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A New Look At Some Old Data: The Nisenan Photographs of Alexander W. Chase

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In 1877, Stephen Powers wrote an extended passage on the topic of money and wealth among Native Californians, and illustrated it by itemizing the treasured possessions of a specific Nisenan chief's family. His account was originally accompanied by four woodcuts based on photographs created in 1874 by Alexander Chase; those photographs are reproduced here, and compared with several additional images from the 1850s to suggest other possible social ramifications of some of the 'wealth' items on Powers' list.

The purpose of this brief report is twofold—first, to call attention to the existence and significance of several additional photographs taken by[1] Alexander W. Chase; and second, to show how those images can be used in conjunction with other newly recovered data to clarify some issues concerning wealth and the use of regalia in traditional societies in Central California. Chase, whose career has been briefly outlined elsewhere (Blackburn 2005; Lyman 1991), was a major contributor to Stephen Powers' pioneering work, *Tribes of California* (1877, 1976), and seems to have provided most (if not all) of the photographs and sketches that eventually illustrated Powers' monograph. Most of Chase's extant photographs, which primarily depict people from northwestern California, have now been published (Blackburn 2005); however, several others have recently been identified at the Smithsonian Institution (two of which, to my knowledge, have rarely, if ever, been reproduced elsewhere) and all are shown here for the first time.

The images in question (Figs. 1–4) depict the members of a Nisenan chief's family attired in their traditional finery and with all of the family's accumulated wealth very much on display. The chief involved, Captain Tom Lewis of *K'otomyan*, was a well-known figure in the Auburn, California Indian community in the 1870s, and figured prominently in Powers' account of the Nisenan (Bibby 2005:68–70). According to Bibby, Captain Tom's wife Jane was a highly respected member of that community for many years and was a noted basket-maker, doctor, and revered elder referred to by all as Koto Jane. The photographs of the Lewis family, in the form of woodblock prints (Powers 1976: Figs. 26, 28, 30, 31), were used to supplement and partially illustrate Powers' text, but some of their informational content was inevitably lost as a result of the process involved in their reproduction. The portraits of Captain Tom and his wife (Figs. 1 and 2) were eventually published a century later in the *Handbook of North American Indians* (Heizer 1978:391, Figs. 4 & 5), and are often reprinted, but those of the daughter and son[2] (Figs. 3 and 4) have seldom, if ever, been reproduced.

The primary significance of the Chase photographs lies in the way in which they both complement and clarify a rather extraordinary passage in Powers' volume in which he discusses in considerable detail money, wealth, and comparative economic values in contemporary native societies, and then provides an inventory and description of the economic capital and prestige items owned by one specific, prominent family. Because of its importance, I will quote the entire passage here:

> The subject of shell-money has hitherto received little more than casual mention. Immense quantities of it were formerly in circulation among the California Indians, and the manufacture of it was large and constant, to replace the continual wastage which was caused by the sacrifice of so much upon the death of wealthy men, and by the propitiatory sacrifices performed by many tribes, especially those of the Coast Range. From my own observations, which have not been limited, and from the statements of pioneers and the Indians themselves, I hesitate little to express

Figure 1. "Portrait of Captain Tom, from Auburn, California, in partial native dress 1874." National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution NAA INV 0152 7500.

