

Native American Resilience: The Tachi Yokut Tribe and the Preservation of Tribal History and Tradition

By
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Introduction

In North America, there are 566 federally recognized American Indian and Alaskan Native Tribes and Villages.¹ The state of California has more tribes than any other state in the nation with 109 tribes.² Native American history, tradition, and culture are unique and have become well-known around the world. Many of these cultures, languages, and traditions have been documented and recorded in museums and universities. These valuable sources of information have survived due to the efforts of historians, anthropologists, and indigenous people, who refused to let them be forgotten. Even though there have been many efforts to preserve these cultures, there is still a concern over the loss of traditional customs within tribal communities.

Much of this history has lived only with tribal elders and has yet to be documented. With reservations growing and developing, tribal youth are seeking to know more about who they are and the traditions of their people. In this paper, I examine the history and traditions of the Tachi Yokut tribe and analyze the overall state of indigenous culture as it relates to themes of erasure, stereotypes, and modern day tribal perspective. Moreover, I critically reflect on the loss of Native American history, and subsequently, the need to preserve generational knowledge.

Tribes in California



Figure 1. Native American Tribes in California.
Source: California Indian Library Collections.

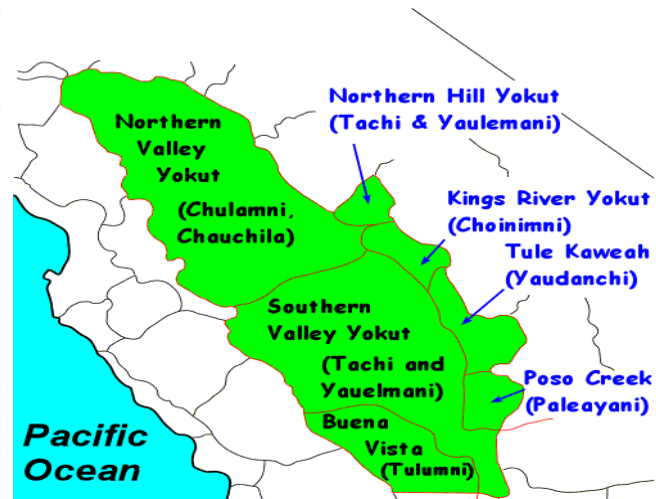


Figure 2. Division of Yokut Tribes in California.
Source: BSAHighAdventure.org

¹ U.S. Department of the Interior Indian Affairs, "Frequently Asked Questions," (Accessed November 13, 2016), <https://www.bia.gov/frequently-asked-questions>.

² California Courts, "California Tribal Communities," (Accessed November 13, 2016), <http://www.courts.ca.gov/3066.htm>.

The maps above display the location of the Native American Tribes in California. Figure 1, on the top left, presents all the tribes in the state of California. This allows readers to get a sense of the general area where each tribe resides. Furthermore, this demonstrates how far tribes are from one another and where they are located. The tribes that are shown on this map are officially recognized. However, there are many more tribes that are not on this map because the federal government has yet to officially recognize them. Figure 2, located on the top right, shows the Yokut tribes in California and divides them into sections. The top sections are the Northern Valley Yokut tribes which consists of Chulamni, Chouchila, Tachi, Youleman, and the lower section is the southern Yokut tribes which consist of Tachi, Youeiman, Tulumni, Paleayani, Yaudanchi, Choinimni.

Background on the Tachi Yokut Tribe

The Yokut is an ethnic group of multiple tribes of Native Americans primarily from the San Joaquin Valley. One of the more well-known tribes is the Tachi Yokut Indians. The Tachi people originated around the Central Valley's foothills and migrated with alongside the change of seasons. When miners and farmers settled in the area, the tribe was forcibly relocated to Coalinga, in modern-day Fresno County. Moreover, the tribe was forcibly removed for a second time when oil was discovered near Coalinga, and they marched back to a desolate spot in the Central Valley near the present location of the reservation. In 1921, the U.S government established a reservation for this tribe known as the Santa Rosa Rancheria. However, it was not until 1934 that the Santa Rosa Rancheria was officially established on about 40 acres of desolate farmland in Lemoore, California.

