Mom — A recently published article which I thought you might enjoy. Love, Sr.



By Felice Pace

the dancing web: a karuk renewal

In summer twilight, rigs brake sharply down steep, rutted gravel toward the dancegrounds. Under bay trees, men and women are up from their rest and moving. The women are off to prepare a meal in the large, canopied kitchen which backs against the bluff. Below, the Klamath River thunders through Ishi-Pishi Falls. Singly and in groups, the men drift toward the three dance camps which lie in semicircle around a central space. Each camp has a small campfire and men gather there, talking easily. Occasionally a burst of laughter erupts as one group or another reacts to cryptic words - a typical pattern of Indian humor. The largest camp is occupied by Karuk, hosts of the dance. The other two camps are occupied by downriver Yurok and Hoopa of the lower Trinity River.

The danceground is suddenly enlivened as two old pickups, beds overflowing with youngsters, rumble into camp. The young ones are returning from an afternoon swim in the nearby Salmon River. Dustclouds rise as boys tumble from the trucks and run to join their fathers - they're eager for dancing to begin, dancing in which they have a part. Adolescent girls will dance too, and they walk quickly to family tents to dress in buckskin skirts and basket hats, their traditional dance costume.

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Medicine Woman returns from her ceremonial bath. She takes her place in the dance pit which dominates the center of the ceremonial grounds. The square pit, eighteen feet to a side, is five feet deep with a ramp entrance in one corner. It is lined with rough cedar planks and surrounded by ranked plank benches. A loose superstructure of fir poles above the pit serves no purpose on this clear evening.

Medicine Helper, a teenage girl, brings logs into the pit to feed the Sacred Fire. All day the fire's smoldered, but now darkness gathers, flames suddenly leap and highlight sharp cheekbones and furrows of Medicine Woman's visage. A small girl lies wrapped in blankets in the pit, with her mother beside her. This is the last night of the Brush Dance, a healing dance. By now the child is used to the old woman burning roots, sprinkling water. She lies quiet, her doe eyes wide and shining.

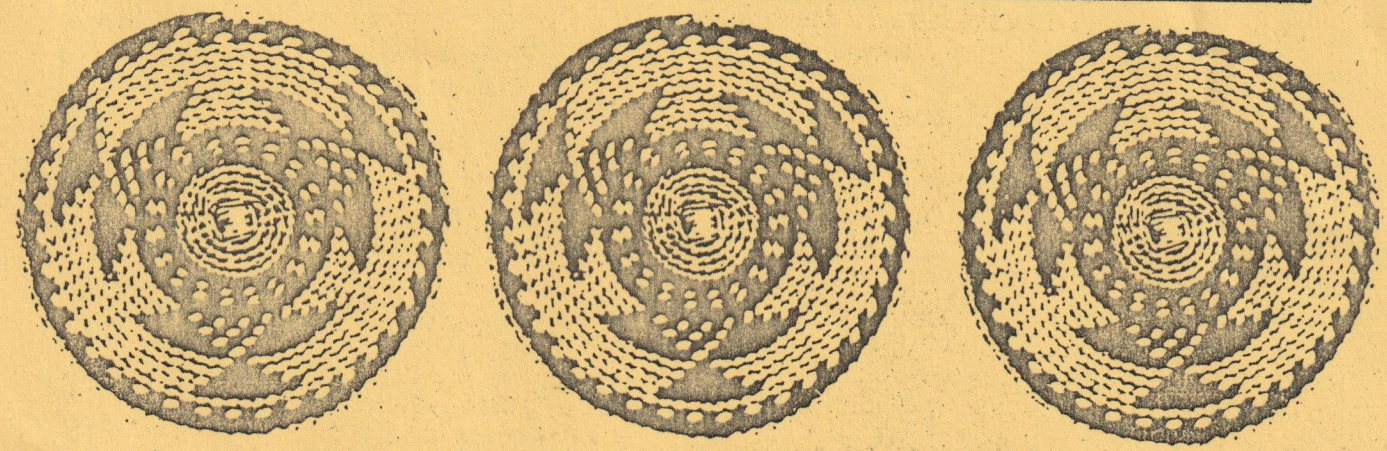
Spectators fill the ranked benches quietly as the first dancers file into the pit. The dancers, fifteen or so men and boys, wear shorts or rolled up jeans, but neither shirts nor shoes. They wear necklaces of abalone, dentalia and other shells mixed with glass beads and pinenuts, and carry yew-wood bows, obsidian knives, and otter-pelt quivers decorated with woodpecker heads. Three adolescent girls enter the pit as everyone turns to face Medicine Woman. The girls link arms with men on each side.

