

# The Yokut Indians

by Mary Ann Brensel

The Yokut Indians lived in the part of California that we now call the Central Valley. Some of the early settlers called it the *Valle de los Tulares*, which means the *Valley of the Tules*. The valley was given this name because of the tules that grew on the shores of rivers and lakes.

The Yokuts lived in tribes. Each tribe had several villages with about 500 people in each group. Each tribe had a name, a language, and a territory where the people lived. The River Yokuts lived in Tulare County. They had lived in this area for hundreds of years. Tribal government was the same among all the tribes. Each tribe's language was a little different, but tribes could communicate. The Yokuts visited, traded, and married among the different villages.

All tribes lived near water. Streams and rivers were important, especially for hunting and fishing. Animals came to drink water, and that meant more food for the tribe to eat. Also, transportation by boat was often easier than walking long distances.

Yokut villages and hunting grounds had boundaries, but no fences. Mountains, rivers, and other landmarks usually marked the tribe's boundaries. The size of a tribe's territory had to be large enough to supply food to every person in the tribe.

Most of the Yokuts were friendly and peaceful. They were tall and strong with straight black hair and brown skin. The Yokuts lived a simple life and depended on the land for food, clothes, and shelter.

Yokut homes were one room like a tent. They were usually made of tules that grew in the swampy areas around Tulare Lake. There was no furniture. People sat and slept on mats on the floor. The kitchen was outside.

Tribal life was similar in each Yokut village. The men hunted and fished, and the women took care of the children, gathered nuts and seeds, and prepared the food. During their early childhood, the children stayed close to their mothers. When they were older, the boys were taught to hunt by their fathers. The mothers taught their daughters basketry and cooking. Children and adults also

enjoyed playing games. There was so much food available that the people could live easily without working too hard.

The old people in the Yokut tribe told stories to teach the children the tribe's values and beliefs. Music and dance were an important part of all their celebrations and special occasions. The Lonewis ceremony honored those who had died each year.

The Yokuts used beads as money to trade with other California Indian tribes. They also traded animal skins and baskets. They traveled by foot, raft, or boat to reach these other tribes.

After California became a state in 1850, settlers from other states moved into the area. Settlers from the countries of Germany, Scotland, and Ireland moved here, too. Growth happened so fast that the River Yokuts had no time to prepare.

At first the Yokuts asked the settlers in the Central Valley to leave, but they wouldn't. Some Yokuts fought the settlers, but they still did not leave. Soon the settlers had houses made of wood and bricks. Settlers needed cows and horses for food and transportation. Cows and horses ate up much of the native grasses. Wild animals had less to eat. The Yokuts had less to eat, too.

Settlers put up fences for their cows and horses. Coyotes, foxes, deer, and other wild animals were no longer free to roam. Sometimes settlers killed the wild animals for no reason and wasted the meat.

The Yokuts lost their land and their food supply. The United States government created the Tule River Indian Reservation for the Yokuts to live on. They could no longer hunt or gather acorns anywhere they liked.

Today there are cities and villages where Yokut hunting grounds once were. Dams stop the rivers that used to flow into Tulare Lake. There are few large wild animals outside the mountains.

About 400,000 people live in Tulare County. Most of them speak English, and many speak Spanish. Some people speak both languages. Sadly, only 78 people in all of California speak the Yokut language now.

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## **TRIBAL GOVERNMENT**

Every tribe had two leaders: the Head Chief and the Winatun. These two leaders ruled over the four or five villages that made up the tribe. The Head Chief lived in the largest tribal village. The Winatun was the messenger for the tribe.

In each village, a Village Chief collected taxes and acted as a judge. Yokuts living in the village paid the Village Chief in seeds, fruit, fish, and animals. Every two weeks the Head Chief visited the villages to collect his share of the food. If anyone in a village did something bad, the Head Chief made sure he was punished.

The Winatun met all travelers coming into a village. They told the travelers news and took them to the Chief. When the visit was over, the Winatun took them back out of the village.

## **COMMUNICATION**

Each Yokut tribe spoke its own language. They could also speak and understand the language of the other Yokut tribes. The Yokuts used sign language mostly with strangers whose language they did not speak.

