# Chapter 10
# Old Man Owl: Myth and Gambling Medicine in Klamath Basin Rock Art

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## Introduction

Site 38-15-04-03P, referred to in this chapter as the "Owl Site," is a petroglyph concentration located within the headwaters of the Upper Sprague River Watershed in the eastern portion of the Klamath Basin of Southern Oregon and Northern California (Fig. 10.1). Klamath–Modoc peoples believed that characteristics of the owl contained supernatural properties, and these properties were integrated into their ritual activities. Klamath–Modoc myths, in combination with local ethnographic information, provide specific and detailed explanations for why the rock art at site 38-15-04-03P is related to power quests in which individuals sought supernatural assistance in gambling. In this chapter we argue that laypersons, as well as the shamans, visited this site in order to acquire the owl's supernatural assistance that would help them to become successful gamblers.

## Site Description

The petroglyph site comprises two main panels. Panel 1 is a combination of circular and linear designs arranged to look like an owl, containing a pair of eyes, a single ear, a beak, a wing, and probable stomach or symbolized pellet containing prey.

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**Fig. 10.1** Map of traditional Klamath–Modoc territories. The *red star* shows the approximate site location. Map adapted from Gatschet (1890a)

The rock art today is partially obscured by lichens and mineral staining. Nevertheless, as Figs. 10.2 and 10.3 show, the entire panel has the strong suggestion of an owl with its torso in twisted perspective as it stares back at the viewer over its wing. Panel 2 consists of two sets of concentric circles that have been arranged to emulate the eyes of an owl staring sharply back at the viewer (Fig. 10.4). Aside from the

**Fig. 10.2** The rock face on Panel 1 has been modified to resemble an owl. Photos by R. David

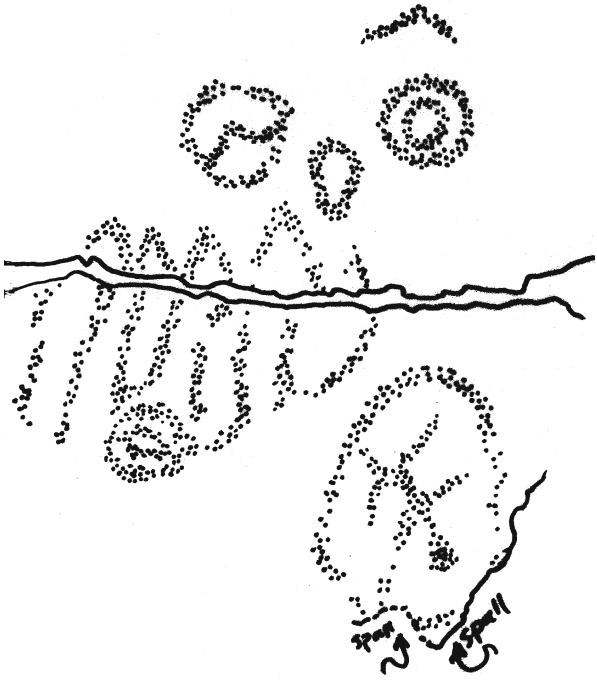

**Fig. 10.3** Stipple-traced representation of Panel 1 imagery. Drawing by R. David

**Fig. 10.4** Panel 2 petroglyphs represent eyes overlooking the pond in Fig. 10.4. Photo by R. David

petroglyphs, the only other cultural features on or around the site are artificial rock piles, which are by-products of Klamath–Modoc power quest rituals (Spier 1930:96; Haynal 2000).

## Site Setting

The Klamath Basin is the traditional homeland of the Klamath and Modoc Indians. It is bound on the west by the southern end of the Cascade Range, and on the east by the northwest rim of the Great Basin. To the north are the Wood, Williamson, Sycan, and Sprague Rivers, all of which are significant Upper Klamath Lake tributaries. To the south, the Klamath River drains Upper Klamath Lake Basin, bisecting the Cascade and Coastal Ranges (National Marine Fisheries Service 2007:2–7). Within the southern portion of the Basin, the Lost River/Tule Lake/Clear Lake Basin water complex now cut off from the Klamath River, once connected through Lower Klamath Lake during periods of high water (Dicken and Dicken 1985:1–4).

