



Pre-Columbian People

OF CALIFORNIA

SHAMAN STORYTELLERS



HOUSES
THAT
SWEAT



WHERE TO
PUT A WEIR



IN PARTNERSHIP WITH
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Meet the California Indians

Redwood forests and ocean coasts. River valleys, towering mountains, and dusty deserts. California has all of these landscapes – and more. Today, people might choose to live in such places because they like mountain views or the sound of waves. But in the past, the places where people lived played a role in *how* they lived: what types of homes they built, the food they ate, even what they did for fun. In turn, how people lived had an effect on their environment.

Before the Spanish came to California in 1769, about 300,000 native Californians lived there. Different groups were spread out all over. Sometimes they came together to trade, or exchange, goods or food. But land and water often served as walls that kept people apart. That's why the many different groups of California Indians spoke at least 90 different languages! But these groups still had things in common. For example, almost all of them could easily find food. So, most groups were hunter-gatherers. Since they had to work hard to get food, most groups stayed in one place. They had more time to make goods and build the collections of stories that taught young people their ways of life.

How did the California Indians live with the land? How did they change it to meet their needs? Read on to find out how geography played a role in the culture, or ways of life, of California's native people.



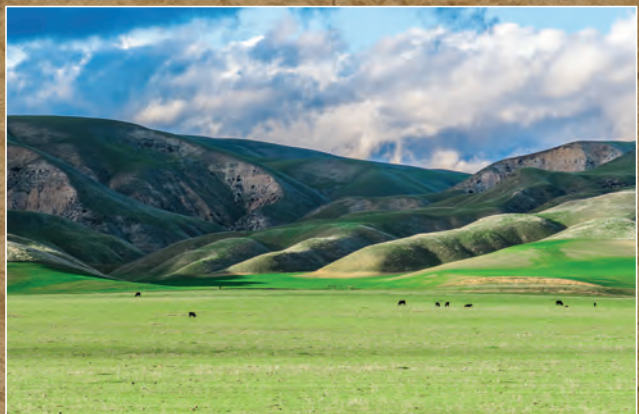


◀ **REDWOOD FORESTS** were a big part of the Northern Coastal Region. These trees provided wood to make homes, canoes, and tools. People like the Wiyot and Yurok settled along the Pacific

coast, by rivers, or near streams. For meat, they hunted deer and elk or fished for salmon. This wet, green environment also overflowed with wild plants. The people gathered them for food.

▶ **IN THE CENTRAL** Valley and Mountains, people of the same group might have lived very different lives, depending on where they settled. For example, some Maidu people lived in valley areas. The ground there was soft and open. These Maidu built large

homes covered with earth, where many families stayed. Higher in the mountains, the ground was harder, and there were more trees. The Maidu there built more basic shelters of bark or brush.



◀ **IN THE SOUTHERN** Coastal Region, the climate was warmer and drier. With less rain, not as many huge trees grew. So California Indians like the Gabrielino

used less wood when building their homes. They put wooden poles together to make a frame. The frame gave the house its shape. Then walls and a

roof were added by covering the frame with materials that were easy to find, like dried grass or reeds.



▲ **WOOD** was harder to find in the hot, dry desert plains and canyons. But there was a lot of sand and clay. So desert people like the Cahuilla sometimes built homes of adobe, or mud bricks. Other

houses were basic shelters to keep people cool. They had tree branches for roofs, and no walls. Small groups stuck close to water sources, where most plants grew and small animals lived.

My California Home

Ever seen a home made of tree bark? If you were an early Californian living high in the mountains, your home might have had walls of bark. On the northern coast, you would have lived in a house made of wood planks. In the desert, your home may have been an open-sided shelter topped with brush or reeds. That's because people built homes with whatever was easy to find and plentiful. For example, huge redwood trees grow along the foggy, rainy northern coast. That made timber easy to find. In the hot, dry desert, few trees grow.

