

The Spiritual Practice Of Pomo Basket Weaving

John Parulis, Native American History 151. October 31, 2006

Driving up north to Ukiah, the October hills and changing vineyard leaves lined the route like a palisade of Impressionist paintings. This was and is Pomo country – a region now defined by Sonoma, Mendocino and Lake Counties. I was on my way to visit a friend from the past, a Pomo basket weaver, Susan Billy. Now she's a grandmother. Susan Billy began weaving in 1973 when she was 22 year old. She met up with her great aunt, Elsie Allen and asked to be her student. Susan's grandmother, Susie Billy, had also been a famous Pomo weaver. Susan was waiting on customers in her shop, called Bead Fever, in downtown Ukiah. When I poked my head through the door, she shot me a big smile, said, "Hi, John." and went back to her customers, two Indian women. I knew to wait patiently and lost myself in beads and books on weaving and the Pomo.

The people who became known as the Pomo, lived in this region for over 10,000 years and numbered around 20,000 people before various white groups established their presence, beginning with the Russian at Fort Ross in 1811. The Pomo spoke seven unrelated languages that were unintelligible to those of other Pomo tribes with numerous dialects within these seven language groups. According to Susan, they still speak three languages. These people belonged to over 70 different village groups. Each village group lived near one or two creeks and their water sheds and each village group's land area encompassed about a 20 mile perimeter. Abundant game and diverse edible plant life gave the Pomos the time to develop a rich craft life that expressed itself eloquently in basket making.

The Pomos were guided by a range of community members in addition to chiefs. These were healers, craftspeople, heads of families and ceremonial leaders who served important leadership functions. The Pomos had an expansive knowledge of their land and had names for virtually every natural feature within their range. Their sense of spirituality infused everything they did, ensuring a sense of care and consideration in the way resources were used. This continues to the present. Susan said that when she and her great aunt, Elsie Allen, went out to the river beds near Ukiah to gather sedge root and other basket making materials, they were constantly talking to the plants with respect and thankfulness and took care to make sure that the sites were left healthy. They took only what was needed.

Like most Indian people in America, the Pomo suffered greatly under white land acquisition (tribes refer to this as theft), and a multi-pronged cultural warfare. From the early 1800's to about the 1860's, the Pomo were either enslaved, killed or infected with diseases, by Mexican land holders, Russians, missionaries, ranchers and the U.S. Army. There was a treaty (Guadalupe Hidalgo) in 1848 that ended the war between Mexico and the United States that forbade slavery. Unfortunately, this did not apply to Indians. A particularly horrible massacre occurred at Clear Lake on a small island in the north of the lake called Bloody Island, where 188 Pomo men, women and children were slaughtered by the U.S. Army in May of 1850. By the early 20th century, the once great Pomo population was reduced to about 1200 people.

In addition to losing people, great tracts of land were lost as well. Traditional ways of doing things couldn't compete with the new cash based economy of the whites. In 1880, Pomo resilience sprang forth. Seven Pomo tribal leaders got together and convinced their people to begin purchasing land that they could own collectively. These lands became the ranchieras. This new found collective purchasing power was augmented by the development of a commercial market in baskets. Wealthy whites traveling to the hot springs near Ukiah and Middletown and other sites along what is now Highway 101, acquired a desire for the exquisite basketry of the Pomos. In the 1920's, when many Pomos labored for about a dollar to a dollar fifty per day doing ranch work, laundry and harvesting, the sale of fine baskets brought in the equivalent of a couple of months of wages.

I headed out to the Grace Hudson Museum, not too far from Susan's shop, as more customers were pouring into Bead Fever. The Hudsons came to Ukiah in the late 1800's. Grace was a talented painter and her husband, John, was a doctor, scholar and collector of Indian basketry and other artifacts. Today, beside their home sits an excellent museum of Grace's paintings, depicting life with the Pomos and a stunning collection of Pomo baskets and Grace's father's photographs.

In Greg Sarris' book, *Mabel McKay, Weaving the Dream*, Pomo medicine healer and basket weaver, Mabel McKay said that the baskets are "living things". Mabel cured people with traditional medicine and dream inspired woven baskets. This notion of living baskets resonates in the Hudson's Pomo basket room. I felt awed, as if I were in the presence of silent sentinels from a profound tradition. Many different types of baskets are on display at the museum.

