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Kashaya Pomo Ethnobotanical Project

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Claudia Lawson and Vana Parrish Lawson are currently undergraduates at California State College, Sonoma. Claudia Lawson is Central Pomo, and Vana Parrish Lawson is Kashaya Pomo.

In 1974, we started to gather plants in various areas around Santa Rosa, Healdsburg, the Kashia Reservation, and in Lake County.¹

The plants we were collecting are used by the Kashaya Pomo people for medicinal, food, technological, and ceremonial purposes. Some of these plants can only be gathered during certain seasons of the year; for example, mid-winter, early summer, or mid-summer. In gathering we had to be careful because we lacked knowledge of some plants; for instance, if a medicine plant is picked at the wrong time it can be poisonous. The word "poisonous" can have one meaning for Pomo peoples and another meaning for non-Pomos. As an example of what the Kashaya Pomo mean by "poisonous" let us consider the strawberry. Kashaya Pomo people do not pick or eat any kind of strawberry before the first fruits ceremony in mid-spring, because if they do they will get sick, or some other kind of bad luck will happen to them. A Kashaya Pomo man once turned into a snake because he ate strawberries before the Strawberry Festival; in other words, he got poisoned. We not only had to know what poisonous plants were from the strictly Pomo point of view, but we also had to know that some plants, if picked at the wrong time, will poison anybody. For example, if the coffeeberry is picked in the spring it will cause intestinal cramps and vomiting because the new growth contains an acid property called "bitters." In order to determine which plants were poisonous at which time of the year, we consulted our knowledgeable older people, and we also studied the ethnographic and botanical literature (Gifford 1967; Jepson 1960; Munz and Keck 1968; Oswalt 1964).

In planning our plant-collection trips we had to consider the following: (1) plants bearing fruit can be gathered from early summer to mid-summer, depending on stages of maturity; (2) plants that are fruitless are gathered from early winter to mid-winter, again depending on stages of maturity. Our fieldwork plans also included consideration of what days and hours would be the best for us and our consultants and where the best place would be to meet. Our consultants went with us to identify plants

since we did not know what many of the plants looked like in their natural environment. Our consultants were Mrs. Susie Gomes, who had known from the time she was very young about medicinal plants and also has some knowledge of food recipes, and Mr. Sidney Parrish, who learned about medicinal and food plants from the older people when he was young. Mrs. Essie Parrish, the present-day shaman of the Kashaya Pomo, added to the information gathered from Mrs. Gomes and Mr. Parrish. Most of our information about technological and ceremonial plants came from Mrs. Parrish.

We asked our consultants such questions as how, when, and where the plants were picked. We asked about general gathering areas, specific gathering sites, the Kashaya names for these plants, and in addition, the Kashaya names of the places. At the same time we got this information we also got recipe information for both the food and the medicinal plants. We asked how to prepare each plant and if the food plants were prepared in the same way as the medicinal plants.

After we got all of the information we needed we then began to put together a pressed-specimen collection. As we gathered the plants we put them into a plant press. Once the plant specimens were ready, we labeled them. The labeling includes the common English name, the scientific name, and the Kashaya name (Fig. 1).

Our next task was the putting together of a bilingual dictionary of plant terms. For this we had to do some more research. It was necessary to clarify the general descriptions of the plants and their habitats. To do this we used the botanical literature. We also had to check and recheck the Kashaya names for plants. To do this we conferred with our consultants and also used Kashaya linguistic materials gathered by Robert Oswalt.² In addition, we had to organize and check information about the various uses of the plants. To do this we checked with our consultants and made use of



Fig. 1. English name: Eastwood Manzanita; scientific name: *Arctostaphylos glandulosa*; Kashaya name: *qaye q^hale*.

the ethnographic literature. Besides data about various ways the Kashaya Pomo use plants, we included information concerning the plants which comes from Kashaya myths and other stories. We got this information from our consultants and also from *Kashaya Texts* (Oswalt 1964).

At present our pressed-specimen collection consists of approximately 160 items, and there are approximately 133 dictionary entries (Fig. 2). The number of dictionary entries and the number of pressed specimens differs because we have not yet incorporated information about some clovers, seaweeds, mushrooms, and corms and tubers into the dictionary. Currently, we are making plans for putting together collections of food recipes and medicine recipes which we hope will be of use

English Name: Eastwood Manzanita

Scientific Name: *Arctostaphylos glandulosa*

Description: Shrub 2-7' high, with many stems coming from a spreading root crown. Wood is red and peely. The leaves are ovate to elliptic, rounded at the base, dark or yellowish-green, glabrous, 1-1¼" long. Flowers bell-shaped in small compact clusters, white or pinkish. Ovary hairy. Berry globose and smooth. Seeds smaller than most.

