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## ETHNOLOGY OF THE

## ALTA CALIFORNIA INDIANS

## I: PRECONTACT

Edited with an Introduction by  
**Lowell John Bean and Sylvia Brakke Vane**

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# Power and its Applications in Native California

by Lowell John Bean

This paper presents a general description of supernatural power as it was perceived and used by California Indians prior to European contact. The principal existential postulates relating to the concept of power which were shared by most native California peoples are outlined, and the normative postulates (values) which regulated the use of power are briefly discussed. Specific ways in which power might be acquired, and the conduits or pathways to its acquisition are reviewed. Finally, some of the social implications deriving from the concept of the presence of power and beliefs about its characteristics are suggested. The description of power presented here is cross-cultural, and the author fully recognizes that not every aspect of power described in this paper can be strictly applied to each ethnic group in the state. Beliefs about power varied from group to group, but for the most part the ideas presented here were widely shared.

## THE SOURCE OF POWER

The source of power is sometimes clearly explained in native California cosmologies, and sometimes it is not. Nevertheless, two principal patterns emerge in the cosmologies: (1) power is created from a void in which two forces, usually male and female, come together in a cataclysmic event that forms a creative force; or (2) power and creators appear simultaneously in the universe without explanation, and a creative force begins thereupon to form or alter the world. In both cases, various acts are accomplished through a use of power by a creator or primary creators that leads to a series of creations — among which is man. The outcome of these acts

(narrated in dramatic episodes in the native cosmologies) is the creation of a hierarchically structured social universe — a cosmological model in which the nature of power is defined and rules are established for interacting with power sources. Although accounts in individual cosmologies may vary considerably from group to group in depicting this universe, throughout California there appears to be at the least a tripartite division of the universe into upper, middle, and lower worlds.

The upper world is occupied by powerful anthropomorphic beings — usually seen as the primary creators — with whom humans can interact to their own benefit. The upper world may also include astronomical personages such as the Sun, Moon, and significant stars or constellations, theriomorphic creatures who are the forerunners of animal species, and other spirit beings who have no counterpart in the real world. Often the dwelling place of the dead is associated with the upper realm, although it is sometimes located in a distinctly different place.

The middle world is inhabited by both men and various non-mortal beings with considerable power. Most native Californians view the middle world as lying at the geographical center of the universe. Usually, it is conceived as circular, floating in space, and surrounded by a void or by water.

Finally, the underworld is inhabited by superordinary beings who are usually more malevolent toward man than those of the other two realms. Such beings take many forms and are often associated with water, springs, underground rivers and lakes, and caves. Frequently, they are reptilian or amphibian in nature (e.g., serpents or frogs) or have a distorted humanoid appearance (e.g., dwarfs, hunchbacks, giants, cyclopes, water-babies).

#### THE NATURE OF POWER

The nature of power in the universe is best understood in terms of four basic philosophical assumptions shared by most native Californian groups in their world view (Bean 1972; White 1963; Blackburn 1974; Halpern 1955). These assumptions are as follows: (1) power is sentient and the principal causative agent in the universe; (2) power is distributed differentially throughout the three realms of the universe and possessed by anything having "life" or the will "to act"; (3) the universe is in a state of dynamic

equilibrium in relation to power; and (4) man is the central figure in an interacting system of power holders.

First, power is assumed to be the principal causative agent (energy source) for all phenomena in the universe. Power is sentient and possesses will. At the beginning of the universe or some later stage in the creation, power was apportioned throughout the three realms in various degrees or quantities. Thus, power is potentially extant in all things. Power may remain quiescent and neutral, choosing its own time or place to manifest itself. Some things possess more power than others, but anything in the universe which has "life" or demonstrates the will "to act" possesses some amount of power. Even seemingly inanimate things may possess power. A rock which suddenly moves downhill may thereby demonstrate an ability "to act" and therefore reveal itself to be a power source. An animal may be normal or possess some extraordinary degree of power, or, most awesome of all, prove to be a were-animal. Nothing can be judged to be without power until it has been tested by empirical indicators. Since man is never absolutely certain whether or not anything is a power source until it is tested or reveals itself, he lives in a constantly perilous world fraught with danger. Power sources remain a continuous threat or advantage to man until his soul enters the land of the dead, where presumably all is well and power vis-à-vis an individual soul is permanently controlled.