Symbols found in Yokut pictographs represented happenings, ideas, and emotions. The Yokuts also used smoke to communicate. If a stranger entered the tribe's territory, smoke signals provided a warning for the tribes.

## **MONEY & TRADE**

Yokuts traded with other tribes as far west as the Pacific Ocean and with the larger tribes east of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. They used special stone beads as well as abalone and Pismo clam shells as money when they traded with other Indian tribes. Deer skins, antelope skins, salt from native salt grass and baskets were also important trade items. The Yokuts traded these items for abalone shells, clam shells, soapstone, and cowrie shells. They also traded for

obsidian to make arrow heads from Indians on the east side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains.

## **HUNTING & FISHING**

Yokut men spent much of their time making hunting and fishing tools. Bows and arrows were built carefully to make them accurate. Young boys used a simple wooden arrow with the end sharpened to a point. With this arrow they could hunt small animals like birds and rabbits. Older boys and men made stone or bone points to put on their arrows. With them they could kill deer, antelope and other large game. The older men of the tribe taught the boys how to make their own weapons. They also taught them to aim correctly and how to fix broken weapons. Besides bows and arrows, the Yokut used spears, traps, and nets to catch and kill wild game and fish. The meat was shared with the tribe, and the skins of the animals were used to make clothes. The bones were used to make tools like awls and needles.

Snares were used to capture many different animals like elk, foxes, coyotes, raccoons, and pigeons. A twig or limb was bent down and fastened over a trail by a trigger. A loop made of waxed string or heavy cord was attached to the trigger. The loop was placed where the animal usually walked. When the animal came by, one of its feet would be caught in the loop. When the animal tried to get loose, the trigger released, and the animal was lifted off the ground.

Yokut hunters stalked deer and antelope to get close enough to shoot them. The men went into the sweat lodge before hunting to get rid of their scent. Then they quietly sneaked up on an animal until they got within shooting distance.

Once or twice a year, several tribes would meet in the area where the antelope lived. One or two of the men would hide in the tules near the antelope. Then they would lie on their backs and kick their feet around in the air to move the tules. The antelope would get curious and come closer to investigate. The other men would begin to circle around behind the antelope. Then the men in the grass would jump up and yell. The antelope would panic and try to run away, but the hunters surrounded them. Each family was allowed to kill one antelope.

If too many people tried to kill the antelope at the same time, the animals stampeded and escaped.

In the spring the Yokuts would move to the banks of Tulare Lake. There they would catch fish and many ducks, geese and other birds. They would make rafts out of the tules and spear fish through a hole in the middle of the rafts. The children would swim and play games in the water.

The Yokuts ate almost anything that moved, but they never ate coyote or grizzly bear because these animals were sacred to them. They caught crayfish in baited traps and gathered clams along the banks of the Kern River. The Yokuts even gathered grasshoppers in the summer and cooked them for a tasty treat.

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## **TRANSPORTATION**

Boats, rafts, and walking were the Yokuts' main forms of transportation. The boats and rafts were made from tules that grew near lakes and rivers. They were able to hold two to four people. The Yokuts made the boats in spring and early summer and built them upside-down. They dried and hardened the poles of the boat over a fire. That made the poles strong and practically waterproof. The boats were sometimes 50 feet long, 10 feet wide, and four feet deep.

## **FOOD**

The Yokuts ate a great variety of food. They had fish, birds, elk, deer, antelope, rabbit, grasses, nuts, berries, and seeds of all kinds. The seeds, nuts, and berries were gathered during spring and summer. Some were eaten fresh, and some were dried and stored for the winter. The Yokut women were in charge of gathering, preparing, and cooking the food.

The main food of the Yokuts was acorns. Each fall, Yokut women and children hiked to groves of oak trees in the foothills. They gathered the fallen acorns and put them in burden baskets. The women attached the burden baskets to their headbands and carried the acorns home.