Food was also easier to find on the coast or near rivers, where people could fish, hunt, and gather plants. Many tribes stayed in the same place because life was good. One good place to live was the Santa

Barbara coast. Some settlements there had up to 1,000 people. In the deserts and mountains, people lived in smaller groups and moved around more. Sometimes groups would come together for a while. They might gather for an antelope hunt or to harvest pine nuts.

Although most California tribes were hunters and gatherers, a few also farmed. One of those groups was the Yuma (Quechan) people of the Colorado River valley. They grew corn, beans, melons, and other crops.

▼ **MOST CALIFORNIA**
Indian villages had *temescals*, or sweathouses. These buildings were centers of tribal social life.

Every evening, men got together in a sweathouse. During these meetings they might perform rituals or prepare

for a hunt. Men and boys often slept in the *temescals*, except when the weather was very warm.





Wiyot

▲ **THE NORTHWEST** part of California was full of huge redwood trees. So groups like the Wiyot built houses

using planks they cut from those trees. They used wedges to chop the planks from bigger logs.



Maidu

▲ **DIFFERENT MAIDU** groups lived in three separate environments: valleys, foothills, and mountains. The rocky land-

scape and climate made life harder for tribes in the foothills and high in the mountains. So their houses were more prim-

itive than Wiyot homes. These Maidu tribes used brush and slabs of bark to build basic shelters called lean-tos.

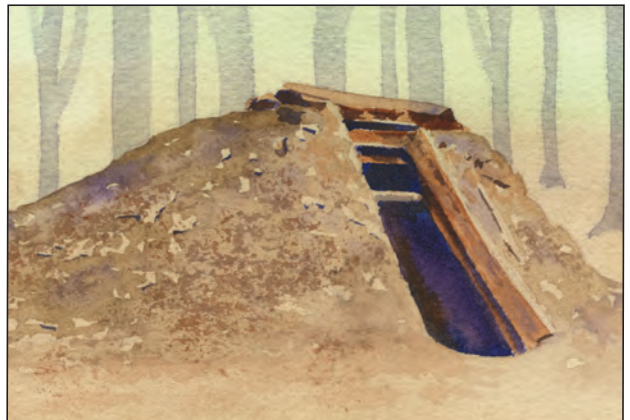


Yuma (Quechan)

▲ **THE YUMA** (Quechan) people lived in a desert climate. Some trees grew along the nearby

Colorado River. So, they cut logs to build basic frameworks for their homes. Then they covered the frame

with brush, sand, or woven twigs stuck together with clay or mud.



Nisenan

▲ **NEAR WHAT IS** now Sacramento, some Nisenan people lived in valleys. They built

homes by making a frame of wooden poles. On top of the frame, they added grass or

reeds. Then they covered the whole thing with a layer of earth.



Serrano

◀ **SERRANO FAMILIES** made round, dome-shaped houses out of willow branches. They covered the branches with bundles of reeds. There was a fire pit

in the middle of the house, but cooking was usually done outside. People mostly used their homes for sleeping and storing their things.

Religion in Daily Life

What if you lived at a time when people didn't read or write? How would adults teach you and other kids about your way of life? Early Californians spoke dozens of languages, but none of them wrote things down. They didn't even have written language. Instead of putting things in books, the people told stories. Some tales helped young people learn about their culture by explaining how a tribe's traditions started. Others told legends of great deeds. These legends were often passed on from one generation to the next over time.

Magic was a big part of tribal religion. People believed in supernatural forces.

For example, they thought magic made crops grow. They also believed magic made people sick – and that magic could cure them. Almost all California Indians had some form of shamanism, or spiritual healing. Shamans were important leaders in the tribe. (The word *shaman* means “one who knows.”) Both men and women could be shamans. They healed people and helped them with problems. Sometimes they dressed up like snakes or bears to tap into the power of those animals. Shamans also made up or learned spoken poems to tell people stories about their culture. They served as messengers between the real world and the spirit world. Even today, shamans play a role in tribal life.



