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**Author:**

[Haynal, Patrick M](#), Gordon Settles Consulting

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# The Influence of Sacred Rock Cairns and Prayer Seats on Modern Klamath and Modoc Religion and World View

PATRICK M. HAYNAL, Gordon Bettles Consulting, 36334 Modoc Point Rd., Chiloquin, OR 97624.

*The focus of this article is the spiritual and symbolic significance of two categories of Klamath and Modoc sacred sites: rock cairns and prayer seats. Both site types are generally associated with the traditional practice of the vision quest among the Klamath and Modoc peoples of southern Oregon and northern California. Both tribes, along with the Yahooskin Paiute—recognized federally as the Klamath tribes—are concerned with the protection and preservation of these important sacred sites. After a background discussion focusing on the cultural distribution of cairns and prayer seats, a discussion of the various functional precontact traditional types of rock cairns and prayer seats found in association with some cairns is reviewed. Next, discussions concerning the modern cultural significance of cairns and prayer seats and the continuing practice of erecting cairns are presented. Finally, the importance of rock cairns and prayer seats to the shaping of modern Klamath and Modoc world view is discussed.*

**T**RADITIONALLY, ethnographers have been brief in their discussions of the ritual importance of rock cairns to the Klamath/Modoc (e.g., Gatschet 1890; Spier 1930; Ray 1963; Stern 1966), and prayer seats receive no direct mention at all. This article focuses on determining the importance of these two categories of sacred sites to the practice of modern Klamath and Modoc (hereafter Klamath/Modoc) religion and the shaping of their contemporary world view.<sup>1</sup> To accomplish this, interviews were conducted with several Klamath/Modoc individuals selected from a list approved by the Klamath tribes. Rock cairns and prayer seats and their relationship to various rituals and practices, such as the power/vision quest and funerary rites, are integral features of the Klamath/Modoc sacred cultural landscape.

The modern-day Klamath tribes consist of three formerly independent cultural groups: the Klamath proper; the closely related Modoc; and the Yahooskin Paiute. These three groups were united under the collective term the Klamath Tribe under the provisions of the Treaty of 1864

(Stern 1966). Today, the tribal government prefers the plural “Klamath tribes” be used to acknowledge all three groups (Haynal 1994:42).

Several researchers (e.g., Gatschet 1890; Barrett 1910; Spier 1930; Stern 1966) have noted the strong cultural similarities between the Klamath/Modoc tribes. Both tribes speak closely related dialects of a divergent form of Sahaptin (Ray 1963:xiv). Historically, the two peoples were geographically adjacent, with some overlap of territory (Fig. 1). The northernmost group, the Klamath, inhabited an area of south-central Oregon that centered on the drainage basin of Upper Klamath Lake, with Klamath Marsh and the Sprague and Williamson rivers as other noteworthy geographic features. The western boundary of their core territory was formed by the crest of the Cascade Range. To the east, their territory extended to just beyond Sycan Marsh, abutting territory belonging to Northern Paiute groups. To the north, the Klamath presence extended to the vicinity of Fort Rock (Spier 1930; Stern 1966). Modoc territory began near the present-day California-Oregon state line, imme-

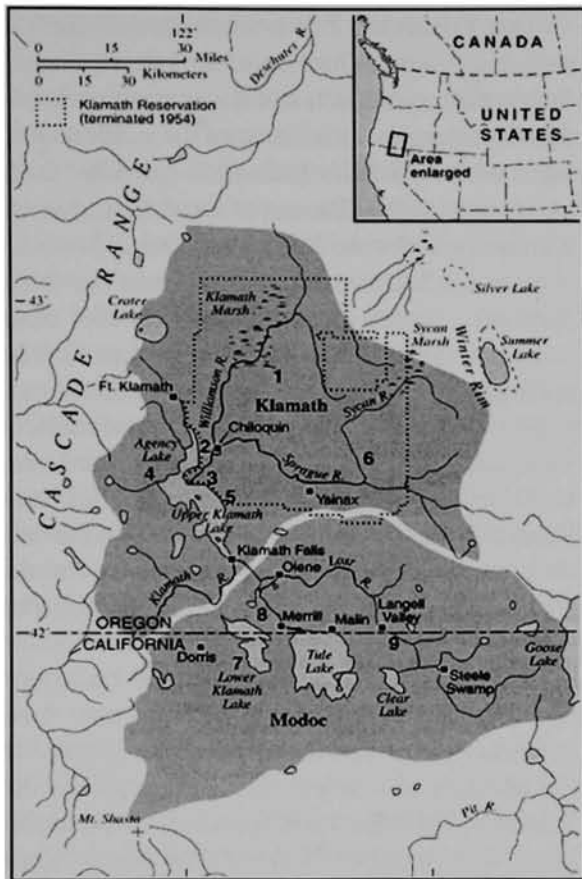


Fig. 1. Klamath and Modoc territories and subgroups in the 19th century (Stern 1966:280; Ray 1963) with modern town locations: 1, Klamath Marsh; 2, Agency Lake; 3, Lower Williamson River; 4, Pelican Bay; 5, Klamath Falls; 6, Upland; 7, Lower Klamath Lake; 8, Lower Lost River; 9, Eastern (from Stern 1998a:447, reprinted with permission from the Smithsonian Institution, Washington).

diately east of the Cascade Range, and extended north to overlap the southernmost extension of Klamath territory. The Klamath River cut through the northwest corner of Modoc territory, with their boundary extending eastward to Goose Lake (Ray 1963:xi). Tule Lake and Lava Beds National Monument also fall within Modoc land. The southern extent of Modoc territory reached into the present-day Modoc and Klamath national forests.