Next they spread the acorns out in the sun to dry. When the acorns were dry, the Yokuts stored them in other baskets, sometimes for months. Later women and children cracked the acorns open with stones to take off the hard shells. Then they used stone bowls and pounding stones called mortars and pestles to grind the "insides" of the acorn into a wet powder called acorn meal. The women dug shallow holes in the ground and then lined them with grape leaves. Next they sifted the meal and put it in the holes. Then they poured boiling water over the meal several times to take the bitterness out. This was called leaching. After the meal was leached, it was left to dry.

As it dried, the meal formed a crust. It was easy to lift this layer from the hole. The women mixed some of this dried meal with water to make dough.

They patted the dough into cakes and put them on hot stones to bake acorn bread.

Yokut women also made acorn mush with the meal. They mixed it with water and cooked it in tightly woven baskets. The water was heated by dropping red-hot rocks into the baskets. When the water boiled, they stirred the mush constantly so the hot rocks would not burn through the bottom of the basket. Acorn meal is rich and nourishing. The Yokut people depended on the oak trees to give them acorns every year.

## **CLOTHING**

The Yokuts dressed in very simple clothes. Young children wore nothing at all except in the cold winter months. Then they would put on simple clothes made from rabbit and other animal skins. The women and older girls wore short skirts made out of the hides of deer, antelope, and rabbits. They also wove skirts from nettle, hemp, and milkweed fiber. Sometimes the women wove beads into their skirts or put long feathers around them.

The men wore a breechcloth made from soft deerskin. They tied it around their waist and folded it over in front of them. Each breechcloth was about four feet long. The men painted it with designs that were symbols of the tribe or family.

Both men and women wore narrow headbands to hold their hair away from their faces. The headbands were decorated with seeds and feathers. Necklaces, earrings, and armbands were made of seeds and feathers, too.

In the winter, all the Yokuts wore fur blankets around their shoulders. They used the skins of mountain lions, deer, rabbits, and wild cats to make these warm blankets. Sometimes they made blankets out of feathers from swans, geese, pelicans, and ducks. They only wore these feather blankets when it was pouring down rain. The blankets were held together with a pointed stick or a long feather from a goose, pelican, or swan. They never used a feather from an eagle or a condor because these birds were sacred to them.

The Yokuts went barefoot most of the time. They did not need shoes because they lived in grassy areas and it was only cold in the winter. During very cold weather, they wrapped animal skins around their feet to keep them warm.

## **SHELTER**

In the San Joaquin Valley, the Yokuts built different types of shelters. The permanent pole house was very common. Some were built for just one family. Others were made for up to 10 families. To make a pole house, the Yokuts started by digging a circular hole into the ground for a floor. The circle for a single family was usually 12 to 15 feet across and was dug about two feet into the ground. The framework for the house was made out of poles about two inches thick. The poles were set into the ground around the inside edge of the hole. Then other poles were tied to the standing poles. The tips of the standing poles were pulled together at the top and bent down and tied to poles opposite them. The houses had a circular opening at the top to allow smoke to escape from a fire inside. Each house had a low rectangular door that faced south.

Mats of tules were laid over the pole frame. Water was added to some of the loose dirt that had been dug out to form the floor. Then it was thrown on top of the tule mats and beaten down with sticks. When the mud dried, it formed a tight, strong covering over the tule mats and poles. Over time, wild grasses grew on the houses' mud covering, and they blended into their surroundings. It seemed to early travelers in the San Joaquin Valley that Yokuts came running out of the ground like rabbits from burrows.

The Yokuts also built other types of shelters. The long tule mat-covered community house was the largest. It was sometimes 300 feet long and from the outside looked like a long tent.

Many families might live in the community house. Sometimes the people of an entire village would live together in such a house. The house had a steep roof and straight sides made of poles. Small cut-off branches were left on the poles so they could be used as hooks. Strings of dried meat, acorns, fish, personal belongings, camping equipment, and bows and arrows were hung from them. The north wall of the house was completely covered with several layers of tule mats. The doorways were along the south side. There were no walls inside the house to make rooms, but each family had its own space, its own door, and its own fire circle.



On the Upper Tule River, some Yokuts built their winter houses from poles tied together at the top and covered with tule mats. A hole was left at the top so that smoke could escape. The houses were placed in very straight rows and looked like the teepees of the Plains Indians.