▼ **TRIBES ON THE Colorado River** believed spirits talked to them in their dreams. They told long stories to explain their beliefs or remember things great ancestors had done. The Mojave creation myth said the Great Spirit created

the land and the people. When he died, his son made the rivers and plants. The Great Spirit's son also told the people how tribes should be set up. He gave certain people the power to do certain jobs, like shaman or warrior.

▲ **THE CALIFORNIA** Indians had two main religions. The *Kuksu* faith was big in northern and central California. People performed rituals and dances to ward off bad weather or bring game to hunters. Some played the role of a spirit such as the coyote or cougar. Dancers in tribes like the Pomo wore colorful feathers and body paint for rituals.



◀ **IN THE SOUTH, THE** Toloache religion was most common. Tribes like the *Luiseno* believed visions told people the future. In some ceremonies, a shaman put boys into a trance, and they had visions. These visions told them what their lives would be like or what jobs they would do.





▲ **NORTHWEST TRIBES**

like the Hupa had rituals to keep the world working as it should. Some rituals, such as the white-deerskin dance, lasted for days. During this dance, people showed off valuable things like white deerskins or stone daggers. Doing that helped them remind others of their place in society. The ceremony also helped keep the balance between people and the supernatural.

► **TODAY, MANY** California Indians want to keep the old traditions alive. So they learn the rituals and ceremonies of their ancestors, or early family members. In the past, native groups used such rituals to mark major events. They might honor the dead or celebrate gathering acorns in the fall. Shown here is a dancer in a Gabriolino ceremony called the Harvest Dance.



California Indians of the Northern Coastal Region

If you had lived as part of a northern California tribe, you might have grown up with redwood trees all around you. You would be close to the Pacific Ocean or a big river. Your dad and other men would hunt game and fish for salmon. You wouldn't go to school. Instead, you might help your mom gather berries, pine nuts, and acorns. The Pomo, who lived north of what is now San Francisco, even trimmed the branches



▲ **MANY TRIBES** of the Northern Coastal Region wove beautiful baskets. The Pomo people were especially well known for this type of work.

Their weavers were very talented. Sometimes they made their baskets even prettier by decorating them with feathers and shell beads.

▲ **MOST VILLAGES** had at least one sweat lodge. Men gathered in the sweat lodge to conduct rituals and hold meetings. Shamans were often men. But Yurok, Hupa, and Wiyot women could be shamans, too. For the Wiyot, sweat lodges weren't as important as they were to other tribes.



◀ **SALMON WAS** plentiful in rivers and streams of the north. So it was a very important food for the northern California Indians. One way they caught the fish was with weirs, like this Hupa man is doing. Weirs were sort of a cross between a fence and a net. Fishermen placed their weirs across part of a river to snag the fish.

of oak and pine trees. Doing that helped the trees grow more nuts.

The Yurok, Hupa, Karuk, and Wiyot tribes built houses out of redwood trees. They cut the wood into planks using tools of stone or bone. Many homes were shaped like a rectangle, with smoke holes in the roofs. Some houses were for one family. Others had room for many families to live together.



▲ In northwestern tribes like the Wiyot and Yurok, many women had chin

tattoos. Usually they were stripes going up and down. The lines could be

thin or wide, and different tribes had different patterns. The markings were thought to be a sign of maturity and wealth. Today, some women of northern coastal tribes get chin tattoos to keep the tradition alive.



▲ **THE YUROK** made canoes from hollowed-out redwood logs split in half. They used fire to burn away the wood inside, making a space for people to sit. Then they dug out more space with tools made of mussel shells. The Yurok paddled their canoes on rivers and in the ocean. Sometimes they sold the canoes to inland tribes. The Wiyot also used redwood canoes.

▼ **THE KARUK** people were a lot like their neighbors the Yurok, but they spoke a different language. They also had a different belief about people's names. Kids didn't get names until they were several years old, and people rarely said anyone's real name. It was actually bad manners to use a person's real name! And it was an insult to speak the name of a dead person. Instead, everyone had nicknames like "Old Man," "Coyote," or "Shoots Swiftly."