## BACKGROUND

For the purposes of this article, rock cairns are defined as any stacked rock feature. Cairns are evident throughout the higher elevations of Klamath/Modoc territory. Occasional cairns can be found at lower elevations. Cairns come in two general physical forms: the stacked rock column, constructed by placing one rock directly atop another in sequence to varying heights; and the conical cairn that has a variable number of rocks forming the base and is thereafter built up with additional rocks until a conical (or mound-like) shape is achieved. Occasionally, linear "s" shaped or "wall-like" rock features were constructed as well. The appropriateness of considering these rock features in association with cairns is explored below.

Prayer seats are defined as any semicircular, elliptical, or horseshoe-shaped area that was built with stone or timber and arranged to a sufficient height to provide a windbreak. As discussed below, information obtained from Klamath/Modoc consultants suggests that prayer seats were often natural features embellished with dry masonry or timber.

It should be noted that the Klamath tribes prohibit touching or photographing cairns, prayer seats, or any other sacred cultural site. While the tribal government permits sketch illustrations, many Klamath/Modoc individuals are uncomfortable with such illustrations. Therefore, no illustrations or photographs are presented here.

Archaeological research in the latter part of the twentieth century has revealed important information on the spatial distribution of cairns in Klamath/Modoc territory and beyond. In 1997, dozens of rock cairns were recorded on Pelican Butte, a mountain overlooking the western shore of Klamath Lake, by crews working for Archaeological Investigations Northwest, Inc. (Kritzer et al. 1997; Haynal 1998). Goodwin (1997:10) described several rock cairn features on Mt. Bryant in south-central Oregon within the country of

the Modoc. Loubser and Whitley (1999:8, 13) reported rock cairns within Lava Beds National Monument, also in Modoc territory. During my long association and years of fieldwork with the Klamath/Modoc, I have observed rock cairns on virtually every high peak or ridge I have visited in the territory of the two tribes.

Until now, prayer seats have not been recorded or described among the Klamath or Modoc in the published literature, with the exception of two nebulous references. Spier (1930:94) referred to a "saucer-shaped bed of rocks" on Ghost's Nest mountain that overlooks the entire countryside. Here, boys lay down in order to see a spirit. Ray (1963:80) noted that Modoc boys often sought shallow depressions in meadows or niches in rocks in which to sleep during puberty power quests. During sleep, the boy would hopefully receive a dream from a spirit. These shallow depressions and niches were used by successive generations and were located in areas believed to have strong power. Including these unmodified natural features in the category of prayer seats may be appropriate and is discussed below.

The Klamath/Modoc were located at the juncture of four broadly defined culture areas; the Plateau, California, the Northwest Coast, and the Great Basin. Caldwell and Carlson (1954) reported the practice of piling stones during the Plateau vision quest. Others observed that it was common practice throughout the Middle Columbia area for youths to stack stone piles as part of their efforts to obtain a vision (e.g., Ray 1942; Stern 1998b; Walker and Schuster 1998). Cairns are also found in the Great Basin. Paul-Mann (1994:329-348) described 245 rock cairns on Far View Butte, a high, weathered, volcanic feature in the Silver Lake Valley within the Fort Rock Basin. While this region was occupied by Northern Paiute groups at the time of contact, the territory was probably held by the Klamath until about 1,000 years ago (see Pettigrew 1985; Oetting 1988, 1989).

The Yahooskin Paiute were close neighbors with the Klamath/Modoc at the time of early Euroamerican contact, and now constitute one of the three principal divisions of the modern Klamath tribes. William J. Cannon (personal communication 2000), Bureau of Land Management archaeologist for the Lakeview District in south-central and southeastern Oregon, told me that a Yahooskin Paiute elder explained to him some years ago that when he was a young man both he and other family members erected cairns for purposes of prayer. Cannon further commented that rock cairns are distributed throughout the Lakeview District, which extends from the Fort Rock Basin to Warner Valley, near the Oregon-Nevada state line. Warner Valley was home to the Northern Paiute band known as the Kidutokados (Ruby and Brown 1992:156).

