

## WOMEN'S BUSINESS: SYMBOLS ON THE ROCKS

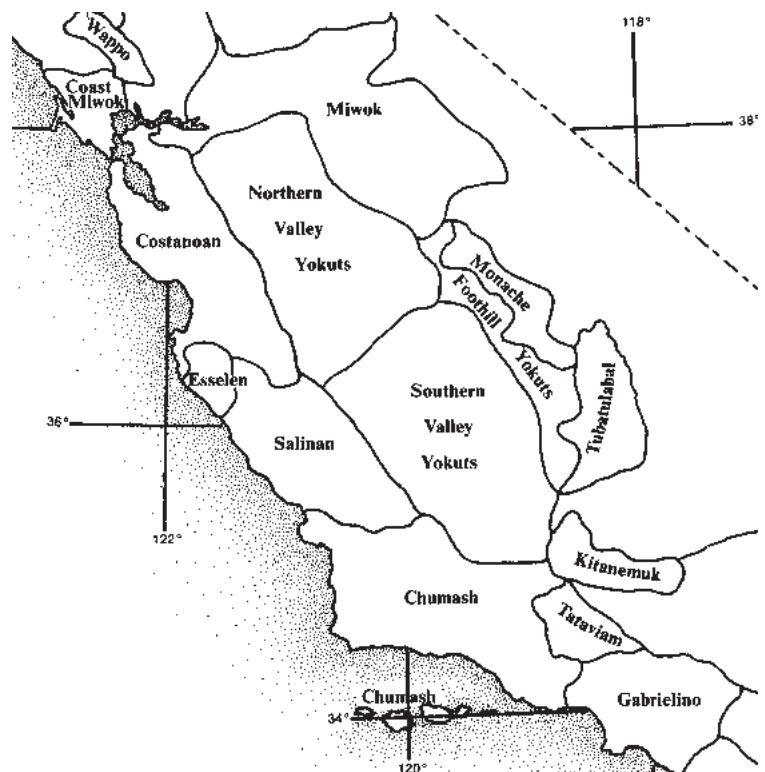
Some years ago at Ferron Box in Utah, I saw an image that appeared to be kokopelli in female form (Figure 1). I began compiling evidence of women in rock art, particularly from Yokuts' sites in the Central Valley of California. This compilation included ethnographic material based on the assumption that for group members to understand the symbols, they would have a cultural origin and a shared meaning (Dickson 1990:154). This paper discusses the context surrounding the rock art and the ethnography that supports its interpretation. Ethnographic information does have limitations because applying myths as explanations for rock art would apply, with any certainty, only for those paintings which are very recent. Finally, research has generally ignored women's activities. Much of rock art literature is biased towards explanations that feature men as the originators of rock art. However, Yokuts' rock art does not follow that pattern. Rock art in the foothills of the Central Valley is women's business.



*Figure 1. Female with some Kokopelli attributes, Utah.*

Yokuts lived in the San Joaquin Valley, a large inland basin rimmed by the Sierra Nevada and coast ranges. In late prehistory, Yokuts were the most numerous of California Indians with villages extending from the Sacramento-San Joaquin River delta in the north to the Tehachapi Mountains in the south. Chumash bordered the Yokuts on the southwest and west. Their neighbors to the east and southeast were the Monache or Western Mono (Figure 2). These groups spoke languages that were very different from the Yokuts.

While the Yokuts' groups have a number of traits in common, there are many differences. These differences are due in part



*Figure 2. Native American tribes of Central California (After Heizer 1978:ix).*

to the ecological zones in which they lived. The individual identity of each Yokuts group depended on the use of a specific dialect of the Yokuts language, residence in a recognized territory and a way of life slightly different than its neighbors. Foothill peoples lived at the base of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Woodland, grassland, and chaparral plant zones provided a wide variety of food sources (Spier 1978:426). In contrast to the valley floor, the rocky hills provided the canvas for several forms of rock art. The Yokuts are well known for their paintings in shades of red, black, white, and yellow. Cupule petroglyphs are common and generally found at habitation sites. A variation of cupule petroglyphs, cups and grooves, and petroglyph images are sometimes painted but they are not common (Gorden 1990).

