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# THE OHLONE WAY

*Indian Life in the  
San Francisco —  
Monterey Bay Area*



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Illustrated by Michael Harney

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## THE OHLONE WAY

The way of a hunter was full of risks, honor, and adventure; and—in a world of magic and “power”—it was also full of fear and even death.

To modern thinking there is something disturbingly “unsporting” about the Ohlone way of hunting. Killing bear cubs, burning the nests of wood rats, setting and clubbing scores of rabbits, and thrusting sticks into burrows appal us. And with good reason: it would be monstrous if someone in our own society were to engage in such practices at a time when wildlife has been vastly diminished. But the Ohlones had no need to practice “conservation;” as the early reports clearly indicate, their hunting did not diminish the numbers of animals to any appreciable degree.

Nor did the Ohlones feel pity toward the animals they killed. Reverence for some animals), yes, but not pity. Perhaps they did not feel themselves superior to the animals, and superiority is one of the necessary ingredients of pity. An animal was killed because its time had come. An animal was killed because it gave itself over to be killed. For the Ohlones, living in a land of unbelievable plenty, hunting and killing animals was a rightful, guiltless activity such as it will never be again. As we look at a fragment of an Ohlone Song, we find a wonderful joy, indeed a celebration of animal life:

I dream of you.  
I dream of you jumping.  
Rabbit,  
Jackrabbit,  
Quail.

## THE DEER HUNTER

The Ohlones, like all other California Indians, were a “Stone-Age” people. Their arrows were tipped with flint or obsidian, their mortars and pestles were of stone, and other tools were made of bone, shell, or wood. To fell a tree they hacked away at it with a chert blade, pausing now and then to burn out the chips before they renewed their hacking. They used no metal, had no agriculture (at least as we understand it), wove no cloth, and did not even make pottery. They lived entirely by hunting and gathering.

But while the Ohlones were a Stone-Age people, hunting was not just a matter of bludgeoning an animal to death with a club, as it is sometimes pictured. Hunting, especially deer hunting, was among the most important things in a man’s life. The hunter pursued and killed deer without pity, but never without reverence. Deer were spiritually powerful animals in a world in which animals were still gods, and deer hunting was an undertaking surrounded at every step with dignity, forethought, and ritual.

The preparations for deer hunting centered around the sweat-house. Every village had at least one, dug into the ground at the edge of the village on the downstream side of the creek. Larger villages may have had two or more. The Ohlone sweat-house was fairly small, holding only about seven or eight men. It had a low ceiling (those within had to crouch), and the door was so low that the men entered on all fours....

It is early afternoon, and the dark interior of the sweat-house is smoky from a tiny fire that is burning near the doorway. The only person present is an old man, crippled in the hip from a hunting accident he has suffered many years before. He now serves as the unofficial caretaker of the sweat-house. He makes certain that enough wood is collected each day for a good fire, he helps keep the place orderly, and now and then he shoos away the children who try to enter the doorway or climb on the roof for a peek through the smoke hole. Much of the time he dozes. But now he is sitting against the wall of the sweat-house amidst a pile of milkweed stalks. He breaks the stalks into fibers by running his fingernail down them until the pulp is scratched away. Then with his left hand he feeds the fibers steadily onto his thigh and with his

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right hand rolls them together, crisscrossing them to make strands of rope. He will later give the rope to the other men for their fishing nets, and they of course will share their catch with him.

Against one wall of the sweat-house lie a number of bows, each wrapped in its own deer-skin or cougar-skin covering. The deer-hunting bow is about four feet long, flattened, tapering toward the ends, with a rounded handgrip in the middle. Thick pieces of otter or weasel fur are wrapped around the bow about six inches from each end to deaden the "twang" of the bowstring. Broad strips of deer sinew are glued to the back of the bow, adhering to the wood like bark to a tree. This sinew backing gives the bow an almost magical elasticity. The inside curve of the bow is painted with a zig-zag design, and tiny feathers decorate the handgrip.

It takes a skilled man ten or more days to work a piece of wood into the proper shape for a bow, and in this Bay Area village the best bow wood comes by trade from distant mountains. But once finished, the Ohlone bow is an elegant, powerful object. It is a man's most valued and necessary possession, and each hunter treats it accordingly. He never leaves it strung when not in use, for the constant tension makes a bow very tired. He never stands it up against the sweat-house wall, but lays it carefully down so it can get its proper rest. He never handles it casually lest it be insulted, nor does he address or stare at another man's bow lest it take offense and lose its luck. He keeps it meticulously clean, talks to it in a quiet, dignified tone, and rubs deer marrow into the wood to give it a healthy glow and keep its spirit happy.