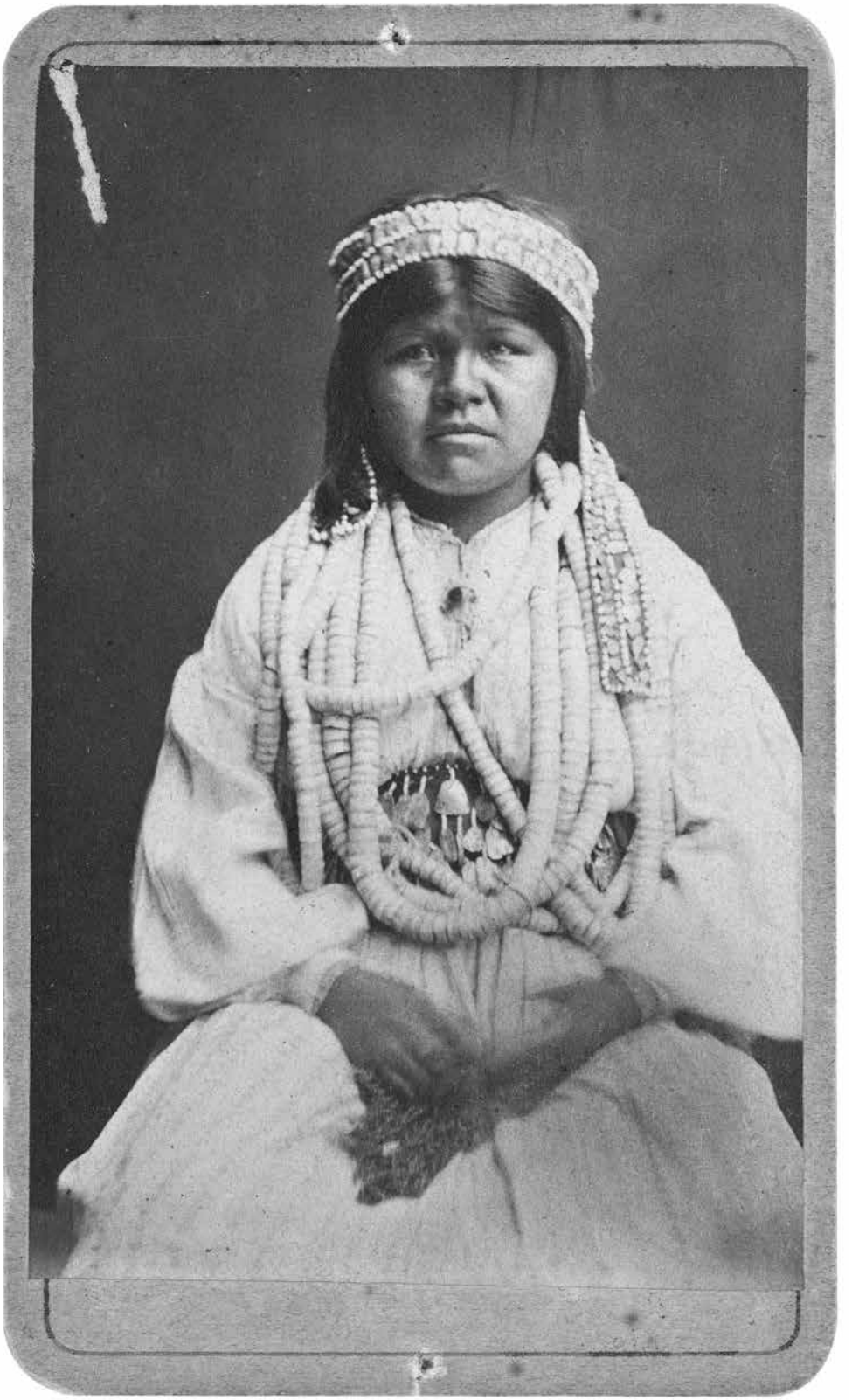

Figure 2. "Portrait of Captain Tom's wife in partial native dress, wearing a ten-yard necklace of 1160 clamshell money beads, and deerskin girdle and headdress with abalone pendants 1874." National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution NAA INV 0152 7600.

Figure 3. "Portrait of Captain Tom's daughter in partial native dress, wearing abalone shell necklace, and deerskin girdle and headband with abalone pendants 1874." National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution NAA INV 0152 7700.

Figure 4. "Portrait of Captain Tom's son in partial native dress, wearing yellow hammer's feathers headband, abalone gorget, and belt with abalone pendants 1874." National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution NAA INV 0152 7800.

the belief that every Indian in the State, in early days, possessed an average of at least $100 worth of shell-money. This would represent the value of about two women (though the Nishinam never actually bought their wives), or two grizzly-bear skins, or twenty-five cinnamon-bear skins, or about three average ponies. This may be considered a fair statement of the diffusion of wealth among them in their primitive condition.

The manufacture of it nowadays by Americans with machinery has diminished its purchasing power by increasing its amount. The younger, English-speaking Indians scarcely use it at all, except in a few dealings with their elders, or for gambling. One sometimes lays away a few strings of it, for he knows he cannot squander it at the stores, and is thus removed from temptation and possible bankruptcy; and when he wishes for a few dollars American money he can arrange it by exchanging with some old Indian who happens to have gold. Americans also sometimes keep it for this purpose. For instance, I have known an American, who associated a good deal with the Indians, buy a pony for $15 gold, and sell it to an old Indian for $40 shell-money. By converting this amount into gold in small sums at a time he cleared $25 in the course of a few months. It is singular how the old Indians cling to this currency when they know that it will purchase nothing from the stores; but then their wants are few and mostly supplied from the sources of nature; and, besides that, this money has a certain religious value in their minds, as being alone worthy to be offered up on the funeral pyre of departed friends or famous chiefs of their tribe.

