Ramona Marine Sanchez and her husband Porfidio Sanchez, parents of Dolores Sanchez, a Muwekma Ohlone elder. Courtesy Alvarez and Galvan families.
A Contemporary Ohlone Tribal Revitalization Movement: A Perspective From the Muwekma Costanoan/Ohlone Indians of the San Francisco Bay Area

by Les Field, Alan Leventhal, Dolores Sanchez, and Rosemary Cambra

Introduction

"The Costanoan group is extinct so far as all practical purposes are concerned. A few scattered individuals survive, whose parents were attached to the missions San Jose, San Juan Bautista and San Carlos; but they are of mixed tribal ancestry and live almost lost among other Indians or obscure Mexicans."1 Alfred Kroeber, the "father" of California Indian anthropology and a major historical figure of the discipline, wrote this sentence of extinction for the Costanoans. This little paragraph would ultimately affect the views of anthropologists, historians, educators, public agency staff and planners, elected officials, school children, and the general public. The magnitude of his statements could well have served as a tribal death knell for the last generation of disenfranchised Costanoan/Ohlone descendants. However, the indigenous families who trace their lineages from three surviving regional and linguistic traditions of the San Francisco Bay Area refused to accept this pronouncement by the mainstream of Californian society.

Kroeber, for his part, reversed his position on the Costanoan peoples some thirty years later, during the 1954-55 California Indian Claims hearings held in San Francisco and Berkeley.2 These hearings decided the fate of the California Indians, who were forced to sit on the sidelines, as academic "experts" argued for and against the existence of each tribe and what land rights were to accrue to tribes that were recognized as existing. One might have observed that an ad hoc moiety system eventually emerged among the "experts" disputing the outcome of the settlement case. On the one hand, the Berkeley side (northern anthropologists) "testified for the petitioners" (California Indians), i.e., more or less in favor of extending limited land rights to a certain number of recognized tribes, while on the other hand, the Los Angeles side (southern anthropologists) became the "expert anthropological witnesses for the Department of Justice," that is, they were much less inclined to recognize any tribes or land rights.3 Although there were more "experts" on the southern side, the Indian Claims Commission decided on July 31, 1959, that the petitioning tribes, collectively referred to as the "Indians of California," could be recognized as an "identifiable group," and that this group could now present its case before the commission.4 This "stamp of approval," or recognition, ultimately served as an important vehicle for many of the disenfranchised California Indians who had participated in the 1928-1933 Special Indian Census; the final settlement of claims in the 1960s resulted in the payment of $668.51 per person. Many Costanoan/Ohlone descendants participated in this entire legal process.

This being the case, in 1991 a duly constituted and federally-documented organization of Costanoan/Ohlone descendants called the Muwekma Costanoan/Ohlone Tribe not only stepped forward to tell the story of their survival and persistence into the late twentieth century, but they also developed a working partnership and understanding with public agencies like Caltrans, Santa Clara County,
and the city of San Jose. The concept of partnership is pivotal and makes it possible for Muwekma descendants to contribute to the overall decision-making process concerning the scientific investigation of their ancestral cemeteries and village sites. Partnership has also provided the opportunity for the authors to write this perspective on their history, as part of the final report on the archaeological investigations conducted at the Tamien Light Rail Station near downtown San Jose. This article, then, is not only the telling of a mostly untold history, it is also a document of historical value in and of itself.

While in recent years public agencies have become more sensitive to the needs of California Indian descendants with respect to archaeological research, and have recognized their responsibility to involve the descendants as site monitors, the process of inclusion has mostly failed to go beyond simple acknowledgement of the participation of certain individuals and/or groups. The participating descendants are usually found only in the acknowledgement section of final archaeological reports. Indeed, in some recent Bay Area cases involving private archaeological contracting firms, the descendants do not appear anywhere in the final reports. This generally accepted, or “normative,” process of marginalizing the role of participating Indians has created a vast gulf between the “data” outlined in the sections entitled “Brief Ethnographic Overview,” which are a standard part of archaeological reports, and the living populations of Indian descendants.

In the case of the Costanoan/Ohlon, region, the brief ethnographic overviews contained in most recent cultural resource management reports rehash the principal works of Alfred Kroeber, Robert Heizer, and Richard Levy, works that accept the theory that Costanoan/Ohlon groups were extinct by the time of California’s admission to the Union in 1850. The time has come to link the living populations of Indians to their historical and pre-contact heritage. This can be accomplished when the descendants carry out contemporary ethnography among themselves and make use of the tools of anthropological investigation. In an unprecedented fashion for California, the Muwekma have decided to participate as co-authors, to share their story, and to do so in the spirit of cooperative partnership with the public agencies involved in the Tamien Light Rail Station project.

