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Tribal Archaeology as Ownership of the Ancestral Past

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By Fanya Becks

Through my doctoral research at Stanford University I have had the honor of working closely with tribal leadership and membership from the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe of the San Francisco Bay Area (referred to hereafter as the “Muwekma Tribe”).

I began with the intention of conducting a community-based research project with the tribe, which has resulted in analyzing the macrobotanical remains from the *Yukisma* Cemetery Site (CA-SCL-38) excavated by the Muwekma Tribe from 1993-94. My initial interest in interacting with the tribal community has also allowed me to have the opportunity to assist in some of Muwekma’s tribal archaeology.

The Muwekma Tribe has emphasized the importance of studying and learning from the remains of their ancestors and associated grave goods, as well as the protection of their ancestral heritage cemetery and village sites against construction, destruction, and academic interests (see Galvan 1968; Cambra et al. 1996).

The current membership of the Muwekma Tribe consists of American Indian descendants from Mission San Jose, Mission Santa Clara, and Mission Dolores, most of whom can trace ancestry to specific Native villages and districts through genealogical research extending back to European contact and the beginning of the Spanish colonial period. While there have been intermarriages between different languages speakers who were brought into the missions, these descendants’ identify East Bay Chocheño Ohlone speakers as their ancestors. After Mexican independence and mission secularization in the 1830s, indigenous communities aggregated around Pleasanton/Sunol creating Native communities called Alisal (near Pleasanton) and El Molino located in Niles, as well as other rancherias within Alameda County, California.[i] Politically, the United States Federal Government recognized the “Verona Band of Alameda County,” in 1906, called Verona because Phoebe Apperson Hearst had purchased the Alisal Rancheria in the 1880s where the community lived, and had the Verona railroad station built close by. However, members of the Alameda-based Muwekma community never referred to themselves as the “Verona Band.” Instead they referred to themselves primarily as “Mission San Jose Indians,” or various spellings of the word “Ohlone.”[ii]

As with many California Indian Tribes, the Verona Band was classified as a landless Indian Tribe because reservation lands were not granted through any of the 1851-52 treaties in California, as in other states. Instead, rancherias and reservations were created through legislative and executive action. On June 23, 1927, the Verona Band of Alameda County, along with 135 other Californian Indian

communities[iii] were dropped from the list of Tribes awaiting lands to be purchased from Congressional allocations by the Sacramento Bureau Superintendent, Lafayette A. Dorrington, who himself was later under investigation for dereliction of duty. The Verona Band, like the other California Indian tribes neglected in this way, were never terminated by an act of Congress, and therefore should not be referred to as Unrecognized Tribes. Although the Muwekma Tribe is not currently on the list of Federally Recognized Indian Tribes and eligible to receive services from the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs[iv], the tribe was previously and unambiguously recognized as the direct descendant of the recognized Verona Band of Alameda County in 1996.[v]

Because of the situation of federal neglect, the issue of burial protection in the San Francisco Bay Area has been both complex and controversial. In California, when Native American ancestral remains are discovered on private land, the California Public Resources Code[vi] requires that contractors notify the Coroner's Office who then contact the Native American Heritage Commission (NAHC) to identify individuals and representatives of tribal groups listed as the Most Likely Descendant (MLD) in counties where a Federally Recognized Tribe is not present. This means that despite the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe's status having previously and unambiguously been recognized, they—a tribe consisting of more than 550 members—are given the same singular representation as other individuals on the list of most likely descendants. In short, the tribal members currently count as one most likely descendant who has the same chance of being notified as other individuals.

Muwekma Archaeology

In the mid-1980s, the Muwekma Tribe incorporated a Cultural Resource Management (CRM) firm called Ohlone Families Consulting Services (OFCS). Through OFCS tribal members, including elders, began training and participation in monitoring, excavations and osteological lab analysis of their ancestral dead. Since then, tribal membership and leadership have worked tirelessly to produce archaeological site reports co-authored between tribal members and archaeological consultants, so that what is known about their ancestors and heritage is available to the public, as well as to the tribal membership. There is a general understanding within the community that for this research to be ethical and respectful, it needs to be conducted in concert with the tribe. This has meant that when the Muwekma Tribe is contacted by the Native American Heritage commission, they have only worked with archaeologists who respect the tribe's rights and perspectives in regard to their ancestral heritage sites.

