ABORIGINAL CALIFORNIA BURIAL AND CREMATION PRACTICES

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MAPS

INTRODUCTION

Information gathered by various investigators in the past has indicated that among California Indian tribes the manner of disposing of the dead differed according to region. In his Handbook of the Indians of California, Kroeber (1925:842) published a map showing the distribution of the practices of cremation and burial in aboriginal California. Three years later Spier presented a further synthesis of California data concerning the disposal of the dead in his monograph, Havasupai Ethnography. Since 1928, however, there have been no more over-all attempts to summarize the information about burial and cremation practices in California, despite the fact that considerable new data on the subject has become available.

The basic purpose of this paper is to attempt such a summary, and for this reason much emphasis has been placed on the distributional maps which follow the text (pp. 166-8). With the amount of new information that has appeared on this subject since Kroeber's extensive treatment of 1925, it is possible in many instances to fill in some of the gaps on his map.

While an early observer (Powers 1877) noted on many occasions that the Indians he had seen and heard about in his travels through California sometimes mixed practices of burial or cremation, the first really systematic discussion of this matter appeared in a statement by Mason (1912:166): "It has been generally accepted that cremation was typical of the greater part of California, but sufficient cause for this belief is not evident." Mason goes on to point out that certain groups, namely, the Chumash, Hupa, Yurok, Karok, Wiyot, Shasta, and Yuki, practiced only burial, while other groups had mixed preferences—the Miwok and Maidu, as well as some Yokuts and Costanoans. There remained only the Pomo, Yuman, and Shoshonean groups who cremated exclusively.

In the light of information which has appeared since 1912, it is not surprising that many of the details of Mason's theory have required modification. However, there is no doubt that Mason was correct in his fundamental assertion that cremation was not universal, and, more important, that mixed practices of burial and cremation by the same groups were quite common. A major purpose of this paper will be to document the occurrences of such mixed practices and discuss the various ways in which these customs are known or thought to have occurred.

SOME THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In a paper presented in 1927, Kroeber offered some speculations concerning the distribution of burial and cremation patterns in aboriginal California. He noted the irregular distribution of these patterns and their noticeable lack of correlation with other features of mortuary activity such as the annual mourning ceremony, taboos on the names of the dead, etc. Basing his ideas on the irregularity of these distributions, Kroeber (1927:308) made the proposition that:

"If the distributions were to be interpreted as is customary, it was evident that methods of corpse disposal had had a history that was less simple and regular, and more fluctuating, than most elements of native Californian culture."

He went on to point out that funerary practices of this sort are more highly charged with emotion than many elements of culture; thus he posed the question:

"Is there then perhaps inherently less stability in affect-laden customs, or is such stability as they possess due to factors other than the degree of associated emotion?" (op. cit., 309).

Kroeber realized, however, that simple intensity of feeling was a poor criterion for judging the permanence of any institution. So he proposed alternatively—though still using the idea of emotional effect—that:

"...it appears that a feature which is pretty likely to characterize mortuary practices is their dissociation from certain large blocks of cultural activity, especially those having to do with material and economic life, its subsistence and mechanical aspects. That is, disposal of the dead also does not lend itself to any great degree of integration with domains of behavior which are susceptible of formalization and codification, like law, much of religion, and social organization.... Disposal of the dead falls rather in a class with fashions, than either with customs or folkways on the one hand, or institutions on the other.... In their relative isolation or detachment from the remainder of culture, their rather high degree of entry into consciousness, and their tendency to strong emotional toning, social practices of disposing of the dead are of a kind with fashions of dress, luxury, and etiquette" (op. cit., 314).

Thus it is that Kroeber suggested some possible explanations for the rather ragged distributions of burial and cremation which he noted in his studies of ethnographic California cultures.

With the additional evidence concerning these mortuary practices now available for the ethnographic cultures of California, it should be possible to examine the ideas which Kroeber proposed, to suggest possible modifications, and, in some cases, alternative explanations.

Map 1. Distribution of cremation and burial as mapped by Kroeber (p. 166)

This map was prepared by Kroeber in 1925. In many instances the specific sources for his information are not stated, particularly in the case of the Coast Miwok, many of the Costanoans, and the Chemehuevi. In these cases it is difficult to assess the accuracy of the informants he was using, but it should be pointed out that where information has become available since 1925 it has usually borne out the characterization given by Kroeber.