When the Yokuts were traveling or in temporary camps, they built smaller and less permanent houses or shelters. Some were just windbreaks made of brush or tules. Shade roofs were built in the areas where the women cooked food to provide shelter from the weather. They were not permanent shelters but often were used as a sleeping place for families at food-gathering camps. These shelters had domed roofs made of brush and had no walls.

A larger shelter, a grinding booth, was built over large bedrock mortars. The mortars were too heavy and big to move, so the women went there to grind their acorns into meal. The shelter made everyday grinding possible even if there was bad weather.

The Yokuts believed that it was good to wash their bodies. They swam often and bathed in the river, and they built sweat lodges in each village. Only men and boys of the tribe were allowed to go into the sweat lodges. Most sweat lodges were small, so fires quickly heated up the inside. Yokut tribes who lived in the foothills had sweat lodges that were dome-shaped. Sweat lodges were about 18 feet across and about 8 feet tall in the center. There was no smoke hole, so the smoke left the lodge through the door that was left uncovered. Men and boys sometimes slept in the sweat lodges if their own homes were too crowded.

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## **CHILDHOOD**

New parents carefully watched their tiny babies to make sure they stayed warm and dry. Usually a baby was strapped into a cradle and tied to the mother's back so she could have the baby with her while she worked.

Children were taught good behavior, traditions, and tribal rules from the time they were babies. Young children were punished lightly, but older children were punished more if they did not follow the rules.

Fathers made their sons small bows and arrows so the boys could improve their hunting skills. They practiced shooting at frogs or chipmunks. When a boy killed his first animal, he was not allowed to touch or eat it. Others carried the animal home, and the people in the village cooked and ate it. This tradition taught boys that they should always share food with the tribe.

Mothers taught their daughters how to cook and make baskets. When girls played together, they sometimes played with dolls made of tules or had contests to see who could make a basket the fastest.

## **BASKETRY**

Yokut women made beautiful baskets of all shapes and sizes. Baskets were used for gathering and storing food, for carrying babies, and even for hauling water. Some baskets were so tightly woven that not a drop of water would leak from them. The Yokut women wove interesting designs into the baskets. The design used most often was the rattlesnake pattern. Sometimes they also wove designs of quail, geese, trees, the sun, the moon, and the stars into baskets. The most often used colors were black, white, tan, and red.

The baskets were made from coiled tule reeds that grew near rivers and lakes. The Yokut women could only use reeds that were no more than one year old because older reeds would not bend as well. The women began by digging up tule roots with a pointed digging stick. Then they split the roots into three different pieces equal in size and length. Next they scraped the root splits smooth. The shorter lengths were twisted together to start the coil for the basket.

Once the coil was long enough, the coiling process continued until the sides were built up as high as needed. Some of the different baskets the Yokut women made were berry-gathering baskets, burden baskets, and ceremonial baskets.

The berry-gathering basket was a small basket. It was only five inches wide and eight to nine inches deep. It had a buckskin handle to make it easier to carry. It hung around the neck and usually rested on the woman's back. When it was not berry picking season, the basket hung in the house to hold odds and ends.

The burden basket was used for gathering acorns and other materials. It was shaped like a cone and was about three feet long and two feet across the mouth of the basket. This sturdy basket could hold up to 150 pounds of acorns. It attached to the woman's headband and was carried on her back when it was full.

One of the ceremonial baskets the Yokut women made was the Rattlesnake basket. These baskets were filled with rattlesnakes and used during the Rattlesnake Dance in the spring.

## **GAMES**

Yokut adults and children liked to play many different games. One favorite game was called the hand game. Each team started with a row of 10-12 sticks. One team passed two small sticks behind them – one was black and one was white. Then all the members of the team held their hands in front of them. The other team had to guess which person was hiding the black stick in his hand. If they guessed right, they got to keep the other team's stick. The game was over when one team had all of the other team's sticks.

Shinny was another game the Yokuts liked to play. They used a ball made of an oak burl that was about the size of a tennis ball. They placed the ball on a small mound in the middle of the field. Then each team tried to get the ball into their own goal by hitting it with sticks. It was a very rough game.