Due to notions of Manifest Destiny and the subsequent influx of settlers, the Tachi Yokut tribe, like many other tribes, suffered decline. Between 1850 and 1900, the Tachi Yokut underwent a significant decline in population due to relocation and diseases, which left them with only 7% of their original population. Kroeber estimated the population of the Yokut in 1910 as 600 individuals. American historian Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz explains that "with the onset of colonialism in North America, control of the land was wrenched away from the Indigenous Peoples."³ Settlers believed that they were entitled to the land, even though it was occupied by Natives. They wanted the land to reap its benefits and plunder the natural resources. This left the forty individuals who lived on the reservation below the poverty level; many lived in Tule huts, tin houses, old cars, or chicken coops. The average education level on the reservation was of a third-grade level, and field labor was the primary source of income. By the end of the 19th century, the Tachi Yokut Tribe was split across the central and southern parts of California.⁴

The Citizenship Act of 1924 gave all members of Indians tribes' American Citizenship rights in a manner which allowed them to retain their tribal citizenship, but it made little difference in the way they were treated by the government.⁵ As part of their integration into "American" society, the federal government sent Native children to government schools where Native religion was banned, and the teaching of the language and culture was forbidden.⁶ As UCLA Law Professor Carole Goldberg highlights,

³ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States* (New York: Beacon Press, 2014), 45.

⁴ Tachi Yokut Tribe, "Our History," (Accessed November 15, 2016), <https://www.tachi-yokut-nsn.gov/about-tachi-yokut-tribe/our-history/>.

⁵ Tachi Yokut Tribe.

⁶ Tachi Yokut Tribe.

California has a tragic history of hostility toward its Native Peoples, including unrestrained, vigilante groups that hunted Native men, women and children like game animals during the first decades of statehood killing thousands. The state's first governor, John McDougal, famously declared, 'A war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian races become extinct.'⁷

This Act in itself did not stop the traditions from being practiced, but it did impact the retainment of these traditions. The Tachi did not want to lose who they were and tribal elders became the sources for what these traditions were and how they were to be passed down.

Tribal Perspective

Lawona Ichō Jasso was a Tachi tribal elder who taught the Tachi language on the reservation for years and was one of the few fluent speakers of the language within the tribe. I had the opportunity to interview Jasso and she explained why holding on to her culture and teaching it was important to her. She stated,

I am a proud Tachi Yokut Native American Indian. My Native American name is Oswick. I have taken part in many Tachi Yokut Native American traditions and speak my language. My family has raised me to learn from the elders and hold on to our ways, to speak to elders with the utmost respect and good understanding of what they said to me. My goal is to teach our ways, traditions, language, and basketry especially to my people. I hope one day my people will remember me for the good things that came from me. That they will carry out our traditions proudly, but with heart.⁸

Jasso explained that the Rancheria during her time was a very strong land. Many tribal elders, including Jasso, described this land as full of many resources, provided by Tulare Lake.⁹ Tulare Lake was a large body of water located by the south-east side of Lemoore. The area of this lake was about 687 sq. miles (1,780 km²)¹⁰ and had provided many resources for the tribes that surrounded it. The Tachi people were a river people who utilized the resources that the lake provided and established a lifestyle based upon them. The lake is now dried up and gone but acknowledging its history and context within the tribe allows for further examinations of their traditions.

