Understanding the Composition of Costanoan Indians

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The Bureau of Indian Affairs’ Response to the Congressional Act of May 18, 1928

From 1928 to 1933, over 17,000 California Indians registered with the Bureau of Indians Affairs (BIA) and identified themselves as benefactors of the land settlement claim against the Government of the United States for California. They did so to open up their claim for reservation lands promised but never delivered to the California Indians as agreed upon in the 18 non-ratified treaties of 1851-1852. The BIA has claimed that this registration was not an enrollment of tribes but rather that it was simply a census of individuals and families who qualified to participate in this settlement. The term "roll number" was applied using the BIA’s method of keeping track of these individuals and family members. Each applicant was considered, nonetheless, an "enrollee" with the BIA. Although this seemingly tribal terminology was applied, this list was not representative of any kind of tribal enrollment.

Years later, there was a legal determination as to what tribe an individual belonged. During a snag in the claims hearing in 1955, the BIA and the Justice Department relied on the input of certain anthropologists (e.g. Alfred L. Kroeber and others) who argued and demonstrated that California Indians were "identifiable land-holding groups." Earlier, in 1925, Kroeber contended that the Esselen Indians were extinct for all intents and purposes. Therefore, almost every "enrollee," of Esselen descent was categorized as Costanoan. This same classification was applied to other Indian descendants who are now enrolled in the Amah-Mutsun and Muwekma Ohlone tribes. These anthropologists determined that the geographical area of the Costanoan people stretched all the way from north of San Francisco, down through and including Santa Clara, Alameda, San Benito, and Monterey counties, to the southern reaches of the Salinas Valley, including Soledad, Arroyo Seco, the Santa Lucia Mountain Range, and the Big Sur Region including the Monterey coastline.

Since 1906, the BIA has possessed a tremendous amount of available genealogical and historical information, supplied by all Costanoan applicants, that would have facilitated the understanding of the aboriginal, geographical areas from which each of these groups or tribes descended. This information was basically ignored by the BIA especially as a result of an administrative "drop" of 135 tribal communities by a single Sacramento BIA Superintendent, Lafayette A. Dorrington. After all, the BIA’s motivation was merely to list the identifiable potential benefactors, not to create any additional tribal enrollments or to recognize any additional tribes.
Mission/Tribal Self-Identification

On the 1928 BIA applications, the Indians were asked to supply the name of their "Tribe or Band." The majority of these applicants, classified as Costanoan, supplied the name of a mission. Although it was rare, some applicants wrote in the name of a village origin. Further, the Indians were asked to supply their grandparents’ names and identify their "Tribe or Band." Again, most often, this question was answered with the name of a specific mission. These missions had a definite geographical location associated with distinct historical Costanoan tribal groups, as shown in the following list:

- Mission Dolores - San Francisco (Muwekma)
- Mission San Jose - Fremont (Muwekma)
- Mission Santa Clara – Santa Clara/San Jose (Muwekma)
- Mission Santa Cruz - Santa Cruz (Amah-Mutsun)
- Mission San Juan Bautista - San Juan Bautista (Amah-Mutsun)
- Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo - Carmel/Monterey (Esselen)
- Mission Nuestra Señora de Soledad - Soledad (Esselen)

In most of the early baptism registers of these missions, the friars recorded the aboriginal village names of their new Indian converts. Further, they often recorded the geographical location of these villages in relation to the mission itself. All of these villages were located in the immediate vicinity of influence to the geographical location of each mission. Those 1928 BIA applicants understood and respected those geographical differences.

Although the BIA applicants at that point in time knew the geographical location of their own ancestors’ origins, many did not know the actual names of their contact-period tribes. Rather, they associated themselves as Indians being attached to a given mission, i.e. "Carmeleño" was derived from the name of Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo, "Clareño" from Mission Santa Clara. One example, of many, is the application of Isabel Meadows, an Indian consultant to John Peabody Harrington in the 1930’s. She filled out one of these BIA applications on July 21, 1930. She answered the question, "...what Tribe or Band of Indians of the State of California do you belong?" with the following: "Mission Indian, Carmel Mission, Monterey County, California." Additionally, the same information was entered for the tribal association of her mother, Loreta Onesimo. This type of response was typical of many, many 1928/33 applicants. However with respect to the Muwekma Ohlone tribal ancestors, there were some notable exceptions.