Baskets were made for almost every occasion and activity – capturing fish, storing and carrying huge loads, cooking, carrying infants, for elements in clothing and for ceremony. They ranged in size from very large to about a third the size of a thumbnail. (see photo)

Baskets were made for birth, death, childhood, puberty, marriages, feasts and healing. Mabel McKay's baskets were "dreamed" and had very specific healing purposes for individual people. The Pomos used seven different kinds of baskets for acorn mush alone. They used around twenty two other types of baskets, each with their own specific purpose. Men would weave the heavier, utilitarian baskets used in hunting, fishing and load carrying. This function disappeared with modernity but women, as always, carried the tradition of making the more intricate and artistic baskets that have achieved international status as objects of rare beauty and craft. Throughout the period from the 1890's to 1929, there was a vigorous market for Pomo baskets. Pomos could earn much more for their baskets than for working the fields or doing laundry. However, many baskets left their native communities with these sales. Weavers could hardly keep up with the demand. With the Stock Market Crash of 1929, demand for the baskets plummeted and the craft fell to older women to maintain and protect. In 1939, Pomo women formed the "Pomo Women's Club", to foster cultural pride and to fight the discrimination that was infecting Ukiah. The club promoted basket weaving displays and demonstrations, a tradition in itself that continues to the present. Today, having survived Termination in the 50's and cultural attacks from Christian religious groups, the Pomos live on 17 ranchieras in Sonoma, Mendocino and Lake Counties. A number of Pomos live off reservation.

In the museum store, I found a great book by Elsie Allen, called "*Pomo Basketmaking, A Supreme Art For The Weaver*". In Chapter 2, Elsie explains how the process starts.

The materials for baskets were usually sedge root, willow shoots and roots, bulrush or blackroot, redbud shoots, sometimes bracken fern and a variety of colorful bird feathers, abalone and other types of shells, magnesite beads and sometimes glass beads. In the spring time, trips are made to the river bed to gather bulrush and sedge roots. Also gathered in the spring are straight willow twigs. Redbud shoots, used for the darker reddish colors in basket designs are gathered in October. Susan told me that good redbud is hard to obtain around Ukiah, so she has to travel to Clear Lake for that. All these materials are gathered with a thankful heart. Susan said that her great aunt Elsie used to talk continually to the plants. They were, after all, living things who were giving themselves for something useful and beautiful. Sedge gathering was done with care. Leaving behind about half of what was found strengthened the growth and soil holding properties of the roots, which served to stabilize creek banks. Later, in the shop, I asked Susan if they actually cultivated or tended these wild areas and she looked up at me with a wicked smile and said, "Sure, did you think we were 'wild' Indians just going into the wild?"

According to Elsie Allen, the hardest part of the process is the preparation of each twig. They have to be cleaned, stripped, whittled and sorted into sizes and then dried in the hot sun for two or three days. Willow roots had to be carefully scraped to uniform thickness because they are thick at one end and thin at the other. After drying, they are stored in a dry place for a year in order to ensure that the materials will produce tight, even weaves. Dying of the bulrush root takes

about three to six months in a concoction of black walnuts, rusty metal and ashes in water. All these materials were soaked in water just before weaving in order to restore flexibility. Each weaver held intricate designs in her mind, or as in Mabel McKay's case, basket designs were "dreamed". It was considered taboo to place depictions of humans in the designs of baskets and the designs of medicine weavers like Mabel could not be copied. There are two types of weaves used, twining and coiling. There are seven twining techniques and two types of coiling techniques. The Pomo used both. Twining is a form of weaving achieved by interlacing horizontal struts, called wefts, between vertical shafts, called warps, at right angles. This method was employed for making fish traps, baby carriers and large baskets. The other method, coiling, involved sewing. There is one stick and three stick coiling. Sedge roots form the base for a system that begins with intricate knots. Willow shoots are inserted into the main knot, and then sedge is coiled around each willow to form a continual spiral. An awl (in old times, a sharpened deer bone) was used to punch holes for the willow root to enter and sedge was coiled around this. The coil grew by weaving them together with sedge, tightening the coils and drawing up the sides, until it reached the top. Each time a sedge root is added, it has to be trimmed so that the overlap is smooth and undetectable. Willow overlaps are treated similarly but they are bound together by sedge roots. At the end of the final coil, the last willow is trimmed to a sharp point and wrapped tightly with roots until snug. If done properly, the spot where the last coil ends can hardly be seen. The majesty of this art, which Susan prefers to be known as a spiritual practice, comes about when designs in feathers, beads, bulrush and redbud have been woven into this spiral. The Pomo weavers excelled at this and achieved international notoriety. Various shapes and bends were carefully calculated and worked to achieve uniform excellence. There is a 3 willow stick method that employs similar techniques. In her book, Elsie said that in the old days, a good three stick

weave resulted in baskets that could hold water. Hot rocks were dropped into these water vessels and food, like acorn mush, was cooked in them. If all this weaving sounds pretty complicated, it is. According to Mabel McKay, the rules were, “no menstruating, liquor or drugs when weaving...the moon time for women is a time for them to relax leave things alone.” (Sarris p.112) When asked by academics how she made those extremely tiny baskets, Mabel said “The Spirit”. (Sarris p.113)

Susan’s great aunt, Elsie Allen, broke with tradition when her mother, Annie Burke, asked her not to bury her baskets with her when she left for the Spirit World. Elsie honored this request and attracted a great deal of criticism from other tribe members. Susan told me that Elsie was even ostracized over this issue. Susan said that Annie Burke told Elsie this had to be done because there were fewer weavers and the survival of the art and spiritual practice of Pomo basket weaving would be at risk. Elsie was also criticized for writing her book that is referenced in this paper. Tradition had the practice of weaving being handed only to relatives. Elsie opened it up to others.

