

# MEDICINAL HERBS AND LANDSCAPE ARCHAEOLOGY: MENSTRUAL CUSTOMS AMONG THE SOUTHERN POMO AND COAST MIWOK DURING THE EMERGENT PERIOD

SYDNI M. KITCHEL  
SONOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

*The ethnobotanical practices of the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok of Sonoma County have been extensively studied by anthropologists. However, there is a lack of research on how menstrual customs were manifested in the landscape. This article explores the use of medicinal herbs for menstrual purposes of Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok women during the Emergent Period (ca. 500-1800 A.D.) and how they used their surrounding landscape. Through tribal consultation, ethnographic research, and archaeological field work, the article concludes with a model for how to understand gendered landscapes in the archaeological record via survey, excavation, and geoarchaeological methods. The focus is to emphasize the lives of Native American women by nominating these landscapes as Traditional Cultural Properties to the National Register of Historic Places since women are an integral part in the sustainability of communities.*

For several thousand years, humans have developed a complex relationship with the earth. Throughout the world, people have utilized their surrounding environment for survival, craft, and trade. Harvesting herbs was an essential part of life for spiritual and physical purposes. Traditional tribal knowledge about medicinal plants was passed along generations through oral traditions. Such knowledge included how particular herbs were favored for their medicinal and practical uses for a wide variety of daily purposes, such as menstrual needs. Some herbs have specific menstrual taboos which can vary between tribes. Taboos around menstruation continue to be enforced within cultures worldwide today, shaping the societies that embody them. Such traditions can be observed within the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo tribes of Sonoma County, California.

Ethnographies conducted by anthropologists in the early twentieth century provide some of the first documentations of Native Californians (Barrett 1904; Kroeber 1925). Samuel Barrett and Alfred Kroeber both mention the tribes that incorporate modern-day Sonoma County which are the Wappo, Lake and Coast Miwok, and the seven separate Pomo groups. During the Emergent Period (ca. 500 to 1800 A.D.), Native Californians used specific land management techniques to systematically manicure flora in order to maintain the health of the local environment (Fredrickson 1974:48). This form of management involved mandatory observations of seasonal cycles throughout the year as well as awareness of climatic and weather changes, thus establishing a deeper understanding and relationship with the environment. This understanding equates an awareness and observation of the changes that happen to plants and knowing what the best season is to harvest a resource. For example, if a plant is picked before it is ready, it could make a person sick (Lawson and Lawson 1976:132). Women were more likely to be aware of these environmental changes since women did the majority of plant collecting. As this relationship with the natural world developed, so did social practices. Just like there are consequences for picking a plant before it is ripe, there are also consequences for breaking cultural taboos. Kroeber (1925) briefly touched upon the subject and described some of the taboos held within Pomo and other Native Californian groups:

The feeling of all California Indians in regard to the exceptional supernatural power inherent in girls at this period [of menstruation] is so deep-seated that it is scarcely likely that the occasion was allowed to pass without some accentuation of the subsequently recurrent taboos. These were numerous, explicit, and of the usual type. If the woman scratched her head with anything except a special bone or stick, she would shed her hair. If she washed, her face wrinkled; should she work on a basket, she would become blind. If she went to fetch water, she might see a monster in the spring; and eating meat would make her sick. Her husband also

refrained from hunting or gambling, and from at least certain religious participations. Evidently her condition was essentially potent for evil and easily transmissible. She occupied a separate hut [Kroeber 1925:254].

This “separate hut” Kroeber referred to is indeed a menstrual lodge. While a woman was menstruating, she would retreat for several days away from her community, either alone or with other women, and was required to observe specific rules. If she did not follow a rule, there were often negative consequences that directly affected her, the community, or the surrounding environment. Limited ethnographic accounts about Native American cultures exist regarding the documentation of menstrual lodges, and when they are mentioned the descriptions are often vague, brief, and discounted. No doubt this lack of detail is tied to the majority of anthropologists being male during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Patricia Galloway (1998:203) brought attention to this type of gender discrimination of the treatment of archaeological features of sweat lodges, noting that “Features created by male-dominated or gender-neutral activities, even if they were designed for purification from ritual pollution, do not suffer from invisibility. Yet for at least half the population, the so-called menstrual huts were equally important for ritual purification, both monthly and after childbirth. This helps make an argument for their being more than flimsy ‘huts’.”