The petroglyphs are located within the Upper Sprague River watershed in a region known to the Klamath and Modoc as *Plaikni.* They are concentrated within a small canyon spur draining into the larger canyon stream that forms a tributary to the Upper Sprague River. Periodic overflow from a spring-fed lake on the plateau forms an intermittent waterfall that drains the overflow into the main canyon stream. This overflow has created a permanent pool at its base (Fig. 10.5). Although its water level varies, the pool retains water throughout the year. The site was

**Fig. 10.5** Fed by an intermittent waterfall, this pond is over 3 ft deep during the wet season. Photo by A. David

discovered in July 2009 during a cultural survey of the canyon system. Its relative isolation and difficult access are perhaps the largest contributing factors to its pristine condition and provide an important interpretive clue.

## Cultural Background

The people who came to be called the Klamath and Modoc entered this region approximately 10,000 years ago from the Great Basin, and by the time of the Mount Mazama eruption, these hunting and fishing peoples began taking on the life ways described in their ethnographies (Cressman 1956:402; Sampson 1985: 507; Stern 1966:3–4). Although once a unified people, the Klamath and Modoc underwent a series of political separations beginning around 1780, and by the time they encountered the whites considered themselves distinct but related peoples (Gatschet 1890a:13). Yet in spite of their political separation, the two peoples remained culturally similar in almost all significant ways (Loubser and Whitley 1999:48), including their use of language and sharing the same corpus of myths, including their creation narrative (Stern 1966:4). Thus, given their commonalities, we refer to them throughout this chapter as the Klamath–Modoc when speaking of cultural traits or properties they shared in common, and by their distinctive names when speaking of traits peculiar to a specific group.

Of particular importance to this chapter is the large corpus of myths that the Klamath and Modoc shared in common. It was this body of cultural information that provided the underlying logic for their rituals and ceremonies, but also structured the more mundane aspects of their daily lives (David 2010). This latter aspect has yet to be explored in Klamath Basin rock art studies.

## Rock Art and Spiritual Connections

The earliest rock art studies in the Klamath Basin were concerned largely with where the art fit stylistically within wider regional patterns (Cressman 1937; Swartz 1963). Later studies, however, showed an increasing interest in understanding rock art's shamanic significance (David 2010, 2012a, b; Hann and Bettles 2006; Hedges 1992; Ritter 1999; Loubser and Whitley 1999; Whitley et al. 2004). More recently, Whitley et al. (2004), Hann and Bettles (2006), and David (2010) have specifically explored the relationship between myth, shamanism, and the distribution of supernatural power, and where these ideals converge on the Klamath–Modoc sacred landscapes. As these latter studies purport, rock art sites are places on the landscape where shamans or people with adequate spiritual power traveled between the physical and supernatural worlds (Hann and Bettles 2006:186; Loubser and Whitley 1999:49; Whitley et al. 2004:226) or where supernatural feats of curing occurred (David 2005:68, 2010:394). It was within these contexts that spirit power gave shamans the necessary potency to diagnose and cure sickness, see the future, control the weather, and excise dangerous spirits from the community. In many instances, the owl spirit provided specific kinds of power directly related to these abilities (Gatschet 1890a:175–176). So it should come as little surprise that we should find owl referents throughout Klamath Basin rock art.

Spirit power was not limited to shamans. Non-shaman Klamath and Modoc individuals also embarked on quests in search of supernatural power. Although the kind of supernatural power gained from such quests was not considered of the same type or caliber as that received by shamans, it did provide the laity with supernatural assistance useful for more mundane pursuits including gambling. So while it is tempting to associate the rock art at this site with any of these shamanic abilities, we propose instead that the owl, in this context, served a more mundane purpose.

