

Miwok by Saif

Introductions:

Before westerners arrived, the Miwok enjoyed thousands of peaceful years of the pristine beauty of Angel Island. Native American use of the island began when people first came to live in the San Francisco Bay area. The Coast Miwok Indians who lived in what is now Marin County reached the island with boats made from tule reeds. Though they tended to become water logged after prolonged use, these boats were adequate for short trips because their lightness made them fast and maneuverable. Miwok Indians established camps at what we know today as Ayala Cove. Several kinds of fish and shellfish were available year round and salmon and other highly prized fish were seasonally plentiful. The Indians also hunted duck and other sea fowl and gathered acorns, buckeyes, and other seed crops, as well as certain roots and leaves in order to round out their varied diet.

Beliefs:

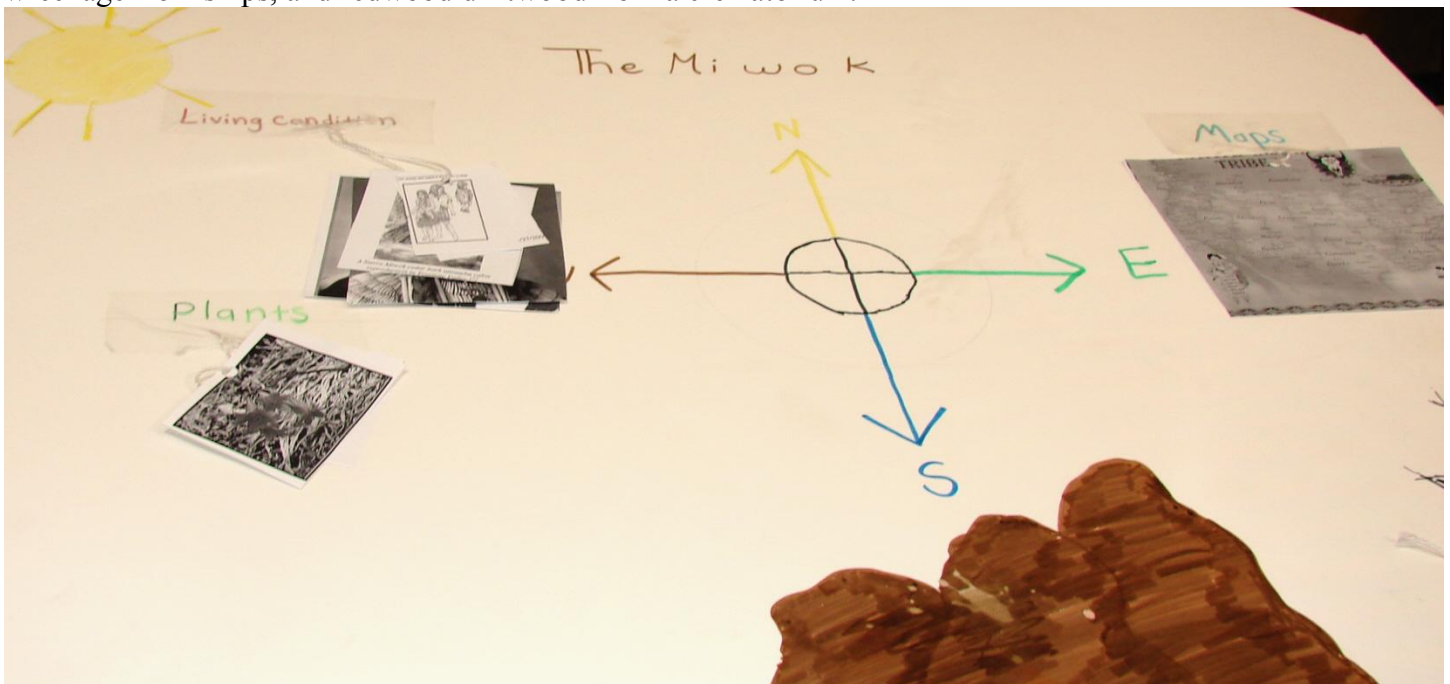
The Miwok had an animistic philosophy. They wanted no walls and trod lightly on the land, leaving no footsteps, always apologizing to the spirits in the animals or nature whenever they disturbed them in whatever fashion. Their oral history was transmitted through stories of the elders and shamans. Tribal boundaries were taught to children by rote.

Social Organizations:

Miwok tribelets preferred to live in villages of about one hundred persons. They kept their villages small in order to enjoy them without the need to destroy. There was a male elder in each village with a woman who was responsible for organizing the ceremonies. The shamans provided both negative and positive rituals. It was accepted that the shaman had power to cure, kill, predict the future, and start the rains.

Living Conditions:

Their houses were made of branches covered with mats of tule. Each house had a small acorn house constructed on legs in order to store the acorns they would collect and protect from deer and insects. They kept no domestic animals. Instead they were gatherers, fishermen, hunters, and basket makers. Several middens on Angel Island have produced bones, shells, money from clams, abalone jewels, skins, snail shell beads, mortars and pestles, wreckage from ships, and redwood driftwood from a crematorium.



Roles:

Men and women had special roles. In winter men would make foot drums, rattles, reed flutes, and bone whistles. They would work on their boats and hunt and fish all year long, the prey depending on the season. Women would make tule mats, baskets, collect beads, feathers, and shells, and prepare skins to make both ceremonial clothing and capes for wear during the cool season. Women also made tule skirts which were generally the only clothing they wore along with their jewelry. In spring women would collect greens such as lettuce, clover, and nettle to supplement their winter diet. Miner's lettuce would be collected and placed near a red ant hill. The ants walked on leaves and exuded a vinegar-like substance which became the Miwok salad dressing. In the summer they collected seeds from wild flowers to make pinole, the basic ingredient for their bread. Autumn brought intensive labor for the whole family.

Hunting and Cooking:

Hunting required extensive preparation, building the sweat lodge so that the hunters could get rid of the human smell. They made deer heads to wear. The philosophy of the hunt was retreat and lure rather than chase and flee. They caught birds using baskets, put plant bulbs in the water to stun fish, and prepared various types of nets to catch salmon, geese, sea gulls, and other wild animals. Food preparation required intensive labor. Cooking was mainly done in waterproof baskets. Rocks for heating mush and water were placed in the baskets and rocks added carefully, being replaced as they grew cold. Meat, fowl, and fish were broiled over fires.

Other Plant Uses:

Many plants on Angel Island were also used for health care. Galls from oak trees were chewed as their toothpaste. Tea from iris buds was used for kidney stones. A corn mush was set aside to age and was scraped off and used like penicillin. Ceanthous leaves were used like tobacco.

Western Encounters and Influence:

In 1579 Chaplain Fletcher with Sir Francis Drake wrote, "They are of a free and loving nature without guile or treachery." In 1755 Father Vincente with Captain Ayala said, "I found the Indians very humorous with courteous manners mimicking my prayers with chuckles. They acted like tender lambs, had fine stature, clean and good colon, very elegant of figure, about four hundred men appeared."