Through regular use of an area, whether that be harvesting favored herbs or retreating to a menstrual lodge, familiarity of the surrounding area was inevitable among the Native Americans. This created a cultural locality that proved sustainable for the local community. Because of the prosperity these landscapes offered, traditions continued to be passed on through the generations (Lawson and Lawson 1978:134-135). This is important as it continues and reinforces the cultural identity of the women to the landscape. This significance has long been respected by Native peoples for generations from all around the world. Western cultures should acknowledge, respect, and support this cultural connection with landscapes among indigenous people because such connections and traditional knowledge are powerful tools that can help our understanding of landscapes of the past, present, and future. Fortunately, the United States government has provided a means to do just that. Defined by The National Register of Historic Places (NRHP), a Traditional Cultural Property (TCP) is an “association with cultural practices or beliefs of a living community that (a) are rooted in that community’s history, and (b) are important in maintaining the continuing cultural identity of the community” (Parker and King 1998:1). Because indigenous women during the Emergent Period were prominent contributors within the tribe as well as being active participants in the cultivation of medicinal herbs, TCPs provide the means for these unique menstrual landscapes to be federally recognized and protected.

Despite the extensive literature on the ethnography and ethnobotany of Native Californians, there is a lack of research in regard to the connection between medicinal herbs used for menstruation and menstrual lodges. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to develop a model to study the plants used between the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok during the Emergent Period. The intent is to distinguish where menstrual lodges and gathering areas were located in relation to community centers, whereby arguing to designate these menstrual landscapes as a TCP to the NRHP. The results of this research will not only be beneficial to other Native American communities, but also to cultural resource managers and scholarly, scientific communities. From this comparative analysis of menstrual ethnobotany and settlement planning with respect to herbal resources comes a deeper understanding of past female lifeways and the adaptations that were made to the natural environment through cultural structures. This knowledge can be used to expand the current status quo of what has usually been constituted a TCP to include women’s menstrual traditions since these rites played an important role in the lives of women, their local community, and the environment.

## MENSTRUAL ETHNOBOTANY

Extensive literature exists in regard to the use of medicinal herbs used by people worldwide that spans centuries. Some of the literature is generalizations of a geographic region whereas others are more group-specific. Herbs like sage (*Salvia* spp.), yarrow (*Achillea millefolium*), and nettle (*Urtica dioica*) are native

to California and have long been common ingredients to address various ailments. The herb angelica (*Angelica* spp.) (Figure 1), for example, is held in high regard among the Kashaya Pomo people in which it was and continues to be used as a tea for menstrual cramping (Goodrich et al. 1980:91). On the other hand, men among the Coast Miwok used angelica by rubbing it onto their bodies as a good luck charm for deer hunting, although “the wife can spoil the luck of the root” (Beckwith 1995:136), alluding to when she is menstruating. This example suggests that there may be several uses of a single herb depending on the tribe. It also suggests that menstrual taboos were associated with herbs. In this particular example, the good luck of angelica could become void if the hunters’ menstruating wife did not follow specific rules. Tule (*Scirpus* spp.) is another important plant resource with several uses (Figure 2). It was favored for basket making among the Pomo people, whereas it was made into sanitary napkins and as floor padding for Coast Miwok women to lay on while in the menstrual lodge (Beckwith 1995:155-156). This shows the various ways one herb can be utilized for menstrual needs.

It is often the case that many herbal resources embody various medicinal functions and beliefs pertinent to specific cultural groups. Despite the resources available on plants used for menstruation, however, finding references that include taboos, gathering methods, and where these herbs were gathered in relation to their community center is nearly impossible. Instead, most sources cover the topic apathetically and are often vague in their descriptions of applied use. Without this knowledge, one cannot grasp the connectivity that Native Californian women had with their surrounding environment, thus impeding the process of cultural landscape recognition.



Figure 1. *Angelica* (*Angelica* spp.).