In preparing this map, Kroeber's objective was simply to learn what was the most common practice among a given group. For instance, if the information he acquired indicated that the group most frequently cremated, he would tabulate them as a "cremation" group; the same rule was applied in identifying "burying" groups.

Map 2. Revision of Kroeber's map based upon additional information (p. 167)

This map follows Kroeber's method of classifying each group according to how prevalent the practice of burial or cremation was within it. Where new information has appeared, changes and additions have been made. It will be noted that in several instances a "P" or "?" appears. These symbols indicate that while information is available on this matter, it may not be wholly conclusive as to what was the prevailing practice. These doubtful instances will be considered in order from north to south.

Northern Paiute:- These groups almost certainly practiced burial for the most part. There is no conclusive documentation of mortuary practices for any of the Paiute bands in northern California, but ethnographies of similar Paiute bands in Nevada (Lowie 1924; Steward 1941) and areas farther south in California (Steward 1933, 1941) indicate burial—sometimes only the depositing of the corpse under a pile of rocks—as the prevailing practice.

Sinkyone:- There is abundant ethnographic information concerning this group, but there is also considerable disagreement about it. Kroeber (1925:146) stated that "the regular disposal of the dead was by burial," but Nomland's (1935:163) study of the Sinkyone ten years later indicated cremation as "the accepted method of disposal of the dead," and provided a detailed descriptive account of the mortuary practices. This same view had been reached much earlier by Goddard (1911:576), and it may well be that cremation was more common than Kroeber believed. Kroeber (1925:146) acknowledged that the Sinkyone did cremate "those slain in battle, or dying at a distance from home or under circumstances imposing haste."

Huchnom:- Although indicated on Kroeber's map as a culture practicing mainly cremation, the only direct reference available in the literature on this matter (Powers 1877:145) suggests that burial was more commonly practiced among the Huchnom. As with the Sinkyone, all indications are that cremation was practiced for those dying away from home (Curtis 1924:46).

Northern Pomo (Kalekau):- Kroeber (1925:253) stated that "the dead were burned by the Pomo. Some marginal fragments of the stock may have practiced burial also." The interviews conducted by Essene (1942) much later indicated that burial was, in fact, normal for this northern group of Pomo.

Costanoans (of Santa Cruz):- At Santa Cruz an informant of Mason (1912:167) stated that "they burned the bodies of those killed in war, but interred at sundown those who died from natural causes." This would seem to imply that burial was the more common practice. Harrington's (1942) work among the few surviving Costanoans also indicated that burial was the more common practice among the southern Costanoans, but the geographic limits of these groups are not well understood. It should also be mentioned that one of Merriam's (n.d.) informants among the Ennesen (Salinans) also reported burial as the prevailing practice.

Panamint (Koso):- Studies by Driver (1937) suggested that cremation was common among all Panamint groups except the Death Valley Panamint where burial may have existed. This information confirms the very much earlier evidence offered by Merriam (n.d.) for the group he termed the Panamint Shoshone, who "put body in cave or hole in rock and cover with rocks; food in basket."

Chemehuevi:- Kroeber (1925:598-599) suggested that the Chemehuevi cremated, probably basing this suggestion upon the close relation of Chemehuevi religious practices to those of the Mohave. Evidence gathered later by Drucker (1937), from a Chemehuevi informant who once lived in

the region, tends strongly to confirm this view. The only reason any hesitation is expressed concerning the practices among this group is because of the fact that the information is based wholly on a single informant who was living on a reservation a considerable distance away from his former homeland. Further information concerning the Chemehuevi would be welcome as a check on the findings already made.

Vanyume:- There is no documentary evidence available to indicate what the predominating mortuary practices of this group may have been, but on a purely distributional basis the strongest possiblity would be that cremation predominated. One cautionary remark is needed, however. On the west the Vanyume were bordered by the Alliklik and Kitanemuk; while these groups are poorly documented for mortuary practices, they are known to have been in close contact with the Chumash to the west. The Chumash are known to have practiced burial without exception, and there is always the possibility that their influence may have been felt as far east as the Vanyume.

Kitanemuk:- The only evidence available concerning Kitanemuk mortuary practices is highly indirect. Kroeber (1925:613) stated: "The Yokuts of today declare that the Kitanemuk interred corpses." On the basis of this evidence, Kroeber was willing to place this group on his map as a predominantly burying culture, but in this paper the Kitanemuk are proposed as a burying group, with a "P" to indicate the practice is probable.