The practice of erecting cairns for ritual purposes among the Yahooskin Paiute (and their presence within Kidutokados territory) leads to the question of whether other Paiute groups did the same. Mel Brewster (personal communication 2000), member of the Walker River Paiute Reservation east of Carson City, Nevada, explained that the Northern Paiute did occasionally erect cairns during their vision quests. This was particularly true of Paiute shamans, who would sometimes erect cairns in the vicinity of the rock art they created as another aspect of their vision quest experiences (see the discussion on the relationship between rock art and power/vision questing below). In California, the Shasta (located west of the Modoc) were reported to have stacked rocks when seeking luck. This practice was reportedly restricted to boys and young men (Holt 1946:335).

Prayer seats, rock cairns, and rock stacks have also been recorded in northwestern California, including portions of Yurok, Tolowa, and Karok territories (Chartkoff 1983). These features constitute three elements of six physically distinct types of rock configurations, together forming a "rock feature complex" located in the



high country of northwestern California, the other three being rock alignments, rock circles, and rock hearth rings. Based on ethnographic information obtained from native interviewees, Chartkoff (1983:745-756) assigned religious functions to each of these six types of features.

Rock cairns constructed for ritual purposes have also been found in western regions of Oregon. West of the Willamette and Umpqua valleys, Oregon is generally considered to be part of the Northwest Coast culture area (see Ross 1990). Coquille tribal member, George Wasson (personal communication 2000), informed me that there are several cairn sites in the Gold Beach and Pistol River regions of Curry County on the extreme southwest Oregon coast, the pre-contact territory of the Coquille and Tututni. There is also a number of cairn sites in the upper drainage of the Rogue River, at the juncture of the Northwest Coast, California, and Plateau culture areas. This region was formerly occupied by the Upland Takelma (see Forgeng et al. 1994). One of these sites, the Ridgeline Meadows Site (35JA301) in Jackson County, Oregon, contained more than 50 cairns constructed in the conical fashion (J. Fagan, personal communication 2000). It should be noted that the cairns in the upper drainage of the Rogue River are quite close to the Takelma-Klamath boundary, and might therefore be Klamath in origin. Gray (1987) did not report cairns among the Takelma.

The sacred cultural landscape context of rock cairns and prayer seats cannot be fully understood without reference to another important aspect of that landscape; namely, rock art. Rock art is an important feature of the sacred cultural landscape to the Klamath/Modoc, as well as other indigenous cultures throughout the world (for detailed discussions of Klamath/Modoc rock art, see Hann [1998]; Swartz [1963, 1978]; Heizer and Clewlow [1973]; Crotty [1981]; Loring and Loring [1983]; Ricks [1994]; Armitage et al. [1997]; Loubser and Whitley [1999]; Ritter [1999]). Several researchers have attributed rit-

ual and/or "shamanic" significance to rock art (Spier 1938; Ritter and Ritter 1977; Hedges 1992; Steinbring 1995). Hann (1998), Crotty (1981), Loubser and Whitley (1999), and Ritter (1999) suggested the same for Klamath-Modoc rock art.

In noting the sacred nature of the cultural landscape in the vicinity of Petroglyph Point and Tule Lake in and near the Lava Beds National Monument in northern California, Crotty (1981:163) concluded that the rock art there may have had ritual connections with the Modoc power quest. She also suggested the possibility that the art was associated with food acquisition rituals, since Tule Lake was a vital resource area for the Modoc (Crotty 1981:163).

In analyzing the petroglyph art at the "House of the Rising Sun" site in and around a small cave in northern California (fictional site name at the request of the Klamath tribes), Hann (1998) interpreted the art as having an association with the power quest. Using published and unpublished ethnographic material from Curtin (MS, 1912) and Gatschet (MS, 1890), Hann (1998:1-8) argued convincingly that the location corresponds with the ethnographically described house of the Klamath/Modoc culture hero, *Gmok'am'c*. In interpreting the petroglyphs at the site, Hann (1998) suggested that the sun disk symbol found in the cave is a symbol of *Gmok'am'c*, who was associated with the sun in myths recorded by Curtin (MS). Hann (1998:8-11) offered the compelling conclusion that the site's strong connections to *Gmok'am'c* made it a "portal" to the supernatural portion of the Modoc cosmos and, therefore, the site would have been a place of great supernatural power and an ideal location for power quests.

Ritter (1999) suggested that the rock art located near Keno, Oregon—near the confluence of Klamath, Modoc, and Shasta territory—was also connected with the power quest. Using an interpretive model known as the neuropsychological model for shamanistic art, developed largely

from the work of Whitley (1994, 1998), Ritter (1999:92-93) reasoned that various recurring symbolic forms depicted in the Keno art are representative of images that occur to the mind during an altered state of consciousness (ASC). Since the ritual procedures of a power quest are designed to produce what westerners would consider an ASC, use of the neuropsychological model has promise.

Loubser and Whitley (1999) interpreted rock art from eight sites in the Lava Beds National Monument as having several religious connections, including vision questing (by both shamans and nonshamans), mythic associations, hunting magic and other ritual specializations, and mortuary associations. They reached their conclusions by careful application of the ethnographic record and recently obtained data on the manner in which the brain processes and recalls visions received during a hallucinatory state (Loubser and Whitley 1999; also see Whitley 1998).