It is my opinion, from its appearance, that the staple currency of all the tribes in Central and Southern California is made of the same material, but I am not positive of that material except among the Nishinam. Here it is a thick, white shell (*Pachydesma crassatelloides*[3]), found on the coast of Southern California, and the money they make from it is called *hâ'-wok*. It consists of circular disks or buttons, ranging from a quarter inch to an inch in diameter, and varying in thickness with the shell. These are pierced in the center, and strung on strings made of the inner bark of the wild cotton or milkweed (*Asclepias*); and either all the pieces on a string, or all in one section of it, are of the same size. The strings are not of an invariable length. The larger pieces rate at about twenty-five cents (though when an Indian saw I was anxious to secure a specimen he charged me fifty cents); the half-inch pieces at 12 1/2; and the smaller ones generally go by the string. A string of 177 of the smallest pieces was valued by its owner at $7, and sold for that. The women often select the prettiest pieces, about one-third of an inch in diameter, and string them on a string for a necklace.

This may be called their silver, and is the great medium of all transactions; while the money answering to gold is made from varieties of the ear-shell (*Haliotis*), and is called *ül-lo*…. They cut these shells with flints into oblong strips from an inch to two inches in length, according to the curvature of the shell, and about a third as broad as they are long. Two holes are drilled near the narrow end of each piece, and they are thereby fastened to a string of the material above named, hanging edge to edge. Ten pieces generally constitute a string, and the larger pieces rate at $1 apiece, $10 a string; the smaller in proportion, or less, if they are not pretty. Being susceptible of a high polish this money forms a beautiful ornament, and is worn for necklaces on gala-days. But as money it is rather too large and cumbersome, and the Indians generally seek to exchange it for the less brilliant but more useful *hâwok*. The *üllo* may be considered rather as jewelry….

A third kind of money, very rarely seen, is made of the *Olivella biplicata*, and is called by them *kol'-kol*.

When I was in Auburn, Captain Tom showed me nearly half a bushel of shell-money and trinkets belonging to himself and family, and I had the curiosity to take an exact inventory of the same, with the values attached to the articles by the Indians.

Captain Tom's Tax-list

Hâwok, ten yards	$230
Üllo, 10 pieces	10
Üllo, 10 pieces	10
Üllo, 12 pieces	24
Üllo, 12 pieces	18
Üllo, 10 pieces	20
Üllo, 15 pieces	30
Üllo, 10 pieces	5
Üllo, 10 pieces	10
Üllo, 14 pieces	14
Chi'-la	24
Shek'-ki	20
Pa'-cha	14
Pa'-cha	8
Pa'-cha	6
Pa'-cha	5
Two abalone gorgets	10
Alabaster[4]	5
Kolkol, 14 yards	14
One grizzly-bear skin	50
One cinnamon-bear skin	4
One bear-skin robe	75
Total	$606