Map 3. Disposal of the dead: Mixed practices (p. 168)

The existence of mixed practices of burial and cremation in the same groups has long been known by students of California cultures. Map 3 shows the documented appearances of such mixed practices, but does not provide much detail as to the specific ways in which such mixed practices were present. Unless discussed specifically in this section, it may be assumed that the cultures shown practiced burial as the primary means of disposal of the dead and cremated only those individuals who, for one reason or another, died away from home. For the most part, these individuals were men killed in skirmishes with neighboring groups while on hunting trips or raids. The most obvious reason one can point to for the cremation of the body on the spot was to make it easier to carry the remains back to the home village. If the person was killed at a considerable distance from home, it would be much simpler for his companions to carry the ashes back in a container than to attempt transport of the complete corpse.

One may, however, with justification ask: why cremation? Why not employ some other means for returning the victim to his home village; for instance, one could always bring back only the heart, head, or some other part of the body and let it represent the whole person at the funeral. Or one could simply bring back a possession of the deceased to be buried or burned at the funeral. Cremation was certainly not the only possibility available to groups which were faced with this problem, and the fact that most of these groups practiced burial as their more usual means of disposing of the dead makes this activity seem somewhat strange.

The likeliest explanation for cremation as the inevitable choice under such circumstances probably has to do with the fact that, as maps 1 and 2 show, no culture which predominantly buried was ever very far removed from a culture which emphasized cremation. These nearby cultures provided a ready model for imitation, and there can be no doubt that many of the cultures which stressed burial were, in fact, aware of the full panoply of cremation devices, even though they rarely if ever actually employed these themselves. The best evidence for this comes from the unpublished Merriam California Indian vocabularies, in which many burying cultures exhibit a complete awareness of terms which apply to cremation practices. Many of Merriam's informants, while stating on the one hand that their people did not practice cremation, would, on the other hand, have a ready vocabulary pertaining to cremation. Such was the case with his informants among the Ennesen (Salinans), Atwumne (Achomawi), Hupa, and Koroo (Patwin). In other instances groups were apparently well aware of the mortuary practices of their neighbors. Thus one finds references by Nevada Paiute to Achomawi cremation, by Yaudanchi (Yokuts) to Mono cremation, by Yokuts to Kitanemuk burial, and by Hupa to Chimariko cremation (though Merriam's informant in this case may have been mistaken since all other evidence points to burial among the Chimariko). Certainly, it would be unlikely that California groups were wholly unaware of the mortuary practices of their neighbors, and the close proximity of groups which emphasized cremation always provided the burying groups with a ready example for imitation when the problem arose as to how to bring back the corpse of a person who had died away from home. It was probably easier for these people to imitate existing traditions which they were aware of than to invent new practices for the occasion.

Other kinds of mixed patterns, however, were also present, and these are specified in order, from north to south.

Modoc:- This group is described as generally practicing cremation, but, "if have no time to burn body, as for instance when group travelling, bury corpse instead of cremating it. Burials rare, however" (Voegelin

1942:229). Among the adjacent and closely related Klamath Indians, however, Spier (1930:71) relates that, "the body of a man killed in war is brought home for cremation."

Chimariko:- Notes in Merriam's vocabulary for this group and studies by Dixon (1910:302) suggest that these people definitely buried; no exceptions to this practice were mentioned by either writer. However, Merriam noted elsewhere: "But the Chemareko of Hyampom burn their dead" (Baumhoff 1958:214). The likeliest explanation of this practice is the probability that the statement refers only to one of the smaller subgroupings of the Chimariko, whose customs varied from those of the main group. The evidence for burial for most of the Chimariko is unequivocal.

Wintu:- For the Trinity River Wintu, Voegelin (1942:230) records that, "only time cremation practiced was when corpse was found long time after death."

Atsugewi:- "The Atsugewi bordered the northeast California area where cremation was practiced and themselves practiced cremation on rare occasions" (Garth 1953:166). However, these occasional cremations cannot be regarded as being reserved for persons dying away from home, for Garth (op. cit., 167) goes on to state: "If a man died away from his village, it depended upon circumstances whether he was brought home for burial or not.... A man killed in a war might be hurriedly buried in a rock crevice, and sometimes, when a man died in a neighboring village, even that of another tribe, he was buried in the local cemetery. Yet in some instances a body was carried in a stretcher long distances to home territory."