Habitat: Dry, rocky, brushy or grassy hillsides.

Kashaya Name: *qaye q^hale*

Food uses: First the berries are put into a pot and boiling water is poured over them to kill the worms. They are dried and pounded and stored for later use. They can be made into cakes or mixed with water and eaten.

Medicinal uses: The bark is peeled and boiled into a tea for diarrhea.

Technological uses: The wood is favored for tools such as awl handles.

Other cultural information: At the time of creation, Coyote threw a dried manzanita bush into the ocean to make a swordfish.

Fig. 2. Sample page from the Kashaya plant dictionary.

to the Kashaya community and other Pomo communities.

The kind of fieldwork we have done in the past year and a half has to be accompanied by certain rituals, and we also have to observe certain taboo restrictions. Before we started gathering plants, Mrs. Essie Parrish gave us a prayer and a few songs in order to protect both of us from harm and to protect the plants so that they would not be destroyed. As we entered each gathering area Claudia prayed in her language, the Central Pomo language. Her prayer explained to the Creator why the plants were being taken from the gathering grounds. Then we both sang a song to protect us from harm and the plants from destruction. We sang this song four times. When we reached the exact place we were to gather plants, Claudia

prayed again, giving thanks to the Creator for allowing us to gather from that ground. Before we started picking plants we sacrificed something of value under the plants we were to pick.³ The sacrificing allowed us to pick any plant in the area that we needed for our collection. It also ensured that the plants that had been gathered would grow better, stronger, and more abundantly. After we had gathered a plant, we covered with soil the area where the plant had been.

There is harm involved if these rituals are not performed. If we do not follow these rules the plants will make us crazy and sick, and we will have bad luck. This is why it is important for our people to observe the rules. Also, the plants will be destroyed if the rituals are not followed. They will die and will not produce more plants for other people to use. If the plants are not protected from harm, the Indian people will not have anything to use for curing various diseases. In addition, they will not have available the various kinds of foods put here on earth for us and other people. These foods are a very important part of the diet of Indian people.

Observance of taboos is another important part of the plant gathering procedure. One such taboo is a rule observed when a woman is menstruating. A married man also has to observe taboos. If a menstruating woman touches plants, or even if she steps onto gathering grounds, the plants will die. For a man, the rule is not as strict; he is only forbidden to touch plants when his wife is menstruating. Both the man and the woman have to be clean before they can touch the plants. When we say "clean," we mean that after she is through menstruating, a woman must undergo a ritual cleansing before she can gather plants; and a man cannot gather plants until his wife has been ritually cleansed.

The rituals and taboos that we have described must be followed by the Indian people if plants are to survive in this world. Knowledge of these restrictions are handed

down from generation to generation. The older people teach the younger people to observe the rules. Children must learn that the traditional way of life is of great importance and value to young people. We are taught to observe these traditional ways and to teach our children of the value of these plants and rituals that make Pomo people different from everyone else.

Both of us are proud of the plant study that we have made. We are proud because we are the first of our tribes to complete something of such importance to the Kashaya Pomo community and other Native Americans. Before we started to gather the plants for our study we took into consideration the feelings of the Kashaya Pomo community. Our hope is that the community will benefit from this study as much as we have. We hope that Kashaya Pomos will teach their children about plants that can heal, teach them about foods they can gather when in need, teach them about the technological uses of plants, and also teach them about the most important part of our culture—the significance of the rituals and ceremonials.

Although the plants we have collected are used by the Kashaya Pomo community, they can be used by other people to teach their children and to inspire their young people to do what we have done. In the past there has been much destruction of plants where Native Americans once gathered, and this destruction is still going on today. Our project will not stop the destruction of Native American gathering grounds, but hopefully it will show people how important plants really are to all Native American communities. Plants are important to non-Indians as well as Native Americans; we would like to see other peoples take an interest in what we protect.

NOTES

1. This paper, presented at the April 1976 meeting of the Southwestern Anthropological Association, describes work carried out as part of the research effort of the Kashaya Pomo Language in Culture

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2. We wish to thank Robert Oswalt who made available to us the Kashaya plant terms in his dictionary files.

3. In earlier times clamshell disk beads or miniature baskets would be given to the ground and plants. Today coins (dimes and/or quarters) are used.

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