> The *hâwok* was all in one string, and contained 1,160 pieces. Tom was very proud of this, and would suffer no one but his wife to be photographed wearing it [Fig. 2]. The *kolkol* was strung in a double string, the shells lying face to face; it is slightly esteemed. The "red alabaster," brought from Sonoma, was in the form of a cylinder, about as large as one's little finger, an inch long, drilled lengthwise, and forming the front piece in a string of shell-beads worn by Captain Tom's baby. One of the girdles, *pacha*, was decorated with 214 small pieces of abalone; the hair-net contained about 100.
>
> Following is a list of articles of dress and ornament worn by the Nishinam, which with a change of names would answer for nearly all the tribes of Central California: (1) The hare-skin robe, often trimmed with ground-squirrel tails, generally used as bedding, but sometimes worn in the rainy season. (2) The breech-cloth of hetcheled and braided tule-grass, worn by women. (3) *Shek'-ki*, a hair-net, made of the inner bark of the milkweed, woven with large meshes, fitting the head like a skull-cap, drawn tight by a string running around the edge. The hair was twisted into a hard knot behind the head, and into this was stuck a plume. (4) *Mok'-kus*, about a foot long, consisting of a stick wreathed with red woodpecker scalps and having at the end a cluster of pieces of abalone-shell or a little flag of yellowhammer's feathers. Worn only by the men when going to a dance. (5) *To'-lai*, the mantle of black, long feathers, eagle's or hawk's, often mentioned in these pages, worn on the back, from the armpits down to the knees, only by men and those generally shamans. (6) *Pa'-cha*, the wide deer-skin girdle, studded with bits of abalone, worn by women around the waist; nowadays generally made of scarlet cloth and covered thick with bead-work. (7) *Chi'-lak*, the bandeau of yellowhammer's feathers, laid butt to tip alternately, and strung on two strings; worn by both sexes in the dance. (8) *Kak'-ki*, the narrow bandeau of fur, worn tight around the head by both sexes in the dance. Seen all over California, nowadays generally supplanted by a handkerchief. (9) *Bon'noh*, ornaments, generally made of a large bird's wing-bones, with red woodpecker's down and pieces of abalone at one end; worn thrust through the lobe of the ear or the septum of the nose by both sexes. (10) *Wuk'-tem-hin*, ("one-hanger" or "single-hanger"), the large abalone gorget worn by men in a dance. The shell-money, often worn by women, has been already described. In the *yomussi* dance the women carry bows and arrows for ornaments [Powers 1877:335–39].

Much of our information on the nature and uses of such regalia in early Central California societies (as summarized in Bates 1982) comes from the kind of historical photographs presented here, which usually depict individuals engaged in highly formalized ritual activities (Bates 1984).

Although the primary focus of Powers' discussion is on wealth and the economic value of the articles owned by a particular elite family, it should be kept in mind that most of these also constituted important items of regalia, items that had significant social and cultural connotations with nuances that we will probably never be able to fully reconstruct. Some (such as the shell bead money and magnesite cylinder) were primarily articles of wealth with a mostly economic significance, while others (such as the flicker-quill headband, hairpin, and abalone gorget) were certainly articles of regalia indicative of their owner's social status. The photographs of the Lewis family are somewhat misleading in that every cherished item they possess has been donned for the occasion, probably with the encouragement of the photographer, and combined in a manner that was probably far from traditional. The flicker-quill headband would normally be worn only in the context of a ceremonial dance, while a hairnet or hairpin could also be worn in a secular context, and might very well have had sociopolitical implications as well.

While most surviving early to mid nineteenth-century images of Native Californians (both drawings and photographs) are relatively uninformative with regard to the social status of the individuals depicted or the circumstances surrounding the making of the image, there are a few interesting exceptions. Figure 5, which is entered in the George Eastman House catalogue as "Maidu Headmen with Treaty Commissioners," by an unknown maker, is almost certainly one of the 300 'lost' daguerreotypes created by Robert H. Vance in California (Palmquist 1978); it was originally listed in Vance's catalogue as "View of Indian Commissioners, Dr. Wozencraft, Col. Johnson, and clerks, in a treaty with the Indians," and was made in August, 1851 at Bidwell's Ranch. The four chiefs standing behind the commissioners are wearing Western-style pants and shirts, but their headgear and ornaments are both traditional and presumably appropriate for such an essentially political occasion. The elaborate hairpins two of the chiefs are wearing are particularly noteworthy.

The remarkable, often exquisitely detailed images created by the artist Henry B. Brown in the Sierra foothills and Sacramento Valley in 1851–2 (Blackburn 2006) probably have the greatest potential for supplying us with useful clues regarding symbolic aspects of native regalia. Brown's drawings, which range in tone

Figure 5. "Maidu Headmen with Treaty Commissioners." The maker is listed as being unknown, but the image was almost certainly created by Robert H. Vance at Bidwell's Ranch in August, 1851. Half plate daguerreotype, courtesy of the George Eastman House. GEH 1969:0205:0037.

from relatively formal to highly informal, depict both individuals and groups in a variety of social contexts, although a majority tend to focus on what the artist considered "leading men" (Blackburn 2006:8). In addition, a number of the portraits specifically mention the subject's social role; few other images from the period are so identified. Figure 6 is particularly interesting in this regard, in that it depicts a man specifically identified as a chief. The drawing has a certain air of formality about it, as if the subject were posing for an 'official' portrait; he is shown wearing a woven hairnet held in place by a bipointed hairpin, ear rods, and an elaborately beaded multistrand necklace with abalone bangles (or possibly a second, separate necklace consisting of bangles alone).