Mattole:- This group provides an interesting problem in ethnographic sampling. Kroeber (1925:142) stated: "Not a single concrete item of ethnology is on record regarding the Mattole, other than the statement that they burned their dead." But he also noted that, if this was true, it would mean that a cremating group was more or less isolated in a region crowded with burying groups. This fact led Kroeber to suspect that, "more likely some settler reported the exceptional funeral of natives shot by his friends" (ibid.). Kroeber raised not only the specific question of mortuary practices among these people, but also suggested a wider problem here. What is it that the ethnographer actually sees? In this case it seems almost certain that the original mention of cremation for the Mattole was atypical, for later ethnographers were informed that, in fact, burial was the prevailing practice among the Mattole (Nomland 1935:163; Driver 1939). This group probably practiced both burial and cremation, with cremation reserved for occasions when a person died away from the home village. Had it not been for Kroeber's early caution concerning this ethnographic report, the group might well have remained on the record as

a society which practiced only cremation (Powers 1877:110; Goddard 1907:823).

Northern Pomo (Kalekau):- The problem of burial in this group has been discussed on page 154. Cremation apparently did occur among these people, but it was rare. Whatever the reasons for these occasional cremations may have been, it is almost certain that warriors were not cremated if killed far from the home village (Essene 1942).

Miwok:- Kroeber's (1925:452) original statement was that "cremation of the dead was the usual but probably not universal practice of the Miwok." Conflicting reports of burial and cremation abound in both the published and unpublished literature, and it seems clear only that some groups did, on occasion, practice burial. The latest studies of the Miwok indicate that, as Kroeber had originally stated, cremation was the general practice among the Miwok (Aginsky 1943; Gifford 1955).

Salinans (San Antonio):- "At San Antonio the most distinguished dead were cremated, while persons of no particular importance were merely buried" (Mason 1912:167).

Mono (Wobonuch and Entimbich):- Gayton's (1948:274) informant reported that, "after burial was adopted, cremation was reserved for disposal of persons who died far from home; the bones and ashes were collected, brought back, and buried by the relatives in the deceased's community burying ground." The same treatment was accorded by these Mono to strangers or enemies who died on local territory. This information is of interest because it is the only documented instance within ethnographic times of the appearance of the pattern of cremation of those dying away from the home territory after the group involved had changed from cremation to burial as the predominant mode of disposal of the dead.

Kawaiisu:- While these people generally cremated, it is reported that they would occasionally bury a body by piling rocks over it (Driver 1937). The circumstances for such burial, however, are not discussed in the literature.

BURIAL IN THE HOME VILLAGE

Observers among many of the California aboriginal groups have been impressed by the intensity of the desire on the part of the Indians to have their remains deposited in or near their home village. Powers

(1877:249-250), for instance, notes concerning the Shasta:

"One thing is especially noticeable of the Shastika, as it is more or less throughout California, and that is their strong yearning to live, die, and be buried in the home of their fathers. If an Indian is overtaken by sudden death away from his native valley, and must needs close his eyes far from kindred, the prayer which he breathes with his dying breath to his comrades is a passionate adjuration to them not to let his body molder and his spirit wander homeless, friendless, and alone in a strange country.... This request is religiously observed. As they anciently had no efficient means of transportation,...[the corpse] was first reduced to ashes, which were carefully gathered up and borne home to rest in the ancient patrimony of the Shastika."

In spite of the rather journalistic manner of his presentation, the pattern essentially as described by Powers has been confirmed in later studies of the Shasta. Normally the Shasta practiced burial, but under these circumstances they would practice cremation. This same pattern has been documented for all the groups indicated by hatched lines on Map 3.

However, several variations appear, based upon this theme. For the Yurok, there is the 1851 account of J. Goldsmith Bruff, who relates how the body of a chief killed about one hundred miles from his home village was brought back by his wife, carried on her back for two and a half days. The body was never cremated (Heizer and Mills 1952:117-118). Similarly, among the Atsugewi it was not uncommon for the body of a person dying at a distance to be brought home on a sort of stretcher. This pattern, however, was not invariable among the Atsugewi, and there are also reports of corpses left in distant villages or hurriedly buried in rock crevices (Garth 1953:167).