All power beings are personalized and akin to man in their nature (capable of such emotions as anger, love, hate, pity, and jealousy). Because power beings are capricious, unpredictable, and amoral, they may manifest themselves in many ways which perform for or against man's benefit. It seems that only in historical times has power been viewed as disparately good or evil. Although power is omnipresent in the universe, it is not always omniscient, which means the beings possessing power can be deceived like humans.

The universe exists in a state of dynamic equilibrium with power. While there is constant opposition between power sources and a struggle among them to acquire more power, no one source of power has the ability to obtain ultimate superiority or to alter the condition of the universe irrevocably so long as man conducts himself in a manner which aids in maintaining the equilibrium.

Man is viewed as the central figure in an interacting system of power holders. As the articulating link between all expressions of

power, man has been provided with guidelines for acquiring, keeping, and wielding power. Since power is sentient and personalized, man can interact with power or conduits of power much as he would with humans. Power can be dealt with rationally through a system of reciprocal rules (expectations), which were established or handed down to man in early cosmic times. Without individual or community action by man through such rituals as world renewal ceremonies, the balance of power in the universe would be upset, and one side of the system might be disproportionately favored over another. Individually acquired power (knowledge) and traditionally acquired power (held by priests or shamans) must continually be employed by man to maintain the dynamic equilibrium or harmony of the universe.

Since man occupies the geographical center of the universe, he is in an ideal location for bringing power from the upper and lower universes into play in the middle world. Religious persons such as priests or shamans are extremely important socio-political figures in native society. They are the boundary players of power, since they possess knowledge which makes it possible for them to travel safely to distant and hence dangerous places — often in any of the three worlds. Through interaction with power sources in all three worlds, men possessing a knowledge of the rules governing power are capable of receiving, manipulating, and controlling power throughout the universe with various degrees of success.

Form, space, and time are mutable and malleable under the influence of power. During rituals, when power is being exercised, past, present, and future may be fused into one continuous whole. A shaman may use power to bring sacred time into the present so that he can interact with beings from that time. He may transcend space, shortening or lengthening distances through the use of power. Or he may draw a land form toward him or travel speedily across space transformed into another creature, such as a bird, bear, or mountain lion.

Within the middle world of man, power can exist anywhere, and anything occupying space may contain power and be beneficial or dangerous. For this reason, the central place occupied by an Indian group — the village — is more sacred and safer than anything beyond its perimeter. Such a central place is viewed as "tame" or safe because it is controlled by men of knowledge who can protect the inhabitants from other power sources (Halpern

1955; Blackburn 1974).

If security, predictability, and sociability are associated with one's home base, everything beyond is associated with danger. The forest and other places not inhabited by man are unsafe because they are defined as uncontrolled — as are the other two universes. Thus, travel away from one's home base increases the chances of encountering danger. The danger of uncontrolled power is believed to increase in a series of concentric circles the farther one moves away from one's immediate social universe. For this reason, the presence of strangers in a community may represent a source of danger and must be viewed with suspicion. They may, because they live at a distance, possess greater power for ill use than one's own people.

Although power operates in a dynamic equilibrium in the universe, one of its major characteristics is that it is entropic (Blackburn 1974; Bean 1972; White 1963). Power has gradually diminished since the beginning of time in quality, quantity, and availability. Such a diminishment of power has occurred because man has at various times treated it or its conduits improperly, failing in his reciprocal responsibilities within an interdependent system. Consequently, as man struggles to reestablish the power balance of the universe in the face of forces seeking to create disequilibrium, power always seems to be restored at a lesser level than in the past. A very rapid loss of power is believed to have occurred after European contact as knowledge concerning the means of regulating power was lost. Nevertheless, power is always partially retrievable as new rules are established for obtaining and maintaining it.

#### VALUES AND THE CONTROL OF POWER

The concept of power is integrally related to several normative values concerning its use which are common to most California Indian groups. To maintain a viable world, it is considered mandatory that man acquire knowledge about the universe. Knowledge has value for its own sake as well as for being an instrument in the manipulation of power. Thus, persons who acquire knowledge are considered powerful and treated deferentially. Often it is assumed that knowledge is in part a

product of advancing age. Very advanced age (without senility) among south central and southern California groups is an indication of greater power. In contrast, power decreases in north central California with advanced age (loss of physical strength before the onset of senility), and offices associated with power are passed on to younger adults.

In order to acquire power, one must behave honestly, prudently, moderately, and reciprocally in relation to others, and possess the ability to maintain confidences. Honesty is qualified by the understanding that deceit can be used by the weak when dealing with powerful beings or persons who have an unfair advantage. Self-restraint, industriousness, self-assertion, and self-respect are other qualities necessary for the proper use of power (Bean 1972; Blackburn 1974).