Similar wealth or status items are visible in other Brown drawings as well, though I have not reproduced them here. The relaxed, informal portrait of Nisenan chief Wehmer and his son (Blackburn 2006:Fig. 9) shows the son wearing two necklaces, one of abalone bangles and the other consisting of multiple strands of beads. Nisenan chief Tacolah (2006:Fig. 10) is also depicted wearing a beaded necklace with multiple strands. Three other drawing are also of interest in this context. In one, an unidentified man (2006:Fig. 22) is shown wearing a hairnet and hairpin, while in another (2006: Fig. 24) the subject is wearing an abalone bangle necklace; on the basis of Brown's descriptions of his work, I would argue that both men were probably chiefs. The third

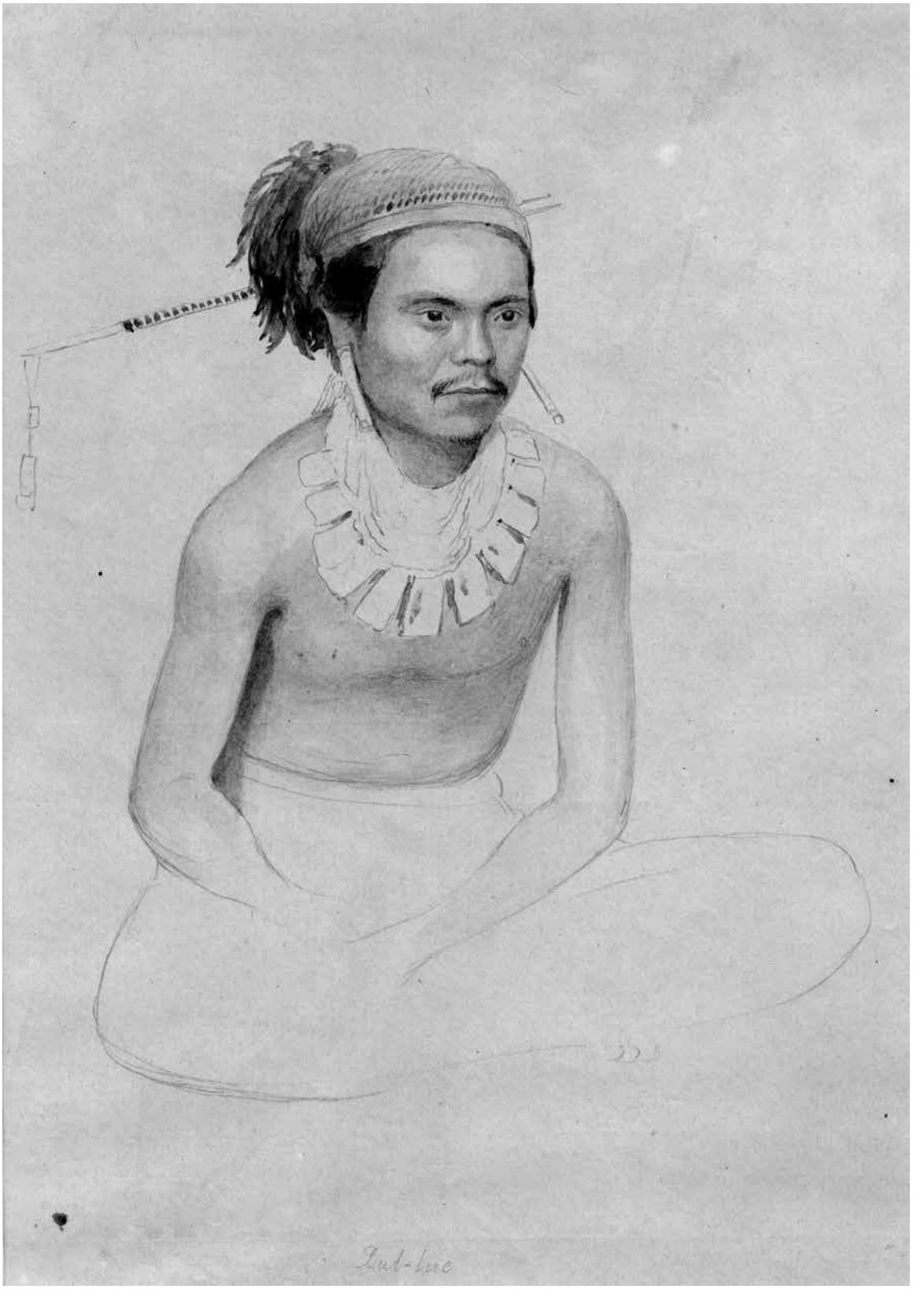

Figure 6. "Bul-luc Chief." An 1852 Henry B. Brown sketch of a chief in the Sacramento Valley. Courtesy of the Peabody Museum, Cambridge (from Blackburn 2006:61, Fig. 21).

Figure 7. "Capitan. Indien Californien du Sud. Stanislau. Coiffé d'une vielle résille mexicaine." Hand-colored engraving, undoubtedly based upon an 1850s sketch by Louis Jules Rupalley. Courtesy of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Banc Pic 1963.002:1305G-ALE.

image (2006:Fig. 17) depicts a group of Konkow men (all presumably prominent members of their community) gambling in a large dance house; several of them are wearing elaborate hairnets.

Figure 7 depicts a man who is identified as being a chief from the Stanislaus River area, and who therefore might have been a member of one of the Northern Valley Yokuts groups. The hand-colored engraving, with its handwritten caption, was undoubtedly created by or was based upon an original drawing by Jules Rupalley, a Frenchman who lived in Greenwood, near Coloma, for several years during the 1850s (Chalmers 2000:162–64). Rupalley was a fine artist with a particular interest in botany; his many beautifully-rendered pictures of native plants often have French notations giving the local Indian names for the plants. The chief shown here is again wearing a hairnet and a hairpin; the hairnet, though stated to be of 'Mexican' style, seems clearly traditional in form.

Figure 8. Early daguerreotype, possibly depicting a Nisenan man.
Courtesy of the Braun Research Library Collection, Autry National Center, Los Angeles. Photo 1346.G.1.

The men in the next two figures can neither be identified nor clearly assigned to a specific time or place, although both are possibly Nisenan and both are probably chiefs. I would again argue that early photographers would have been most strongly (and understandably) inclined to focus on capturing images of those individuals—such as chiefs—that held the most clearly recognizable and important social positions in native communities. The young man in Figure 8 