If rock art is associated with the power quest, what is the spatial association between rock art and cairns? While Brewster (personal communication 2000) reported a direct spatial association between rock art and cairns among the Northern Paiute, very few of these direct associations have been recorded in Klamath/Modoc country. Loubser and Whitley (1999:8, 13) observed a few cairns in close spatial association with rock art in the Lava Beds National Monument, but these appear to be exceptional. Currently, Whitley et al. (MS) are exploring a line of investigation that suggests there were key "male" and "female" aspects of the Klamath/Modoc sacred cultural landscape and that these sexual aspects explain why rock art is usually found at lower elevations (female) and power quest cairns are usually found at higher elevations (male).

### THE TRADITIONAL CULTURAL CONTEXT

Traditional Klamath/Modoc religious life focused on cosmology, quests for spiritual power,

and the activities of the shaman (Spencer 1952: 218). The Klamath relied on the powers of their village shaman and their own individual powers gathered on power/vision quests in an effort to ally themselves with cosmological entities in order to satisfy the basic needs of life (Haynal 1994:47).

The land that formed Klamath territory was believed to have been brought forth solely for the Klamath by the creator and culture hero, *Gmo'kam'c*. Two Klamath tribal members (Priscilla Bettles and Karen Ray) explained that the land and the people are a part of each other and were created to care for and nurture one another (Haynal 1994:317). The Modoc had a similar spiritual bond with the land. In fact, the two tribes recognized the spiritual and sacred nature of each other's lands (Curtin 1912:vi). Obtaining power from the spirits located throughout the landscape was a key aspect of Klamath/Modoc traditional religion. Virtually every unique rock feature, mountain, cave, body of water, meadow, or any other distinct location within the land had a spirit and everything with a spirit had power. The animals of the land had power as well. From the Klamath perspective, all the cosmos, both animate and inanimate, was alive and everything alive had both spirit and power. Even a single rock had power. A rock from Mt. Shasta carried a portion of the great power of the mountain itself (Spier 1930; Ray 1963).

Power from the spirits of the landscape and the animals within it was sought by every person, of both sexes, commencing at puberty. Males went on solitary power quests that lasted from five to seven days and required the individual to fast. Young women did not normally go on power quests per se because of the danger in being alone, but they could still obtain power through dreams given to them by spirits. Interviewees 10 and 11 explained that when a young woman did go on a power quest, an older male relative kept a close eye on her from a discreet distance. When young people went on power quests, they

sought an isolated place known to be a concentration of spirit power, such as Crater Lake.

In order to receive a spirit dream, the power seeker would become exhausted by swimming, running, sweating (taking part in a sweat lodge ceremony), piling up rocks (a form of the rock cairn), and engaging in other energy-consuming tasks. Finally, the individual would fall unconscious from the exertions and begin to dream. Power was transmitted from the spirit during the dream in the form of a song (Stern 1966:15). Ray (1963:77-78) noted that a boy on a vision quest during his puberty rite might construct several stone piles, one a day for the duration of the quest. Sometimes the individual would stack a pile of rocks to its maximum height and then unstack it, only to restack it a few feet away. Each cairn would be constructed as high as the boy could make it. The power obtained on a quest could give an individual some measure of control over success in procreation, battle, hunting, accumulating wealth, the domestic arts, or gambling. Therefore, individuals used this power to satisfy basic daily needs and to ensure long-term success in these various activities (Spier 1930; Stern 1966). Those with the most spirit power and the greatest success in a wide range of social activities became the most prominent individuals in society (village leaders, leading warriors, or shamans).

### Rock Cairns

Many of the first Euroamericans to enter the Klamath Basin made note of the vast numbers of rock piles erected by the native inhabitants (Abbot 1855; Clarke 1885). Prior to contact with Euroamericans, rock cairns had several religious functions, including the piling of rocks during power quests described above. Anthropologists have taken the view that stacking rocks during a power quest, in combination with fasting and sleep deprivation, contributed to a state of exhaustion that placed the individual into a "hallucinatory state" (Spier 1930; Stern 1966). Today,

such a "hallucinatory state" is more correctly understood to be an altered state of consciousness.

A second function of rock cairns was in a mortuary capacity. It was common to mark cremation grounds or a solitary cremation with a rock cairn or cairns overlooking the sacred location.<sup>2</sup> In the interviews for this article, one Klamath consultant (Interviewee 1) stated that in the old days, as various groups of her people traveled throughout their territory, sometimes a person would pass away. When a death occurred away from the village and its associated cremation grounds, that person was often buried in a location close to their passing and a cairn would be constructed to mark this location.