Figure 2. *Tule* (*Scirpus* spp.).

### **MENSTRUAL TABOOS, MENSTRUAL LODGES, AND HABITATION SITES**

Depicted through various Native Californian cultures, the role a menstruating woman held within her community was filled with much power and responsibility. To obey menstrual taboos meant to maintain cosmic balance, for she embodied both life and death (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988). This responsibility not only affected her, but also her husband, community and ultimately all of nature. While harvesting herbs, for example, the Kashaya Pomo explain to the Creator why they are gathering herbs from an area and sing a special song to protect the plants and themselves from the gathering process (Lawson and Lawson

1976:134). Menstruation taboos among Native Californians have been documented by ethnographers and anthropologists since the late 1800s. Whether this knowledge of menstrual taboos and lodges was collected ethically with permission from tribal members or without their consent is not clear. Be that as it may, their records reveal that specific taboos varied among tribes. Common themes observed include food, drink and bathing restrictions (Kroeber 1925; Buckley and Gottlieb 1988) which are strictly enforced for the purpose of maintaining the delicate cosmic balance. One misinterpretation is that bleeding women and menstrual lodges are dangerous and impure, whereas Native women have an opposite view. Thomas Buckley (1982) describes an interaction he had with a young Yurok woman in where she explained that women isolate themselves because that is the time when they are at the height of their power. Time, therefore, should not be wasted on mundane tasks and social distractions, but rather be focused to find out what her true purpose of life is. Like men's sweat lodges, it is considered a place where she goes within herself to make herself stronger (Buckley 1982:49).

Within the indigenous community, the use of a menstrual lodge was also surrounded in taboo. While menstruating, women would temporarily isolate themselves, either in solitude or with other women, in a lodge for several days away from her community while adhering to specific rules. Harold E. Driver (1941) used ethnographic data to create extensive maps that compared several Native American tribes throughout the western United States. Using a map with the guidance of a legend, he illustrated various menstrual taboos, location of menstrual sites and more by placing various dots on an aerial map of the western United States (Figure 3). This is vital in understanding how Native Americans used the landscape, how far a female ventured away from her community and how traditions were similar to or different amongst tribes. Though, specific customs and locations of menstrual lodges and habitation sites pertaining to the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo are unclear due to Driver's vast coverage of tribes and geographic landscape.

## **TRADITIONAL CULTURAL PROPERTIES**

The incorporation of TCPs into this study offers avenues for strong legal protection against any impacts of cultural resources. In this particular case, it is through the way women navigated and interacted with their surrounding environment. With regular use of an area, familiarity of natural features was sure to ensue. This created a cultural locality among women that proved to be sustainable for their needs. Because these landscapes were rich in resources, the cultural traditions associated with them continued to be passed on through the generations. This is important as it continues the cultural identity of women within the community and landscape.

Butzier and Stevenson (2014) discussed the various legal and non-legal documents associated with sacred sites and traditional cultural properties. Through a review of national and international laws and court decisions, they conclude that consultation with tribal members before any extraction activities of artifacts or human remains that may impact sacred sites or traditional cultural properties is required by law. In addition to consultation being a political requirement, they emphasize it is ethical and good business practice between tribal members, land managers, and archaeologists, wherein the results lead to improved business reputations for future developments on native land with tribal members (Butzier and Stevenson 2014). The research gathered by Butzier and Stevenson offer a cultural resource perspective regarding tribal consultation and traditional cultural properties, providing examples of what successful and unsuccessful enacted procedures consist of.

T. J. Ferguson (2003) highlighted the Hopi and Zuni tribes of the American Southwest to investigate TCPs and cultural affiliation where tribal members take an active role in contributing to the social theory and historical narratives of their ancestral past. Ferguson (2003:137) stated that the Hopi and Zuni call for archaeologists to not only look at material culture as a way of looking at the past, but to also incorporate religion, culture, language, kinship, and traditional history. By studying trails, or umbilical cords as the Hopi and Zuni call them, Ferguson (2003:139) noted that they provide tangible links to village locations and outlying cultural locations that connect their pueblos with shrines and cultural places associated with their ancestors that are still revered today. He also noted that Hopi and Zuni tribal members advocate for the change in the