is wearing European-style clothing, but is holding a skin quiver of arrows and has what appears to be a rather elaborate cloth hairnet or head covering held in place by a fancy hairpin. In 1978, Palmquist (1978:163) believed this to be the sole surviving pre-1860 daguerreotype of a California Indian. Figure 9 is an 1880 woodcut, clearly based on an earlier daguerreotype, that depicts a man holding a bow and some arrows. He is wearing a necklace consisting of a single strand of beads from which a series of rectangular abalone bangles are suspended, and his hair is covered by a bead-decorated woven net.

I find the frequent reoccurrence of particular items of apparel—such as elaborate hairnets, decorated hairpins, and necklaces consisting of rectangular abalone bangles—in these images interesting and suggestive, although certainly not definitive. All of the men depicted are clearly wealthy and important individuals, and most can be identified as chiefs. With the exception of the men in Figure 5, all are shown in more quotidian than formal or ceremonial contexts, so the items of regalia that are being worn were not apt to be reserved for use on special occasions only, though they may have been restricted in their use in other ways. Ethnohistoric and ethnographic data on the subject, unfortunately, are sparse and sporadically distributed in both time and space, although they do provide some useful clues.

West of the Sacramento Valley, most of our information on early nineteenth-century Indian dress and adornment comes from visitors to the various mission communities established by the Spanish and tends to be rather generalized; native social distinctions are usually ignored or not explicitly addressed. Extant images from the period, such as those of Louis Choris, tend either to show men dressed in elaborate, formal dance costumes or in everyday mission garb, although both Choris and Mikhail Tikhanov did depict a few group scenes involving more mundane activities such as hunting or gambling. One remarkable 1818 watercolor by Tikhanov is particularly interesting; it depicts the death of a Coast Miwok chief at Bodega Bay and the possible investiture of another (Fig. 10). A man in the foreground of the picture—perhaps the chief-to-be?—is holding an elaborate feather headdress that may have been a symbol of chiefly rank; he is also wearing what appears to be a beaded hairnet and hairpin (Hudson and Bates 2015:Fig. 7.6, p. 118). Later ethnographic information indicates that among the Pomo, both men and women commonly wore hairnets and hairpins, although elaborate, beaded hairnets and fancy hairpins similar to those present in early nineteenth-century Russian collections (see Hudson and Bates 2015:126–32) were apparently worn only by members of the secret society on special occasions (Loeb 1926:156–157, 270).