“Elsie felt that if she didn’t share what she knew, it would die. She didn’t want this to happen, so she broke the traditions. She got a lot of flack, but the time was right for people to listen to her.”

Kathleen Smith, Pomo (Billy, p.21)

Elsie's collection of baskets can be seen today at the Santa Rosa Junior College Jesse Peter Museum. This is located at 1501 Mendocino Avenue in Santa Rosa, California.

During a dinner break at the store after the customers left, Susan signed her book for me and told me that it's hard to make baskets today because of the intense time commitment required. Baskets can take anywhere from months to a year to a lifetime to make. Susan doesn't make her baskets for sale. Access to the materials is getting more difficult as well, as creeks and rivers are dammed and housing developments and private property encroach on former gathering sites. Sometimes weavers have to travel great distances in order to gather materials. Adaptability has been called forth in unusual ways. In the 1970's, Elsie, together with non-Indians, transplanted sedge away from the soon to be flooded Warm Springs Dam area, a former gathering site, to a protected piece of land nearby. Susan said that you don't even start the gathering process unless you are committed to seeing the creation of the basket all the way through to completion. With all her responsibilities, she now makes one basket a year. When I asked her how many basket weavers there are today, Susan said she didn't know or wouldn't say. This is partly because of concerns to protect these weavers from basket collectors and also to honor their need to fully engage in their family life.

I thanked Susan for the time she spent with me and promised to visit her again soon. As I drove home in the fading light of the autumn day, I kept thinking about how so much of Pomo life is bound together by the woven fabric of time and tradition. I thought about how the baskets were like people themselves, standing as sacred objects, uniting people, place and the cycles of time.

“Among our people, both men and women were basketmakers. Everything in our lifestyle was connected to those baskets. Our lives were bound the way the baskets were bound together.”

Susan Billy, Ukiah Pomo

(Since 1990, Susan has been the featured weaver or guest curator at New York's Museum of Natural History, Brooklyn Museum, National Museum of the American Indian/The Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., The De Young Museum in San Francisco, the Mendocino County Museum in Willits, and in an exhibition at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington D.C. where she presented Pomo basket weaving techniques. She also provided the HBO movie *Grand Avenue*, produced by Robert Redford and written by Greg Sarris, with original Pomo artifacts and basketry coaching. Susan's sole proprietor business, Bead Fever, in downtown Ukiah, is in its 20th year.) Ref. mcn.org

“The first thought I have when I see or touch a Pomo basket is of my ancestors. Was the weaver my great aunt, my great grandmother, or great great grandmother? I never knew any of these ladies but when I am with their baskets, I feel they are with me too.”

Quote from an unidentified Pomo woman from Grace Hudson Museum Exhibit

References

Books

Mabel McKay, Weaving The Dream by Greg Sarris

Pomo Basketmaking, A Supreme Art For The Weaver by Elsie Allen

The Pomo Indians Of California, And Their Neighbors by Vinson Brown and Douglas Andrews

Remembering Your Relations, The Elsie Allen Baskets, Family & Friends by Suzanne Abel-Vidor,
Dot Brovarney, Susan Billy

Web Sites

<http://www.mcn.org/a/mendoart/ae/199903/susan.html> (Susan Billy Bio)

<http://www.kstrom.net/isk/art/basket/pomohist.html> (The California Pomo People, Brief History)

<http://www.gracehudsonmuseum.org/> (Grace Hudson Museum, Pomo Basket Collection)

Personal Interview

Susan Billy, Pomo Master Basket Weaver, Teacher, Grandmother

Pictures of Pomo Baskets, Weavers and Materials



Baskets from the late 19th Century. Grace Hudson Museum



Basket Materials. From left, sedge coils, redbud coil, willow bundle, unpeeled bulrush bundle, prepared & split bulrush, short sedge bundle, deer bone awl, large awl, pocket knife & milkweed string.

