIA'S ETHNOGRAPHIC RECORD

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Ethnography has contributed many invaluable insights into California prehistory. But how far back into the past can its perspectives legitimately be projected? The unique characteristics of myths and other traditional oral narratives make them useful for evaluating the time depths that were reached by native memories and by cultural continuities. The evidence suggests that substantial information was often conserved across several centuries, but that attempts to extend ethnographic testimony farther back than that are probably illusory.

Most California prehistorians would agree that ethnography has made many important contributions toward illuminating their subject. Those contributions have related primarily to an “ethnographic present” lying on the borderland of prehistory and representing lifeways as they had existed immediately prior to Euro-American contacts and impacts. It is worthwhile to ask how far back into prehistory the direct evidence from ethnography can legitimately be extended.

Myths and other forms of traditional oral narratives offer an important perspective on the time depth that is reflected in the ethnographic record. A large body of traditional California narratives is available to researchers, thanks in particular to the extensive records made by ethnographers during the first half of the twentieth century (e.g., Gifford and Block 1930; Heizer 1978). These traditional narratives reflect time depth in two ways. The first arises from what they reveal about the historicity of aboriginal cultures – that is, the extent to which those cultures maintained factual memories of past events and cultural changes. The second concerns the extent to which the narratives themselves remained stable over extended periods of time within their main lines of cultural descent, or alternatively the extent to which they were creatively modified or diffused across such lines.

To assess the historicity and stability of traditional California narratives, four kinds of evidence are briefly considered here. These include the presence of cultural archaisms or anachronisms in the narratives, the inclusion of local references, the remembrance of identifiable past environmental events, and geographical patterns in the ways narratives were shared among different cultures.

Cultural archaisms are references to conditions that had once existed in the past but that no longer prevailed when the narratives were being written down. The inclusion of archaisms in oral traditions may indicate either that the narratives' content had remained stable throughout the periods during which the cultural changes were occurring, or that a significant degree of historicity was present in native thinking, and an awareness was maintained that things had been done differently in the past. Anachronisms are the opposite: cultural elements that properly described the present or the recent past but were out of place in the earlier context that was supposedly being described in the narratives. Anachronisms reflect both the unstable character of the narratives' content and a certain lack of historicity within the cultures.

Considered on a relatively short time scale, archaism is a prominent feature of Native Californian traditional narratives. The region's recorded myths and legends did not describe native lifeways as they were being lived in the early twentieth century, or as they were directly remembered from the second half of the nineteenth century. They described credible memories of earlier, pre-contact conditions. It is true that there had already been some infiltration of post-contact anachronisms into the myths. A scattering of references is found to Old World races (whites, Chinese, etc.), domesticated animals (horses, chickens, etc.), agricultural crops (wheat, watermelons, etc.), and technologies (steel swords, rubber, etc.) (Laylander 2001:177). However, these very late anachronisms appeared comparatively rarely in the myths. They also seem to have been more frequent in the southern and western parts of the state, in areas where contact with Western culture had occurred earliest. This suggests that a slightly longer separation from pre-contact

conditions, measured on a time scale of only a few decades, had made a noticeable difference in the conservation of traditional memories.

Turning to a much longer time scale, on the order of a millennium or so, anachronisms rather than archaisms strongly prevailed. Southern California myths, which were supposedly set at the time of the world's beginning, incorporated references to ceramic vessels and to New World agricultural crops (Laylander 2001:164). The most extensive case of anachronism on this time scale is provided by references in myths to the use of the bow and arrow. Substantial bodies of recorded myths are available from 49 out of 51 major ethnolinguistic groups in the state, and at least 45 of these 49 groups included references to the bow and arrow in their myths. Evidently no collective memory had been preserved of such comparatively late prehistoric events as the initial introduction into the region of ceramics, agriculture, and the bow and arrow.

Another indication of the rate of change in traditional narratives is the incorporation of local geographical references into accounts that were set in the mythic period. Linguistic evidence suggests that many (but not all) of the ancestral Californian cultures may have been located within the borders of the state prior to late Holocene times, but that until quite late in prehistory many of these cultures were not settled in the specific places where the traditional narratives would later be recorded (cf. Golla 2004; Moratto 1984). Despite this, the myths of virtually every major ethnolinguistic group in the state – 48 out of the 49 that offer substantial evidence – incorporated explicit geographical references to the local settlements, rivers, and mountains that were most familiar to the descendant groups. This line of evidence suggests that almost every group had resided in its contact-period homeland since what was literally, for them, “time immemorial.”

The situation is similar with respect to references to socio-cultural geography. Other ethnolinguistic groups were mentioned in the myths much less frequently than places, but those groups that were mentioned were generally the narrators' neighbors at the time of historic contact. Some of these ethnic groups would have been unknown to the narrators' ancestors at any substantially earlier period of prehistory. For example, a Hupa myth referred to the neighboring Shasta, Karok, Yurok, Tolowa, and Eel River Athapaskans (Goddard 1904:129). The first three, non-Athapaskan groups, presumably would have been unknown to the ancestors of the Hupa before the latter entered northwestern California, which according to one estimate may have happened as late as about A.D. 1300 (Foster 1996:75). Although it is clear that

ethnolinguistic groups moved around California throughout prehistory, that they expanded their territories or saw them shrink, and that some groups became extinct, little or no memory of such events was preserved in traditional narratives. Memories were short enough, and the contents of the myths were fluid enough, that the circumstances of the recent prehistoric past could credibly be projected back to the beginning of the world.