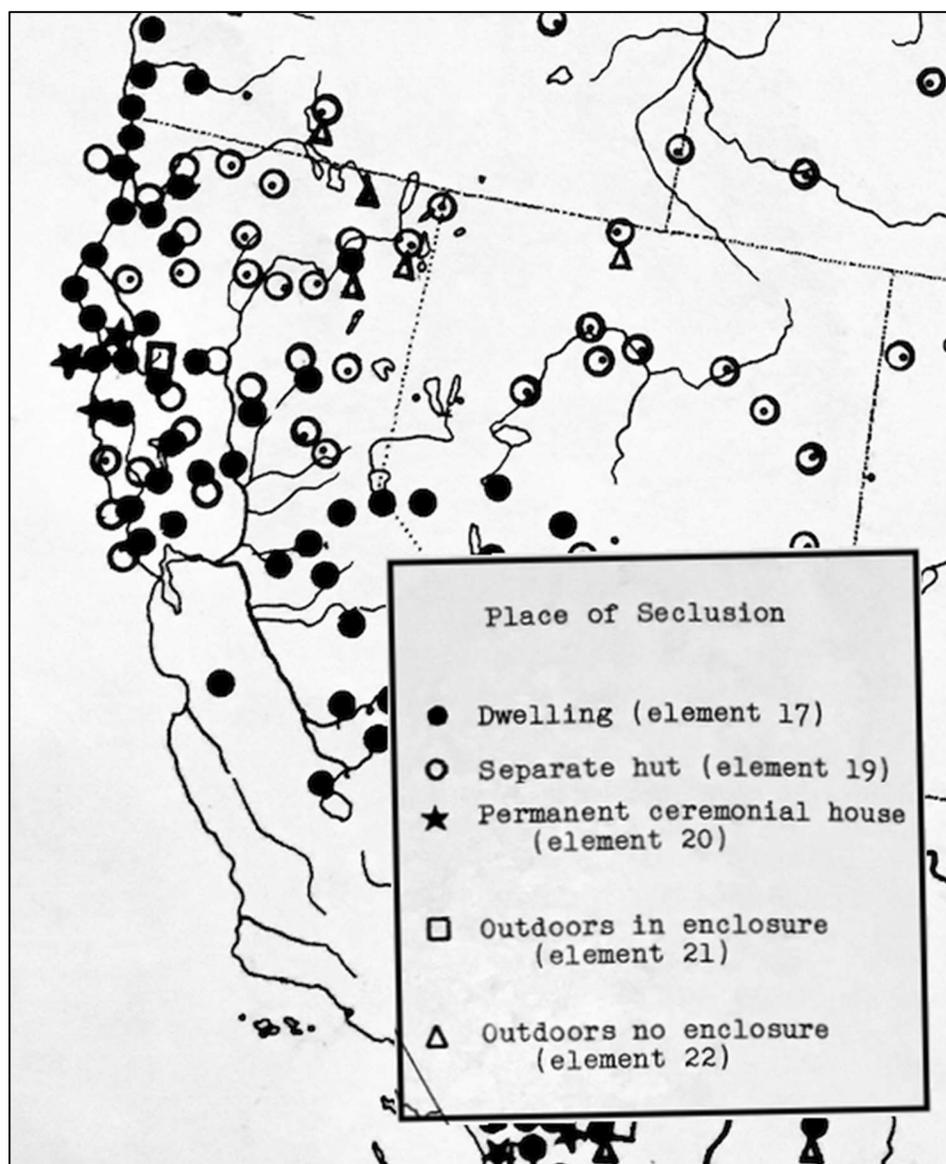


Figure 3. Driver's map of places of seclusion (Driver 1941:40).

TCP language. Tribal members prefer the phrase “traditional cultural *places*” as opposed to “*properties*” since the word “places” articulates cultural importance as opposed to the superimposed property real estate values (Ferguson 2003:139). This research contributes to TCPs in a CRM context where tribal members, land managers, and archaeologists consult together the ways to fill the cultural resources gap as well as the preservation of native heritage through the amendment of particular language.

