

THE RITUAL AND MYTH OF POMO GIFT BASKETS

JEANNINE GORESKI
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY
FALL 1988

Art is a way of seeing, and what we see in art helps to define what we understand by the word "reality". We do not all see the same things. Though the dominant societies usually presume that their vision represents the sole truth about the world, each society (and often individuals within the same society) sees reality uniquely. The complex process by which the artist transforms the act of seeing into a vision of the world is one of the consummate mysteries of the arts---one of the reasons that art is inseparable from religion and philosophy for most tribal peoples. This act of envisioning and then engendering a work of art represents an important and powerful ritual. Making images is one of the central ways by which humankind ritualizes experience and gains personal and tribal access to the ineffable ...the unspeakable and ultimate substance of reality.

-Jamake Highwater

Traditional basketmakers provide us with a link to the past. Persistently through time and cultures, man has created baskets. These baskets represent the rhythms of their makers lives. Sometimes slowly, sometimes swiftly, always demonstrating respect for materials and the precious link between man and his natural environment. Rossbach refers to basketmaking, "as something related to a place and a way of life."² They heighten our awareness of such rhythms as work, nourishment, rest and birth, death, rebirth. Ritualistic in process and function, they inform and enlighten.

Among the Pomo Indians of northern California there exists a tradition of very small, highly decorated, coiled baskets. These are gift baskets. They are presented at times of birth, marriage, death, and used by the shaman during rituals of healing and burial. These baskets are inhabited by spirits.

Cultural barriers obviously exist. Information as to the personal and cultural significance of these gift baskets is guarded. Though obstructed from a full understanding, resources available offer a glimpse of the ritual and myth invested in these tiny forms.

The ritual of the gift basket begins with the process of gathering materials in the summer months. Willow is gathered for the warp; sedge grass, redbud, and bulrush for the weft. Feathers of the woodpecker (red), meadowlark (yellow), robin (rust), California jay (blue), mallard

(green), and quail (black), along with trade beads and shells are collected for surface embellishment. In the winter months, the baskets are made, using minimal tools: needle, awl, knife, and a bowl. It is not unusual for a basket ranging from one to three inches in height to consume several months of work and then to be burned as part of the funeral ceremony.³

At the Pacific Basketmakers Symposium and Exhibit, in 1981, Mabel M^CKay, the Pomo basketmaker from Santa Rosa, California attested to the religious aspects of her art:

It is important, for example, that when Mabel M^CKay, the Pomo basketmaker, explained her art to the other basketmakers, she opened her talk with a long prayer and song which had been given to her to heal disease. The prayer, among other things, asked "the spirit to accept her," and in her talk she went on to discuss how various of her baskets were used for herb medicines as well as in various other rituals. She indicated how fully pregnant with meaning baskets can be even to the point of being dangerous, and insisted that what she had learned about basketmaking was never learned from books but had been given to her by the spirits. In fact, little of her presentation had to do with the technology and craft of basketmaking, but rather she concerned herself with her relationship to Pomo religious practices, herb cures, and related customs, both sacred and secular. When Mrs. M^CKay passed a small plastic container of tiny baskets around the room saying that they were strongly medicinal and should not be touched, when she told some anecdotes about the use of medicine baskets in the Pomo tribe, and when she had made clear all of her spiritual perceptions of basketmaking, it had become abundantly clear that for her--and we may logically assume for Pomos in general baskets are not simply seen as items to hold things in. Rather, baskets are so richly evocative of powerful forces that they

need to be produced, opened, and used only with the strictest adherence to rules and customs which grow out of the very specific historical and religious backgrounds of that particular tribe. Such perspectives allow us to go beyond the basket into the meaning of the basket, allow us to see the basket not as an item in and of itself only, but as the focal point or gathering place for a cluster of ideas which may derive from some of the most important philosophical perspectives in the experience of a group of people.⁴

The form of a Pomo gift basket is distinctive. Curving outward from it's base, it reaches it's fullest, half-spherical shape and begins curving back in toward the rim. Occasionally oblong baskets are seen, also closing in toward the rim. Designs are woven to the edge, seemingly moving off the basket and into space.

Traditional designs are accepted, "as part of the being of the basket. Designs are not laid on - or made up. They are an organic part of basket weaving, as they follow the form and technique."⁵ A single line of stitches or break in the continuity of the design is called the "dau", or door of the basket through which the basket spirits escape when they die, when the basket is destroyed.

Coiled basketry is constructed by a spiraling process. Starting at the center bottom, the basket spirals upward and outward, resulting in feelings of movement and growth in the finished basket.