Other objects in the sweat-house include a pile of shells half-worked into beads, some blunted prayer sticks with tufts of eagle feathers attached, and (tucked into the rafters) a flute and some split-stick clappers. Several quivers made from the whole skins of foxes and bobcats are hanging from the rafters at the back wall of the sweat-house: within them are bundles of deer-hunting arrows tied together with deer-skin thongs. Also, lying here and there, are a few squarish steatite stones with grooves worked into them. These are "arrow straighteners." When an arrow becomes crooked, the stone is heated over a fire and the warped arrow is moved along the groove with a rapid rolling motion to straighten it.

By late afternoon the men of the village return to the sweat-house. The old man takes his pile of milkweed stalks and moves outside. The other men begin to heap wood on the fire. At first it smolders, and acrid smoke fills the sweat-house. The men cough and squint as they fan the fire. They kneel down to breathe the fresher air near the ground. Suddenly the fire springs to life, and the smoke begins to clear through the smoke hole in the roof. Heat now

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fills the enclosure. The men crowd together near the back wall of the sweat-house, and there is much joking and satisfaction among them. It is a good hot fire today; the older men feel a welcome looseness in their joints. Among them is a fourteen-year old youth, and they begin to tease him.

"Are you going to run out again today?" they ask.

"Make sure you run through the door and not through the wall," someone advises, and the other men laugh loud and long.

The young man does not answer. As the heat intensifies he feels the sweat ooze out of his pores and flow in rivulets down his body. Following the example of the others he runs a curved rib bone of a deer over his body to drain the sweat. He has been admitted to the sweat-house only a month before, yet (despite the teasing) he already feels a welcome easiness here, a sense of being at home. In fact, as he squats against the back wall he has the curious sense that he has been here a million times before. It is as if the closed sweat-house with its cluster of men is the real, eternal world, and the world of the village, the meadows, and the woods is merely a colorful but passing dream.

The fire grows hotter. The men stop talking. The young man feels the heat flaying his skin and searing his lungs. He puts his face to the ground to catch some of the cooler air. The heat scalds. Sweat stings his eyes. The other men are groaning, but the sound of their voices becomes very distant, like waves on a far-off shore. He is afraid he will lose consciousness. He does not want to be teased, no, no, he does not. But even as he resolves to hold his place a blind desperation overcomes him and he lurches past the other men, skirts the fire, and scurries out of the entrance hole. To his surprise, the other men follow close behind, all of them pushing through the hole into the cool, sun-lit air; after a brief run they throw themselves into the bracing waters of the stream. As they splash in the water several other men are laying aside the shinny rackets and wooden ball with which they have been playing, and make themselves ready to enter the sweat-house.

Virtually every Ohlone man visits the sweat-house at least once a day. After all, a man must keep himself scrupulously clean, especially when he is about to dance, gamble, or undertake any adventure of importance, and most particularly when he is preparing for a deer hunt. The sweat-house provides not just a thorough physical cleansing, but here at the very center of the men's spiritual world a deeper kind of cleansing as well.

Along with the daily sweat-bath a man preparing for a deer hunt undergoes still other purifications. He lives apart from his wife, neither

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touching her nor looking her in the face. He strictly avoids meat, fish, salt, and all oily foods, and he eats sparingly even of those foods that are permitted. He does not indulge in anger, and he follows innumerable prescriptions in regard to his bow, his arrows, and his general behavior. He spends most of his time, day and night, in and around the sweat-house.

Through denial and self-control the man turns his face from food, women, the life of the village, and from ordinary emotions. The discipline and deprivation strengthen him inwardly and at the same time open him to the larger spirit world. There are songs to sing, stories to tell, and dances to perform. He smokes tobacco, and one night—when he feels ready—he grinds some oyster shells to make lime, mixes the lime with tobacco, and swallows a large amount. The mixture acts as an emetic, and he goes to the edge of the village where he vomits repeatedly. The vomiting, along with the days of sweating and partial fasting, leave him feeling light-limbed and empty, almost transparent; and he goes to sleep that night with his mind open to dreams from the spirit world. He hopes, and perhaps fears a little, that an ally will come to him: a hunting ally (maybe even Mountain Lion) who will appear in a dream, give him advice, instruct him on seeking an amulet, or perhaps even teach him a power song.