(Billy p. 98)



Mabel McKay holding sedge root at Warm Springs Dam site
(Billy p. 78)



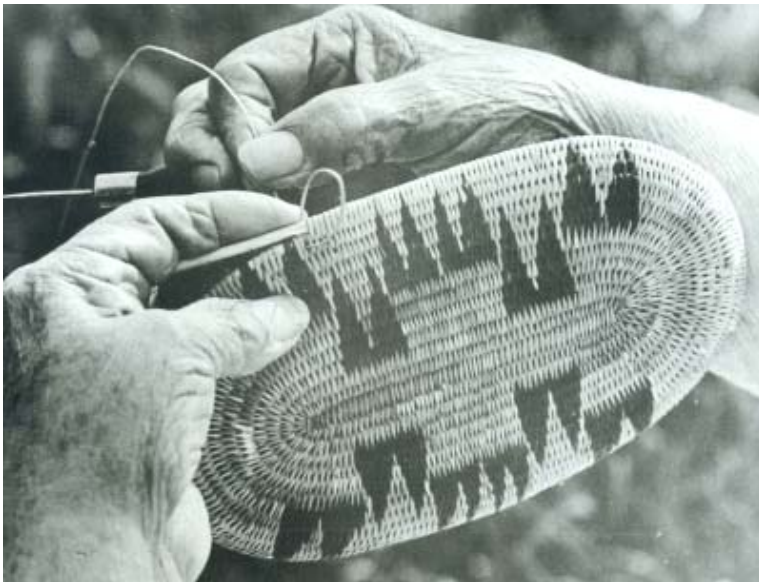
One of Mabel's tiny baskets



Elsie Allen cutting willow at Warm Springs Dam site
(Billy p. 92)



Susan Billy (Billy p. 48)



*Detail of Lara Somersal coiling a one
stick basket, Dry Creek Ranchiera
(Billy p.97)*



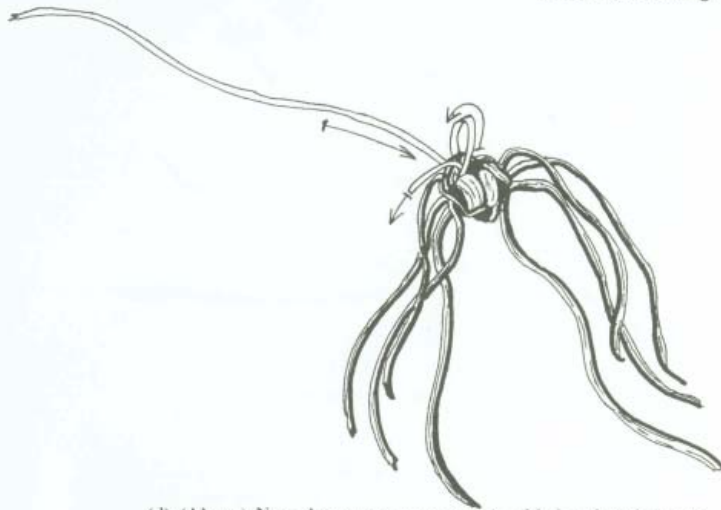
Susan Billy, coiled baskets, 1975, 1976
(L: first basket; R: first feathered basket)
"My first feathered basket, I carried...
around with me for months before
giving it to my father, Ignatius."
—Susan Billy⁹

Susan Billy's baskets (Billy p.105)



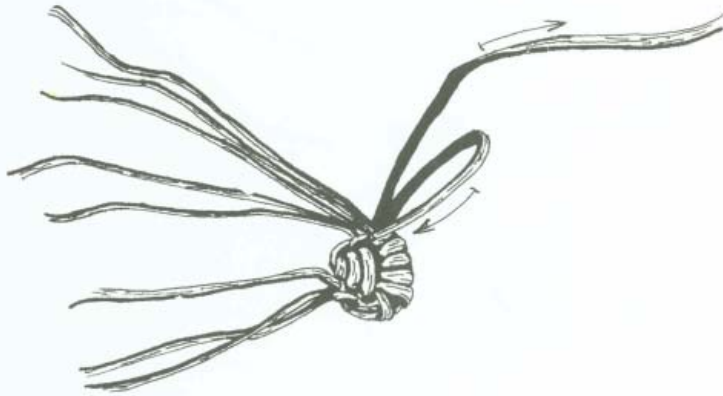
Susan Holder's feather basket

(Billy p. 72)



(d) (Above) Now, however, a new root is added and tied around one corner of the knot, as shown.

(e) (Below) This starts a curving section of wrapped-around knots, making the beginning of a circular coil.



Details on the beginnings of the coiling process From Elsie Allen p.28-29



(f) When little more than a circle is completed with this coil, a willow stem is spliced into the end of the coil by driving its point in to match the point of the last-used sedge root so the two can be wrapped together. Care must be taken to make each wrapping tight. An awl is used to punch holes for the root point to enter, as it is now coiled around the single willow, attaching it to the outer coil of roots (see photograph number 24 for how an awl is used).