A third function of rock cairns is closely related to the first, in that these cairns were also erected during a quest for power. However, unlike the power quest cairns erected as part of the Klamath puberty rite, these cairns were constructed by mature individuals seeking additional powers as their lives progressed. Mature individuals did not always stack rocks to tire themselves. Instead, they used rock cairns to focus their minds during their quests. This type of cairn began small, consisting of a stack of two rocks. Then, on subsequent visits to the same location, the individual would add a rock (or rocks) to the stack. It was common for those embarking on this more relaxed and contemplative form of the power quest to remain at a sacred location for weeks at a time.

Mature individuals did, however, erect cairns in a fashion reminiscent of the exhaustive puberty power quest when the occasion required it. The Klamath/Modoc also sought guidance and comfort from the supernatural world during a life crisis. Specifically for the Modoc, Ray (1963) characterized this practice as a crisis quest. The Modoc embarked on crisis quests on the occasions of the birth or death of a child, chronic illness, the death of a spouse, or serious gambling losses.

That the Klamath also embarked on crisis quests is evidenced by remarks from a Klamath



man, Tyee Blow, recorded by Samuel A. Clarke in the later nineteenth century (Swartz 1980). Blow related that when a child died, a man might travel to the mountains to

fast and punish himself by piling rocks, climbing steep mountains and descending at night from mountain tops into cold lakes . . . and would perhaps continue his labors at night on the mountain tops until he would bleed at the mouth and nostrils and fall into a deep sleep almost like death . . . While thus sleeping they see visions of every kind and everything which seems so mysterious to us becomes perfectly clear to them [Swartz 1980:29].

Thus, it is suggested that the crisis quest was not altogether different from the power quests undertaken by mature Klamath/Modoc individuals throughout their adult lives, in that a crisis in one's life may have been seen as an indication that one's spiritual powers were weakening or insufficient and needed renewal and/or enhancement.

Various rock formations have been observed that are more elaborate than simple stacks or piles, but which may be related to the more typical cairns in origin and function. These features take the form of wall-like or linear structures. Some contemporary Klamath/Modoc have speculated that they may have been built during power quests as individual embellishments of the more typical stacked rock cairn. John Fagan (personal communication 2000) described a linear rock formation at the Ridgeline Meadow Site (35JA301) that points directly to Mt. Shasta. Mt. Shasta is another prominent feature of the Klamath sacred cultural landscape. Many contemporary Klamath have said that Mt. Shasta is the principal home of their culture hero, *Gmo'kam'c*.

Goodwin (1997) reported the presence of several vision quest cairns on Mt. Bryant in south-central Oregon. This mountain was within the precontact territory of the Modoc, specifically the Kokiwas band (Goodwin 1997:10). Interestingly, Goodwin (1997:10) observed numerous cairns arranged in a serpentine-like pattern, as well as cairns arranged in circular and triangular

patterns. Just as often, cairns on Mt. Bryant are isolated with no discernible physical relationship to other cairns. Together, the linear rock feature that points directly to Mt. Shasta at the Ridgeline Meadow Site and the Mt. Bryant features provide evidence for two locations with rock features associated with cairns that were not built in the typical stacked or conical fashion.

The Klamath/Modoc religion allowed for a wide expression of individual variation. This individualism might account for the spatial and physical variation between rock cairns and the associated atypical rock features of the power/vision quest type. It is suggested here that the physical variation found in power quest cairns might also be attributable, in part, to the particular vision or dream a power seeker received from the spirit domain.

The fourth type of cairn has been recorded along trails. During the Williamson survey party of 1855, Abbot (1855:70) noted that

[a]mong the whole chain of Klamath waters we noticed, in many places, large stones laid one upon the other, forming piles from two to six feet in height. Some of the party thought that these were marks to show the trail when the ground was covered with snow; but the vast numbers of them, sometimes found within a few feet of each other, and their frequent proximity to trees which could have been easily blazed, rendered this hypothesis rather improbable.

In providing an explanation for this type of cairn, Ray (1963:23) related that it was common practice for the Modoc to stop at certain places along trails to offer prayers for safe passage and overall good luck.

Given the Klamath/Modoc belief that places such as springs, caves, and rock formations were special places of power or the abodes of specific spirits, it was likely at these places that prayers were offered. Ideally, a food offering was left at the prayer location, but a stone would be substituted if food was short or unavailable. Gradually, over the centuries, these stone piles grew to be two to six feet in height and are distinguished



from power quest cairns by their location and the smaller size of the stones. Unfortunately, due to economic development of the floor of the Klamath Basin, virtually all examples of this type of cairn have been destroyed.

