



## The Modocs

### Modoc Prayer

How good I have felt when the sun has shown and warmed me on a cold day. You are our great sun. Thank you for your care.

### Spiritual Life

To the Modocs, the world was a disc with the eastern shore of Tule Lake at its center. Gmukamps, the creator, was of human form and behavior, and was part male and part female. Gmukamps' contributions to humans included the sweat lodge, knowledge of edible and poisonous plants, and instructions concerning shamanism.

The Modoc shaman was usually a man, although a woman past menopause could also be a shaman. The call to be a shaman usually came in mid-life in a dream. Not only was the shaman a spiritual leader who was able to

communicate with powerful spirits, but he was also a healer. The shaman's job was risky. If his powers failed and a patient died, the patient's family had the right to kill the shaman.

For the Modocs, holy places were everywhere, particularly in prominent geographic locations, like Mt. Shasta and Petroglyph Point. Mountains, trees, animals, and many other aspects of nature had stories associated with them that imparted guidance and wisdom. The values imparted by these stories were desirable traits for a Modoc leader.

### Leadership and Organization

The Modocs were a relatively small tribe, and were only loosely organized. They operated in small, autonomous bands, each with a *la'qi* (head) who served as a domestic advisor. Leaders were expected to make wise judgments based on cultural standards and keep peace in the community. Affability, diplomacy, oratorical ability, and strong moral character were desirable traits for a

*la'qi*. He (or rarely, she) was also expected to advise young people in Modoc values, responsibilities, and history.

Actions affecting the entire village were made by a consensus of the people. A community assembly of all adult men and women, during which anyone had the right to speak, was convened to make important decisions.

### Social Life

The Modocs had a rich social life filled with game-playing, gambling, and singing. *Ca'gla* (gambling) was done both in teams and individually. A man's gambling prowess, or lack thereof, affected his socio-economic status.

A ball kicking game using a buckskin ball filled with hair or grass was a popular sport for men, as was distance running. Women used a staff and ball to play a similar game to the men. Enthusiastic shouting and yelling accompanied the ball games.

Major events in Modoc life; such as the vision quest, marriage, death, and mourning, were marked by formal ceremonies. The majority of Modoc marriages were monogamous; however, it was not uncommon for a man to have two or more wives. In some cases, Modoc marriages were arranged by parents. Proposals and negotiations between parents, gift giving, and the marriage ceremony itself were all very

elaborate. Gifts were exchanged between the two families, and then later redistributed among kinsmen. The couple lived with the wife's parents until several children were born, after which they built their own lodge.

When a Modoc died his or her body was cremated in a communal ceremonial site, except if the person died while traveling or in battle, in which case the body was sometimes burned at the death site. Bodies were wrapped in buckskin or a tule mat and placed on a pyre with the head toward the west. During the funeral, the possessions of the deceased were placed around the pyre to be taken by relatives or friends who substituted appropriate articles, gifts, or services. For two or more years the name of the deceased could not be mentioned among kinsmen. Upon the death of her husband, a woman cut her hair short and covered it with pine pitch and ashes.

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## Daily Life

Modocs placed tremendous value on family and child rearing. Praise was considered an important motivator. Parents strove to involve their children in work or activities so that praise could follow. Modoc women had heavy daily work demands, and were therefore unable to spend as much time with their children as fathers. A father would sit for hours at a time with an ailing son or daughter. Parents also encouraged adolescent children to undertake a *spu'do* (vision quest), an individual journey into the wilderness promoting self reflection and personal development.

The Modoc traditionally used three types of dwelling, an earthlodge, a matlodge, and a wikiup. The earthlodge and matlodge were dug partially into the ground and covered with earth and mats of woven tule reeds. Frames were fashioned from poles of juniper or

pine. For the earthlodge a ladder descended from the entrance in the ceiling to the floor. The entrance to the matlodge was on the east-facing side of the home, because to the west lay the land of the dead. The wikiup was a similarly domed structure but without the excavation component. The frame was covered only with tule mats and it was typically smaller than both lodges.

Clothing was scant in the summer for both men and women. It typically consisted of an apron worn in the front for men and an additional apron worn in the back for women. Children were allowed to run naked until they reached puberty. Modoc faces were often painted black with charcoal for protection against the sun. In winter fur robes were used for warmth. Women wore basket hats made from tules year round.

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## Seasonal Round

The ancestral Modocs understood how to use animals and plants to meet their needs and make sure there would be plenty for future generations. The annual cycle that the Modocs lived was a rigorous one. Their survival was dependent on when and where food was available. They moved with the seasons in search of game such as elk and deer, waterfowl, fish, as well as edible bulbs, seeds, and plants. The Modocs lived on both sides of what is now the California-Oregon border. Their lands stretched roughly 100 miles from Mt. Shasta to Goose Lake (near present day Lakeview, OR).

Above all, the Modocs were a people of the water. Their homeland contained many waterways teeming with fish,

waterfowl, and plant life. Tule reeds, which grew in abundance on the shores of Tule Lake, were used to weave baskets, make footwear, and in the fabrication of boats and homes. The seeds of the wocus, a waterlilly that also grew in profusion along lake shores, were ground into meal or flour and were a staple of the Modoc diet.

Along Lost River and other streams were lush, green banks, the most valued grounds for villages and camps. Prior to Euro-American emigration into the Modoc homelands, it is estimated that the Modocs had at least 20 semi-permanent villages along the shores of lakes and rivers.

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## Modocs in Crisis

A series of smallpox epidemics passed through the Modoc homeland no fewer than four times in early historic times (1770s, 1801, 1824-25, 1838). The first populations encountered and documented by Euro-American explorers probably represented only a fraction of the much larger populations prior to these epidemics. Because the elderly were among the most vulnerable to the disease, the Modocs lost many of their leaders and keepers of cultural knowledge.

Early hostilities with Applegate Trail settlers and emigrants culminated in the Ben Wright Massacre. Ben Wright, known as an "Indian Hunter," had a reputation for being a mutilator and humiliator. In November of 1852, Wright and his men rode into a Modoc camp and there, under a white flag,

slaughtered more than 30 Modoc men, women, and children.

Tensions between settlers and Modocs mounted and the Modocs were relocated to a reservation with the Klamaths and the Yahooskin band of Paiutes. For numerous and complex reasons including friction with the Klamaths, inadequate provisions from the government, and difficulty subsisting in a new landscape, a group of Modocs returned to their traditional villages near Lost River. The Modoc War began when this group was attacked by the U.S. Army in an attempt to return the Modocs to the reservation. The war lasted from November of 1872 to June of 1873, when the Modocs were captured, and their leaders executed. After the war, the Modocs who had participated were sent to Oklahoma.

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## Modocs Today

Two federally recognized tribes have enrolled Modocs. The Modoc Tribe based in Miami, Oklahoma has an enrollment of approximately 200 members, all descended from those who fought in the Modoc War. The Klamath Tribes in

Chiloquin, Oregon are comprised of Klamaths, Yahooskin Paiutes, and Modocs and have about 3,500 members. The Modocs represent only a small minority of the Klamath Tribes.