In most instances where it was considered important to bring the body home for burial if death occurred at a distance, there is also some documentation to the effect that the burial place was located close to or right within the village. Ashes from cremations were placed in the same graveyard with other remains. Among the Shasta the graves were often placed at a considerable distance from the village, but it is interesting to note that the graves (not burials in the ground but cairns in which the bodies were placed) were located on the top of some prominent hill overlooking the village (Powers 1877:250). At some later date a change seems to have occurred among the Shasta as regards this pattern, for dug graves are reported by Dixon (1907), though the Indians stated that this was a recent innovation.

Lest one receive the impression that the return of the body of a person killed at a distance was a universal practice among California Indians, it is well to cite a couple of exceptions. Among the Modoc, if a person was killed while distant from the village, he might be quickly buried among some rocks (Voegelin 1942). Among the Tübatulabal, one hears that "the bodies of those who died away from home were brought back if possible; flesh not cremated off bones first; those killed in war away from home buried on spot" (Voegelin 1938:47).

However, there can be little doubt that the desire to be buried in or near the home village was once widespread among many California Indian groups. This fact would account for most instances of the mixed practices of cremation and burial among numerous groups in aboriginal California.

GAPS IN THE RECORD

As is apparent from the maps, there are still several groups for which virtually no direct information is available. These are the Okwanuchu, Salt Pomo, Southeastern Wintun, Northern Valley Yokuts, and Alliklik.

The Okwanuchu were speakers of the Shastan dialect of Hokan (Kroeber 1925:284) and lived in close proximity to other Shastan-speaking groups to the east, west, and south. Since burial is documented as the prevailing practice among these neighboring groups, it does not seem unreasonable to propose that the same custom prevailed among the Okwanuchu.

For the Northeastern (or "Salt") Pomo we also lack any direct information. In this instance the maps are of less use in making inferences, for this small offshoot of the main Pomo group existed on the edge of the territories of groups which cremated as well as of those which buried their dead. As has been shown earlier, there is every likelihood that some of the northwestern groups of Pomo may have deviated from the general Pomo practice of cremation, and the same may be true for the Northeastern Pomo.

Concerning the Southeastern Wintun, Kroeber (1925:359) states: "The groups near upper San Francisco Bay, and some of those in immediate contact with the Pomo, may have cremated." Kroeber's inference concerning the Wintun groups adjacent to the Pomo has been verified by subsequent investigation, and there is no reason to suppose that his estimate concerning the remaining Southern Wintun groups is in error.

One group about which it is almost impossible to make inferences is the Northern Valley Yokuts. While sharing boundaries mainly with groups which cremated, it must be noted that most of the other, more southerly Yokuts groups practiced burial as the major means of disposal of the dead.

Direct ethnographic information for the Alliklik and Vanyume is utterly lacking. The Vanyume were bordered on three sides by groups for which cremation has been documented, and it is possible to infer from this fact that they, too, may have cremated. But the Alliklik had closer contacts with groups like the Chumash, among whom they were known (Kroeber 1925:556). Since these groups buried almost exclusively, there is some chance that the Alliklik did also. In short, any deductions about either of these groups must remain highly tentative.

In all of these instances, conclusions concerning aboriginal practices of disposal of the dead must remain conjectural. There is little likelihood of new direct evidence becoming available for any of these groups in the future, so inferences, guided whenever possible by data from nearby groups, must stand.

CONCLUSIONS: THE THEORY REVIEWED

It is clear from the data which has become available since Kroeber's study of 1925 that the original zones which he proposed then have been closely substantiated. We still do not adequately understand the origins for the peculiar southern California zone of burial, which extends from the Mono to the Chumash, but the existence of this zone remains, and is, in fact, more widespread than Kroeber had originally suspected. Also, many of the blanks in the northern California zone of burial and southernmost zone of cremation have been filled, now that documentation is available for many of these groups.

But should this essential confirmation of Kroeber's outline of patterns of disposal of the dead be interpreted as also a confirmation of his theoretical views on the subject as expressed in 1927? In part it may be, for there can be little doubt that there still exists much of the irregularity in the distribution of these patterns which he originally posited.

However, as this paper has attempted to demonstrate, there is some question as to whether these modes of disposal of the dead are as dissociated from other aspects of life as Kroeber originally believed. It is true that there is a certain separation of burial and cremation practices

from more directly subsistence-derived activities, but this does not necessarily mean that methods of disposing of the dead always operate independently of other, more stable, patterns in the society. The principal and best documented example of this fact is the relationship which cremation and burial bear to the belief found among many California Indian groups (for motives that this paper has not attempted to explore) that it was essential for a person's remains to be deposited near his home or home village. Map 3 illustrates the extent to which this pattern has been documented as being present, and much of the discussion presented herein has been devoted to demonstrating the causal relationships involved between this pattern and those of burial and cremation.