That night the hunter dreams his dreams. The next morning he awakens before dawn, steps to the edge of the village, and thanks his ally. If the ally has given him special instructions—bathing in the creek, for example, or collecting a certain herb—he now fulfills his duty. Then he begins his final preparations. He sweats again and rubs angelica and other sweet-smelling herbs over himself and his bow and arrows. In a small mortar he grinds a ball of reddish clay into a powder, mixes the powder with grease, and with the help of another man carefully paints the proper designs over his entire body. He now puts on his deer-head mask and—with other deer hunters who have likewise prepared themselves—he leaves the village to seek the deer.

The hunt itself is a splendid sight. The hunter, often with a companion or two, his body painted, his bow and arrows properly treated, lean, hungry, alert, connected with the dream-world, his mind secure that he has followed all the proper rituals, approaches a herd of grazing deer. He wears a deer-head mask, and perhaps an amulet hangs from his neck. He moves toward the grazing grounds slowly, almost diffidently—in many ways more like a suitor than a potential conqueror.

As soon as he sights a herd he crouches low and begins to move like a deer. ("He played the pantomime to such perfection," noted a French sea

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captain who witnessed one such hunt, "that all our own hunters would have fired at him at thirty paces had they not been prevented.") So convincing is the hunter's imitation that he must keep his eye out for mountain lions and grizzly bears, who sometimes mistake him for a real deer.

As the hunter closes in on the herd he has three strategies to choose from. First, he can keep his distance and try to entice one or more of the deer toward him. Perhaps if he acts oddly, he can get a curious individual to wander over. During fawning season he blows through a folded leaf, making a bleating sound that often attracts an anxious doe. In rutting season he rubs his antlers against a bush, knocks two sticks together to suggest the clash of antlers, and repeatedly twists his head sideways—ploys calculated to enrage a buck and cause it to leave the herd to challenge him.

A second strategy often used when many men are hunting together is to spread out over a meadow and frighten the herd of deer. Disoriented and panicked, the deer run in circles. The hunters study the circles and, positioning themselves behind rocks and bushes, ambush the deer.

The third strategy is for the hunter to move closer to the herd, indeed to become part of the very herd he is hunting. The hunter crouches down and drags himself along the ground, little by little, with his left hand. In his right hand he carries a bow and a few arrows. He lowers and raises his head so as to imitate the motions of the deer. The herd catches sight of him. The deer perk up their ears and strain their necks to get a better view. Suddenly, they toss their heads, and with wide-eyed terror they bound away. The hunter, too, tosses his head and bounds after them. They stop and he stops. They run and he runs. The hunter seems almost to be dancing with the herd. Gradually the deer feel soothed, and—if the hunter has properly prepared himself—the herd accepts him. They push their noses into the cool, green grass and the hunter easily moves in among them. When it comes time to release his arrow the hunter is often so close that (according to one description) he can nudge the deer into a better position with his bow. He shoots, and the arrow hits silently. A deer collapses. The others look about confused. Another arrow is released, a second deer falls, and the herd now bolts wildly up the hill.

What is the hunter thinking about as he moves closer to the herd of deer? There is an intriguing suggestion by J. Alden Mason, an anthropologist who studied the Salinans just to the south of the Ohlones. Writes Mason: "The hunter always chewed tobacco assiduously while approaching the game, as this tended to make it drunk and less wary."

Chewing the strong native tobacco undoubtedly affected the hunter's





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mind; but why, by altering his own consciousness, should the hunter think he was making the deer "drunk and less wary?" To understand this—to understand the subtle ways in which the hunter felt that his mind was linked to the mind of a prey whose nature and intelligence were not very different from his own—is to glimpse some of the drama and spiritual complexity of deer hunting as it was practiced by the Indians of California.

Once the deer has been killed, the decorum and restraint that mark Ohlone deer hunting do not break down. The butchering and distribution of the meat also must be done according to the prescribed ways.

After a prayer and a gesture of thanks to the deer, the hunter carries the carcasses back to the village where members of his family have been singing deer chants to give him good luck. Here the deer is skinned, and the skin is given to the hunter's wife. The stomach is removed, stuffed with certain entrails and choice pieces of meat from around the kidneys, and presented to the men who accompanied the hunter. The liver is set aside for an old woman who has fed him acorn mush and seed cakes since he was a child. The sirloin, legs, and other parts of the deer are distributed among relatives and neighbors. The brains are placed on a rock to dry for later use in tanning hides. Antlers and various bones are saved for making awls, wedges, tule saws, and other tools.

The hunter, of course, is proud and happy. Fires burn throughout the village as different people roast their parts of the deer. Long thin strips of meat hang from bushes to dry. The people of the village smile at him warmly. He is *koxoenis*—the bringer of meat. The men of the village give him some of the fish they have caught, and the women present him with steamed roots and chunks of acorn bread. He now looks his wife fully in the face, and they smile at each other. Tonight he will return to his own dwelling and slide in among the rabbit-skin blankets next to her.