This large body of water provided many resources, from food to everyday materials. This lake, as Jasso mentioned, was a major part of the Native's lives. When asked about the tribe, Jasso expressed how proud and resourceful the indigenous people were. One example of this resourcefulness was a big attribute of the lake: the tule reeds that grew in the water. Tule was used for long houses, boats, mats, and baskets to catch fish. Tule and the lake were incredibly important to the tribe, and only one aspect of the tribe's utilization and integration with the natural environment. The tribe hunted for food and animal fur, which was used for clothing, blankets, and to block doorways as a form of insulation. The bones of the animals were used for sewing, games, and tools. Jasso also stated, "Mother earth gave us fish, duck, frog, catfish, clam, turtle, mustard

⁷ Tachi Yokut Tribe, "A Short History of California Indians," (Accessed November 15, 2016), <https://www.tachi-yokut-nsn.gov/about-tachi-yokut-tribe/historical-documents/>.

⁸ Lawona Ichō Jasso, *Oral Interview*, November 2016.

⁹ Jasso, *Oral Interview*.

¹⁰ "Tulare Lake" *Wikipedia*, (Accessed November 29, 2016) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tulare_Lake.

green, blackberries, elderberries cottonwood for shade and salt grass as far as the eye can see.”¹¹ Life for the Yokut people was based around this lake and the abundance of resources and opportunities that it provided.

As the interview was drawn to a close, Jasso explained the importance of the continuing of traditions and fostering education. She offered me a glimpse into her life with this statement,

To what that I do remember, there were only very few houses, a school and a Catholic church... The kids back then were told to respect your elders. Your elders were everything to you. They would tell you stories about what had happened long ago. Most of the elders would tell us kids to continue to go to school so you could have a better life... My mother and father have shown me how to talk the language and make crafts and this has motivated me to teach my grandkids and their generation, so this won't be lost with time... I hope that I can help to the fullest by teaching them what I had learned from my elders.¹²

Native Americans were resilient and worked to retain the traditions that made them who they were. Tachi people fought hard and lost a lot to keep these traditions alive.

Basketry and Traditions

Within the tribe, each person played a unique role. Generally, the men had the responsibility of hunting, fishing, and performing ceremonial blessings and songs. The women gathered food, cooked, pounded acorns, and created basketry. To effectively carry out these tasks, both men and women had to refine and develop task-specific skills. For example, cleaning, leaching and cooking acorns are skills which were required to be taught. The process of learning these skills is also a tradition that lends itself for examination, as they were handed down from elders and family. I examine the tradition of basketry, something that the Tachi tribe is especially known for.

Basketry does not simply entail weaving a basket but includes learning the entire process of prayers and offerings, gathering materials, and cleaning materials along with weaving skills. There are very important aspects of weaving that a weaver needs to be aware of, such as the time of the year that certain materials are gathered and the importance of each step in the process. Common materials that are utilized include: white roots, deer grass, red bud and sour berry sticks. Each of the materials collected play a part in the final product. White root is used as the weaver, while deer grass serves as the filler. Red bud is used as a design weaver to create beautiful patterns associated with baskets. Acquiring these materials is a process and tradition in itself. As individuals gather materials, they offer a blessing and only take what is necessary. The materials also require further preparation prior to being utilized, for example, white root is dug up, cleaned, split, and shaved down to weave. Red bud is picked after the first frost, then split, cleaned, and thinned down with obsidian. Deer grass was cleaned with a piece of deer leather in order to not get slivers in the hand. The preparation process is extensive but is rife with traditions and relevance. It serves as a form of reverence not only to the natural environment, but also for the ancestors who passed on these skills.

¹¹ Jasso, *Oral Interview*.

¹² Jasso, *Oral Interview*.

In the past, basketry was a skill which was solely taught from women to women. After young girls completed their first basket, it would be given away. This is a form of blessing the weaver in a manner so that her hands would be able to make more baskets. Given that baskets were ubiquitous in the tribe and used for gathering, storing, fishing, cooking and baby cradles, this initial blessing has significance not only for the young women, but also the future of the tribe. Below are some pictures of finished baskets woven by Jasso. She came from a long line of basket weavers.



Figure 3. Lawona Icho Jasso holding one of her completed baskets. Source: Cecilia Moreno.