There are, as has been pointed out, exceptions both in the presence of these patterns and in the nature of the relationships between them. These exceptions themselves are of great interest, but it can be shown that among many groups in aboriginal California the instability of cremation and burial practices may be accounted for by referring these practices to a wider pattern—the desire on the part of the Indians to have their remains deposited in or near their home village.

Thus there does exist among the practices of disposal of the dead in California definite instability, that is, irregular distributions and mixed practices abound. However, since it is possible to account for these variations in so many instances by reference to a wider system within the culture, one may question whether Kroeber's invoking of "fashions" accurately describes the situation.

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AMNH	American Museum of Natural History
-AP	Anthropological Papers
-B	Bulletin
SI	Smithsonian Institution
-BAE-B	Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin
UC	University of California
-AR	Anthropological Records
-PAAE	Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology

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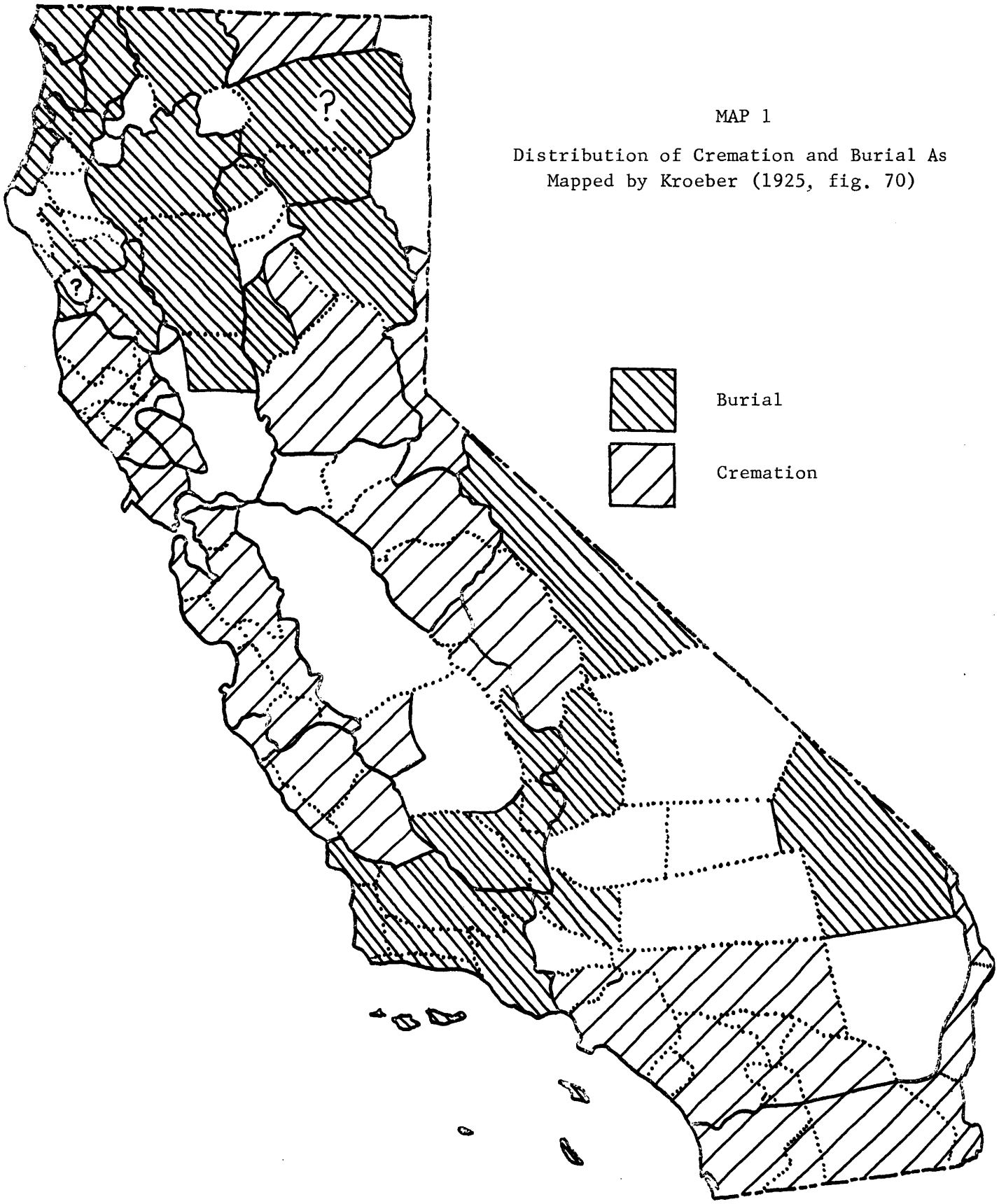