A game that the men and older boys liked to play was the pole and hoop game. The purpose of the game was to improve their hunting skills. Two people rolled a hoop back and forth between themselves. As the hoop rolled by, men

and boys on the side tried to throw their poles through the hoop. Sometimes the game was played with spears.

One of the favorite games played by the Yokut children was called Bear. One child was the bear, and the other children ran from him. When someone was tagged, that person became a bear and helped tag other people. This continued until all the children had been tagged. The last child tagged was the bear for the next game.

## **MUSIC & DANCE**

Singing and dancing were important parts of the Yokuts' everyday life. They changed songs when they played games. Women sang to their babies while they worked. The men sang and danced when they performed ceremonial dances such as the Rainmaking Ceremony and the Rattlesnake Dance. During the Rainmaking Ceremony, the rainmaker wore a feathered skirt and headdress. He painted his body black and decorated himself with white feathers. He danced around a fire and burned herbs as he sang his magic songs.

The Rattlesnake Dance was performed in the spring. The Yokuts hoped it would keep them safe from rattlesnakes as they collected seeds and berries during the summer. They would not kill a rattlesnake because they believed that it was the helper of the Keeper of the Hereafter. The Yokuts believed that the rattlesnake's business was to spy on them and report anyone who broke the rules of the tribe.

The Yokuts used very few musical instruments. The most popular rhythm instrument was the clapper. Rattles were also used as rhythm instruments. Yokuts used few, if any, drums. They beat two sticks together or beat on a log with a stick to keep time.

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## BELIEFS

Yokuts believed in the power of spirits or gods in nature. They thought it was important not to make a spirit angry. They believed that birds and animals had spiritual power. They felt that the grizzly bear was an evil spirit and should not be killed. They thought that the eagle was a powerful spirit for good. Eagle feathers were very important religious objects.

Each member of the tribe had the spirit of an animal as a personal guardian, like what some people today call a “guardian angel.” If a Yokut had a deer as guardian, he could never kill a deer or eat deer meat.

The Yokuts believed in life after death. They were respectful of death and were afraid to make a dead person angry. When someone died, the family was not allowed to say that person’s name out loud. Since it was easy to accidentally say the dead person’s name, the name was usually given to a new baby. That way the name could be said out loud and the dead person would not become angry.

A member of the tribe called a shaman was in charge of the religious ceremonies and beliefs. The Yokuts believed he could talk to the spirit-gods. His job was to cure sick people and scare off evil spirits. He also spoke to the gods and told them what the tribe needed.

# Myths and Legends

compiled by Mary Ann Brensel

## A Yokut California Creation Story

A great flood occurred upon Earth long, long ago. While Earth was still covered with water, there were no living creatures upon the land. Then out of the sky one day glided an enormous Eagle with a black Crow riding upon its back, searching for a place to light.

Around and around Eagle flew until he discovered a projecting tree stump, or what appeared to be a stump, upon which he landed to rest. There on the flat surface was a home at last, a home which was large enough for Eagle and Crow to roost upon. From there, they surveyed the greenish gray water as far as they could see. The sky was a brilliant bright blue with a few white, drifting clouds occasionally swirled by a passing breeze. All seemed serene to Eagle and Crow.

Small fish were visible below the water, sometimes leaping out of the sea playfully. Hunger caused Eagle and Crow to swoop down, catching a meal for themselves from time to time. Soon a game developed between the two birds to see which one would be the winner in the fish-catching contest. Upon their return to the stump, however, they always shared their fish.

The two birds often flew in opposite directions exploring for land, and because of Eagle's great size and wingspan, he soared to great heights and surveyed widely. But no land did they find, and no other flying creatures did they see. Between themselves they wondered, "How can we possibly think of a way to make land? We know we cannot dive deep enough to find dirt, and the fish are of no help except to provide food." Day after day, these scenes were repeated as the birds explored in search of land and wondered how to create land.

One morning, much to their surprise, a Duck was swimming around and around their stump. Occasionally, it dived deep in the water and rose to the surface chewing small fish. One time, Duck emerged with more mud than fish in its mouth.

Eagle and Crow talked excitedly about this. "Can Duck possibly bring up enough mud for us to build land?" they wondered. How could they let Duck know that mud was what they needed most?