The hunter feels very successful. Yet strangely enough, he eats little—often none—of the deer he has killed. To do so would seem ill-mannered to the people of the village, and it would be dangerous in regard to the spirit world. Thus the deer hunt ends as it began—not as a crude, "primitive" killing and eating of an animal, but as a spiritually aware, socially conscious exercise in restraint and self-discipline.

## SACRED TIME

The Ohlones lived in a world swarming with power and magic. A man sitting on a rock might feel it swelling and growing beneath him until it raised him high into the air. Shamans could turn themselves into grizzly bears or transport themselves over tremendous distances in the forms of birds. Every object—the sun, a trail, a spring, even the common pestle—had a life and a force of its own.

The creation of this magical world was shrouded in mystery. There was a fight between two great forces (Good and Evil), followed by an immense flood. Waters covered the entire earth, wiping out all traces of the previous worlds and leaving only two islands. On one island (Mount Diablo, according to the people of the San Francisco Bay Area, Pico Blanco according to those near present-day Monterey) stood a Coyote, the only living thing in the world.

One day Coyote saw a feather floating on the water. As it reached the island, it turned into an Eagle, which spread its wings and flew to join him. Later Coyote and Eagle were joined by Hummingbird, and this trinity of animal-gods undertook the creation of a new race of people. It was a creation which began not with pomp and solemnity, but with a raunchy joke. Eagle told Coyote how to find a wife, commissioned him to make children, but neglected to tell him the “facts of life.”

“How will my children be raised?” asked Coyote. Eagle wouldn’t say. Coyote considered trying to make children in the woman’s knee. “No,” said Eagle. Next he considered trying to do it in her elbow, then in her eyebrow, and finally in the back of her neck. “No, no, no,” replied Eagle to each suggestion.

Hummingbird, meanwhile, could not restrain his mirth. He shouted out: “This place will be good, here in the belly.”

Then Coyote went off with this girl. He said to her: ‘Louse me.’

The girl found a woodtick on him. She was afraid and threw it away. Then Coyote seized her. He said: ‘Look for it, look for it. Eat my louse.’

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Then the girl put it into her mouth. ‘Swallow it, swallow it,’ he said. Then she swallowed it and became pregnant.

Despite the extraordinary and magical pregnancy, Coyote’s first attempts at raising a new race of people ended in a strangely moving, dream-like tragedy:

Then she was afraid. She ran away. She ran through the thorns. Coyote ran after her. He called to her: ‘Do not run through the brush.’

He made a good road for her. But she said: ‘I do not like this road.’

Then Coyote made a road with flowers on each side. Perhaps the girl would stop to take a flower. She said: ‘I am not used to going between flowers.’

Then Coyote said: ‘There is no help for it. I cannot stop her.’

So she ran to the ocean. Coyote was close to her. Just as he was going to take hold of her, she threw herself into the water, the waves came between them, and she turned into a sand flea. Coyote, diving after her, struck only sand.

He said: ‘I wanted to clasp my wife, but took hold of the sand.’

Afterwards, Coyote found another wife who proved more congenial, and with her he sired five children.

Then his children said: ‘Where shall we make our houses? Where shall we marry?’

Coyote told them: ‘Go out over the world.’

Then they went and founded five tribes with five different languages.

The Ohlone story-tellers told and retold the ancient myths of creation—tales of Eagle, Hummingbird, Coyote, Falcon, Lizard, Bear, and other spirits who appeared soon after the flood, spirits which (roughly like the centaurs and mermaids of the ancient Greeks) seem to have combined the attributes of humans, animals, and gods. But of all the spirits it was the character of Coyote that held the most interest. He was endlessly complex—as complex as the sly little wolf-like animal that prowled the outskirts of the Ohlone villages.

To begin with, Coyote was a great magician. His wife once went down to the seashore where she was so frightened by the sea-monster, Makewiks,

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that she fell dead. Coyote carried her away, built a fire, and laid her down beside it. Then he sang and danced over her. "He jumped three times and brought her back to life."

Coyote was also greedy. Once he caught a salmon and put it into the ashes of a fire to roast. Now and then he nibbled at the salmon. His children wanted to try some, but Coyote fooled them into thinking that he was eating fire.

Coyote was extremely lecherous too. In another story he seduced a beautiful woman by claiming that a thorn was stuck in his eye. He asked the woman to remove it with her teeth, and when she moved closer Coyote seized her.

Vain and jealous as well, Coyote could never forgive Hummingbird for being so much wiser and cleverer than he.