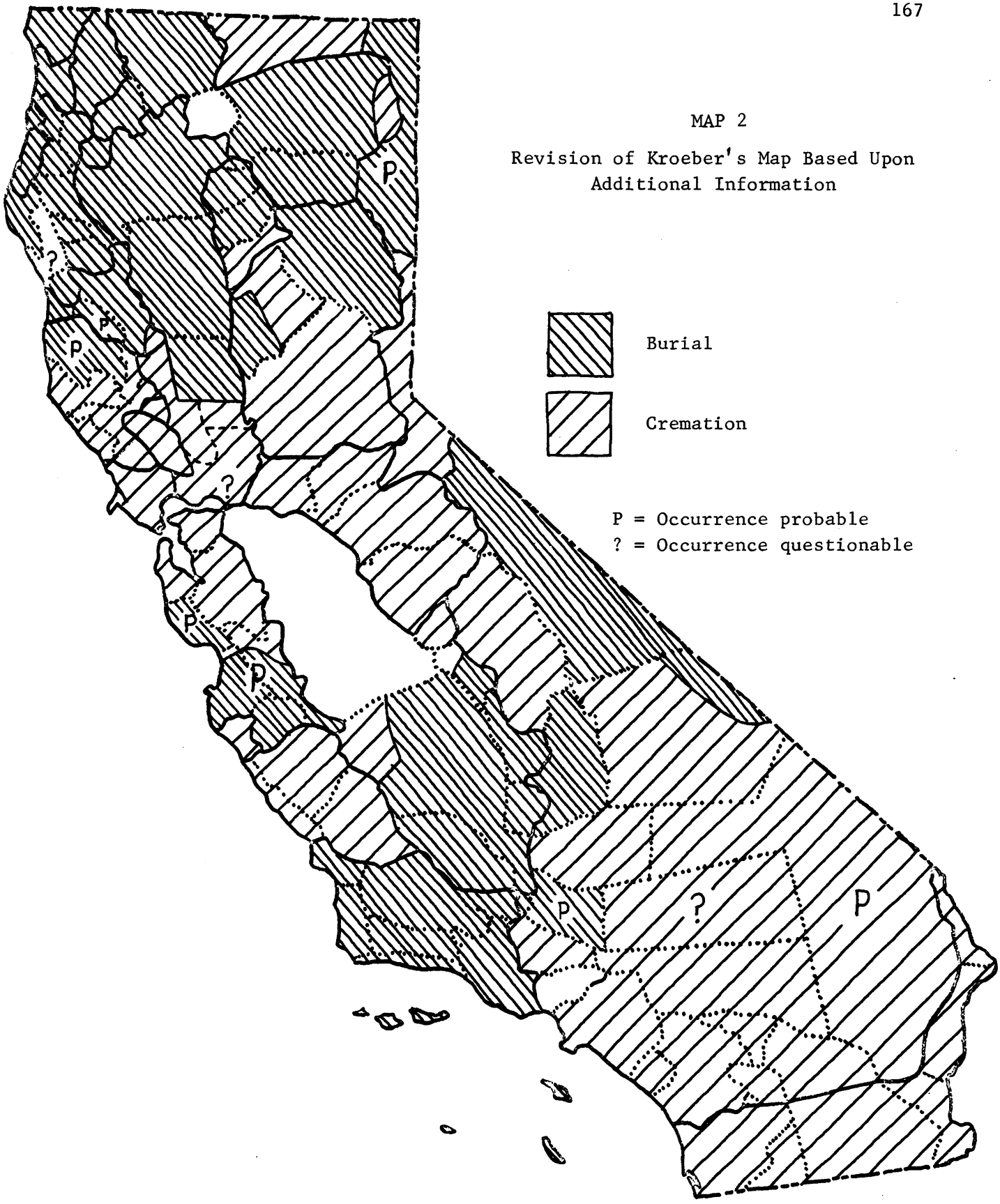
MAP 1

Distribution of Cremation and Burial As Mapped by Kroeber (1925, fig. 70)