Memories of major environmental changes potentially offer one of the best tools for evaluating the preservation of authentic prehistoric memories within oral traditions. A wide variety of infrequent and often catastrophic natural phenomena seem to be depicted in Native California myths and legends. However, in most cases it is not possible to convincingly match these references with specific prehistoric events. Earthquakes, droughts, severe storms, floods, and wildfires were mentioned in traditional narratives, but usually all that can legitimately be inferred from such a reference is that the narrator was aware of the generic phenomenon, not of a specific, potentially datable prehistoric event.

Two of the more promising possibilities for matching narratives with environmental events concern volcanic eruptions and hydrological changes. These phenomena are geographically specific, and they are potentially datable in the geological record. Holocene volcanism occurred in several parts of the state, including the Cascade Range, the eastern Sierra region, and the Mojave Desert. However, no persuasive matches have been proposed between prehistoric Californian volcanic events and traditional narratives.

The most important hydrological change during California's human prehistory was the rise in sea level during terminal Pleistocene and early Holocene times. Not surprisingly, given the great time depth involved, the changes associated with this set of events were not remembered. For instance, the existence of San Diego Bay, created after about 8000 B.P., was projected by the Kumeyaay back into mythic times (Laylander 2004a:80; Masters 1988), and Patwin legendary accounts of the formation of San Francisco Bay by a catastrophic earthquake do not match the geological facts (Powers 1976:448).

On the other hand, on a much shorter time scale, genuine memories of prehistoric Lake Cahuilla seem to have been preserved in oral traditions across about 200 to 300 years (Laylander 1997, 2004b). Lake Cahuilla is probably the best case in California of the remembering of a set of events and conditions that antedated the ethnographic present.

Additional indicators for ethnographic time depth are provided by the ways in which oral narratives, particularly myths, were shared among different ethno-linguistic groups. If myths tended to be highly stable within cultures, they would have been passed down primarily along the main lines of cultural descent, which were usually marked by linguistic affiliations. On the other hand, if myths tended to be relatively unstable, they might commonly be found to have diffused across linguistic lines and to have diverged in content between groups that shared a common cultural descent.

The relative roles of retention and diffusion in creating the observed geographical patterns of sharing in myths are sometimes difficult to disentangle. More often than not, groups that were neighbors at the time of contact were also linguistic kin to each other. However, it is possible to compare the relative strength of the similarities that were shared with kin and with non-kin neighbors (e.g., Laylander 2001:162-164). Additionally, linguistic relatives sometimes did become geographically separated from each other, and such cases provide important clues to stability or change in their myths.

At least five general, hierarchical levels of linguistic affiliation can be distinguished on a continuum of ascending closeness: stock, family, branch, language, and dialect. In a loose way, these imply five different time depths of common cultural heritage. The degree to which myths, or elements of myths, were shared by groups that were related to each other at these various levels, over and above what would be expected merely on the basis of their recent geographical proximity, indicates something about the antiquity and stability of the myths within the cultures.

Comparative studies are currently in progress, but some tentative conclusions are apparent. A substantial number of mythic elements have continent-wide distributions (Thompson 1929). The wide geographical ranges of these myths attest either to an extremely old conserved heritage, or else, more plausibly, to an active process of diffusion, but one that was accompanied by sufficient stability in the contents of myths so that recognizable similarities were preserved even while the myths travelled across distances of thousands of miles. There seem to be no significant patterns of enhanced sharing of myths based on common membership in a linguistic stock, a family, or a branch. There is some evidence for significant sharing based on affiliation at the lower levels of language and of dialect. However, sharing a common language or even a common dialect did not always assure uniformity or override the factor of geographical proximity. One example of geography taking precedence over

language-level affiliation comes from the notable divergence between the myths of the Mono-speaking Owens Valley Paiute and Monache, and the considerable degree of assimilation of Monache myths to adjacent Yokuts and Miwok patterns (Gifford 1923; Steward 1936). Another and even more striking example of language-level divergence comes from just beyond the boundaries of California, in the dissimilarities between Upland Yuman (Yavapai, Walapai, and Havasupai) traditions in western Arizona and Paipai traditions in northern Baja California (Laylander 2001:163). In general, this line of evidence hints at an appreciable degree of stability in the contents of myths when they are considered on a time scale on the order of a few centuries, corresponding to the possession of a shared language or dialect, but not on a time scale of a millennium or more, represented by higher-level linguistic affiliations.

In conclusion, for California prehistorians to get the maximum evidential value out of oral traditions in particular and ethnographic testimony in general, it is essential to be clear about the time depth that was represented by collective memories and by cultural continuities. Two "myths" about myths need to be set aside.

The first myth, suggested by highly conservative early anthropologists such as Robert H. Lowie (1917) and more recently favored by postmodernism, is that traditional narratives are almost entirely phenomena of the present and do not preserve any reliable information about the prehistoric past. On the contrary, the evidence indicates that the most recent prehistoric past, lying several generations behind the consultants' own lifetimes, was often remembered. Traditional narratives rooted in that past have been useful in reconstructing the latest prehistoric lifeways, particularly in the realms of cultural values and social relationships, which were otherwise not well attested (e.g. Blackburn 1975).

The second myth is that traditional narratives were extremely conservative, and that they preserved reliable information about very remote periods of prehistory (e.g., Deloria 1995; Echo-Hawk 2000; Merriam 1910:15). Claims for chains of factual information stretching back many centuries, or even many millennia, have sometimes been based upon a form of religious fundamentalism. As such, they are not open to refutation by scientific evidence, but they will also carry little or no weight for nonbelievers. However, similar claims have also been taken seriously by some scholars and bureaucrats, as in the well-known Kennewick Man case in Washington state. Any proposals for cultural memory and stability in aboriginal

California on a similar time scale (e.g., Shipek 1986) would appear to be without scientific merit. Even much more moderate proposals, for instance concerning the preservation of memories of the medieval climatic anomaly (Jones et al. 1999; Kowta 2001), should probably be taken with a strong dose of skepticism.

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