Figure 3A. A close-up of Jasso's basket highlighting the intricate details that go into basketry. Source: Cecilia Moreno.

Her grandmother Maggie Icho is a very her well-known weaver. Jasso's grandmother served as a source of inspiration for her to weave and continue to teach and pass on these traditions to the new generations. The basket pictured above took her about six months to gather and clean the materials, and three and half years to complete. This was the first larger basket that she had made and wanted to give to her dad, but sadly he had passed away before she finished. Because of this she decided to hold onto her basket until one of grandkids is of age.



Figure 4. Maggie Icho adding shape to a basket. Source: Cecilia Moreno.



Figure 4A. Maggie Icho weaving a basket. Source: Cecilia Moreno.

The pictures above are of famed weaver Maggie Icho. She is very well known for her basket work and has had a great impact on many native weavers due to the quality of her baskets. In Figure 4, she is using a bone awl to add in the grass and make a hole in between and weave in the white root to tie it together; this helps give the basket its shape. The design on her basket represent ants in a line. Because of her status as a weaver, the baskets that she has woven are a treasure and very hard to find. Maggie Icho's baskets have been preserved and showcased by historical institutions. Many of them can be found in museums all over the United States and are valued not only monetarily, but for the appreciation of the attention to detail each basket has and the amount of skill that they present.

Basketry, while popularly appreciated, is only one of the many major aspects of Native Americans' lives. However, its history is rarely outlined. The reason I took time to explain so much about the subject is because for a period of time, there were hardly any weavers left within the tribe. The traditions and rituals I outlined were at risk of not being passed on. The possibility of only seeing basketry from behind a glass in a museum could have been a reality, which is the unfortunate case for many tribes in the nation. In an effort to prevent this, organizations and cultural collectives have been formed. For example, The California Indigenous Basket Weavers Association or GoNative projects bring weavers together and are open to the public so that these skills and traditions do not fade from collective memory.

Conclusion

The popular recollection to the term "Native American" is often stereotypes. For example, in *The Winter We Danced*, some accounts say that "Native Americans get free housing, don't pay taxes, are lazy and... everything that happens to them is their own fault."¹³ However, systematic oppression and cultural erasure have contributed to this narrative. Native Americans have lived through seeing a genocide of their people, as well as the institutional mistreatment. These factors and their side effects, such as the abuse of alcohol as a coping mechanism is an example of Native resilience and struggle that many people do not fully understand. It took a significant and sustained effort from Native American individuals to collectively thrive once more.

Part of this ongoing process is to hold onto traditions. This serves a dual purpose in that it preserves Native history, and also functions as a source of inspiration and strength in the modern day. Language, basketry, hunting techniques, are a few examples of traditions that are, and continue to be, incredibly significant for many tribes. Not only have Native people been resilient, these traditions have also survived with us by being shared within tribal communities. These aspects of Native American life live within the elders, which is why in any tribe, an elder is so valuable. Unfortunately, many tribes have lost their elders who possessed such knowledge, and there are tribes who have had to rebuild their language, traditions, and culture from almost nothing.

The speaker I interviewed was my grandmother, Lawona Icho Jasso, who taught me so much of what happened during her life. She was my history book, but sadly she has passed away. It is imperative for the culture to not end with the elders that had experienced such hardships, and for the new generations to quickly learn and preserve these traditions. This will help ensure that the legacy of their tribe may continue into the future. My grandmother preserved her culture in her own way by meeting with tribal elders, so she could learn her language and sing their traditional songs. After hearing her experiences and seeing how she embraced her culture, it made me want to work harder to preserve this little piece of history for future generations. Currently, there is a new age of Native American researchers who are trying to save and preserve traditions and history.

¹³ The Kino-nda-niimi Collective, *The Winter We Danced* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Publishing, 2014) 131.

Along with my sister, Delia Moreno who assisted me in this research, I advocate alongside this diverse new generation of scholars that advocates against indigenous erasure of rich Native American traditions from our collective historical memory.

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