When Cannon and Woody (2007) analyzed gender bias in the rock art in the northern Great Basin, they concluded that the role of women was seldom considered. They found rock art in direct association with habitation sites and groundstone at many sites. They believe that the archaeological context of the rock art is important to understanding the meaning of the art and to providing evidence of its production.

Tulare County has 207 recorded rock art sites. Data on the presence of milling features, ground stone, midden, and lithics was compiled from site records and checked using several sources. Table 1 compares the presence of milling features, such as bedrock mortars and slicks, ground stone artifacts, midden, and lithics at sites that have either pictographs or cupule petroglyphs, or both. One hundred-twelve sites have pictographs, of these

48 of the 112 sites had no other features recorded. Cupule petroglyphs sites, either alone or with pictographs, have a high probability of containing milling and habitation features. A 62 per cent correlation of milling features with pictograph and cupule sites is a good indication that rock art in Tulare County is an activity which is closely associated with women.

### PETROGLYPHS, PICTOGRAPHS, AND PHYSIOGRAPHIC FORMATIONS

Yokuts tied their landscape and rock art to myth. Myths are not fanciful stories. They contain the blueprint of an entire belief structure (Solomon 1988:16). Landscape is the visual map of myth. It is sacred because of its significance in the mythic life of the tribe (Campbell 1969:16, 33; Patai 1972:23). The following discussion includes examples of women's business in secular and sacred time.

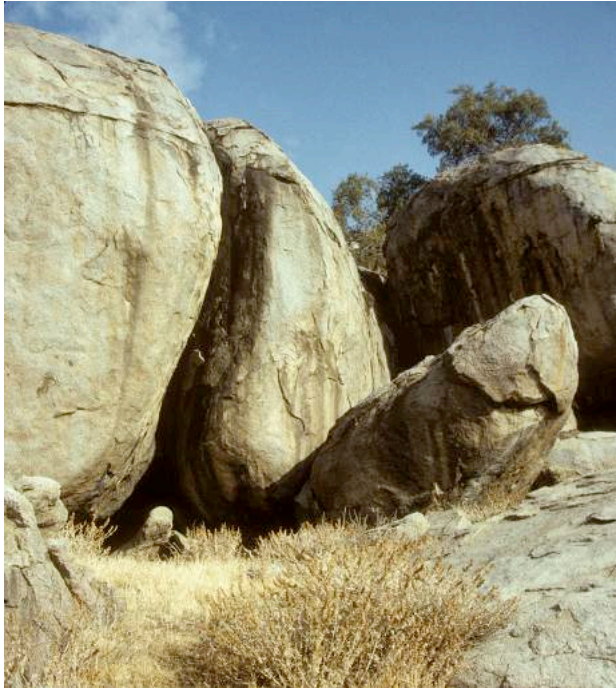
California Indian groups and Great Basin people have explanations for physiographic formations or special rocks that are transfixed persons or things. The people associated unusually shaped rocks with myths that described their origin and explained their importance (Gorden 1990:230; Patai 1972:161).

Rock features and rock art relating to fertility appear in sites throughout North America and California has a number of examples (Begole 1984); Gorden 1990; McGowan 1982; Rafter 1990; Slifer 2000; Weinberger 1983, 1992). Sites on the Carrizo Plain and in the Sierra Nevada foothills display a number of features pertaining to

**Table 1.** Summary of Tulare County Sites with Rock Art and Habitation Features.

Rock Art	Site Total	Milling	Midden	Artifacts	Lithics
Pictographs only	112	38	26	24	21
Pictographs and Cupules	54	51	32	25	21
Cupules only	41	39	25	25	19
Total	207	128	83	74	61
%		62	40	36	30

Source: Gorden 1990:228-229; Marymor 1995: 215-224; Office of Historic Preservation 1988.