▲ **NORTHERN** coastal tribes spoke different languages but were alike in many ways. They made animal-skin clothing decorated with shells and feathers. They traded with other tribes,

buying and selling goods like canoes and baskets. For money, they used woodpecker scalps and special long seashells called dentalium shells. Being rich, or wealthy, was important to many

tribes. Wealthy people had a lot of shells. Land was another sign of wealth for tribes like the Yurok. Other groups thought everyone should share land.

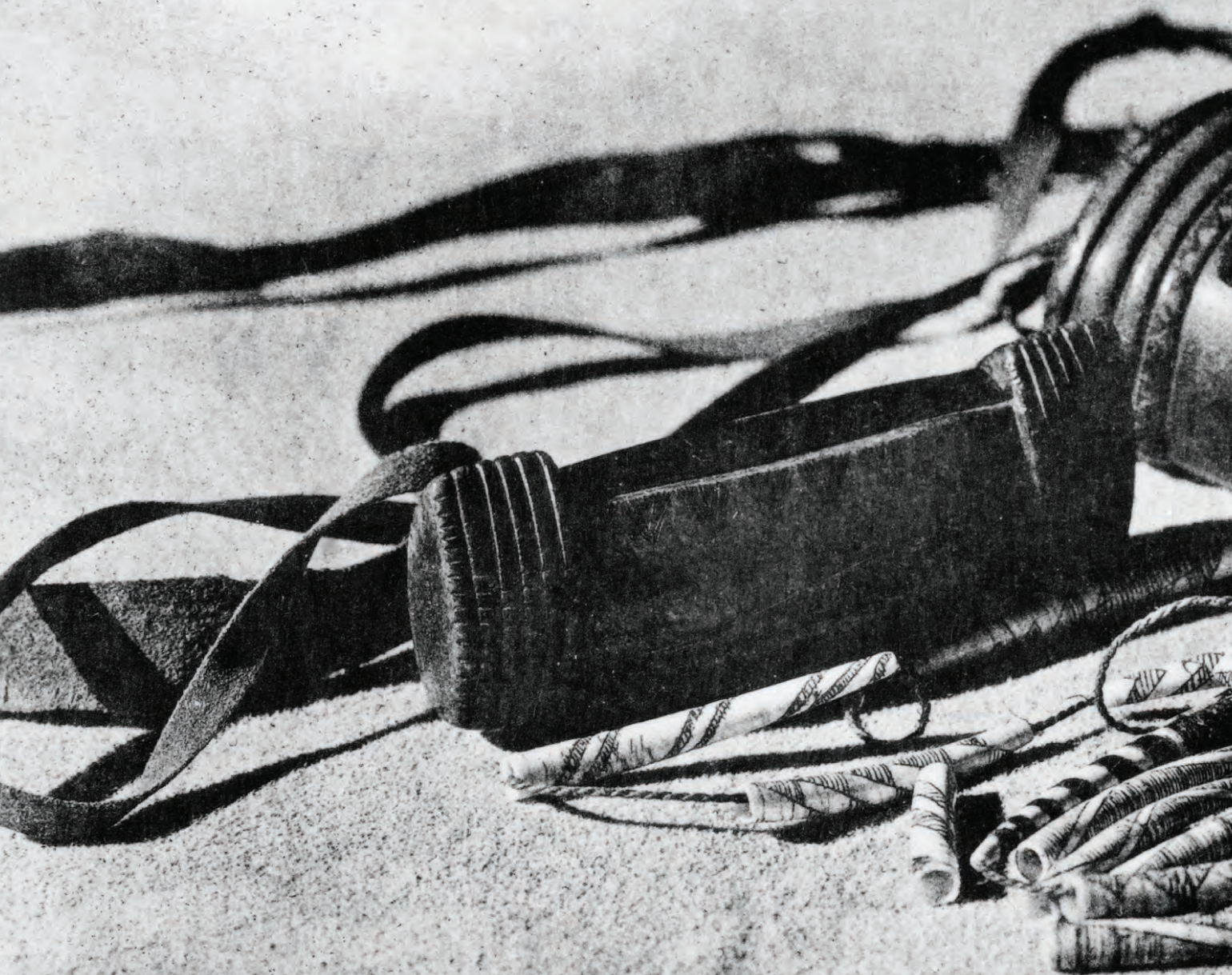


Which one of you is Old Man?