The rules for handling power and using its conduits (such as ritual paraphernalia) function to control the power holder and prevent his misuse of power in two ways. First, power can be used only at proper times and in proper places, and it must be used in accordance with set procedures (e.g., in combination with various power acts such as smoking tobacco). A failure to exemplify in one's conduct those moral values associated with the use of power (such as reciprocity and prudence) leads to automatic disenfranchisement of the power holder and possibly punishment from a tutelary spirit or other persons of power. Secondly, persons having power and knowledge may withhold from unworthy candidates information on procedures for acquiring and maintaining power. Thus, if a candidate's deportment in daily affairs is such that it is believed he will not use power safely or productively, he is kept away from the principal conduits of power. Sometimes, however, among certain groups a "troublemaker" was drawn into the circle of power to "tame" him. It was thought that his acquisition of an awesome responsibility might transform him into a better man.

In addition to the moral virtues described above, men of power adopted an eclectic and highly pragmatic view of the universe. Because power was seen as omnipresent and completely malleable, all phenomena were potentially useful as sources of power. The fact that potential power residing in an object was not immediately obvious could simply signify a failure on the part of an observer to have the requisite knowledge to recognize and use it. Thus, it was important to preserve an empirical attitude toward all new

phenomena or ideas and cautiously test them against the framework of cultural realities which were already known. To the native Californian, the diversity and unpredictability of power was consistent with an ecosystem that was equally diverse and unpredictable, although often kind and bountiful in the resources provided by nature. Because it was understood that the sources of power were so diversified, an eclectic and experimental attitude toward power existed in California. Man was not dependent upon one source of power, but attempted to acquire power from as many sources as possible. Since power was unlimited in its potential for acquisition, one shaman might have as many as ten or more guardian spirits.

Finally, because this empirical and eclectic attitude toward power was pervasive throughout California, new ideas developed and spread rapidly and were readily molded into unique, culturally specific styles of power control by different Indian groups. One example of such a diffusion of new ideas was the Chingishnish religion, which appears to have arisen in the late eighteenth century either on Santa Catalina Island or among the Gabrielinos (White 1963: 94). This religion spread south to the Luiseño and Diegueño, who uniquely grafted it onto their own religions, and even reached as far into the interior as certain Cahuilla groups, who adopted specific features of the cult.

#### POWER FROM OTHER WORLDS

Power that existed in the here and now of man's middle universe was viewed as left over from the sacred time of creation. This residual power (White 1963) was conceived as lying about, rather free floating, obtainable and manageable by those born with sufficient innate abilities to handle it or those who otherwise had acquired the requisite knowledge. The principal sources of power, however, lay in the upper and lower worlds, residing in the "sacred beings."

Among some Indian groups in California, every individual sought a connection with power. In other groups, only specifically recognized persons or those who wanted extraordinary power sought it out. Since power was believed to be ubiquitous and continually available, its presence and influence in the events of daily life were constantly appreciated by all members of a culture.

Man was connected with the power available in the upper and lower worlds in very specific ways. Direct contacts were possible with tutelary spirits who instructed one in the use of power; souls and ghosts transcended the space between worlds and could be contacted during ghostly visitations to the middle world; and some humans — through ecstatic experiences — were able to transport themselves to the other worlds or to bring from them supernatural power. Some of the means through which power might be acquired include the following: the vision quest, the calling upon of power sources, dreaming, the inheritance or purchase of knowledge or ritual equipment, and prayers and offerings. Individuals might be instructed in the knowledge, acquisition, and use of power by a power giver itself (sacred being), or they might receive such knowledge through training from a shaman or other ritual specialist.

Various techniques also existed for making the individual more open to the acquisition of power by altering his mental or bodily sensibilities. These included the use or combined use of hallucinogenic plants, the handling of power-containing objects, and various forms of sensory deprivation or acts designed to concentrate attention, such as meditation, fasting, imposed periods of sleeplessness, isolation, induced sweating, listening to music, singing, drumming, chanting, and hyperventilation.

One of the principal routes to acquiring power was the vision quest, and the induction of an ecstatic condition to receive spirits having power was a common preliminary act. Several means were used to induce ecstasy on the vision quest, the most dramatic being the use of hallucinogenic plants with or without accompanying ritual. In California, the most frequently used plants containing hallucinogens were *Nicotiana* (tobacco) and *Datura* (jimson weed). The California poppy and formic acid from ants may also have been used by some groups. It was believed that such hallucinogens altered the user's perceptions and level of awareness, making him more receptive to perceiving sacred beings and other power sources.