*Figure 3. Physiographic formations embellished with paintings and cupules*

women's business. Rock formations resemble breasts and female genitalia. One large habitation site has a small area that is removed from the main site. Pictographs and cupule petroglyphs enhance rock features that look similar to male and female genitalia (Figure 3), a basket rock, and several rock shelters. The interplay of the formations with artistic embellishments and myths make these areas very special places. Yokuts' informants identified areas with similar features as places reserved exclusively for women (Harrington 1915).

Cupule petroglyphs are the most common form of rock art in the foothills. They have a very complex symbolism and are one of the oldest forms of rock art (Giedion 1962:78, 126). Perhaps their longevity through time and countless cultures is because several senses are involved. They are tactile and involve hearing when they are made by pounding. Since cupule petroglyphs occur in a variety of situations in Tulare County, the same simple form serves functional, ritualistic, and aesthetic purposes (Fenenga et al. 1984; Gorden 1990).



*Figure 4. Bedrock mortars with patterned cupules.*



*Figure 5. Painted cups and grooves.*

Several sites in the foothills have patterned cupules on horizontal surfaces next to bedrock mortars. The women used cupules directly associated with bedrock mortars on horizontal surfaces to hull acorns, a utilitarian purpose (Latta 1949:105–115; 1977:400, 405–406). The two uses in these examples, utilitarian and sacred, are mixed (Gorden 1990) (Figure 4). Since mothers handed down their bedrock mortars to their daughters, it follows that women related to each other would also have made the cupules.

More than a dozen sites in the Sierran foothills have painted cups and grooves. Yokuts used the natural color in the granite for a particularly pleasing effect (Figure 5). Yokuts associated cups and grooves with fertility as did those in other Native American cultures (Slifer 2000:49, 51).



**Figure 6.** *Ahnusin, Place of the Basket Rock, with columns of cupules.*

At *Oioiu*, the place of the pregnant woman, the patterned cupules cover a vertical surface. Women who had difficulty conceiving came here and, with the help of a ritual specialist, delivered healthy babies in due time (Meighan et al. 1988; Witt 1960). Nearby was a large boulder called *Tòr'uju'*, or pregnant woman. When the informant was a child, the old women told the girls not to go to this area or they would become pregnant (Harrington 1915).

Rock formations such as *Ahnusin*, the basket rock, are examples where ethnographic material and myth tie cupules to specific places on the landscape. Basket rocks occur throughout the foothills. South of the Tule River one basket rock has columns of cupules on the vertical surface (Figure 6). In the 1970s a Yokuts elder at the site related the following story: A woman walked up the ridge with her carrying basket. When she set the basket down at the top of the ridge, it turned



**Figure 7.** *Mushroom-shaped rock with painted panel on side.*

to stone (Gayton and Newman 1940:97; Latta 1936:65; Weinberger 1983:73–75). Yokuts in the north part of Tulare County tell another basket rock story. As the relatives carried a corpse back home to be buried, it revived and everyone turned to stone. Among the relatives was a girl carrying a burden basket that was also petrified (Weinberger 1983).

The following is another example involving a myth, a woman, and a physiographic feature on the landscape. A Koyote Yokuts informant told Harrington (1915) about *T'awawatph*, a woman with a toothed vagina and *Mikiti*, a cultural hero, who kills her with a hot arrow straightener. The informant also identified a rock, called *T'awawatph*, along a trail south of Porterville, which can be seen to this day. Kroeber (1907:205–207) records a Gashow Yokuts version of this story.

Mushroom-shaped rocks with cupules and paintings occur in sites as often as basket rocks (Gorden 1990) (Figure 7). However, there is no ethnographic information specific to this shape. The Tule Elk with painted cupules (Figure 8) is on the mushroom rock shown in Figure 7. Connecting ethnographic material with the images reflects the social and spiritual life of the people that made them. Yokuts ethnography does not explain the symbolic or mythic connection the Tule Elk had with women.