The Evolution and Reconstitution of the Muwekma Tribe

The Muwekma tribe embodies the contemporary reorganization and revitalization of the descendants of missionized Costanoan peoples of the east and south San Francisco Bay Area (Santa Clara, Alameda, and Contra Costa counties). Other central California peoples have also contributed ancestry to the contemporary Muwekma people. Intermarriage between persons of different indigenous ethnicities, particularly among elite social strata, has been an important part of kinship systems in central California for hundreds, possibly thousands, of years. “Muwekma” means “the People” in the Tamien and Chochenyo (or Lisy'an) languages, which were aboriginally spoken in this part of the San Francisco Bay Area. The name “Muwekma” is probably an accurate reflection of how the indigenous peoples of this region identified themselves. “Ohlone” is the contemporary term used for the descendants of all of the indigenous peoples who lived in the entire Bay Area, extending inland from the Carquinez Strait south to Soledad, and from the Golden Gate to Big Sur on the Pacific Coast. Ohlone, like Muwekma, signifies the heritage of both Costanoan and other central California indigenous peoples, since the intermarriage that existed before the arrival of Europeans continued, although under drastically different conditions, during the experiences of missionization and the eras of Mexican and American control. The east and south bay descendants of Mission San Jose Indians have referred to themselves as Ohlones since 1916, and in the last twenty years, the term has become generalized. We will use the term “Ohlone” in discussing the descendants in this century, and use the terms “ancestral Muwekma,” “indigenous peoples of the Bay Area,” as well as “Costanoans,” in discussing the more distant past.

In addition to the Muwekma, two other Ohlone groups have regrouped and organized in the contemporary period: the Amah-Mutsun of the Gilroy-San Juan Bautista area (“Amah” means “the People” in the Mutsun language), and the Carmel Band of Rumesen-speaking descendants in the Monterey region, who trace their lineages to Mission San Carlos. The three groups have worked together (along with some thirty other California tribes) to achieve a common goal: federal acknowledgement of tribal status, based upon a pending congressional bill. The Muwekma tribe has traveled the farthest along the road of revitalizing tribal history as a part of the acknowledgement process.
Consequently, this study, which for the first time assembles many materials together in a single text, will also play a significant role toward achieving tribal recognition.

The Revitalization of the Muwekma Ohlone Indian Families

Randall Milliken has described the complex socio-cultural attributes of the indigenous peoples of the southern San Francisco Bay at the time of contact with the Spanish. That period has, by now, been documented in numerous archaeological interpretive studies, although seldom to the satisfaction of the Ohlone descendants. Similarly, the story has also been told of how the missions effectively eroded indigenous cultural, social, and economic institutions, a process that, along with a series of disastrous epidemics, led to the elimination of perhaps eighty percent of the indigenous peoples dwelling in the Bay Area at the time of the arrival of the Spanish. The result of missionization’s devastation of the ancestral Muwekma was so traumatic that it is understandable that an anthropologist as eminent as Alfred Kroeber could surmise the extinction of this people with such assurance.

Nevertheless, the story of the emergence of the Muwekma into the contemporary era begins

San Francisco Bay Indians, probably Ohlone hunters, as interpreted by the visiting French artist Louis Choris in 1816. Courtesy Huntington Library.
in the period after the Mexican government secularized the California missions in 1834 and during the subsequent period of American conquest and the creation of the state of California. There were three distinctive periods in post-mission Ohlone history between 1850 and the present. Unlike the typical historical recounting, however, this study begins with the contemporary period and then goes backward in time. The reasons for doing so have everything to do with the unique character of Ohlone culture. We will describe the contemporary process by which the Muwekma have arrived at a partnership with Caltrans on the Tamien Station project, and how the Muwekma have developed their specific revitalization within the context of the modern Bay Area. Only in this context can one make clear the trajectory of strength and tenacity deep within the Muwekma Ohlone that has enabled them to survive the last one hundred fifty years. The revitalization process that led the Muwekma to reorganize themselves in the contemporary era was, in fact, the precondition for uncovering the history discussed here, a history unknown to the general public, and long undocumented among Muwekma families themselves.
The Contemporary Period (1964–Present)

Three converging historical processes underlie the forces that contributed to and shaped the resurgence of the Muwekma Ohlone families. First, an ever-present and undeniable sense of Indian identity and collective realization continued into the 1960s among the families. Although the Muwekma Ohlone have not possessed a common land-base for almost eighty years, the various interrelated families who lived all over central California kept in contact with each other, especially on the occasion of births, marriages, and deaths of relatives and loved ones. Visits and social gatherings among different lineages were also part of the process of social cohesion.

Against the backdrop of ongoing familial social activities, the political machinations associated with the California Indian Claims Settlement of 1964 were also taking place. The Muwekma families had participated in the settlement by going to Sacramento to meet with Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) personnel. According to anthropologist Omer Stewart, even after the settlement “it required over four years, until September 21, 1968, for Congress to enact the legislation, Public Law 90-507 (82 Stat. 860) to authorize the Secretary of the Interior to spend up to $325,000 to prepare a list of Indians of California to share in the award.”