Coyote thought he knew more than anyone; but Hummingbird knew more. Then Coyote wanted to kill him. He caught him, struck him, and mashed him entirely. Then he went off. Hummingbird came to life, flew up, and cried: 'Lakun, dead,' in mockery.

Coyote caught him, made a fire, and put him in it. He and his people had gone only a little way when Hummingbird flew by crying: 'Lakun.'

Coyote said: 'How shall I kill him?'

They told him: 'The only way is for you to eat him.'

Then Coyote swallowed him. Hummingbird scratched him inside. Coyote said: 'What shall I do? I shall die.'

They said: 'You must let him out by defecating.'

Then Coyote let him out, and Hummingbird flew up crying: 'Lakun.'

The animal-gods of the Ohlones were far from omniscient, omnipotent, or even virtuous. They were very much like flesh-and-blood people and animals, except they had far more magical power. Yet there was more to Coyote than magic and trickery. He had a noble and tragic side as well; after all, he was quite literally the father of the human race, the animal-god who—more than any of the others—was responsible for creating people and teaching them how to live properly.

Now Coyote gave the people the carrying net. He gave them bows and arrows to kill rabbits. He said: 'You will have acorn mush for your food. You will gather acorns and you will have acorn bread to eat. Go down to the ocean and

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gather seaweed that you may eat it with your acorn mush and acorn bread. Gather it when the tide is low, and kill rabbits, and at low tide pick abalones and mussels to eat. When you can find nothing else, gather buckeyes for food. If the acorns are bitter, wash them out: and gather grass seeds for *pinole*, carrying them on your back in a basket. Look for these things of which I have told you. I have shown you how to gather food, and even though it rains a long time, people will not die of hunger. Now I am getting old. I cannot walk. Alas for me! Now I go.'

Coyote left the world. Eagle and Hummingbird grew old and left the world. Falcon and the host of other animal-gods also grew old and withdrew from the world. Sacred Time, the time of creation, came to an end, and the world as the Ohlones knew it began.

Where did the animal-gods go when they withdrew from the world? Among the California Indians this was never very clear. Some groups said they went to an island across the ocean. Others insisted they went up into the sky, went north, or went east. Among some people it mattered little where they went: among others it was a subject of endless speculation and contention. But one thing was very clear to everyone: wherever they went, it was not very far away. The animal-gods of Sacred Time still pervaded the everyday life of the world. Instead of retreating into a distant heaven, they were very much present—and still as tricky, emotional, unpredictable, and powerful as ever. If a person was lucky or unlucky in love, hunting, seed-gathering, gambling, fishing, or health, it was due to the influence of these beings who lived just a hair's breadth beyond the gates of ordinary consciousness.

To pass beyond ordinary consciousness and cultivate a special relationship with one or more of the animal-gods was a more or less constant activity for the Ohlones, as it was for other California Indians. Virtually all people (not merely shamans) needed at least some spiritual help to defend themselves against enemies, protect themselves on strange trails, avoid poisons, win at gambling, have successful love adventures, avoid rattlesnake bites, cure minor ailments, hunt and fish well, or live a long life. It was taken for granted that everyone had some power. A shaman differed from ordinary people mainly because he or she plunged deeper into the spirit world than the others, seeking richer and more varied contacts with the animal-gods, perhaps even cultivating relationships with the more unpredictable and dangerous of the spirit-world figures. The shaman could thus perform feats of

magic far beyond the capabilities of ordinary people.

To seek power from the spirit world, the Ohlones used methods that are well known throughout the world. They fasted, abstained from sex, danced long and repetitive dances, chanted, and sometimes performed feats of bodily punishment such as withstanding great heat in the sweat-house or suffering periods of cold or loneliness on mountain tops. They smoked tobacco (*mater* in the Mutsun dialect) to achieve intoxication (*materegnin*), and in some places they used jimsonweed. Often they set prayer sticks into the ground—sticks about a yard long decorated with feathers, hairnets, and offerings of meat, mussels, or fish—and throughout the day they performed innumerable rituals to show their respect for the spirit world.

If the power seeker was lucky (that is, accepted by power), the various religious activities led to dreams by which a person might easily pass out of the ordinary world and into the spirit world of the animal-gods. "They have an obstinate belief in whatever they dream," the missionary at Mission San Jose was to note, "to such a degree that it is impossible to persuade them that their dreams have no reality." For the Ohlones, as for most other Indians, dream events were fully as real as waking events, dream logic as valid a way of thinking as waking logic. Indeed, there was probably little difference, for the Ohlones seem to have lived at a time and in a spiritual place (how important it is for us to grasp this!) before the imagination was cast away and isolated from "mainstream" consciousness. Since dreams were real, when an animal-god appeared in the hollows of the dream mind, it was not mere illusion: it was a divine revelation.