**Figure 8.** Three columns of painted cupules with Tule Elk below. (D-Stretch, Jon Harmon 2008)



**Figure 9.** Female figure with Tule Elk horns.

In a nearby rock shelter the female figure is either in a birthing or sexually receptive position (Figure 9). She has Tule Elk horns and webbed feet. Frog Woman and the Tule Elk appear in



**Figure 10.** Abstract version of a figure with Tule Elk horns.

Yokuts' myths, but not as fertility figures (Harrington 1915; Rogers and Gayton 1944: 203). In Shoshonian and South-central California myths, Frog Woman is Coyote's wife. In one tale, she disguises herself and tricks her husband (Applegate 1978:44; Gayton 1948: 114; Lowie 1906:271; Riddell 1978:91; Smith 1993). Coyote and Frog Woman as imposters in the skin of their victim is another concept that occurs in California Indian myths (Kroeber 1963:223). The more abstract figure also has Tule elk horns and may represent the same mythic person (Figure 10).

Figures 11 and 12 show two versions of pregnant women. The woman in Figure 11 appears to be giving birth. Yokuts' women sat holding onto two sticks driven into the ground that helped them push (Gayton 1948:102). A stick figure with ears is with the women in each figure. According to Maria H., Harrington's Yokuts consultant, rabbits had significant astronomical and ritual associations (Hudson and Underhay, 1978:115). Maria also described a stuffed rabbit that people carried on a stick during festivals that represented a totemic animal (Hudson and Blackburn 1986:231–232). The couple wears what appear to be rabbit-eared headdresses as do the two women figures.



**Figure 11.** Rabbit-eared staff and pregnant women.



**Figure 12.** Two figures with rabbit-eared headdresses, one appears to be pregnant



**Figure 13.** Split Rock with cupules on the inside walls.

Large foothill sites have slides near the women’s work areas. Countless children formed these slick tracks on the rocks. Slides at four sites in Tulare County have cupules on them. This leads one to believe that slides have an additional symbolic meaning, but again, we do not have further ethnographic information (Gorden and Weinburger 1993).

### EXCEPTIONS TO CUPULES AS WOMEN’S BUSINESS

Not all cupules in the foothills are related to food processing, fertility or other activities related to women. At least 12 split rocks contain paintings and cupules (Figure 13). Tribal groups gathered at a site in the southern foothills for mourning ceremonies that took place each fall (Latta 1977:5). Yokuts have an Orpheus myth of the man who followed his dead wife into the after world. The myth describes their journey and explains what happens after an individual dies (Gayton and Newman 1940:17–19,26,28–29,35,50; Kroeber 1907:228–229). This site was special because as the mourners walked through it, and they could experience the trials that the soul faced after death.

After a person died, his or her spirit took a three day journey to the west. One of the first tests the spirit encountered at the end of the trip was to pass through two clashing rocks. The spirit who knew the proper prayers avoided being crushed and went on to face the next trial (Gayton and Newman 1940:19). Yokuts prepared themselves for the inevitable journey by making or deepening a cupule and saying the proper prayer as they passed through the split.

Pahpawits, Sounding or Ringing Place, is beside a major north/south Indian trail along the foothills (Latta 1977:196–197). It is a basaltic rock with number of large cupules that co-occur with bedrock mortars on horizontal surfaces. The traveler used a small stone to ring the rock while saying a prayer for a safe journey (Gorden 1990:230; Weinberger 1980:4–5). Pahpawits and the Mourning Ceremony site are examples of the variety of meanings that cupules have depending on the context and, in this case, one not tied specifically to women. However, more sites have ethnographic material that tie cupules to women (Gorden 1990).