Three separate, non-related, Muwekma Ohlone family heads answered this same question with the term Ohlone. On application #10298, Lucas Marine answered, "Ohlones," application #10299, Joseph Francis Aleas answered, "Olanian," and application #10300, Bell Olivares-Nichols answered, "Olanian." There were many more 1928 BIA applications filled out by Muwekma ancestors. On those other applications, that question was answered with "Mission San Jose," and/or "Alameda County."
However, it is paramount to understand who participated in filling out the answers along with the applicant. Of the eighteen 1928 BIA applications studied, belonging to Muwekma ancestors, ten were typed and eight were written out by hand. The handwriting belonged to Fred A. Baker, the agent who locally coordinated this enrollment effort and who also signed every application as the examiner. It is not reasonable to suggest that those ten applicants had typewriters. After all, it was Fred Baker who typed up hundreds of these applications. Is it reasonable to suggest that the applicants were illiterate and could not fill out these applications on their own? Out of eighteen applications, only two could not sign their name and had to put their mark on the application. However, it is possible, and probably very likely, that Mr. Baker filled in the answers according to his own knowledge without encouraging the applicant to further explain. Those applicants, who did supply the extra information of an Ohlone tribal identification, could very well have been more assertive than the rest and made sure this agent wrote it like it was.

In the years of 1911, 1915, 1917 and 1921, four Muwekma Ohlone ancestors died - the Marine sisters. They were buried in the Ohlone Cemetery along with other Ohlone ancestors. The family elders took responsibility for cleaning and maintaining the cemetery of their ancestors. In the 1960’s, this tribal cemetery was threatened by the development of plans for building a non-Catholic church on the site. Several documents exist within the Rupert Costo American Indian Special Collection held at UC Riverside, California. These documents consist of lists of tribal members, tribal member meetings, correspondence, and various memorandums pertinent to the protection of the Ohlone Cemetery. All of these documents refer to the participants as Ohlone. All of these participants are relatives of the Muwekma Ohlone tribal ancestry and membership.

For the third BIA enrollment period, beginning in 1968, California Indians were again asked to fill out applications. These applications asked the individuals to give their tribal identification along with other genealogical information. Of 14 folders studied, representing much larger families and an objective cross section of all Muwekma Ohlone ancestries, one applicant wrote in the Mission San Jose as the name of the tribe, one applicant wrote in Costanoan as the name of the tribe, and twelve wrote in Ohlone as the name of the tribe.

As the tribal genealogist for Esselen Nation and the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, Escobar has had the unique opportunity to compare those types of notes from application to application, from tribe to tribe. Also, as the Esselen Nation Librarian, she has had the unique opportunity to review hundreds of the 1928/33 BIA applications of all three Costanoan tribes as well as the 1948/55 and 1968/72 BIA files for Esselen Nation ancestry. Her findings thus far show that the use of the term Ohlone is not consistent with the history of the Esselen Nation or Amah-Mutsun Tribe. However, the use of the term Ohlone is historically consistent and specifically unique to the Muwekma people. Therefore, if any of the Costanoan tribes can legitimately claim the identity Ohlone, it is the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe.

Regardless of the tribal affiliation each applicant may have known to be their own, this opinion was influenced by the historical time frame operable at that time, i.e. family
history, labeling efforts by anthropologists, secularization and survival. Nonetheless, these applicants knew what aboriginal, geographical area to which their ancestors were attached. Based upon the results of careful mission record research, the grandparents of the descendants of the Muwekma Tribe all claimed that their Indian ancestors were aboriginal to the missions Dolores, San Jose, and Santa Clara. The grandparents of the descendants of the Amah-Mutsun Tribe all claimed that their Indian ancestors were aboriginal to the missions Santa Cruz and San Juan Bautista. The grandparents of the descendants of the Esselen Nation claimed that their Indian ancestors were aboriginal to Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo and La Nuestra Señora de Soledad. However, the BIA chose to ignore this fact and, instead, chose to classify and recognize all of these applicants as Costanoan. Additionally, some academic institutions still teach the Kroeberian theory of extinction without regard to his reversal statement issued in 1955, and also still teach that Costanoans are a single people, a single tribe, and a single language group.

**Labels**

To further confuse the issue, the term *Ohlone* was eventually applied to these same Costanoan people. *Ohlone* was decided upon as the "politically correct" terminology and means of identification. Just as it was, at one time, politically correct to call African Americans "Negroes" or "Blacks," the politically correct term was changed to "African Americans." Likewise, the Indians indigenous to the Costanoan area suffered the same process and were virtually re-labeled as *Ohlone* as an entire group, again sloughing over the fact that the Costanoan Indians were not a single tribe or people.

Robert F. Heizer explained this phenomenon:

"In recent years the term ‘Ohlone’ has gained some currency as an alternative name for Costanoan. The label Ohlone does not seem preferable to the long-established one of Costanoan. A small tribelet whose designation was variously spelled Alchone, Olchone, Oljon, Ol-hon, and which was located along the ocean coast about half way between San Francisco and Santa Cruz provided 18 converts to the Mission Dolores between 1786 and 1790 (C.H. Merriam, Village Names in Twelve California Mission Records, University of California Archaeological Survey, Report #74, 1968, p. 19). This tribelet, apparently a small and unimportant one, **has been thus selected arbitrarily to designate a much larger series of ethnic groups**, each of which was also named. Even the term Ohlone is a misspelling, perhaps copied from A.S. Taylor’s mistaken rendering in the *California Farmer* of May 31, 1861." (Emphasis is author’s)