Much of the time the animal-god gave the dreamer some good advice or performed an act which the dreamer would later think about and interpret. Other times, though—and this is what the vision-seeker generally hoped for—the animal-god offered itself as a helper. Often it taught the dreamer a magical chant: if the dreamer could remember it upon awakening and sing it exactly the right way, he or she could summon the power of the animal-god as an ally whenever needed. Other times, the animal-god instructed the dreamer to seek out a certain talisman or charm—a piece of quartz crystal, the root of a certain plant, or perhaps part of the animal in the dream—which it would imbue with power. Once the dreamer had acquired the talisman in the prescribed manner, he or she could, by rubbing it or talking to it, summon the power of the animal-god as a helper.

The Ohlones often sought out the animal-gods as helpers or advisors, but at the same time they were also deeply afraid of them. For these were still the animal-gods of the myths: amoral, unpredictable, greedy, irritable, tricky,

and very magical. Cultivating such helpers was a complicated, exasperating, and often dangerous undertaking. Sometimes, when a person needed them most, the helpers failed to come: perhaps they had wandered too far away, perhaps they were sulky or cross. Other times they came, but they lied, played tricks, or even acted vengefully. Now and then people were even destroyed by their own helpers.

In short, the spiritual power sought by the Ohlones was not the pure, abstract kind of power such as modern religions offer. Rather, it was power attached inseparably to the characters of the animal-gods. In addition to its good qualities, it had erratic and often malevolent aspects as well: hence the great ambivalence and restraint with which most Ohlones pursued spiritual contacts. In fact for some people the quest after power was simply too dangerous and troublesome, and they preferred to be without it—depending upon the power of friends and especially relatives to help them out of difficult situations.

As for the shamans, they too acted cautiously toward the world of power, but on a more intense level. More diligently than others, they cultivated allies, learned chants, collected talismans, and performed feats of extraordinary magic. Everyone in the village had witnessed these feats many times. A poisoning shaman could easily shoot invisible missiles through the air to strike one's enemies—and likewise could use magical powers to suck out missiles that other shamans had shot. In one village there was a shaman who could sing and dance his way toward clairvoyance, seeing into the future, finding lost objects, or diagnosing difficult illnesses. In another village lived a shaman who could influence the rain, the clouds, the hail, and the thunder. Some shamans, generally women, gained control over the fertility of plants, and the villagers brought them gifts to assure themselves of a plentiful acorn or seed harvest. Still other shamans could grant an abundance of fish, bring about the beaching of a whale, transform themselves into grizzly bears (becoming immortal in that guise), or instantly transport themselves over vast distances.

Whenever a person in the village began to accumulate shamanistic powers, the other villagers watched with mixed emotions. It was undeniably good to have a powerful shaman in their midst, one who could insure good crops, bring adequate rains, see into the future, and protect the people against enemies. Yet the people were also deeply suspicious, for the tremendous power of the shaman could always be turned against them. The weather shaman could, if crossed, bring on thunder, hail, bitter cold, strong winds, or floods that would cause great misery. The woman who influenced



the acorn harvest could, if treated badly, produce an infestation of oak moths or cause the oak flowers to wilt without bearing nuts—and in some years she did this to show her power or just to be spiteful. Rattlesnake shamans not only knew how to cure snake bites, but they could use their powers to cause snake bites. The shaman who healed could also scourge his enemies with disease.

So powerful were the shamans that many of them could poison an enemy fifty miles away, and later that night send an owl to fly across the enemy's path and literally frightened him to death. Grizzly bear shamans, with poison stored in their claws and teeth, could go on a killing rampage. The fear of shamans was so pervasive that people avoided collecting wealth or flaunting possessions—not only because it was considered rude—but also because such behavior might attract the attention of unscrupulous shamans who were thought to poison wealthy people and then drain them of their wealth by prolonging the cure.

It was even rumored that certain shamans resorted to what we would call diabolical witchcraft: killing young women with poison, for example, stuffing their bodies with straw, and keeping them hidden in secret caves guarded by all sorts of hideous monsters. A shaman who went that far would eventually have to be ambushed and killed; but such an undertaking was extremely dangerous, and the people did not like to think very much about it.