An idea occurred to Eagle, which he bird-talked to Crow. "If we supply fish for Duck, maybe he will bring up more mud than fish." Through trial and error, the two birds caught fish for Duck, placing them at the edge of the stump, until Duck learned that the fish were for him in exchange for mud. When Duck appeared on the surface after a deep dive, Eagle and Crow brushed off the mud from Duck's bill and his body with their wings. Progress was slow but steady.

Gradually, Eagle had a pile of mud on his side of the stump, and Crow had a similar pile on his side. Each placed fish on his own side for Duck, who now responded by carrying more and more mud to Eagle and Crow. This became a great game of fish-and-mud exchange.

Duck worked very hard, and consequently, he was always hungry. The birds were surprised at how large each one's mud pile grew every day. In bird talk they said, "Duck is helping us to make a new world. This we will share equally."

Occasionally, Eagle and Crow flew toward the horizon, exploring for any new signs of land. They always returned with nothing new to report; however, they did notice a slight lowering of water around the tree stump. "Surely the flood must be coming to an end," Crow and Eagle agreed.

Each day they watched for a change in the waterline. Each day their piles of mud seemed higher and higher. Faithful Duck kept up his good work as Eagle and Crow caught fish for him and scraped mud from him for each side of the new world.

One day, Eagle flew high and far in search of dry land and did not return until late. The sun had set and darkness had enveloped his world on the stump. The next morning to Eagle's great surprise, his pile of mud had grown much higher. After looming across at Crow's mud pile, however, Eagle was astounded to see that Crow had given himself twice as much mud while Eagle was away. "Is this your idea of sharing the new world equally?" shouted Eagle to Crow.

Of course, they quarreled all that day and the next over Crow's unfairness. The following day, however, they went back to work making their new land. Eagle

decided that he must catch up. He caught two fish for Duck and put them in his usual place. Duck responded by bringing up mud twice to Eagle in exchange for his two fish. All three animals worked very hard for many, many moons.

Gradually, Eagle's half of the new world became taller and taller, much taller than Crow's half, even though Crow seemed to work just as hard as Eagle. Duck was faithful to his task, never tiring in his effort to supply mud. Of course, Duck continued to give Eagle twice as much mud for his two fish. Crow never seemed to notice that Eagle's half of the new world was growing larger than his half.

One morning as the sun rose brightly the two birds looked down through the water and saw what appeared to be land. "So that is where Duck finds the mud," they said. They were pleased to see that the water was subsiding. How they hoped that soon they would be high and dry on their new world!

But all was not so easy, for that very night lightning flashed across the waters, and thunder rolled and rolled from one horizon to the other followed by a heavy, drenching rain. Eagle and Crow sought shelter in holes they dug into the sides of their mud piles. All night long the rain continued to fall, washing away much of the new world into the sea.

When the rain stopped and the sun rose, Eagle and Crow looked out upon the waters and saw an arc of many colors reaching from one edge of the horizon across the sky to the other horizon. This brilliant display held their eyes in wonderment. What did it mean? They marveled at how long the colors lingered in the sky. Eagle flew toward the scene for a close look, returning when the arc disappeared.

In bird talk, Eagle and Crow decided that the storm of the night before must have been a clearing shower. They began their land-building project again, hoping that Duck would resume his work as mud-carrier. Soon the sun's rays burned strong and hot, drying the mud until it was hard. Duck appeared, and the team of three continued to build the two halves of the new world.

Day by day, the waters subsided, and new land began to show above the waterline. Eagle's half emerged taller and taller and was hard-packed by the hot sun. Crow's share of the new world was still great, but it never became as large as Eagle's half of the new world.



In retelling this creation story, Yokut tribal historians always claim that Eagle's half became the mighty Sierra Nevada Mountains. They also tell how Crow's half became known as the Coast Mountain Range.

Yokut historians end their tale by saying that people everywhere honor the brave and strong Eagle, while Crow is accorded a lesser place because of his unfair disposition displayed during the creation of the new world by Eagle and Crow.