A Hupa Coin Purse

Most tribes along the northern coast used shells as money when they traded with other tribes. The shells came from a certain type of mollusk. A mollusk is a sea creature such as a clam or oyster. People made beads from the shells. They carried their shell money in coin purses like this leather one, made by the Hupa.





California Indians of the Southern Coastal Region

Your dad has an important job to do. He's the leader of your village, and everyone is getting ready for a big deer hunt. People from other villages are joining in, so your dad has to work with the other leaders to make plans. You listen carefully to how they make up their minds about who should do what. After all, one day it will be your job to be the leader.

Life was different for the Chumash,

Gabrielino, Luiseño, Kumeyaay, and other California Indians in the south. In the warm, dry climate, not as many big trees grew. People built houses by making a frame with thin poles of willow or other trees. They covered the frame with dried grass and other plants. Gabrielino people on islands off the coast used whale ribs instead of branches. They covered the ribs with brush or sea-lion skins.



► **SOME LUISEÑO** tribes lived on the coast, but most lived inland, in hills and valleys. These groups wanted to make sure that animals they hunted, like rabbits and deer, had enough to eat. So sometimes they

set fires to burn up brush. Their neighbors the Kumeyaay also did this. With the brush gone, grass and other plants grew better. The animals had more food – and the people had more animals to hunt.



▲ **THE TRIBES OF THE** Southern Coastal Region built houses differently than the tribes in the north did. The Kumeyaay, or Diegueño, lived near what is now San Diego. Like many of their neighbors, they used wooden poles to make a frame for a house. Then they covered the frame with dried grass or brush.

The turtles are restless again.



► **THE CHUMASH** were skilled artisans, meaning they were really good at making things with their hands. They made tools from wood and whalebone. Like their neighbors the Gabrielino, they also created carvings out of a soft stone

called soapstone. Chumash were expert basket-makers, too.



▲ SOUTHERN

California gets a lot of earthquakes. One Gabrielino legend explained why the Earth shook sometimes. The story says that Earth used to be covered by water, until a spirit called Qua-o-ar (Giver of Life) told seven giant turtles to hold up the land. He wanted the land to be out of the water, so things could grow. The turtles had to stand still, but sometimes they got tired and moved a little. And that's what made the Earth shake.



◀ **THE CHUMASH** lived in villages along the Pacific and on islands near what is now Santa Barbara. A leader headed the village government. This person worked within a system to decide what was best for the group. Chumash leaders mostly came from the same family. When one died, the son usually became leader. If a leader had no son, a daughter,

brother, or sister took over. When village leaders met, they might agree for their villages to work together, or cooperate. If a few villages decided to go on a deer hunt, the leaders might cooperate to decide what job each person did during the hunt. Shown here is Jimmie Addington, one of the leaders of today's Chumash tribe.

► SOUTHERN

coastal people ate a lot of fish and sea animals. They built canoes and rafts to travel in the ocean and on rivers. They hunted deer, rabbits, and other animals. For many tribes, the acorn was as important as it was in the North. Tribes regularly traded with each other, often using beads made of clam shells for money.



California Indians of the Central Valley and Mountains

Winter is coming. Are you ready to help your village prepare? Then grab that basket your mother made and go with her to dig up roots. Later, you can help her hang them up to dry so they can be used as food in the colder months. While you and your mom are gathering roots, your dad is out with his bow and arrow, hunting elk with other men. They might be gone for days, but when they return, everyone will feast.