According to myth, gambling power came from *Mukus,* Old Man Owl (Curtin 1912:9). The owl, in fact, was an important supernatural being amongst most western North American tribes (Spier and Sapir 1930:237–240; Ray 1939:94–95; Keyser 1992:91, Keyser et al. 2004:74; Keyser et al. 1998), and is probably best summarized by Malotkni (1992:2), who says, "Few birds have generated such powerful emotional reactions and caused more ambivalent impressions on the human mind than the owl." In Klamath–Modoc spiritual practices, the owl plays a number of important roles, including shamanic curing medicine and as a purveyor of supernatural power for gamblers. Shamanistic cultures around the world recognize a more or less uniform set of characteristics that have made the owl a desirable source

of supernatural power. One of the owl's most prominent features is its ability to extract secrets. Equipped with acute vision and hearing, the owl is specially adapted to detect subtleties in the night. They have extra light-sensitive cones and rods in the retina to help with this. Thus, it is believed that one of the owl's supernatural powers was its ability to see what others could not see or to be able to see into the darkness within other people, where they kept their secrets (Andrews 1996:173).

> One who works with the owl medicine will be able to see and hear what others try to hide. You will hear what is not being said, and you will see what is hidden or in the shadows. You can detect and pinpoint the subtleties. This can make others uncomfortable because they will not be able to deceive you about their motives or actions. Owl people have a unique ability to see into the darkness of others' souls and life. This is very scary to most people. This vision and hearing capabilities has metaphysical links to the gifts of clairvoyance and clairaudience as well (Andrews 1996:175–176).

For Klamath and Modoc peoples, it was these same characteristics of the owl that were believed to contain certain supernatural properties, and are, in fact, the reasons why supplicants sought out the owl's powers to assist them in becoming successful gamblers.

## Ethnographic Information

The Klamath and Modoc visited the Upper Sprague River Valley seasonally in order to exploit salmon runs and to hunt and gather upland roots and berries (Coville 1897:101; Ray 1963:198; Spier 1930:146). When the hunting and gathering concluded in the late fall, the Klamath joined a gathering of various other groups to engage in gambling, trade, and other activities in the uplands (Allison 1994:202; Rosetti 1995). Thus, it is within this context of seasonal use that we must evaluate this site.

Gambling and trade fairs continue to be an underappreciated aspect of the Klamath–Modoc economic life. Although intra-tribal gambling occurred at any time throughout the year (Ray 1963:123), *inter*tribal gambling took place only at times that accommodated large gatherings. Near the end of their food-gathering cycle in the late fall, the Klamath, Modoc, Snake, Paiute, Shasta, Achumawi, and other groups congregated in this region to gamble and trade (Davis 1974:19). Tremendous amounts of wealth often traded hands. One such location was located in the Klamath uplands. These large fairs were important components in the tribal economy, as they provided wealth to some and served as an economic leveling mechanism for others (Ray 1963:180–182; Spier 1930:145–146).

The principal gambling game was the four-stick game called *so'kals* (Spier 1930:77). Played exclusively by men, this game was basically a contest between two opponents. While one player arranged marked game pieces and kept them hidden under a special gambling mat called *p'a'la*, the opposing player tried to guess their arrangement (Fig. 10.6). While success was largely a matter of chance, an element of skill was also present. According to Ray, "… the guesser was permitted

**Fig. 10.6** Klamath versus Paiute in the traditional "stick" game, in which players from one side arrange two sets of marked bones beneath the bandanas while their side sings a power song. Opposing players must then guess the arrangement. 1915 Photo by H. W. Hinks

unlimited preliminary guesses, without being committed to such guesses until he accompanied one with a subtle formal signal (1963:12)." Likewise, until such a signal was given, "… the opponent was privileged to shift the position of the pieces at will" (Ray 1963:123). As this went on, the two opponents studied one another's eyes, facial expressions, and body movements, seeking subtle clues that would yield an added advantage in the contest. Notably, the player who interpreted his opponent's actions more accurately was usually the winner in the long run (Ray 1963:123–124).

