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THE HUPA  
WHITE DEERSKIN DANCE

BY

WALTER R. GOLDSCHMIDT AND HAROLD E. DRIVER

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# THE HUPA WHITE DEERSKIN DANCE

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## INTRODUCTION

THE WHITE DEERSKIN DANCE is a protracted ritualistic festivity engaged in by several tribes of northwestern California, and is peculiar to that region. It consists of a simple dance repeated frequently; the regalia utilized include most of the wealth objects of the society. The dancing takes place throughout an eight- to ten-day period of feasting during which the members of the tribe camp at the several successive dance grounds and are fed by those wealthy tribesmen who are initiating the dance. In the following pages we shall present the essential features of the ceremony, pointing out its ceremonial, religious, social, and socio-economic aspects.

## A SUMMARY OF HUPA CULTURE

### GEOGRAPHY AND ECONOMY

The Hupa Indians and their neighbors, the Yurok and Karok, possess a distinctive and well-developed culture. Hupa culture has typically Californian traits, yet it also has particular characteristics reminiscent of the Northwest Coast proper. The essential features of the culture in general are given by Kroeber in the first chapters of his *Handbook of the Indians of California*,<sup>1</sup> and a specific study of the Hupa is presented by Goddard in his *Life and Culture of the Hupa*.<sup>2</sup>

These Indians are an Athabascan-speaking people. They dwelt on the lower reaches of the Trinity River from near its confluence with the Klamath in the north to its confluence, farther upstream, with the South Fork of the Trinity. They are now concentrated on the Hupa Indian Reservation, which is roughly a ten-mile-square tract of land containing the major part of their original territory. It is essential to know that these people, though they roamed the hills for game and grass foods, were concentrated in the narrow, fertile valley of the Trinity River, separated from tribes to the east and west by mountain ranges passable only part of the year, and connected with the people below and above them on the river system by narrow gorges. These geographical circumstances brought about both concentration of population and geographical isolation; the latter was not so rigorous as to preclude cultural connections, but made the Hupa a nonwarring people. Concentration of population was made possible by the abundance of salmon in the Trinity and of tan oak in the neighboring flats; these adequately supplied the two staple foods. The most important part of the Hupa territory was about eight miles of valley bottom, and it is with the people of this area that the present paper deals.

<sup>1</sup> A. L. Kroeber, *Handbook of the Indians of California*, BAE-B 78, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> Pliny E. Goddard, *Life and Culture of the Hupa*, UC-PAAE 1:1-88, 1903.