From *Myths and Legends of California and the Old Southwest*, compiled and edited by Katharine Berry Judson, 1912. Glenn Welker  
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### **The Lizard Hand**

It was Coyote who brought it about that people die. He made it thus because our hands are not closed like his. He wanted our hands to be like his, but Lizard said to him, "No. They must have my hand." He had five fingers, and Coyote had only a fist.

Coyote replied, "Well, then they will have to die." That is how it came to be that humans must experience death.

From Kroeber, University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, iv, 231, No. 38.

## A Yokut Prayer

My words are tied in one  
With the great mountains,  
With the great rocks,  
With the great trees,  
In one with my body  
And my heart.

You all do help me  
With supernatural power.  
And you, Day!  
And you, Night!  
All of you See me  
One with this world!

From *The Tache-Yokuts: Indians of the San Joaquin Valley*, written by  
Marjorie W. Cummins, Pioneer Publishing, Fresno, CA  
<http://wwN.sacred-texts.com/nam/calscclsc18.htm>

## The Origin of Fire

The people in the foothills had no fire. Only to the west in the plains was there a man who had fire, and he had it all. Now one day as the man slept, Antelope, selected for his swiftness, was sent to steal the fire. He took the fire and fled. Antelope was still in sight of the place from which he had started when a rain came and put out the fire. Then others tried to bring it. The last was Jackrabbit. After he had stolen the fire, he hid in a thick bush. There he burrowed and crouched over the fire, holding it in his hands under his belly. From this the palms of his hands are black. When he stole the fire, it was not extinguished, and so he obtained it for the people.

<http://WNW.sacred-texts.com/nam/calscclsc18.htm>

## Why Animals Are the Way They Are

The birds and animals from the foothills went to war with the animals of the lake below. With the warriors from the mountains was Coyote. He had a large quiver full of arrows. In the morning he got up, knotted his hair behind, took his bow, and called to all, "Get up, get up, or I will kill you. I am ready to go to war."

All the way down to the plains Coyote led the way and hurried the others. Alongside him was Hummingbird, and he and Coyote were the leaders. There were also three Owls with the party. One of these carried an inexhaustible supply of arrow points in his mouth, another carried sinew, and a third carried feathers for arrow shafts. As the arrows became used during the fight, the Owls produced these materials and kept the animals supplied. After a long fight, the people from the mountains beat those of the plains.

But there were two animals they could not kill — Fish and Turtle. One of these was slippery, the other was hard, and the arrows glanced off their backs. Then Coyote broke his leg, took out the bone, stuck it into the end of his arrow, and shot. He struck the Fish in the back of its neck and killed it. Then he shot at the Turtle and struck it in its head and killed it.

Now Eagle, who was the chief of all, sent off the victorious mountain animals. He said, "You cannot live here any longer. You must go away. Where do you want to go?"

Coyote said, "Wishawishawisha! Wishawishawisha! Wishawishawisha! I do not want to go."

Hummingbird agreed with him.

Eagle said, "Well, what are you going to become? What will you be? I am going to fly high up in the air and live on squirrels and sometimes on deer."

Dog said, "I will stay with people and be their friend. I will follow them, and perhaps I will get something to eat in that way."

Buzzard said, "When something dies, I will smell it. I will go there and eat it."

Crow said, "When I see something lying dead, I will peck its eyes."

Coyote said, "I will go about killing grasshoppers. That is how I will live."

Hummingbird hummed, "I will go to the flowers and get my food from them.

Condor added, "I will not stay here. I will go far off into the mountains. Perhaps I will find something there."

Woodpecker said, "I will get acorns and make holes in the trees."

Bluejay chirped, "I am going to make trees grow over the hills. I will work."

Rat said, "I will go where there are old trees and make my house in them.

Mouse squeaked, "I will run here and there and everywhere: I shall have holes, and perhaps I can live in that way."

Trout added finally, "I will live in the water, and perhaps I can find something to eat there."

That was the time they stopped being like us and scattered.

From McClurg, A.C. *Myths and Legends of California*, 1912.

[http://www.archive.org/stream/mythsandlegends00judsgoog/mythsandlegends00judsgoog\\_djvu.txt](http://www.archive.org/stream/mythsandlegends00judsgoog/mythsandlegends00judsgoog_djvu.txt)