The Indian Claims Commission Act of 1946 indemnified the descendants of California Indians who had signed eighteen treaties with the United States, treaties that had never been ratified by Congress, but which had nevertheless facilitated the loss of the majority of Indian lands in the state. The Ohlone Indians of the greater Bay Area, like many other native California tribes, had lost their aboriginal lands, as well as small settlements called rancherias, during Spanish, Mexican, and early American settlement, although their tribal status as Ohlone Indians was formally documented by the Department of Interior, Bureau of Indian Affairs, as early as 1913 as the Verona Band in Alameda County on the bureau’s “Indian Map of California,” and later by the special application for enrollment carried out by the Department

This photograph of Mission San Jose, by Carleton Watkins, was taken in the 1850s, before the mission was severely damaged in the earthquake of 1868. CHS/Ticor Collection, University of Southern California.
of the Interior’s Office of Indian Affairs between 1928 and 1933. The Muwekma Ohlone’s tribal status was never formally terminated by any act of Congress, as it had been for many other tribes throughout the United States during the 1950s. It seems, instead, that the Ohlone people of the San Francisco Bay Area were somehow lost in a bureaucratic paper shuffle in Washington, D.C., and were assumed to have formally ceded their lands and rancherías, which, in fact, the Muwekma had not actually done.

Notwithstanding such random neglect and disregard of their existence, the Muwekma families did not leave the Bay Area, their ancestral homeland, nor did they forget their identity. Ohlone men often worked as ranch hands, vaqueros, truck drivers, and employees of local businesses, such as the Spring Valley Water Company and Wells Fargo and Company. The women maintained the family households, grew vegetable gardens, kept chickens and other livestock, and harvested native plants as food and medicines. "We always knew; our mother told us," recalled Julia Lopez, council member of the Muwekma tribe. "She used to say to us ‘you are Ohlone Indians.’" 13 Both Julia and her brother Manuel drove their mother Dolores back and forth between San Jose and Sacramento, to make sure all of the BIA paperwork was in order for the Sanchez families during the Indian Claims Commission hearings in the 1950s.

When the final settlement of the Claims Act came through, and the Muwekma families awaited receipt of the checks from the government, discussion ensued among the families about tribal status. "We wondered why we were receiving this money," said Rosemary Cambra, current chairwoman of the Muwekma tribe, "when we had never formally lost the land, and had always been recognized as a tribe in the past. . . we began thinking about ourselves, about the history." 14 The rhythm of life, of births, marriages, and funerals, also created occasions and opportunities for the descendants to look toward the future.

The second historical process contributing to the revitalization of the Muwekma families was indirectly tied to the thrust of socio-political changes affecting the whole of American society in the mid-to-late-1960s. By 1964, the civil rights movement had gained high visibility, with a message of ethnic pride and militance meaningful for all minorities and oppressed peoples living in the United States. Scenes from the war in Vietnam illuminated American living rooms in a way never before experienced. Several young Muwekma men, including Thomas "Woody" Alvarez and Robert Martinez, enlisted in the armed forces to serve this country. Alcatraz federal prison closed, a prelude to important events for Native Americans in the Bay Area. The Indian claims settlement was finalized, and pan-Indian groups organized and established the American Indian Historical Society. Rupert Costo, the chairman of the Cahuilla Indians of southern California, helped to organize and lead this fledgling society. In 1964, the historical society decided to "concentrate its efforts at protecting Indian burial sites, as well as demanding reform in textbooks dealing with Indians." 15 The society managed to create a high-profile publication series, The Indian Historian, which utilized the talents of professional anthropologists and historians and published many important and innovative articles about Native American societies. At this time, Philip Galvan, an Ohlone descendant from Mission San Jose, joined the editorial board at The Indian Historian. In 1968, the magazine published an article concerning the Ohlones of the Bay Area written by Galvan’s son, Michael Galvan. 16

One of the most important burial sites that the American Indian Historical Society decided to work to "protect" was the neglected and vandalized Ohlone Indian cemetery, near the old Mission San Jose, in the present-day east bay city of Fremont. The society sought out and received title to the cemetery from the Catholic church at the mission, where some 4,000 Ohlone ancestors had been buried since the establishment of Mission San Jose in 1797. In 1971, the title to the cemetery was transferred to a newly created non-profit entity called the Ohlone Indian Tribe, Inc., with hopes that its ownership and management would help strengthen Ohlone identity. 17

The third process contributing to Muwekma revitalization stemmed from the explosive urban expansion on previously undeveloped and open agricultural, grazing, and wilderness lands in the Bay Area. This development would ultimately adversely affect ancestral Ohlone cemetery and village sites. The rapidity of events within this larger arena intensified the internal processes of organization among the Ohlone descendants. As urban expansion throughout the Bay Area accelerated, more and more ancestral cemetery and village sites were discovered and disturbed, many of them with elaborate mortuary complexes containing