For the Sacramento Valley and Sierra foothills, where most of the later mid-nineteenth-century images under discussion originate, we have only a handful of pertinent comments. C. Hart Merriam, for example, briefly noted (1967) that among the Choohelmemsel Patwin, several types of men's hairnets were recognized and employed in different contexts:

> **Hair net for men**. Ordinary kind, kit-te'-ko; for rich people, buk-cher-ro; beaded and very valuable, hisse'cher-ro. During the ceremonies the leader of the dance wears a headdress called poo'-ta, the crown piece of which is of the white down of the snow goose. The occiput piece, called li'-e, projects backward from the back of the head and consists of a dense bunch or large rosette of tail feathers of the magpie, worn horizontally (pointing backward). The leader of the dance also wears on each side of his head a forked feather pin standing out sideways. This consists of two white feathers (sometimes three), each five or six inches in length, attached to a wooden pin [Merriam 1967:272].

Among the Sierra Miwok, Barrett and Gifford (1933) also observed significant variations in the use of hairnets and hairpins:

> The hair net...was worn for dancing, gambling, and when wishing to be dressed up about the house. It was not worn when hunting. Sometimes young women wore the hair net, when dressed for dancing, but it was not worn by old women. The chief might wear daily a hair net, sometimes a beaded one. Other men usually did not wear a hair net daily, as this was regarded as the chief's privilege [1933:223].
>
> The feather plume...consisted of feathers tied upon a stick about a foot long and about the diameter