The Ohlones envisioned the workings of the world largely in terms of witchcraft and magic. That does not mean, however, that they were a terror-ridden people, living in constant dread of the workings of shamans, their lives dominated by the fear of sorcery. The idea of evil sorcery, horrible as it might seem to us, was commonplace to the Ohlones. Prudent people took appropriate measures not to bring misfortune upon themselves. They took care not to insult others, cheat at gambling, commit adultery, flaunt possessions, or neglect any of their social or spiritual obligations. In many ways the fear of sorcery served in place of a formal code of laws. But while everyone was aware of sorcery and acted accordingly, very few people dwelled morbidly on the subject. Keeping on the good side of power was a casual and continual occupation, a habit more than anything else. The Ohlones were not obsessed with sorcery any more than we (to borrow Anna Gayton's analogy) are obsessed with germs in our food, gaslines that run under our streets, electricity that runs through our houses, airplanes that fly overhead, automobiles that speed along our highways, or any of the other dangers of our own world—dangers that an Ohlone would find absolutely terrifying even to contemplate.

The fact was that the Ohlones were well acquainted with the idea of sorcery, and they made allowances for it in nearly every action. For them it was simply a fact of life. It was part of a world that they took entirely for granted, a world in which they felt very comfortable, a world that was conceptually quite different from our own.

A simplified picture of the Ohlone universe shows it as divided into the ordinary world of the senses, inhabited by people, animals, plants, and physical objects, and the spiritual world inhabited by the animal-gods. People and things in the ordinary world got their power from the spirit world. A stone could become infused with the power of an animal-god roughly the way a wafer and a glass of wine might, for a Catholic, take on extraordinary spiritual qualities.

But in reality, things were not that simple; for the world of common objects, far from being lifeless and powerless, was in and of itself superbly, anarchistically alive. Not only could ordinary things draw considerable power from the spirit world, but they had an aliveness and power of their own. Everything did: people, animals, plants, bows, arrows, cradles, pestles, baskets, springs, trails, boats, trees, feathers, natural objects and manufactured objects as well. Everything was alive, everything had character, power, and magic, and consequently everything had to be dealt with properly.

A view of the world that bestows life on all things (or, as the Ohlones saw it, recognizes the aliveness of all things) is called "animism." Our own culture engages in animism, but in a small way: gamblers talk to their dice as if the dice had a will and intelligence of their own, gardeners talk to their plants, a driver pleads with a stalled car.

For us animism is a fringe phenomenon, but for the Ohlones and other Indians it was central to their understanding of how the world worked. Everything had intelligence, willfulness, and power, everything demanded a personal relationship. When a man went hunting, not only did the deer have life and power, but so did his bows, arrows, and deer-head decoy. If he did not treat his bow properly—if he did not talk to it in the right tone of voice, if he failed to anoint it with its favorite oils, or if he allowed a woman to touch it—it would get angry with him and turn against him. If he was so careless as to drop the deer-head decoy on the ground, it would eventually find a way of getting even—perhaps by jabbing him with the antler, or jumping off his head at a crucial moment during a hunt. Similarly, a woman might refuse to lend her pestle to someone else, not because she was greedy, but because her

pestle was fastidious and did not like to be touched by strangers.

Everything had power, but not equal power. A river stone had very little power of its own, while springs, rivers, redwood trees, the moon, the stars, and other major phenomena had not only great power but great intelligence as well. During thunderstorms the Ohlones came out of their houses to admonish the thunder for being too loud, and during an eclipse of the moon they shouted their discouragement and disapproval. They shouted at the heavens not just to vent their fears, but because they thoroughly believed that if they yelled loud enough the thunder or the eclipsed moon would hear them and respond to their distress. And when the thunder ceased or the eclipse reversed itself, the people knew for sure that they had been heard.

The sun in particular was powerful—perhaps the most powerful thing in the entire universe. The Ohlones greeted it every morning with shouts of joy and approval. At the winter solstice, when the sun was at its lowest point (the Ohlones must have been careful observers of the heavens to have noted this) the people held special ceremonies. They talked to the sun throughout the day and gave it offerings of meal, beads, shells, and whiffs of tobacco smoke. They felt that the sun was particularly fond of tobacco because people were fond of tobacco, and they believed that both people and the sun had very similar natures.

For the most part power was seen as the attribute of something specific: the sun, a pestle, an animal-god, or whatever. But there was, in addition, another kind of power, more abstract in nature, that was thought of as free-floating throughout the universe. This was power left over from Sacred Time, shreds of power, as it were, that had long since detached themselves from physical objects. This kind of power could also be sought, tamed, and collected by people, especially shamans. Or it might of its own accord attach itself to some person or object, suddenly filling a previously powerless thing with extraordinary magic, and adding still another element of unpredictability to the world.

