Village Life of Ohlone Women

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Women’s Activities in a traditional Ohlone Village

- Gathering food
- Cooking
- Basket making
- Caregiving
- Clothing
  - Women’s Appearance
Gathering food
Edibles gathered by women included berries, plants, acorns, roots, hazelnuts, pine nuts, walnuts, and vegetables. They also gathered wood for fires.
If they were close to the ocean, women would go to mud flats (wetlands). By the end of the day they would have baskets full of sea food such as mussels, clams, and oysters.

If fresh water was nearby, women would be able to go out and get it. If not, men would.
Cooking
- Women were responsible in making the meals for their families. Thanks to all the things women gathered and the animals men hunted, women were able to do that using wood fires.
- Women cooked their meals over open fires, using basaltic rocks. These “cooking rocks” wouldn’t explode at high temperatures. They were heated and then carefully placed in waterproofed baskets where meat and other foods cooked in their heat.
They also steamed or smoked over slow burning fires.

A popular food was Nupa (acorn) Soup. This was made by letting acorns dry, leaching them, pounding them, to turn them into flour. This was mixed with water and cooked in a watertight basket with hot cooking rocks. The soup simmered with hot rocks replaced as they cooled until meal time.
Basket Making
Women made baskets from plants including willow shoots, sedge rhizomes, bulrush rhizomes, tule, hazel.
Plants were harvested in their season, processed, dried for several months, then cleaned and trimmed for weaving.

Baskets were very time-consuming to weave.

Baskets were a women’s art and every basket had its own unique design.

Baskets included cooking baskets, gambling trays, serving baskets, storage baskets, water-carrying baskets, etc.
Linda Yamane, is an Ohlone Native American. She has been tracing and recreating her tribe’s rituals, art, clothing, and jewelry throughout her life. She brings back the way of life of the Ohlones, so we don’t forget how they lived.

In the video below you will get a chance to see how baskets were made, starting with finding the right plants. Yamane begins singing some related Ohlone songs, then explains the art of basket making.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fPBuGZ6sbKw
Taking care of others
Though they did have healers called shamans, ordinary women were able to take care of others using different types of plant remedies. Yarrow reduced inflammation. Wild Ginger relieved toothaches.
- *Fragaria Chiloensis* helped stomachaches

- Ribes currents helped swelling
- Salvia Apiana (White Sage) is an anti-inflammatory

- Satureja Douglasii (Yerba Buena) helps colds and fevers
Clothing
Women were in charge making clothing for males and females. Women used the leftovers from the animals (skin, fur, bones) to create the clothing.
Women made capes, blankets, jewelry, regalia (the distinctive clothing worn and ornaments carried at formal occasions as an indication of status), and all the special clothing for the special ceremonies such as dresses.
Traditional appearance

- Ohlone women wore skirts made of tule reed (a hollow grass) and deer skin, held on with rope belts.
- The Ohlone didn’t wear shoes nor shirts.
- In winter, the Ohlone wore capes from animal fur to keep warm.
- Everyone wore necklaces and earrings made from shells, beads, and feathers.
- Many women had tattoos on their chins, dots or vertical lines, such as the three lines called “one elevens”
- For some, hair was up tied up with a buckskin thong of yellow or gray deerskin. Some women had bangs, and others wore their hair loose.
Women’s life events in an Ohlone Village

- Menstruation
- Marriage
- Pregnancy
Menstruation
The way the girl acted at puberty would affect her the rest of her life, so everything she did had to be extra-carefully done. If she didn’t act properly, the rest of her life she would be seen as an improper woman.

This time was big for girls! The Ohlone had special ceremonies.

A girl would be put into a separate hut made for the occasion. At night others came to dance and sing to the girl about becoming a woman.
Girls couldn’t have meat, fish, salt, or cold water at this time.

Girls were prohibited from touching their bodies. Instead, each had a “scratching sick”

Girls took ritual baths.

In this hut, girls were taught how to be women by the elder women.

At the end, a girl had a great feast in her honor, to celebrate her becoming a women.
Marriage
If the family was of modest status and respectable, a man who chose a woman would be accepted.

Among higher status families, marriage was arranged by elders.

Males married outside their own villages to ensure the offspring were healthy.

Women received gifts from the male’s family before marriage.
One big feast occurred that lasted several days. It honored the new marriage.

At first, the couple would live with the women’s family to see how the man was. If the man was worthy, the couple later moved in with the husband’s family.

Divorce was accepted if either the man or women became unfaithful or if they didn’t pay attention to their relationship.

In a divorce, children would live with their mother.
Pregnancy
Pregnancy was a super-important event in a woman's life, because she had to follow all the rules in order to have a healthy baby.

Women were limited in what they ate. They couldn't have any meat, fish, or added salt during pregnancy.
- A pregnant woman couldn’t scratch her belly.

- If she had twins or deformed babies, they’d be killed because it was thought they were evil.

- A new mother wasn’t allowed to engage any sexual activity until she was done nursing.
Ritual and death

Group of Ohlone's

Ohlone Grave

Dance

Buried Ohlone's
Ritual
The Ohlone had many different types of ritual ceremonies for health, spiritual, and social occasions. These included: The Sun Dance, Devil’s Dance, Bear Dance, Coyote Dance, Dove Dance, Puberty Dance, etc.

Some dances were only for women, such as the Loole dance. Women danced in pairs to music created by rattles of wood or cocoons.
During ceremonies, men and women wore lots of feathers and other regalia.

Usually women did not wear the same ornaments as men.
Death and burial
There was no difference when it came to burials for women and men. They were treated the same in the last event of their lives. Bodies were cremated or buried.

If the deceased was a Chief, Shaman, or warrior, he or she would be cremated.
Corpse were “tied in a flexed position with knees tucked under the chin and hands on the cheeks” according to Malcolm Margolin. They were embellished with feathers, flowers or beads.

It was very important to bury the corpse with all her or his possessions in order for the deceased ghost to not be “angry” with the living.
Quiz

- How were traditional Ohlone women dressed?
- How did women express their art?
- What were some important rules for women?
- What would happen to children after parents divorced?
- How were corpses treated, and why?
- What occurred when a girl became a women?
- How important were women to the Ohlone?
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