All four general types of cairns were built to acknowledge and appeal to the spiritual powers of the Klamath/Modoc world. The rituals of fasting, running, and sweating (or, for more mature individuals, simple meditation and prayer) culminated with the construction or enhancement of cairns made for the purpose of receiving or enriching spiritual power. From the native practitioner's point of view, the rituals involving physical exertion demonstrated a willingness to sacrifice and prepare for a desired visit from a spirit power. The erection of the cairns themselves was an offering to the spirit powers and was quite an exhaustive act for adolescents on their power quests (or for mature men and women involved in a crisis). These demanding acts of physical exertion or denial (fasting) are reminiscent of the vision quest pattern found throughout the Plateau and the Plains. Plateau and Plains Indians would also fast and participate in sweat lodge ceremonies prior to seeking a vision (Lowie 1935; Sandoz 1942; Neihardt 1961; *Stands In Timber and Liberty* 1967; Walker and Schuster 1998). The related Crow and Hidatsa commonly practiced self-mutilation and self-torture to demonstrate their worthiness to receive a vision (Lowie 1935; Bowers 1992).<sup>3</sup> No acts of self-mutilation or self-torture involving power quests have been reported for either the Klamath or the Modoc.

Cairns associated with power quests were normally located with an eastern orientation, such as the east slopes of hills or mountains. The Klamath/Modoc always built their shelters with the entrance facing east and began all prayers facing the east, the direction where the sun first appears. The cremation cairns and grounds at higher elevations were also located facing the east. Cremation grounds on the basin floor did not always follow this rule.

Some power quest cairns have been found on north, south, or west-facing slopes. According to three Klamath/Modoc interviewees, an individual would sometimes seek power on one mountaintop and be compelled to honor the spirit of another mountain. For instance, said individual would find a place on Pelican Butte with a view of Mt. Mazama and erect a cairn on that spot. In general, though, the Klamath avoided west-facing slopes as the land of the dead was believed to lie in that direction (Spier 1930:102).

### Prayer Seats

The second general category of sacred sites under discussion is the prayer seat. Some Klamath label this type of sacred site as "prayer circles." Prayer seats are not directly described in the ethnographic record as pertaining to the Klamath or Modoc peoples. Therefore, modern Klamath interviewees have been relied on for physical descriptions and cultural significance. One consultant (Interviewee 7), a Klamath elder, described prayer seats as sacred areas, circular in form, where certain Klamath would go to pray from within the circular feature. Interviewee 5, a consultant of middle age who practices a form of the traditional religion, described prayer seats as more "U" shaped. Yet another traditionally oriented Klamath (Interviewee 5) explained that prayer seats take different forms; they can be completely human-made by arranging rocks or logs, or a naturally formed circular area suitable for seating, or a natural area modified by adding additional materials. All three interviewees said that the sacred function of the prayer seats/circles was to serve as a location for prayer.

Reference was made above to unmodified natural features reported in the literature that were used by Klamath/Modoc boys during their puberty quests (Spier 1930:94; Ray 1963:80). Given that Interviewee 5 stated that prayer seats can be a naturally formed circular area, the saucer-shaped bed of rocks described by Spier (1930:94)

and the shallow depressions in meadows or niches in rocks described by Ray (1963: 80) can be considered a variant of the prayer seat.

According to interviewees, prayer seats were often found in association with rock cairns. Not enough attention has been paid by anthropologists to the existence of prayer seats, especially the natural unmodified variety, in order to better document this reported correlation. Interviewees were in general agreement that prayer seats were used by powerful leaders or shamans on prolonged power quests. These powerful individuals were able to enter the psychological state necessary to receive power through dreams without physical exertion. Instead, they entered a trance-like state through what westerners would consider a meditative process. Such power quests might take several days or weeks, so the individual constructed a prayer seat, or used a naturally formed one, for comfort and shelter from the elements. Interviewee 2 noted that a brush roof might be added over the seat to protect an individual from foul weather. An individual might return to the same sacred area and settle into his prayer seat year after year. With each visit, the associated cairn would have another rock added to it. The cairn would act as a focus for meditation, as well as an offering to the spirit powers. When encountered, these individual sacred areas were avoided by other tribesmen.

### THE MODERN CULTURAL CONTEXT

As a result of nearly a century under the forced assimilation policies of the United States government, from 1864 to 1954, the vast majority of the Klamath/Modoc peoples became Christian. Despite this, elements of the traditional religion continued to exist in a syncretic relationship with Christian beliefs. Today, most of the tribes continue to be strong adherents of the Christian faith. However, many Klamath/Modoc are eager to revive as many elements of the traditional religion as possible, as long as those elements do not conflict with Christianity (Spencer

1952; Zakoji 1953; Haynal 1994, 1996).

The modern Klamath/Modoc peoples, both traditional and Christian, hold a deep respect and reverence for both ancient and more recently constructed rock cairns and prayer seats. A small but significant number of Klamath/Modoc practice a form of the traditional religion with pan-Indian influences (Haynal 1994). It is difficult to estimate the precise number of those practicing traditional religion; many of those who do prefer not to discuss the matter with outsiders. These individuals still follow the old practice of constructing rock cairns while seeking power. Even some Christian Klamath/Modoc follow the practice, but have adapted it as part of their prayer offerings to God and Jesus Christ (Haynal 1994: 319).