Power could also be tapped and acquired through many channels that brought it into the human sphere of activities. These included rocks (such as quartz crystals) and other unusual objects, human and animal bones (especially predators among animals), human and animal hair, various animal parts (such as the heart and

entrails), non-mind altering plants (such as angelica and pepperwood), and all ritual paraphernalia.

Any unusual phenomenon or event might serve to bring power into the middle world of man or prove to be an omen which could be read for predicting the future (e.g., astronomical events, any peculiar behavior of humans or animals, multiple births, people with unusual marks or physical characteristics, etc.). Power could also be concentrated in specific places in the environment, such as in a pond (water being the great transformer), on a mountain top, or in a particular tree or grove of trees. Power might also be put into a place by those having power. A shaman, for example, might protect a sacred place outside his village where ritual paraphernalia was stored by putting power there.

Within the community, power was invested in or accumulated at various private and public places, most commonly the ritual center where the religious, political, economic, and social lives of the people came together. Such ritual centers were considered sacred places where cosmic or sacred time and space and spiritual beings met with secular time and space and human beings. In such ritual centers, elaborate rites of intensification were carried out as necessary to maintain the equilibrium of the universe or to aid in cosmic rebirth at the end of each year or when the balance of the universe was endangered. Such rituals were particularly critical during times of cosmic imbalance, usually the result of man's failure to perform rituals properly or to act reciprocally with other beings in the universe.

Sacred places could also be divested of power, however, and some places contained power only at appropriate times, such as during religious ceremonies or on those occasions when supernatural powers were closer and more accessible to man. During certain times or periods (such as at night or in winter), power was considered closer to man than at other times and simultaneously more dangerous unless checked and kept under control. In particular, during times of life crises (such as menstruation, birth, illness, and death), power might be in a highly chaotic state and very dangerous to the community. On such occasions, malevolent outside powers entering the village or emanating from the individual experiencing the crisis could harm both the individual and the community. Thus, ritual action, both public and private, was necessary on such occasions.

## SOCIAL AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF POWER

The nature of power as described in native California cosmologies provides an explanation for certain socio-cultural organizational modes only recently becoming clear to researchers (Bean and King 1974; Bean and Lawton 1973). One of these modes is reflected in what Blackburn (1974) has called an assumption of the inevitable and inherent inequality of the universe. Just as power is distributed differentially and hierarchically throughout the universe, so is it distributed for acquisition and use by human beings.

Inequalities in social rank, intelligence, social prerogatives, wealth, and skills can all be explained by reference to the differential distribution of power. Certain individuals are naturally born with power or inherit it, others possess the capacity to seek it out, and in some instances power itself seeks people out. In a hierarchically ordered universe, it is not surprising that a hierarchical ordering of power is also accepted as part of the structuring of man's middle universe. In the middle or "real" world, some humans have more access to more power than others, and humans in general have more access to power than other species. A similar hierarchy exists in the plant and animal kingdom. Carnivores, for example, are more powerful than plants. In most California Indian cosmologies, there is a clear-cut chain-of-being in the biotic world in which man stands near the top of the power pyramid in the middle universe. He is also at the center of the entire universe, receiving power and using it to maintain the universal equilibrium.

Society itself is similarly hierarchically structured — characterized by the presence of classes of people with inherent power and with it privilege and wealth. Like cosmological beings, humans with power are regarded with ambiguity by others in their community. Power holders are "necessary evils" performing vital functions. They are treated with respect and awe, but also with considerable caution, since they are potentially amoral in their relationships with others. Their allegiance is to power, both the maintenance of power and the acquisition of more power, and thus primarily to other persons of power, even as much as their allegiance may be to the community they serve as administrators and boundary players. In effect, men of power stand somewhat

above and outside the social system in which they live — not entirely responsible to the claims of the local social order. For example, a shaman may not be as dependable in his conduct toward his relatives as ordinary people would be. His higher calling sometimes transcends his secular obligations.

In societies fraught with uncertainty, a person who can control, acquire, or manipulate power is absolutely necessary. While the social price required for his presence may be great, it is necessary to pay it. Generally, throughout California, chiefly families were those which had many priests and shamans. In economic matters, the elite families controlled the principal means of production and distribution of goods, owned monopolies on many valuable goods and services (e.g., eagle down and ritual positions), possessed the power to levy taxes, fines, and establish fees to support institutions, and were able to charge exorbitant interest on loans, thus amassing further wealth. In legal matters, they were the final judicial arbitrators with the power of binding decisions involving life and death within the community.