The skilled gambler enjoyed high social and economic status. Even though the contest was between two "champion" players, any number of individuals could participate. Less skilled gamblers, or those less economically fortunate, could increase their wealth by casting bets with those who were more successful (Ray 1963:124). As the two primary opponents played, the participating bystanders cast bets and supported their champion by singing power songs (Ray 1963:124; Stern 1966:49). Small red-painted sticks, sharpened at one end, were used as counters (*kshesh*). Correct guesses as to the arrangement of the gaming pieces resulted in winning possession of one or two counting sticks, depending on the value of the guess. An incorrect guess resulted in the forfeiture of one of these counters (Dorsey 1901:24). When one side possessed all of the counters, the game was concluded.

## Acquisition of Supernatural Power

Both skill and luck were contributing factors to the gamblers' success, but those who possessed the most potent spiritual assistance had an additional edge. Spirit power was necessary for all aspects of Klamath–Modoc life, and according to Spier (1930:93–95) was sought by nearly every member of the community, starting at puberty. Supplicants sought supernatural assistance with things like hunting, love-making, warfare, and gambling. The quest itself is called *spu'tu,* and the power was manifested in a song heard in a dream. During this period of ritual isolation, supplicants spent up to several days running up and down hills, piling rocks, and swimming in lonely mountain pools. They would call loudly to the spirits at night, asking for power, and would sleep uncovered, warming themselves only occasionally by a small fire throughout the night. Their goal was to secure song that arrived in a dream. The song itself (*swi'is*) was the manifestation of spiritual power.

## *The Owl as Gambling Medicine*

Observing and keeping track of your opponent's subtleties took a very accomplished gambler—one in possession of the right kind of spirit power. Two of the owl's characteristics most relevant to gamblers include its extraordinary vision and its habit of ingesting prey head first, keeping only those parts that were most beneficial and regurgitating the rest. For gamblers, these abilities served as powerful metaphors for the skills necessary to be successful. The owl's ability to see at night (e.g., to see what is concealed) is parallel to the successful gambler's ability to read his opponent's face and body language and correctly guess the arrangement of the game pieces, which were concealed under a blanket, skin, or woven mat. Similarly, the owl's ability to ingest only the most beneficial parts of its prey, and regurgitate the rest, is parallel to the guesser's role in sorting through all of the preliminary guesses and discarding them until he is ready to make the official guess he feels is correct. A close examination of the petroglyphs comprising Panel 1 demonstrates that these are the very characteristics the artist chose to depict, and even to exaggerate, on this site (Figs. 10.2 and 10.3).

For example, a close look at the owl's eyes reveals that they differ, but that these differences actually enhance the owl's normal vision. One eye comprises a simple set of concentric rings while the other is a circle bisected by a zigzag through its center (Fig. 10.3). The concentric circle is a pervasive motif throughout the Klamath Basin and has been identified with *Kumush,* the most powerful spirit in Klamath–Modoc cosmology (Hann and Bettles 2006:190). The use of this symbol in place of an owl's eye links it specifically to spirit power. At the same time, the senior author has suggested elsewhere that in at least some instances the zigzag symbol represents the Lightning Spirit (*Lemenish*) (David 2012a:126). The use of this motif in combination with the owl's eyes symbolically enhances the owl's already amazing sense of vision.

According to Ray, Lightning was among the first spirits called in shamans' curing ceremonies because it *enhanced the shamans' vision*, enabling them to "see" the supernatural causes of sickness and disease (Ray 1963:56). In mythical terms, the act of adding the power of Lightning to the eye of an owl enhances its already supernatural eyesight, thus giving him something akin to "super vision." Taken together, these combined motifs symbolize exactly the kind of keen vision that would benefit gamblers, whose often enormous wagers depended greatly on their ability to read their opponents' facial expressions and guess their thoughts (Ray 1963:123–127). Supplicants in search of supernatural aid in gambling would visit this site for just that very purpose.