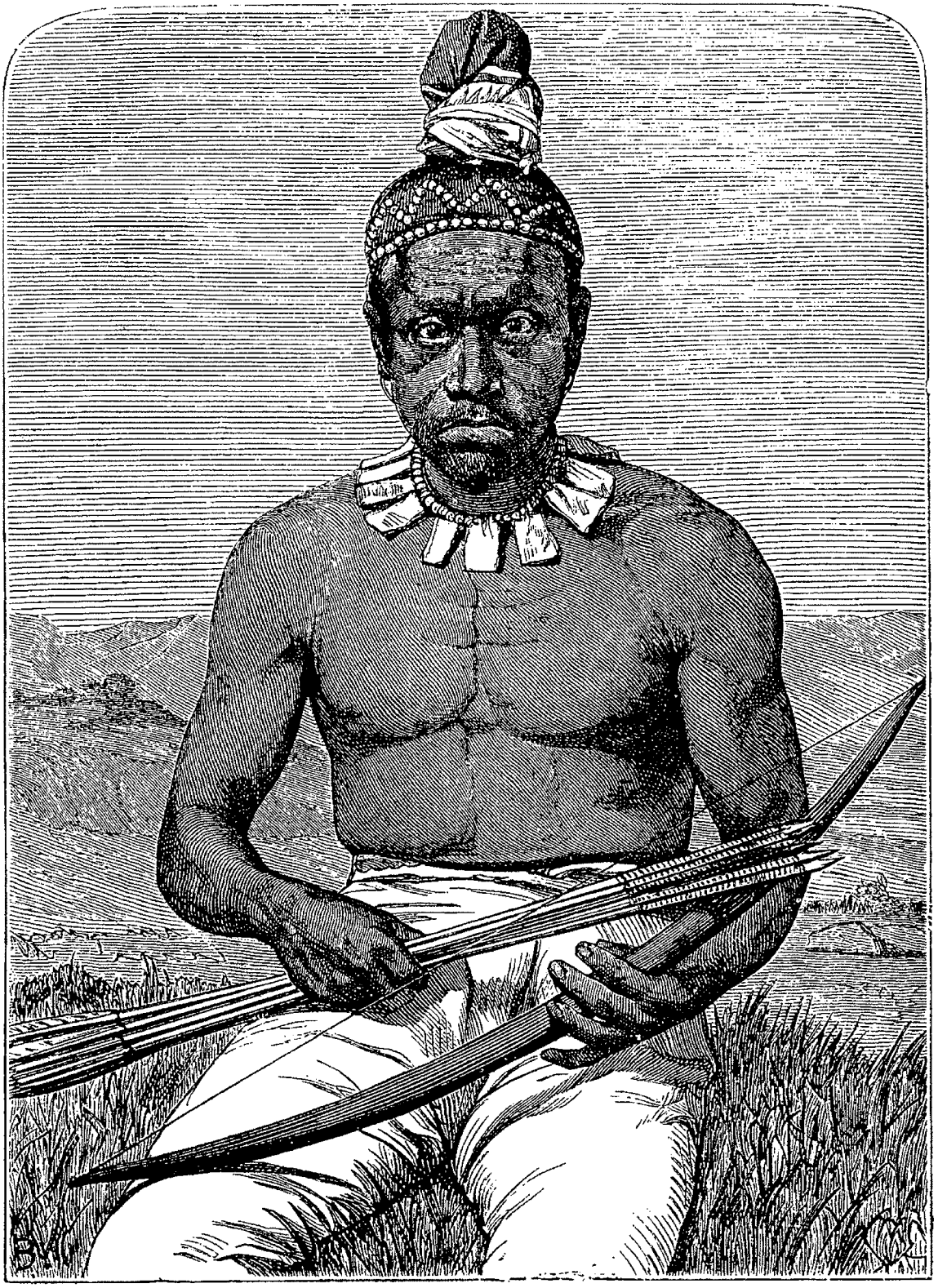

Figure 9. "Indigène de la Californie." Woodcut, based upon an earlier daguerreotype, that probably depicts a Nisenan man (from Louis Figuier, *Les Races Humaines*, 1880:Fig. 244).

Figure 10. Death of Coast Miwok chief at Bodega Bay, 1818 (Tikhanov watercolor, after Hudson and Bates 2015:Fig. 7.6). Courtesy of the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History.

> of a lead pencil.... The elaborate feather plumes were employed in dances only, while the ordinary ones were worn daily by chiefs and other men of importance. They were usually worn in pairs, being so placed in the hair as to project forward at an angle from the top of the head [1933:227].

Unfortunately, there is an even greater paucity of ethnographic information on the abalone-bangle necklaces present in a number of the images shown here. Abalone bangles in a variety of forms are well represented in archaeological collections, and are present in some numbers in ethnohistoric collections as well (see discussion in Hudson and Bates 2015:152–56). Although Powers discusses them solely as items of wealth, it is quite likely that they had a significant non-economic dimension as well (as the extraordinary abalone gorgets worn by the members of the Lewis family undoubtedly did); their frequent association with the more elaborate hairnets and hairpins worn by men known to be chiefs is again suggestive though not definitive.

In our efforts to elicit information from these images, it is tempting to use familiar categories in describing or interpreting what we see, and to talk about articles of *apparel*, *adornment*, *wealth*, *prestige*, or *regalia*, but such categories are neither simple nor mutually exclusive. For example, a police officer's badge, a priest's cassock, or a king's crown are all items of regalia, yet their social significance varies considerably, as do the contexts within which they are normally encountered. Thus my suggestions regarding the possible symbolic referents of certain of the items on Powers' list are nothing more than an initial sketch of possibilities, and a tentative one at best. Other people may very well come to different conclusions, but the data are now available for alternate interpretations.

NOTES

[1]Although Chase was undoubtedly responsible for their creation, I suspect that he was not the actual photographer, since these and the other extant 'Chase' photographs were taken in a professional studio.

[2]According to Powers (1877:329–30), one of Captain Tom's sons, Dick, was convicted of an unspecified crime and sentenced to San Quentin for 10 years. The family burned his possessions and mourned him as if he had died. Dick Lewis may be the young man in the photograph.

[3]*Pachydesma crassatelloides* has been reclassified as *Tivela stultorum*, or Pismo clam.

[4]The 'alabaster' or 'red alabaster' to which Powers refers is magnesite or magnesium carbonate, which the Southeastern Pomo quarried and made into cylindrical beads that were widely traded. It is whitish in color when freshly dug from the ground, but turns color when 'baked' in a fire.

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