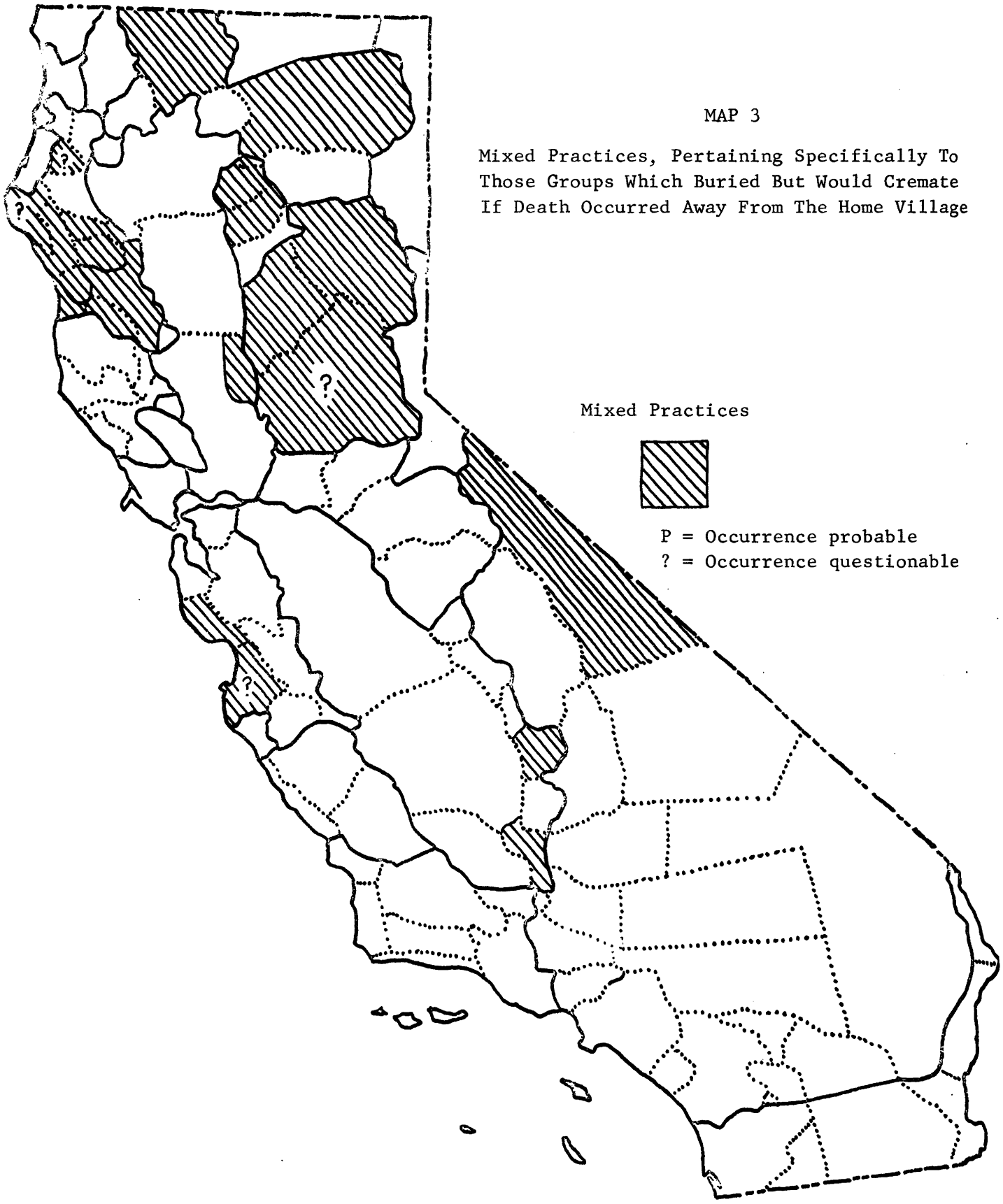
[See Frontispiece for area identification]

MAP 2

Revision of Kroeber's Map Based Upon Additional Information



[See Frontispiece for area identification]



MAP 3

Mixed Practices, Pertaining Specifically To Those Groups Which Buried But Would Cremate If Death Occurred Away From The Home Village

Mixed Practices

P = Occurrence probable
? = Occurrence questionable

[See Frontispiece for area identification]