Another owl characteristic represented in the petroglyphs is the circle enclosing the stick-bodied zoomorphic figure (Fig. 10.3). The head-down posture of the zoomorph indicates that the artist understood that the owl ingested its prey head first and incorporated this concept into the motif. The reason for this is because the head-down stick-figured quadruped constitutes another gambling metaphor.

> Much study has been done on owls in regards to their prey. This is possible predominantly due to "owl pellets." An owl will usually swallow its prey whole and *head first* [emphasis mine]. The parts of the prey that are indigestible (bones, fir, teeth, claws, and such) are then regurgitated in the form of pellets. This is a very symbolic act in which much significance can be found. In the swallowing of the prey head first, the owl *takes into itself the wisdom and energy of the prey* [emphasis mine]. The regurgitation reflects its ability to eliminate those aspects that are unbeneficial and unhealthy for it (Andrews 1996:177).

A head-down posture of the stick figure quadruped in Fig. 10.3 is reminiscent of the behavior of the guesser's opponent in the stick game. Just as an owl absorbs the wisdom and energy of its prey (Andrews 1996:177), the guesser studies his opponent's subtle movements, facial reactions, and movements while making a series of preliminary guesses, weeding out all the non-useful information in preparation for making his final guess as to the arrangement of the gambling pieces. This part of the panel appears to be a reference to that aspect of the contest.

The supernatural connection between the owl and gambling medicine is contained in Klamath–Modoc myth. One story from *Myths of the Modocs* (1912), recorded originally by Jeremiah and Alma Curtin in 1884, tells about how *Kumush* instructed his adopted son, *Aisis*, to embark on a series of quests throughout the Klamath Basin for supernatural power. Each location offered a specific kind of power, but by and large, the ritual process at each locale was identical. As he visited each location, *Aisis* followed *Kumush's* prescription, speaking to the spirits at each locale, telling them what he desired, piling rocks, and then swimming and drinking from the sacred ponds. His goal at each location was to dream, and in those dreams secure a song (*swi'is*), which was the manifestation of his supernatural power (Curtin 1912:7–9).

After each visit, *Aisis* returned home to sweat in a sweat lodge and to recuperate from his journey. Finally, near the end of these quests, *Kumush* sent him to the owl rock in search of gambling medicine:

> *Kumush* said: "Now you must go to old man *Mukus*. Before *Gäk* turned him into a rock *Mukus* was the greatest gambler in the world. Around him are many rocks, the men he was gambling with when *Gäk's* word was spoken" (Curtin 1912:9).

Notably, in Curtin's original manuscripts, *Kumush* instructed *Aisis* to pile rocks at the Lava Beds before going to visit Old Man *Mukus* (Curtin 1884). Nonetheless, the description of *Aisis'* trials is very much in line with Spier's description of the Klamath–Modoc power quest (Spier 1930:95). Seeking isolated places praying to the hills, piling rocks, and swimming in ponds believed to be charged with supernatural power are common elements of this procedure. Subsequent to his visit with Old Man *Mukus*, *Aisis* visited yet another site called *Kaimpeos* and specifically swam in the pool located there in order to receive gambling sticks from one of the "*Kai's*" that lived under the water (Curtin 1912:10).

Based on the mythical description of these ritual activities associated with "Owl Rock," site 38-15-04-03P is well suited to facilitate power-seeking rituals of just this nature. Not only is it isolated from the mundane activity areas in and along this canyon system, but artifacts related to everyday living such as ground stone items, broken stone tools, and debitage are pointedly absent from the site. Its isolation from the mundane added to this site's suitability as a place for seeking supernatural power. The presence of the owl motif in Panel 1 suggests that this site was a place where people came to specifically seek supernatural assistance for gambling. By extension, we argue that the petroglyphs on this panel represented none other than *Mukus*, the Old Man Owl from myth. The stacked rock features in the surrounding area demonstrate that seekers followed the ritual power quest protocols described in the myths and noted above. Upon emerging from the pool after ritual bathing, seekers found themselves staring back at the stark, piercing eyes of the owl spirit in Panel 2, which appear to have been placed low on the rock face and overlooking the pond for that very purpose (Fig. 10.4).