Careful objective research demonstrates how easily labels can be applied without a complete understanding of all the facts. For example, Isabel Meadows is known, in the academic world, as a "Rumsen" informant. In the book, *The Papers of John Peabody Harrington in the Smithsonian Institution 1907-1957*, Vol. 2, edited by Elaine L. Mills, on page II, xxxvi, Isabel is shown in a photograph with Harrington. The caption read,
"Harrington and his long-time Rumsen informant, Isabelle Meadows..." Yet, when she was asked where the Rumsen lived, her answer revealed a long ignored truth:

"Isabelle, April 1935: Another kind of Indians here was rum.cen. These and the guatcarones and eslenes were the Indians here. The white (gente de razon) [people of reason] were called monc. Has no idea where the rum.cen lived. Very important and carefully heard. No Rumsien at all. Isabelle, March 23, 1932 has no idea where the rumcenakay lived." (John Peabody Harrington Notes, Reel 72, page 20B. [Emphasis is author’s])

In this response, if she truly considered herself Rumsen, why did she not indicate her own home, or that of her ancestry, as a Rumsen dwelling place? Isabelle Meadows was born in 1846, long after the assimilation of nearby villages. She referred to her people and her language as "Carmeleño" rather than Rumsen or Runsien, the designation of previous anthropologists.

An additional examination of her words, however, offers even more clarity. Isabel Meadows offered further tribal identification of her own lineage:

"Lupecina was Is's mother's mother. She was from Buena Vista (over towards the Sugar Factory) Tomas Cornelio was her husband. They brought from Buena Vista at the same time, estaban. Buena Vista, via Buena Esperansa & Guadalupe are places near together, beyond the sugar factory. It was rancho of Juan Malarin muy antes. Juan Malarin's brother was Moriano Malarin. David Espens (un carm.) later had that ranch. The people from Buena Vista were of an indiada that were called eselenes. But in idioma eslen. 13 Mar 1932 (John Peabody Harrington Notes, Reel 72, page 83B. [Lupecina was actually Isabel's mother's grandmother; Emphasis is author’s.])

Again, according to Isabel herself, she was very clear about how the name Esselen was applied:

"The Buena Vista Indians, these Esselenes, would go to the mouth of the Salinas River to get clams and would camp there a week, having Indian dances. The name is eslen, the plural is es lenakay, and is a tribe name not a place name." (JPH Reel 37, page 667 [Emphasis is author’s.])

Isabel Meadows left no doubt. Here are further notes from Harrington:

"Isabelle Meadows Oct. 1934: Jacinta Gonzales... would say ’I am eslén, and a southerner (sureno) (because her father was from the South, he was called Sebastian, and her mother was eslén, from here, from Buena Vista... )" (JPH Reel 37, page 667 [Emphasis is author’s])

Depending on the point of view or agenda of the labeler as well as the historical time reference, California Indians indigenous to the designated "Costanoan" territory have
historically been bestowed with many names. Indians indigenous to Monterey County were called Achastiens, Runsiennes, Esselenes, Guacharonnes, Ecclemachs, Sureños, Calenda Rucs and Carmeleños among others. Indians indigenous to San Benito County were called Mutsun, Amah, and Pacines among others. Indians indigenous to Santa Clara and Alameda Counties were called Nepeño, Chocheños, Lisyan, Tamien-e, and Clareños among many others as well.

**Conclusion**

In addressing the present-day federal recognition process, these Costanoan tribes have been faced with the task of clearing up the confusion. Therefore, as a means of clearly identifying themselves, three separate major tribes, with the label of Costanoan peoples, have chosen names that clearly distinguish themselves from each other as distinct historical tribal and cultural groups within this group. And, because of the fact that there exists a history of institutionalized confusion, these tribes chose names that incorporate the legal terminology historically applied to them as well – Ohlone/Costanoan-Esselen Nation, Amah-Mutsun Costanoan/Ohlone Tribe, and Muwekma Costanoan/Ohlone Tribe.

In the end, it does not matter most what labels have been used. Neither does it matter most how others may attempt to divide, sub-divide, or congeal the Costanoan Indians with their categorizations and classifications. These tribal people know they are the descendants of those Indians who held their respective lands and life ways long before the appearance of the first European. They know they are the descendants of those Indian people, who were affected by the missionization process. They know who they are and who they always will be as aboriginal people.

As required by the criteria of the federal recognition process, each petitioning tribe must demonstrate that they are a distinct group of Indian people. This has been done within the larger so-called "Costanoan" classification. In this case, there are three distinct groups of Indian people, three major tribes historically distinct from each other – The Muwekma Ohlone Tribe to the north, the Amah-Mutsun Tribe of the central area, and to the south, the tribe of Esselen Nation.

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