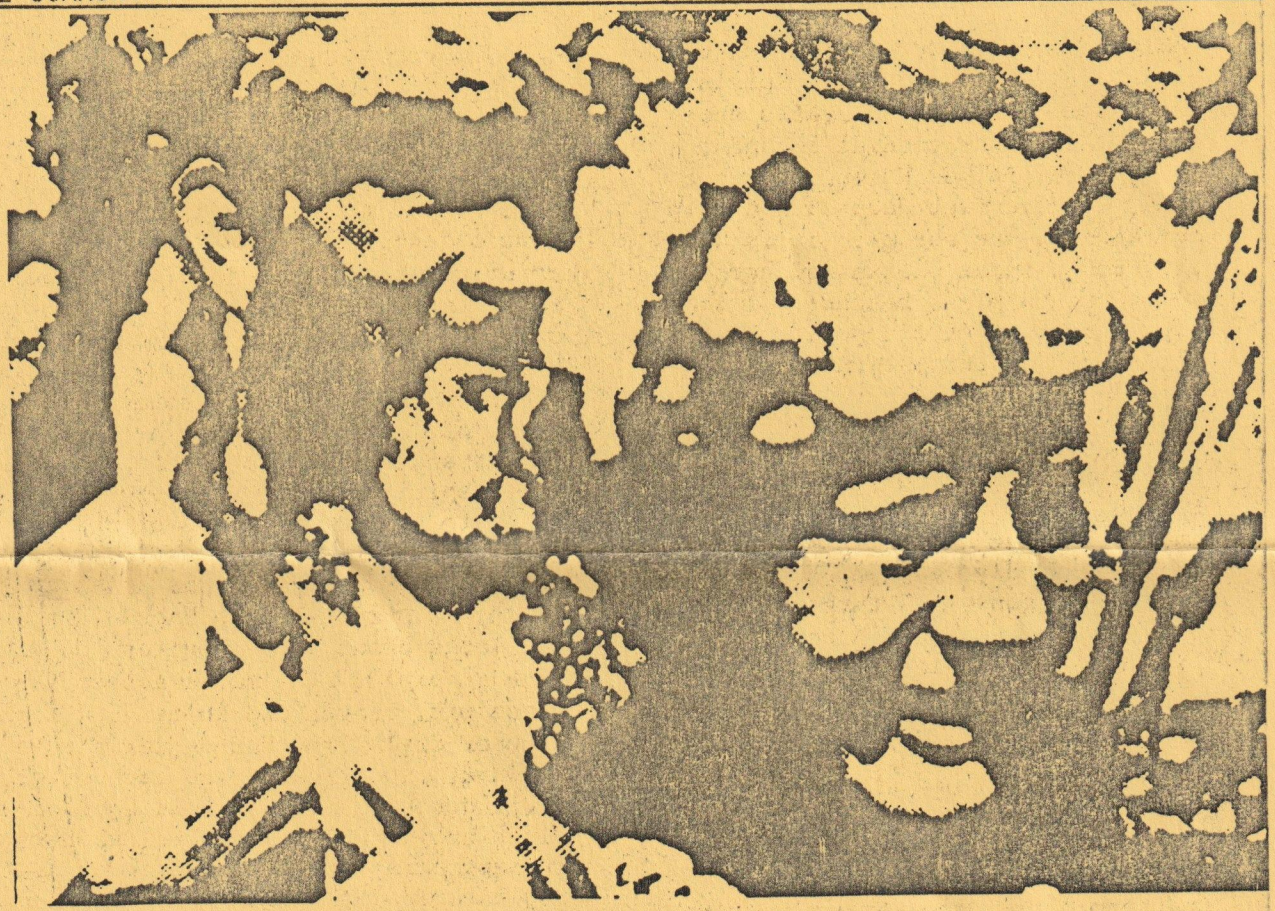
A singer intones the "heavy" or Medicine Song. The dancers pick up its slow cadence with their own guttural chant which counterpoints the singer's falsetto cries. Onlookers are restrained and solemn. The pit becomes lively as three primary singers begin their first Brush Dance song. The group of dancers provides a chanting chorus and the rhythm becomes increasingly spirited. Each dancer moves in place to the rising tempo of the song - and suddenly a piercing cry! A single dancer steps forward. His cries continue, he struts before Sacred Fire and looks about. He crouches low and with a jumping step moves across the dance pit, quiver and knife held high. Another cry! Another dancer struts forward. Two rivals face each other, their gestures mimic battle and continue until one succumbs to exhaustion. The appreciative crowd applauds, calling encouragement. A pause, then another song. Once more the chorus chants in contrast to the song and once more dancers step forward.

This is the third and final night of the Katimin Brush Dance, so dancing continues all night. Each song is repeated three times, accompanied by men "jumping center". When the Karuk hosts complete a half dozen songs they leave the pit. A short intermission,

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then Yurok and afterwards Hoopa dancers enter and perform. Then Karuk dance again and so on through the night.

The Brush Dance is one of several dances and ceremonies celebrated each year by Karuk and other tribes of the Klamath River. These dances, with their games and feasts, reflect a rich and unique cultural heritage. Viewing the ceremonies transports one to another time and provides special appreciation for the river country and its native people. Most whites inhabiting the Rivers are either unaware of these events or would never dream of attending them.

