Cultural Significance of Trees in Native Californian Social Organization

The relatively small Northern California cultural area shows a number of features that at first glance appear to be ethnographic idiosyncrasies in North America: extreme atomization of social organization, a high level of individual property, weakness of collective institutions asserting sovereignty, a wide range of monetary exchanges, and the “purchase” of women for marriage. Far from reflecting some fundamental invariants of human nature as shaped by utilitarianism and male domination, these features are explained by an overarching “vegetalism” that determines subsistence and social structure. Symmetrical to totemism with animals, the notion refers to a cognitive capacity to take species of vegetation — mainly trees — as a model and a reference for social existence. Gender roles, differential valuations of war and hunting, the role of dentalia shell money as a substitute for speech, and the specificity of kinship nomenclatures designate these groups as representative of a radical inversion of prototypical American totemism, personified by Algonquian cultures found in the eastern regions of the sub-continent.