It has been impossible to enforce tribal control over all sites within their ancestral territory because the NAHC does notify other MLDs on the list. Despite the difficulties of their continued legal struggle, the Muwekma Tribe has conducted archaeological research in collaboration with San Jose State University, Stanford University, California State University Chico, and Washington State University, among others.

Archaeology is used as one tool to teach tribal members about their heritage including their connection to the landscape and the ancestors. OFCS has produced archaeological site reports to reclaim ancestral heritage sites, naming them in the East Bay Chocheño language (by the Muwekma Tribe's Language Committee), and connecting ancestral villages and districts recorded by the Spanish with pre-Colonial villages and cemeteries, and with the current tribal membership in the co-authored ethnohistory chapters.

In 2014, Muwekma tribal members and leadership continued their stewardship of their heritage sites, by excavating ancestral remains of ancestors disturbed through construction, and participating in the archaeological analyses of these remains and associated funerary items. Young tribal members have been encouraged to gain archaeological experience through summer jobs working on non-burial and burial associated materials to gain both a better understanding of archaeology as an intellectual pursuit, and practical experience with careful excavation.

Once an ancestor has been disturbed, the Muwekma Tribe works to learn as much as possible about each individual regardless of lack of budget. One example was the excavation and reburial of over 243 individuals from the *Yukisma* Cemetery Site (CA-SCL-38) in Milpitas. Before reburial, ribs were selected so that DNA and isotopic analyses could be conducted. These analyses have resulted not only in detailed information about the genetic populations on site and their relationship to other ancestral burial populations, but also yielded information about ancient diets and infant weaning practices as well.

Writing History with Archaeological Science

A major value of tribally-controlled excavations has been the ability to insist that archaeologists and graduate students work within the parameters set by the tribe. This means ensuring a collaborative research process that considers the interests of tribal members, such as a focus on both broader scale cultural processes and information about the lives of specific ancestors. Whenever possible, those remains initially disturbed through construction are diligently analyzed to contribute to tribal knowledge about their history within the San Francisco Bay Area. As a result, individuals conducting tribal archaeology are held responsible for interpreting what can confidently as well as what can possibly be said about their ancestral heritage. Furthermore, because the tribally-based archaeological site reports are considered the intellectual property of the Muwekma Tribe, this reaffirms their ownership of and their responsibility to protect ancestral remains within their ancestral territory.

DNA research within the Tribe

In 2008 the Muwekma Tribal council sponsored two tribally enrolled college students from UCSC and SJSU for training in ancient DNA extraction and amplification at Washington State University. This work was seen as a means to understand interactions between different people across the site, as well as long distance relationships illustrated by the amount, and timing of genetic diversity within the site. Furthermore, tribal members have had their mitochondrial DNA identified in order to distinguish theirs from the ancestral burials. Through analyses of mitochondrial DNA researchers have been able to posit relatively stable matrilineal lines within the *Yukisma* Cemetery from 1,500 to 2,000 years ago and compare those results to other Bay Area sites that the Tribe has controlled (Leventhal et al. 2010). This is evidence that could potentially project some aspects of ethnographically recorded social organization into the deep past because it allows for an understanding of population interactions (as measured through different types of artifacts from different places) and their relationships to genetically related peoples across different sites. This brings the understanding of ancestors, and ancestral heritage sites closer to understanding interactions across lineages within the deep past. The Muwekma Tribe's forward thinking perspective toward archaeology has allowed for their integration of new technology as another tool for maintaining, and protecting relationships between the people and their ancestors.

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Photo: Tribal member Eric Lenci, looking at obsidian hydration slides with SJSU graduate student John Schlagheck in 2011. (Photo: A Leventhal).

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[i] History of Washington Township.

[ii] This description is based upon documents from the 1928 California Indian Jurisdictional Act enrollment applications

[iii] Field 2003.

[iv] Tribal Entities List 2014, *Federal Register* 79:19 (29 January, 2014).

[v] For more information see Field et al. 2013

[vi] See Native American Heritage Commission for more details