## METHODS

In order to address my research questions regarding the menstrual customs of the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok, certain data requirements need to be in place. Consultation with the tribes through contact with Graton Rancheria is essential. As a community, Graton Rancheria is a federation of Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok individuals as recognized by the U.S. Congress as a tribe (Federated Indians of Graton

Rancheria 2017). Consultation with these tribal members will be the most important and relevant aspect of the research to obtain answers for most of my research questions as they are the most direct source of information. My intent is to establish a mutually respectful and trustworthy working relationship with tribal members. In doing so, I would then be able to retrieve necessary information pertinent to my research questions through the collection of oral histories, direct consultation, and participant observation at events. As some tribal members may not feel comfortable disclosing traditional cultural knowledge regarding a topic such as menstruation, I realize the cultural sensitivity of the topic may result in reservation, thus denying access to particular information. In this case, I will inquire and propose alternative ways we can work together where both parties are satisfied. My research questions include:

1. Where are the herbs and plants utilized for different ailments procured?  
Where herbs were harvested in relation to habitation and menstrual sites needs to be addressed. There are two areas of data needed. First, paleoenvironmental and soil data to discern if conditions during the Emergent Period were suitable for ample growth and availability of specific herbs. Second, ethnographic consultation with tribal members to obtain information about traditional gathering methods for plants local to the area. This will involve field visits with tribal members where information about important wild plants and herbs is obtained and specific collection areas are identified. Sediment core samples collected near known gathering sites may provide geoarchaeological evidence of menstrual herbs which would then determine where they were harvested. This will also be used to determine what environmental conditions were like during the Emergent Period.
2. What is the spatial relationship between menstrual sites and geographic features?  
Higher concentrations of menstrual sites near certain geographic features will be investigated. This is due in part from research conducted by Fentress (1994) and Gillette (2011) suggesting that pecked curvilinear nucleated (PCN) petroglyphs may have been created through Pomo ritualistic fertility rites. This could allude to menstrual rites as well, further connecting women to the landscape. Whether menstrual rites have been performed at certain geographic features can be answered through tribal consultation since they have the highest likelihood of knowing specific sites, as well as from archival resources. If such sites have been recorded previously, a records search at the Northwest Information Center (NWIC) will be done and a comparison will be made to determine if there are geographical connections between the sites, geographical features, and any menstrual customs. An important aspect of this research will be to identify the kinds of menstrual lodges constructed and utilized by the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo through tribal knowledge and archival research. Subsequently, a records search at NWIC will be conducted to locate specific sites and obtain permission from landowners to conduct a pedestrian survey. Consulting archaeologists in governmental and environmental firms will provide useful knowledge as well. This will provide a better understanding of what specific archaeological features are important to identify during pedestrian survey.
3. Are traditional gathering methods and taboos associated with menstruation still observed?  
Finally, my last question pertains to whether traditional gathering methods, observance of taboos, and the use of menstrual lodges are still practiced among the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo today, either in their traditional territories or in a new location. This will be answered by consulting tribal knowledge of current uses of TCPs. Archival research will also be incorporated which would determine if methods have changed over time. The collective research tactics, as previously discussed, will provide substantial data necessary to establish how Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo women managed their menstrual cycles during the Emergent Period.

## SUMMARY

By addressing ethnobotanical and menstrual landscapes, the primary objective of my research is to document the interconnected relationship these elements have, thereby advocating these cultural landscapes be designated as a TCP. With the incorporation of TCPs into this study, female traditions have an opportunity

to be featured in a way that had not been previously done before. It also sheds light on menstrual lodges, a feature that notoriously has been kept in the shadows, prompting the question why we as archaeologists are not taking these features into consideration. This study can be used as a model of how to incorporate women's heritage since women are a fundamental aspect to the collective culture history. Harvesting particular herbs offered women an opportunity to know which plants would be most beneficial in times of need because they, too, experienced cycles of fertility. Menstrual lodges were a place of purification and strength; where a woman could look within herself and become stronger by connecting to her higher power. Furthermore, evaluating them as TCPs provides an avenue for these unique menstrual landscapes to be preserved.

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