The Ohlones, then, lived in a world perhaps somewhat like a Van Gogh painting, shimmering and alive with movement and energy in ever-changing patterns. It was a world in which thousands of living, feeling, magical things, all operating on dream-logic, carried out their individual actions. It was a basically anarchistic world of great poetry, often great humor, and especially great complexity. Every Ohlone adult had a prodigious amount of knowledge—knowledge needed for day-to-day life—about how the different kinds of “poisons” (bad powers) worked and about the rules for getting along in a

world full of erratic, independent, sometimes hostile entities. Shamans, gamblers, and fishermen often collected over a thousand different songs to help them in their pursuits.

In the Ohlone world religion was not isolated from daily life, something to be thought about once a week in the special setting of a church or shrine. Power was everywhere, in everything, and therefore every act was religious. Hunting a deer, walking on a trail, making a basket, or pounding acorns were all done with continual reference to the world of power. The people fasted, abstained from sex, and smoked tobacco to court power. They danced the great cycle of dances to put themselves into synchronization with the world of power.

Everything was religious. But Ohlone religion was one of direct action rather than one of tenets and faith. Dogma, so central to European religions, was not very important to the Ohlones. It did not matter whether one believed that Eagle flew east or west after the creation of the world: some groups believed one thing, other groups believed something else, and for still other groups it was a matter of doubt or complete disinterest. What did matter was that one knew how to get along with Eagle, acquire Eagle's power, and display that power in one's relationship with others. Thus Ohlone religion was one without dogma, churches, or priests: it was a religion so pervasive (like the air) that the missionaries who first visited the area missed seeing it entirely and concluded (how wrong could they be!) that “these Indians have no religion.”

In the Ohlone world herds of elk and antelope wandered over the grasslands. Grizzly bears, poised along the banks of the rivers, now and then lunged after a silver-flashing salmon. Giant condors hovered in the sky. Billows of fog rolled in from the ocean and settled into the redwood groves. The people in the tiny villages went about their daily affairs in a naturally and supernaturally alive and magnificent world.

But deep down they knew that their world was doomed, destined for complete destruction. In the beginning, at Sacred Time, power was pure and awesome. But since then it was forever slipping away, diminishing in quality, quantity, and intensity. The people of today were less powerful than their grandparents before them. A deep-rooted pessimism and fatalism ran through their view of the world. Things were getting worse with each generation. And some time in the future this magnificent world, like the worlds before it, would be sapped of power. The people would eventually stop doing their dances and ceremonies, and the Ohlone world—their beautiful, living



world—would collapse in upon itself and dissolve into chaos. Then perhaps the spirits would rise up again, mysteriously reborn from a flood—spirits like Eagle, Coyote, and Hummingbird—to create once more a fresh, clear, awesomely powerful world, a world perhaps populated by a new race of people, but a world that would most assuredly be without Ohlones.

## THE ISLAND OF THE DEAD

A man is dying. His family sends for the shaman, as they have done many times before, and the shaman begins the curing ceremony once more. She sings her chants and summons her helpers. But suddenly, right in the middle, she stops and walks out of the house. It is no use. It is no use. She will return some of the beads and skins the family has sent her. He is dying. Her helpers can do nothing. Death comes to everyone. She shakes her head hopelessly. In the end there is nothing but death....

Death to the Ohlones was a matter of enormous grief. In these tiny villages every person was well known and had a special place. Even before a man breathed his last, the villagers began sobbing and crying. When he finally died, the widow broke into a shrill, penetrating wail that rose in waves of anguish and filled the entire village. She screamed and screamed. She reached blindly for her pestle, beat herself on her breasts, and then fell to the ground still wailing and sobbing. Later she would singe her hair close to the scalp and cover her face with ashes and pitch.

Death brought with it the deepest and most heart-felt grief. But still there were ceremonies that had to be followed. The man's ghost demanded proper treatment and would be fearfully angry if the ceremonies were neglected. At the time of a death, figures from the spirit world mixed closely with the villagers. These were dangerous times: the people, especially the widow, were extremely vulnerable.

Messengers were sent to the surrounding villages, and soon people arrived from all around to join in the wailing. Distraught friends and relatives gathered firewood and heaped it onto a funeral pyre. Others attended to the corpse. They closed the eyes and adorned the body with feathers, flowers, and beads. They flexed the man's body, placing his knees under his chin and hands against his cheeks. After tying the body into this flexed position, they wrapped it in blankets and skins and laid it upon the pyre. Then going through the village they collected the man's possessions. His bow, arrows, blankets, skins, deer-head decoy, dance regalia, medicine mortar—everything he owned—was broken, cracked, or disfigured in some way (in other