Rock cairns of modern construction are of three basic types: the power quest cairn constructed by traditional Klamath/Modoc; the memorial cairn erected in memory of a deceased friend or loved one; and the Christian cairn, built by Christians seeking a closer communion with God and Christ. Most Klamath/Modoc readily discuss the spiritual significance that rock cairns generally have for themselves as individuals. On the other hand, most of those who actually construct cairns are reluctant to discuss the details of these personal spiritual matters. The best way to convey the significance of rock cairns to the modern tribal population is through the use of direct statements from modern Klamath/Modoc.

Interviewee 3, a young Klamath man in his twenties, explained that

[a] rock cairn is basically the same thing as a church, people go there to pray, men go there for puberty to put on vision quests, it's just a very spiritual place.

Interviewee 4 made a similar comment about rock cairns, stating:

To me those cairns are no different than a church. We know how our people would go on a vision quest or power quest and be up all night long building the cairn as a method of prayer.

Also in reference to vision quest cairns, Interviewee 5 stated that they “are prayer altars. The people offered prayers to the creator for luck and a number of reasons.” Interviewee 6 also described the cairns as sacred altars:

When our people went out to seek God . . . seeking the truth, seeking power, seeking direction, seeking guidance . . . whenever they went there and received an answer or confirmation or received a power . . . they built an altar saying “this is where the Creator spoke to me” and this is now sacred.

In noting the power of cairns, Interviewee 6 added that

[t]he thing about cairns is, if you knock them over or if people destroy them with malicious intent . . . somehow the spirit of the place or of this person who put it there could come back on you.

With that statement, Interviewee 6 voiced a commonly held cultural belief that disturbing a rock cairn, either inadvertently or deliberately, can result in serious supernatural consequences. Interviewee 3 told the following story about the power of cairns:

We were going up to locate a site, it was a vision quest, and a tree had fallen down on top of this rock. The rock was probably 10 inches tall and weighed about 7 or 8 pounds. A tree fell down on the rock and the rock didn't move. It was just sitting on another rock, it didn't budge it. They're definitely powerful, there's definitely some kind of spirit there, I believe.

The remarks of Interviewees 3 and 6 reflect the modern perception that every cairn has its own sacred spiritual power and is not simply a focal point or conduit of power. This modern perception may have a connection to the precontact traditional culture. Ray (1963:27) quoted a Modoc prayer recited to a cairn:

My good helper, stone pile, you give me good luck, I am going out to hunt now, I give you this. Help me to have good luck hunting deer. That is what I want you to do.

Interviewee 7 explained that rock cairns are sacred but that the precise meanings cairns have

vary from cairn to cairn and from individual to individual. Some may have been erected to obtain personal desires, while others mark a place of mourning or simple prayer. According to Interviewee 7, “It was an individual person's quest and most of the time it was never revealed to anyone what they wanted.”

Interviewee 5 uses the mountains for prayer and explained that the sacred nature of the mountains is made obvious by the presence of the numerous power quest cairns. This interviewee stated, “I myself, I built one for a friend who passed away three or four years ago,” but declined to provide any specific details of this spiritual and deeply personal activity.

Not every Klamath believes that the power represented by rock cairns is benign. Interviewee 8, a respected tribal elder, was a Christian, born and raised during a time when Christian missionaries and other whites still denigrated traditional cultural practices and equated traditional religion with Satan. This had a profound influence on the elder as a boy, an influence that stayed with him throughout his life. He told the following story about rock cairns and the people who erected them:

My uncle said . . . that this is where a real mean Indian doctor (goes) you know . . . and the spirit tells him to pile it. The spirit speaks: “You fear. You can't eat, drink, you can't see anybody, you stay by yourself and you talk to me. You can't eat nothing, can't drink nothing. And you'll be a very powerful person, now you put this other rock on top.”

According to Interviewee 8, “That's why they do this . . . I want to be rich, I want to control the reservation. Someone does something to me I'll heap evil on that person.” The ultimate goal of these ill-intentioned people, explained Interviewee 8, was to become an “Indian doctor.”

Most Klamath/Modoc do not share this view of cairns and those who built them, but all interviewees agreed that one should not touch a cairn built by another person's hands. The power of these cairns is not yours and, as Interviewee 6

explained, that power—or the spirit of the deceased individual who built the cairn—might harm or kill you.

Perhaps the most important aspect about the beliefs of modern Klamath/Modoc concerning rock cairns and prayer seats is their nature as unifying cultural symbols. These ancient sacred sites serve as cultural symbols linking ancestors with the living people, and as such, the modern people are strongly committed to protecting all cairns and prayer seats from destruction resulting from development, timber harvesting, or deliberate vandalism. The following quotes illustrate this. Interviewee 9, a Klamath woman in her forties, is of the opinion that cairns

should be left alone in the most natural state that they can. That might be a place where someone might come back to someday. I was taught not to disturb anything. It is like their church. They have significance to individuals and their personal relationship with the Creator.