## Discussion

As a spiritual enterprise, it should come as no surprise that gambling referents turn up in Klamath Basin rock art. Gambling played an important role in the Klamath–Modoc economic life, and continues to be an important tradition in the form of modern-day Indian casinos. Games were played intra-tribally and intertribally. Large quantities of wealth often traded hands during these games. In economic terms, intra-tribal gambling served primarily as an economic leveling mechanism. Losses of one day could be offset by winning the next. At the same time, intertribal gambling brought wealth into the tribe as a whole. And while some players were consistently more successful than others, the less talented players could still increase their own winnings by betting with the more successful gamblers (Ray 1963:124).

Success at gambling, however, required supernatural assistance, which supplicants sought in familiar spirit dwellings in the rivers or in mountain lakes (Spier 1930:76). According to myth, this power was also found by visiting places associated with *Mukus,* which are the petrified remains of the mythical character Old Man Owl (Curtin 1912:9).

The owl as a source of gambling medicine makes a certain kind of sense. The owl's phenomenal eyesight equates well with the kind of shrewdness needed to be a keen gambler, thus providing a suitable metaphor for gambling prowess represented in rock art. All of the owl's powers are related to the kind of sight that transcended that of ordinary people and beings. Even shamans, whose primary job is to identify and excise malicious disease-causing spirits from the community, required supernatural assistance for this extraordinary ability in perception (Spier 1930:104). Lightning, by virtue of illumination, further enhanced this ability. Thus, it is no great surprise that these properties were featured in the rock art together.

While it is apparent from the available ethnography that power questing for gambling success was a common enough practice in the North American far west (Haynal 2000:175; Holt 1946:335; Keyser 1992:47; Pritzker 1998:154; Ray 1963:77; Silver 1978:215; Spier 1930:94), it is not yet known whether mythical beings provided this specific kind of spirit power, and consequently came to be represented in other local rock art traditions. Discovering this could greatly expand our understanding of rock art in the North American far west. The ethnography of the Shasta, Paiute, and Achumawi groups indicates that gambling was among the various reasons why people sought out supernatural power (Olmsted and Sturtevant 1978:228–229). Perhaps a deeper exploration of their mythologies might shed light on some of the rock art in this regard.

Starting in the mid-twentieth century, researchers have focused on a number of different aspects of Klamath Basin rock art. Swartz (1963) has demonstrated that plausible relationships exist between the rock art's design styles and rendering techniques, and thus he proposes its suitability for archaeological study. Lee and Hyder (1989) incorporated paleoenvironmental data in order to propose relative dates for some of the petroglyphs in Lava Beds National Monument. Armitage et al. (1997) turned to AMS dating to provide chronometric dates for a painted site within Lava Beds National Monument. Ritter (1999) examined local ethnographies to gain insights into the intertribal use of one important rock art site near an important upper Klamath River fishing station. More recently, Loubser and Whitley (1999), Whitley et al. (2004), Hann and Bettles (2006), Hann et al. (2010), Poetschat et al. (2010), and David (2005, 2010, 2012a, b) have incorporated landscape studies in conjunction with ethnographic information to propose that at least some Klamath Basin rock art sites are the outcomes of shamans' vision quest rituals.

While a few of these researchers incorporated information from local mythology, none have recognized that non-shamanic activities such as gambling *also* required supernatural power, and that information related to that very concept is contained in the myths. This example, so well grounded in local myth and ethnography/ethnohistory, illustrates a wider role for rock art in spiritual power needs and practices.

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