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Mainstream ignorance of the lives and traditions of our bioregion's native tribes is deep. Native Americans are identified as "disadvantaged". They're believed to exhibit epidemic levels of alcohol abuse; they're blamed for the decline of the fishery. Many whites assume all Indians receive extensive federal support. Others idealize Native Americans and attribute saintly character and mystic power to any who claim them. Such attitudes spring from a lack of direct experience.



Aware of their difference from the mainstream and mindful always of past treatment, many Native Americans keep themselves apart. Many can relate how they were punished in school for speaking native language. The memories of beatings by local police, and of lands seized extra-legally remain powerful and painful. Such memories are conveyed to the young and shape their attitudes.

American society's treatment of the Karuk has been mild relative to the experience of some tribes, but the list of grievances is nonetheless long. Karuk lands were expropriated first by miners and later by homesteaders, then by all levels of government. Treaties were written but unratified and no reservation lands established. Federal Indian agents encouraged the river people to relocate either to the Hoopa reservation or to the Quartz Valley rancheria, both locations obviously outside Karuk territory. Children were taken from their homes and sent to Oregon, Nevada and Southern California BIA schools. The Karuk Tribe itself was unrecognized by the government.

Yet the tribe continued to perform ceremonies and dances which are the center of communal life. Karuk adapted to invader society, incorporating gardening, guns and log cabins into their lifestyle. Years passed and despite depletion the people continued to draw sustenance from the salmon runs. Then came World War II and the draft, and for the first time many Indian men left the area. Dances stopped. A small handful of Karuk continued to perform esoteric rituals which they believed necessary to keep the world from destruction.

The War ended, but like so many of the men the dances did not return. Poverty and alcoholism spread; diabetes, heart disease and nutritionally-influenced health problems became common. Private land holdings, obtained via the New Deal's Indian Allotment Act, were lost through foreclosure and a variety of unscrupulous means. Decline of the salmon accelerated. Still, a handful continued world-fixing ceremonies.

Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty and growing Indian activism focused attention on Native Americans, and the six-

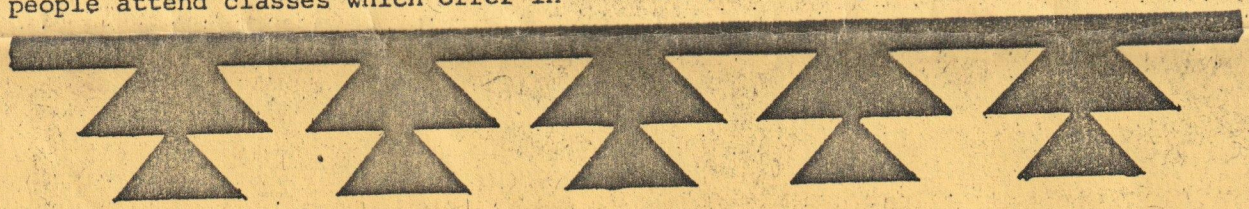
ties produced an influx of federal dollars. For the first time, a generation of Indian youth had access to college. By the early seventies, many young men and women were returning to Northern California and re-establishing contact with their cultural roots. Assisted by knowledgeable elders, this generation has forged a cultural revival and political awakening. One by one, the dances return. Ceremonial attendance often numbers in the hundreds, growing yearly. Pride in "Indianness" has been renewed and young people attend classes which offer instruction in traditional arts, crafts, food preparation, games and dances. Preservation of vanishing language is underway. Recently a handful of young people achieved fluency in conversational Karuk, Yurok and Hoopa.

Revival of native Klamath cultures has been assisted by federal policy which now favors tribal self-determination. For the Karuk, a landmark was reached in 1979; the government responded to tribal petition with official recognition of the Karuk tribe.

Though real obstacles remain, Karuk goals are clear: control of aboriginal land and its resources; a healthy, well-housed, educated membership; traditional, flourishing culture and a living Karuk language. Slowly the dream assumes outline. Within the past month, the Tribe broke ground for a Tribal Community Center in Happy Camp. Last week the third crop of fingerlings was released from rearing ponds into the River. The past year has seen a continuance of Tribal members returning to family lands. The songs, ceremonies and dances continue.

The sun is gaining the ridge at Katimin. The People have danced through the night. Each dance has produced more and older regalia brought out to decorate dancers. Now in the final dance, they're laden with family riches - a thousand woodpecker heads, 10,000 strings of dentalia. Sunlight edges into the pit. An adolescent boy and girl come forward to flank Medicine Woman. From her hand, they each receive a small basket of medicine, final tribute to Spirit World. For a moment, dancers and onlookers are united in powerful silence.

Somewhere above a raptor cries. In their hands the boy and girl hold not only the final offering of the dance but also the Karuk future. ▲



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