Tribal members feel that if development or other impacts are approved in an area with cairns, then those sites should be avoided and protected with buffer zones. Interviewee 5 argued:

They need to be left alone from the start. Avoidance. If there's going to be a problem . . . at least give them a buffer zone where if work goes into that area that they're not knocked over or damaged or people leaving garbage or things like that. You just need to stay away from them.

Interviewee 6 also believes that the best way to protect cairns is by leaving a buffer zone of trees around each one. She further believes that their exact locations should be recorded for purposes of protection but that these locations should not be published or in any manner released to the general public. Interviewees 10 and 11 agreed with this position.

Director Gordon Bettles (personal communication 1997) of the Klamath Culture and Heritage Department explained to me that the Klamath tribes take the position that rock cairns and prayer seats are objects of cultural patrimony. As

defined by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (United States Congress 1990), objects of cultural patrimony are those that have "ongoing historical, traditional, or cultural importance central to the Native American group or culture itself" and are the property of a tribe, or a subgroup of a tribe such as a band or clan, and could not have been given or sold by an individual member. Congress intended this category to be restricted to objects of great importance, such as Pueblo kachina dolls and Iroquois wampum belts (United States Department of the Interior 1991:12). It is apparent, given the data collected for this research and the personal communication with Bettles, that the Klamath/Modoc equate the importance of rock cairns and prayer seats in their cultures to kachina dolls or wampum belts in the Pueblo and Iroquois cultures. Since rock cairns and prayer seats are so vital to the Klamath/Modoc, their presence in a specific area is critical in the evaluation of traditional cultural properties in order to determine the location's eligibility for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places, per the terms of the National Historic Preservation Act (see Parker and King 1990).

### CAIRNS, PRAYER SEATS, AND MODERN WORLD VIEW

Elsewhere, I have discussed how Christianization has altered Klamath/Modoc traditional ethos and world view (Haynal 1994). Traditional Klamath/Modoc cosmology and their belief in the importance of acquiring spiritual power were key components of their traditional ethos and world view. Klamath/Modoc world view focused on a reality full of powerful spirit beings, including the culture hero, *Gmo'kam'c*. They incorporated as a key aspect of their ethos the practice of seeking power from these spirit beings by undertaking quests to areas within their landscape known to be strong in power. Among these places were high mountain peaks and ridges, springs and lakes, caves, and other geologic for-



mations believed to be the homes of powerful spirit beings, as well as various rock formations believed to represent spirit beings turned to stone for various transgressions. With this power, a man or woman could influence people, things, and events for their own personal well being.

While Christianity has reduced the numbers of Klamath/Modoc who still seek spiritual power from sacred areas of their landscape, it has not removed the spiritual connection of the people with the land. Christian and non-Christian Klamath/Modoc both look upon the rock cairns and prayer seats left behind by their ancestors as integral parts of the spiritual nature of their home land. Christian Klamath/Modoc journey into the high country not to seek personal power but to commune with their Christian God through prayer. So, while they now rely on God to provide for them instead of seeking power to provide for themselves, rock cairns and prayer seats have become powerful symbols of their spiritual and ancient bond with their land.

An important component of a people's shared world view is their perceptions regarding their relationship with nature (Geertz 1973). Contemporary Klamath/Modoc have lost legal possession of most of the land once inhabited by their ancestors. However, both Christian and non-Christian tribal members believe they were created within their traditional territory and that they have a responsibility to serve as the protective stewards of not only the former reservation but of all their traditional territory. They feel that this stewardship is an eternal responsibility divorced from legal ownership of the land (per tribal members Dino Herrera and Don Gentry, as cited in Haynal 1994:226). This protective stewardship includes not only oversight of the natural resources located within their territory but all cultural sites as well, both sacred and secular.

The modern Klamath/Modoc view protection of the land and the sacred cultural sites within it as crucial for their long-term cultural survival. Rock cairns and prayer seats are shared cultural

symbols that reinforce—in both old and young, traditionalist and Christian, and educated and noneducated—their common ethnic and cultural identities and long occupation of the Klamath Basin and surrounding environs. This concept of stewardship is an integral and shared component of modern Klamath/Modoc world view, a component that is reinforced by the continuing physical and symbolic presence of ancient cairns and prayer seats and the ongoing practice of erecting new cairns.

### NOTES

1. A draft of this article was submitted to the Culture and Heritage Committee of the Klamath tribes for review in April of 1999. In late August 1999, verbal agreement to pursue publication was received from Mr. Gordon Bettles, then Director of the Klamath Culture and Heritage Department.

2. I have personally assisted members of the Klamath tribes in the evaluation of one such cairn directly associated with the cremated remains of an individual. This cairn consisted of several five to 20-pound rocks stacked atop a natural rock outcrop. The cairn was located on private property being developed for housing. The burial cairn was identified prior to strengthening of the Oregon state laws protecting Native American graves, but the Klamath were able to negotiate a mutually satisfactory site mitigation plan with the property owner.

3. It was more common among Plains peoples to limit self-mutilation and self-torture to the rites involved in the performance of the Sun Dance.

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