### BASKET DESIGNS AND PAINTED SIGNS

Yokuts myth<sup>1</sup> tells of a girl who makes baskets as she wanders. As the girl creates basket patterns, she paints the corresponding symbol on the rocks in the Southern Sierra foothills. The story, which I recount in abbreviated form below, also de-



**Figure 14.** Painted panel with basket designs.



**Figure 15.** Yokuts basket with water snakes and rattlesnake designs.



**Figure 16.** Painted rattlesnake design.



**Figure 17.** Painted gopher snake design.

scribes several locations where rock art is found today (Gayton 1948:58–59; Johnstone 1975:41–59; Latta 1936:76–79). Great Basin mythology features a similar girl child who makes superior baskets as she travels (Lowie 1924:136, 192; Steward 1936:400).

Kadadimcha and her pregnant daughter, Nashush lived near the Kaweah River. They made plain baskets because in the beginning, no one made designs. One day while Nashush was eating sweet clover in the meadow, a bear killed and ate her. The one drop of blood remaining on a leaf called to the searching mother. Kadadimcha took the blood drop home, placing it in a covered basket. At dawn, a baby cried. Kadadimcha picked up the baby girl, clothed, and fed her. She named her granddaughter, Chuchancum. The young girl grieved for Nashush and crawled about looking for her. Chuchancum played with basket materials when she thought her grandmother was not watching.

One day Chuchancum disappeared. Kadadimcha dreamed that her granddaughter had traveled into the mountains. Kadadimcha walked up the South Fork of the Kaweah River where she found fresh paintings on the rock and a small basket with the same design woven into it. Chuchancum knew



**Figure 18.** Yokuts basket with lightning design.

that Nashush, her mother, had been a good basket maker, so she carefully wove a design into each basket (Figure 14).

As Chuchancum traveled she made a succession of baskets, each with a design, the duplicate of which she painted on a near-by rock. On the North Fork of the Tule River she wove and painted the design of the Water Snake (Figure 15). On the main fork of the Tule, it was the Rattlesnake (Figure 16). On Deer Creek she made the Gopher Snake design (Figure 17). She made Wild Goose, Caterpillar, Pine Tree, Lightning, King Snake, Arrow Head, and many others (Figure 18). She left a new basket by each painting, forming a trail for Kadadimcha to follow.

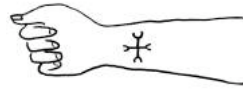


**Figure 19.** Painted digging sticks in red and new moons in white are also basket patterns.

Finally, way to the south at Tehachapi, Kadadimcha found her granddaughter. After much persuasion, Chuchancum returned with her grandmother to their home on the Kaweah River. Thereafter, they began making baskets, using all of the patterns the girl designed during her years of wandering and searching for her mother. The story ends with the two women teaching the other Indians how to make all the designs found on Yokuts baskets today.

In this story not only does the talented girl create basket patterns, but she paints the symbols on the rocks at sites where pictographs remain to this day. While the girl is supernatural, she is quite different from the male oriented theories believed responsible for creating rock art in much of the literature (Cannon and Woody 2007). The Yokuts do not have any myth or ethnographic material about men creating rock art. For the Yokuts, rock painting is also women's business.

Many sites throughout the foothills contain basket designs, such as digging sticks with the new moon (Figure 19). The Yokuts associated women



**Figure 20.** Drawing of tattooed religious symbol. (After Gayton 1948:69).

with the moon, as did many traditional people (Gayton 1948:101). Yokuts living near the San Joaquin River had clan totem design of two parallel oblique bars, which mimicked the two dark bars on the side of the Falcon's head. This design appears at a site near Terra Bella (Merriam 1908:562; Weinberger 1981:4).

Before marriage, women tattooed themselves as a permanent form of decoration. One design with religious significance was placed on the inside of the right forearm just above the wrist (Figure 20). It marked the location of, or point of permeation of, one's supernatural power. When Anna Gayton, an ethnographer, asked a Tulamni Yokuts for a further explanation, the woman evaded her question (Gayton 1948:69–70). This symbol occurs as paintings and cup-and-groove petroglyphs over 100 miles of the Foothill Yokuts' territory (Gayton 1948:69, Witt 1960) (Figures 21 and 22).