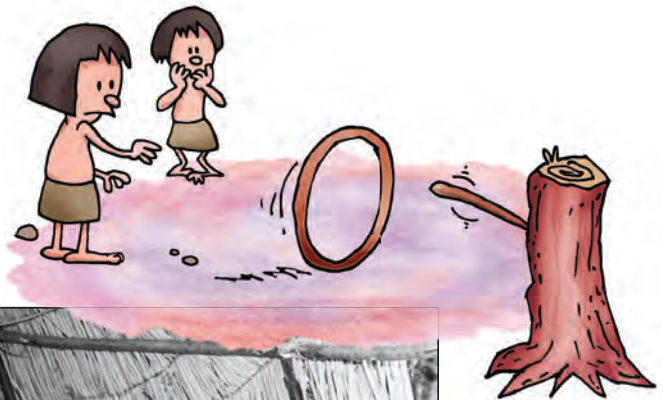
Like other California tribes, the Central Valley and Mountain groups had a smart

way of getting work done. Each adult had a certain job – like hunting or gathering food. Kids sometimes helped out, too. When different people do different jobs, it's called a division of labor. Some jobs needed an expert, or a person with a special skill. For example, a woman might be great at making acorn flour. She would specialize in that job. That means she did one job and learned to do it really well.

▼ **THE YOKUTS** people made houses out of wooden poles tied together. Men and women cooperated to

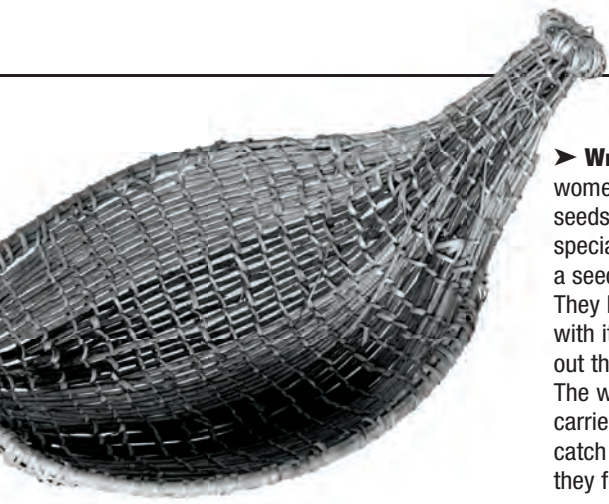
build a house. Men made the frames, and women wove mats out of tule (a type of reed found in central

California) to cover the house. Large houses could hold many families.



▲ **JUST LIKE KIDS** today, children in California Indian tribes loved to play. The games of Miwok and other tribal kids were a lot like the ones you play now, such as tag or hide-and-seek. Other games helped them learn valuable skills. For example, the ring-and-dart game taught hunting skills. A player rolled a wooden ring along the ground. As it rolled, another player tried to throw a five-foot dart through it. What games have helped you learn skills?





► **WHEN MAIDU** women harvested seeds, they used a special tool called a seed beater (left). They hit grasses with it to knock out the seeds. The women also carried baskets to catch the seeds as they fell.



◀ **IN SOME WAYS,** life for people in the Central Valley and Mountains was a lot like it was for most other tribes. They had plenty of animals to hunt, like deer and elk. They gathered nuts, berries, and plants to eat. The climate was mild, which made life easier. Tribes from this area included the Achumawi, Maidu, Miwok, Nisenan, and Yokuts. In fact, lots of people lived there. At one time, it might have been home to more than half of all California Indians. Today, this area produces much of the fruits, vegetables, and nuts grown in the U.S.

► **THE ACHUMAWI** lived in valleys high up in the mountains, where winters were long and cold. So their winter homes were dug into the ground. They used wooden poles to make a roof over

the hole. The poles were covered with grass or bark, and then a layer of earth. To get into the house, people climbed down a ladder through a smoke hole in the roof.