Feathers are affixed in the process of coiling: sporadically, at the rim, or covering the entire surface of a gift basket. Rossbach interprets these feathered

baskets:

The Pomo basket is a marvelous reconstitution of a bird. The feathers arranged over the three-dimensional surface of the basket allow the light to fall in various ways to reveal the depth of color and iridescence of feathers covering a bird. Such an ingenious and painstaking transference of feathers, one by one, from the breast of the bird to the covered surface of a basket is a re-creation closely related to the covering of a basket surface with leather or paper to render the traditional basket shape in a material which is familiar in another shape. All the while, the basketry maintains it's identity apart from the surface decoration. The basket is somewhere inside.⁶

Also "somewhere inside" these baskets are the myths of the Pomo people. "To the Pomo of older times, baskets could assume the status almost of living things - dream-inspired poetic entities of mind and mythology."⁷

The following Pomo myths explain the basket spirits and the basketmakers responsibilities to them.

THE MYTH OF THE DAU

When the world-maker, the coyote spirit, had concluded his work of creating the world and man, he seated himself to rest, congratulating himself upon the many good works he had done. At this juncture the Pika Namo, or basket spirits, came before him and petitioned him to give them a village or home to be theirs always. The coyote spirit graciously acceded, and said to them, that there, on the surface of baskets, they might have a home which should be theirs always, he then addressing the basket spirits, said, "You basket spirits, young men and young women, old men and old women, children all, here is a good home for you all, to be yours always. If you die, you will lie in the ground four days here, then you will ascend to the upper sky to live forever, where there is no sickness, where it is always day, where all are happy.

"The door (dau) of the basket will always keep swinging for you to escape through when

you die."

But the basket spirits were discontented and kept crying out as if in pain.

"What are you doing down there?" the coyote spirit asked. "We said nothing," they said. "We talk good; we speak discourses to the dead ones. Now we basket spirits are going to do good; you have spoken wisely to us and we will remember it. We will stay in this home you have given us until we die and can go to the sky home."⁸

THE LEGEND OF KALTOI

There was a woman in Gravelly Valley, near Kaltai, who had failed to make a dau on a basket. To her appeared the spirit of the basket, saying, "you have always neglected to make a door for our spirits to escape by. You shall never go the the home above over there, I say to you. Good women never fail to make daus, I tell you. I will myself cause you to die; this instant shall you die.

Then the Kaltai woman said, "O, my basket spirit, spare me now, and after this I will never fail to make daus in my baskets. When I die I will meet you in the sky-home above, where we will always be good, where day always stays, where you and I will live together. O, basket spirit, my heart is good now. My brain will stay good. If I die now, you will come to me afterwards and we will live friends forever."

Then the world-maker said, "It is good. I accept this woman's life as a sacrifice, and you may live in the sky home together."

Then the⁹ woman, weeping, accepted her fate and died.

In these myths the basket spirits are personified. They have the intelligence and power to "speak discourses to the dead ones." They have the power to cause human death. The myths prove basketmaking to be a serious undertaking. One that involves creation, responsibility, and consequence. That in mind, the basketmaker's art becomes a sacred process, a ritual in and of itself.



Coil Basket, Pomo



Mabel M^CKay

ENDNOTES

¹Jamake Highwater. The Primal Mind. NAL Penguin Inc., New York, N.Y., 1982 p. 58.

²Ed Rossbach. Baskets As Textile Art. Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York, N.Y., 1973, p. 8.

³Sandra Corrie Newman. Indian Basket Weaving. Northland Press, Flagstaff, Arizona, 1974, p. 6.

⁴Suzi Jones, editor. Pacific Basket Makers: A Living Tradition. University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks, Alaska, 1983, p. 29.

⁵Newman. p. 20.

⁶Rossbach. p. 85.

⁷Jones. p. 50.

⁸S. A. Barrett. Pomo Myths. Public Museum of the City of Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1933, p. 380.

⁹Ibid. p. 381.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barrett, S. A.. "Ceremonies of the Pomo Indians." University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology. 12, (1917).
- ". "Pomo Bear Doctors." University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology. 12, (1917).
- ". "Pomo Indian Basketry." University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology. 7, (1908).
- ". "Pomo Myths." Bulletin of the Public Museum of the City of Milwaukee. 15. (1933).
- Bovis, Pierre and Miles, Charles. American Indian and Eskimo Basketry. San Francisco, California: Pierre Bovis, 1969.
- Highwater, Jamake. The Primal Mind. New York, N.Y.: NAL Penguin Inc., 1982.
- James, George Wharton. Indian Basketry. New York, N.Y.: Dover Publications Inc., 1972.
- Loeb, Edwin M. "Pomo Folkways." University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology. 19, (1926).
- Jones, Suzi, ed.. Pacific Basket Makers: A Living Tradition. Fairbanks, Alaska: University of Alaska Museum, 1983.
- Metzler, Sandra. "A Family Album of Pomo Baskets." Fiberarts. 11, (1984).
- Newman, Sandra Corrie. Indian Basket Weaving. Flagstaff, Arizona: Northland Press, 1974.
- Roszbach, Ed. Baskets As Textile Art. New York, N.Y.: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1973.