The final two examples combine the concepts discussed in this paper. The two physiographic features are on steep slopes above habitation sites that contain a number of painted panels. Bedrock mortars are within a few meters of the rock formations.

The body hole (Figure 23) may be the ultimate cupule. Painted cupules surround the entrance. Peering into the hole, cupules lining the bottom and sides are visible. The hole gradually narrows to three red hemispheres marking the end. As you lay on your back and slide into the cupule, it envelops your body. Your head reaches the painted hemispheres that draw you deep into the earth. Your eyes view paintings on the ceiling. You slide out of the cupule reborn. The recounting of my experience in the body cupule reflects my cultural bias. We will never know what has changed in cultural meaning over time for a feature like





**Figure 21.** Engraved religious symbol.



**Figure 22.** Painted religious symbol.

the body hole, but we can realize its significance in current thought.

Tulare County sites contain a wide variety of cupules, including painted pits and grooves. The abraded cups are arranged in abstract patterns or aligned geometrically over horizontal, vertical, or sloping rock faces. Pitted boulders in the form of burden baskets, mushrooms, and split-rocks are common (Gorden 1990:227). Cupules are most commonly associated with fertility (Fenenga 1984:56–57; Harrington 1915; Witt 1960).

The final physiographic formation is a seat in the shape of a quail (Figure 24). Quail were a very useful animal. They were a common food item. Women wove the quail head pattern into many of their baskets and they decorated the baskets with quail topknots. Yokuts used quail feathers to make earrings and other ritual objects (Gayton 1948:102; Harrington 1915). In mythic times when animals were people, Eagle gave the animals their “choice of habitat and their future service to human beings” (Gayton 1946:261). Quail chose to help women in childbirth and it was also a woman’s dream helper. When Mollie Laurence’s daughter was in labor, Molly called on Quail, her spirit helper, to speed her grandchild’s birth (Gayton 1948:100, 102). Yokuts also believed



**Figure 23.** Body hole with painted cupules around the opening and on the floor.



**Figure 24.** Cavity resembles a Quail. The seat is on the right inside edge.

Quail was the champion of fair play (Latta 1977: 650).

In Yokuts' territory rock features resemble animals, familiar objects, or special body parts such as genitalia. The unusually shaped rocks often include cupule petroglyphs and paintings that have stories describing their origin or linking these rock features to myths. The stories and rock features formed a web of understanding that answered the timeless questions of who am I and how do I fit in the universe. These symbols demonstrate that in addition to their role in the religious life of ancient and modern groups, rock art is a historical and cultural record. The paintings, petroglyphs, and effigy rocks provide clues about the lives of Yokuts women and form a link to the past. Rock art images can tell us about the people and the culture. The better we understand the culture that made the images, the more meaning we will see in the rock art.

Many of today's people live in an artificial world of buildings that are designed to shut out the natural world. It is difficult for modern man to identify with people who were acutely aware of their surroundings. The identity and world view of traditional people was intimately tied to their natural environment. The landscape mirrored their world view. In addition to cupules, painted symbols connect women to rock art through ethnographic material and myths. Cupules and paintings are the symbolic interpretation of Yokuts' values. For the Yokuts, rock art was women's business.

#### END NOTE

<sup>1</sup> The Yokuts basket pattern myth is my retelling of the story, which is published by Johnstone, Latta and Lowie. Yokuts dialects are stately in cadence and form compared to English. The language is not metaphorical, certain refrains or story lines are repeated throughout the myths, and there are many other differences. I write and tell the myths in a way that is interesting to people outside the culture, but reflects some of the original cadence and succinct sentences. I have writ-

ten a number of the myths for our local teachers, but never formally published any.

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