California Indians of the Desert Region

The weather is warm and dry, but your grandmother still wants the fire to be hot. She's making a clay pot, and fire is how the pot gets finished. The heat bakes it until it's hard. Someday when you're old enough, you might get to make pots, too. So you watch closely as she carefully shapes a clay jar. You hope it turns out right. A good pot can be traded to another tribe for food or something else your family needs.

Many desert people built their homes out of brush because they had few other resources. Cahuilla houses were usually dome-shaped or rectangular. Mojave people lived in some of the hottest parts of the desert. Temperatures could get really high, especially in the summer. To keep cool during the hottest times of the year, the Cahuilla and Mojave sometimes built homes that had roofs but no walls.

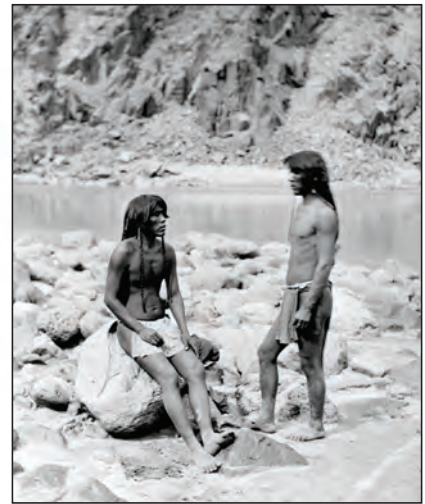


◀ **ONE THING THE** Cahuilla traded with other tribes was clay pots. Clay is made from special kinds of very fine dirt found in streams and rivers. Pots could be used for cooking. They were also good for storing food and water. Many other

California groups didn't make clay pots, although the Mojave did. That's because other tribes had grass and wood around for making bowls and baskets. The Cahuilla traded their pots for things like food, tools, and shell beads.

▲ **THE SERRANO** built wigwams (wigwams) using willow branches as a frame. They covered the branches with rushes (a grassy plant found in southern California). The chief, or *kika*, had the largest house

in the village, and ceremonies were held there. The job of village chief was handed down from generation to generation, usually from father to son. Each Serrano village also had a sweat lodge.



▲ **IF IT WAS SO HOT** and dry, how could the Mojave tribes farm crops? They had the Colorado River. In spring, snow in the Rocky Mountains melted and flooded the river. When the water level went down, a layer of silt was left on the

riverbank. Made of bits of soil and rock, silt is good for growing things. Men also fished in the river and hunted along its banks. Nearby, Mojave women gathered mesquite beans, seeds, and cactus fruit.



▲ **LIFE IN THE** Desert Region was a lot harder. The land was much more arid, or dry.

Not much rain fell, not as many plants grew, and not as many animals lived there. Not as many people lived there, either, and they moved around more than other tribes. Some tribes, like the Mojave, also worked at farming, or agriculture. They raised crops like squash and beans. They also gathered roots, berries, nuts, and herbs.

► **DESERT TRIBES** had a harder time getting things they needed from the land around them. Many, including the Mojave, traded with each other and with outside groups, too. The

Cahuilla traded with the Serrano, their neighbors to the north. They also traded with the Gabrielino, who lived west of them, closer to the Pacific Ocean.



Activities

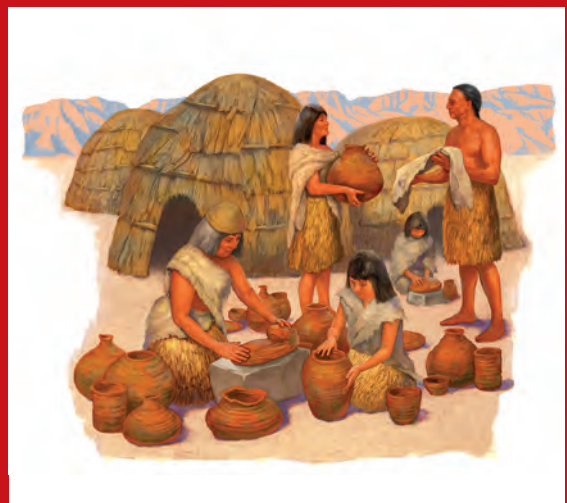


HOUSE DIAGRAM

Choose a type of house built by a California Indian tribe. How did location affect the kind of house that they made? Think about the land and climate. What were the natural resources available to use as building materials? What did the people need to shelter from? Draw a diagram of the house and label the different parts of it. Be sure to include a description of the resources used.