Just as there was a constant conflict between those with innate power and those seeking to acquire it in the myths and cosmologies of the California Indians, so did such a conflict exist in human society between the elites holding power and newcomers seeking to acquire it. The elites, with their inherited power that brought wealth and privileges, were in continual conflict with individuals from beneath their ranks who sought to acquire power, since power was potentially available to anyone. The elites, however, possessed control mechanisms for the licensing or sanctioning of power such as secret societies, initiations, and inheritance of rank, knowledge, and control of ceremonial equipment. These mechanisms provided a means by which persons of lower rank, possessing skill and ambition (sometimes even those who were socially disruptive), might enter the system. Through such a licensing of power, bright young people of lower ranks were able to move upward, yet the power structure was always kept safe from serious disruption by malcontents with talent.

Since power could always be destroyed, men of power who misused their abilities or endangered the community could be reduced in rank or power through ritual disenfranchisement or, if necessary, assassination.

Empirical indicators of status held by elite families, such as

symbols of political office (e.g., ceremonial bundles), were also cosmological referents to the most powerful supernatural beings in sacred positions of the upper world and therefore symbols of power as well. The main social implication of power was that elites lived a life and shared a knowledge system which clearly separated them from their people.

Chiefs and to some extent shamans and other specialists were usually men of conspicuous wealth, who had inherited their offices — patrilineally in southern California and bilaterally in Northern California. They wore expensive clothing, lived in larger houses than ordinary people, often were polygamous (certainly having greater sexual access to women), and married within the higher ranks (usually within their class, thus compounding wealth among ruling families). Such people were relieved from the day-to-day routine of hunting and gathering life and were often totally supported by the populace. This was also generally true of the higher ranking craftsmen. Unquestionably, the elite families received better medical care (because the best medical practitioners were in their ranks), the best diet, best living accommodations, and the least amount of risk in daily life (since they weren't required to carry out sometimes dangerous activities such as hunting or fishing). Such persons were generally relieved from fighting during warfare, serving instead as the arbiters who determined who would go to battle and as negotiators of peacemaking.

Thus, the distribution of power within a community played the primary role in determining all social acts and interrelationships, whether these were between close kin, members of the community, or between different political groups. Even warfare and conquest could be justified in terms of the need to acquire or maintain a power balance. Understanding this allows us to better appreciate the complexity of the social, economic, and political institutions of native California.

### CONCLUSIONS

We have seen that understanding assumptions about power is central to understanding the nature of man and his relationship to the universe in native California. Power explains the operations of

man's social universe within which all beings are potentially hierarchical, but competitively and reciprocally. Each part of the system through man's intercessionary role at the center of the universe performs a task vis-à-vis the other parts that will create or strive for a state of balanced equilibrium and the maintenance of a viable ecosystem.

The congruency we find between the philosophical assumptions in native California culture about power and the social realities by which the culture functions should encourage us to delve further into the nature of "power" as it is defined by other cultures. We should take seriously each culture's cosmological view of the universe and the role of power within the universe, because this may tell us more about the social rules for behavior than any other aspect of a cultural system.

In further studies of native California, I hope to explore the assumptions concerning the role of power in the universe and the rules for using power as they vary from one ecosystem to another. Clearly there are differences from group to group which I have glossed over in this generalized sketch. In particular, the different sorts of strategies for using power should be examined for all hunting and gathering societies to determine what rules (and I suspect they are very few) equip man to cope with specific types of ecosystems, levels of technology, and social and political conditions.

In another context (Bean 1974: 13), I suggested that native Californians achieved a level of socio-cultural integration not unlike that of many horticultural and agricultural societies — a level which may be more indicative of the normal levels reached within the limitations of hunting and gathering technology than those contemporary hunting and gathering societies which anthropologists have studied in the twentieth century. The California case continues to suggest that our evolutionary models for hunting and gathering societies are inadequate. It also suggests that the process by which cultures switch over to more advanced forms of economic achievement are yet to be understood, since native Californians had the opportunity and knowledge to make such a shift, but in most cases failed to do so. Such an opportunity existed in California because the philosophical assumptions about power provided for *all* possibilities of change. And, most especially, they provided a



justification for centralized and hierarchically structured power, for the exploitation of individuals and other societies, for conquest, and for other variables necessary to political and economic expansion.