MURAL SCENE

Choose a California Indian tribe and think about what you might see if you were able to visit their village. What are people doing on a typical day or for a special event, such as an animal hunt? How are they interacting with their surroundings and each other? Draw a mural of a scene from a day in the life of your selected tribe. Be sure to show people in their different roles and what the environment looks like. Tell a story with your drawings.



MAKE CONNECTIONS WITH THESE RELATED TITLES



Spanish Exploration and Colonization

No smartphone. No Internet. Not even a map. The Spanish explorers who set out to discover and colonize what is now Mexico and California had few tools at their disposal. But the promise of land and riches and the mission of spreading their religion pushed them forward, paving the path for a new future in America.



Mexican Settlement and Rule

During mission life in early 19th-century Mexico, priests and Spaniards often clashed with Native Americans and Californios. With different rights for different groups of people, it's easy to see why many residents of Mexico longed for freedom. Learn about Father Miguel Hidalgo's cry for freedom and Alta California's path to independence from Mexico.



Bear Flag Republic: Road to Statehood

What does the phrase "bear flag republic" have to do with California? Investigate the pushes and pulls that brought people here in the first place. Discover when, why, and how we became a state in record time. Uncover the controversies, the characters, and the conflicts along the way.



LEARN MORE ONLINE!

- Yurok houses were square and made of redwood planks. Pomo houses were made by tying poles into a round frame and covering them with reeds or grass. What are some of the other differences between the houses these two groups built?
- Many Native Americans who live in California today come from



- tribes outside of California. How many different tribes are represented across the state?
- The Chumash did not have a written language, but they

still found ways to record their ideas for future generations. What are pictographs? What role did pictographs play in preserving the history of the Chumash?

- Acorns were a main source of food for many California Indians. But you can't just crack open an acorn and eat it. Learn about the step-by-step process for making acorn flour.

CALIFORNIA STANDARDS

HSS 4.2 Students describe the social, political, cultural, and economic life and interactions among people of California from the pre-Columbian societies to the Spanish mission and Mexican rancho periods.

4.2.1 Discuss the major nations of California Indians, including their geographic distribution, economic activities, legends, and religious beliefs; and describe how they depended on, adapted to, and modified the physical environment by cultivation of land and use of sea resources.

Historical and Social Science Analysis Skills:

Chronological and Spatial Thinking 2. Students correctly apply terms related to time, including past, present, future, decade, century, and generation.

Historical Interpretation 2. Students identify the human and physical characteristics of the places they are studying and explain how those features form the unique character of those places.



**KIDS
DISCOVER**

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Pre-Columbian People of California	Cultural Development and Diversity
Spanish Exploration and Colonization	California: Becoming an Economic Power
Mexican Settlement and Rule	A Plan for Government
Bear Flag Republic: Road to Statehood	American Government: Federal, State, and Local
Gold Rush	

ON THE COVER: Hupa Indians perform a ritual, wearing deerskin and thatch-topped hats. **Alamy/National Geographic Creative:** W. Langdon Kihn.

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Brobel Design: Map of Early Missions and El Camino Real, p.15.

Michael Kline Illustration: Where to Put a Weir, Houses That Sweat, cover; Toloache Religion, p.6; Nicknames, p.9; Restless Turtles, p.13; Ring-and-Dart Game, p.14.

Wood Ronsaville Harlin, Inc.: Matthew Frey: California Indians Map, pp.2–3; Locator Maps, p.9, p.13, p.15, p.17; Rob Wood: Wiyot, Maidu, Yuma, Nisenan, and Serrano Houses, p.5; Achumawi House, p.15; Ron Spears: Trading, pp.16–17.

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