Control of Ancestral Remains

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Recently the media has widely publicized what has been construed as a very controversial issue: the reburial of Native American ancestral remains currently held within the vaults and shelves of museums and other curatorial facilities. The recent decision by the Stanford University administration to consider a request made on behalf of documented Costanoan/Ohio family members to have approximately 550 ancestral human remains reviewed for scientific merit (future research potential), proper curation and possible reburial, has sparked a storm of accusations, misinformation, and controversy in the scientific and Native American communities.

First of all it is not our intention to impede scientific inquiry relating to our heritage and ancestral remains. We are, however, concerned that the orientation of archaeological research, specifically relating to the Costanoan/Ohio Territory, has been and is currently much undernourished. Many of our family members have reviewed the extant and generally inaccessible literature about our people (biological, prehistorical, and cultural) from the archaeological and historical records. We have determined that for the most part the archaeological community has resigned itself to removing us as living descendants from our ancestral past or what they call "the Archaeological Record." The history of anthropological thought and the development of regional models for prehistoric California is most remarkable when one views it with a native eye. We find ourselves looking at our rich ancestral past through the eyes and interpretive minds of an alien world view. Many archaeologists for purposes of continuity and from the way they were so-

cialized within the discipline of anthropology, find it useful to pigeonhole our ancestral past into fictitious phases, facies, horizons, or other clever and catchy nomenclature. Seldom do they recognize that the human remains, along with the associated assemblage of ceremonial regalia, represent our ancestral past. What archaeologists tend to call "collections, materials or archaeological residues," we refer to as "our ancestral remains."

The history of anthropological and archaeological inquiry around the Bay Area and California was inspired by Dr. Kroeber at UC Berkeley at the turn of the century. Dr. Kroeber, in conjunction with his colleagues, attempted to "save" the remnant memory, culture, language, songs, and other working knowledge of their respective societies from the elders of various tribal groups before they died. Recognition of their efforts must be acknowledged even though they were somewhat purist in their world view. While some cultural anthropologists were busy interviewing the elders of the tribes, another group took an interest in the large shell mounds that dotted the San Francisco Bay shore. Interestingly, these anthropologists never tried to explain, based upon discussions with late 19th- and early 20th-century knowledgeable tribal people, how the mounds developed and specifically why so many burials were contained...
Partly excavated shellmound at Coyote Hills Regional Park, Fremont. Photo courtesy of East Bay Regional Park District. At the turn of the century there were 400 such mounds, all but a handful of which have been excavated or paved over.

Therein. These early studies were focused upon the antiquity of the mound based upon volumetric shell analysis. Essentially the model developed was: take how many shellfish one individual eats per year, and extrapolate it through time based upon the overall estimated volume of shell at the site. In the late 1950s and 1960s other publications concerning the Alameda Bay Shore Mounds were published — for example the report on CA-ALA-328. In this report we are introduced to a complex stratified mound containing numerous burials. The archaeologists discuss the “ceremonial complex” at this site by the identification of the presence of charm-stones, quartz crystals, red and yellow ocher, and other associated objects. What archaeologists fail to address is that these objects and “associations” are merely by-products of our ancestral “ceremonial complex,” and that we performed funeral ceremonies when our people died and mourning ceremonies thereafter. The point is that the scientific community has done very little to help bridge the gap between the living descendants who trace their lineages through the missions and their pre-contact ancestral lifeways as interpreted through archaeological processes.

As a result of the recent storm of articles concerning Stanford’s decision to consider the requests made by the concerned descendants, a newsletter has been published by a group of archaeologists called ACPAC, which essentially assails the decision made by Stanford University. Furthermore, there is an attempt within this newsletter to discredit our concerns as Native California Indian descendants, by reducing us to a negative image. They refer to us as nameless and faceless “activists.” Similar tactics were employed by the government and media against the North Vietnamese people by reducing them to faceless “enemies” and “communists.” Additionally, the ACPAC folks have determined that these few activists are bent upon destroying the collections and Indian culture by reburying ancestral remains back in the ground. We are surprised and chagrined that these supposed men of knowledge would stoop to such tactics. We don’t have a Ph.D. in anthropology. We do, however, have our documented lineages that demonstrate that we are indeed descendants of the people buried within our ancestral territory.

The anthropological community, rather than reacting in such a hostile fashion, should recognize that Native American communities change through time. Change involves some loss. We no longer know how to start a fire with sticks. But how many anthropologists know how to harness a plow horse? Does their loss of “tradition” make them less Anglo? Change also brings gain, in our case the acquisition of knowledge and power. Knowledge and power were inaccessible to us during the past scores of years. Our parents’ genera-
tion was socialized to accept a lower status in this society. Education and avenues to economic advancement were certainly not available to our people until the civil rights era. Rather than taking a position, based upon ignorance and misinformation, that is hostile to us, the scientific community should try to provide a forum for discussion in order to understand the dynamics of changing Native American communities. Have they forgotten their own basic curriculum? What do California anthropologists and archaeologists do these days? How does their work benefit the communities they are studying? How does their work benefit the greater society and upcoming generation of school children? We, Costanoan/Ohlon descendants, have seen much money spent on Bay Area pre-contact archaeology. However, we haven’t seen the benefits passed on to the greater general public or to ourselves in the form of educational curriculum, public forums, or displays. We desire that the history of our rich heritage be known! For over ten thousand years our ancestral peoples have lived and died in California. We have been involved with local institutions and archaeologists, receiving training in current processes concerning “cultural resource management.” We desire that, if there are impacts to our ancestral villages and cemeteries, and an archaeological recovery program must be formulated, then we want to be part of the decision-making process rather than being treated in the traditional “after the fact” token fashion. Furthermore, the research designs should incorporate a way to bridge the living descendants with their pre-contact past. In other words, if you are going to do archaeology, it better be good! We already know that you think we eat nuts and berries and hunted deer, but the literature is devoid of the rich culture and human qualities that were shared among us who inhabited the area of central California.

Regarding our concerns about our ancestral remains residing within the vaults at Stanford University, we want to offer the following:

1. Due to the historical nature of archaeology as a discipline within California there were no guidelines concerning the treatment of human remains as well as other curatorial standards until these past two decades.

2. When we were invited to review our ancestral remains housed at Stanford, we expressed that we would prefer that they be curated in a different and more sensitive fashion.

3. We inquired about what is the long-term short-term research and educational potential for these ancestral human remains now that Dr. Gerow has retired from Stanford.

4. We requested that an independent physical anthropologist be brought in as a consultant to assess the research and educational value of these ancestral human remains. Dr. Philip Walker from UC Santa Barbara was selected to do this assessment.

5. We requested that those human remains thought not to have any further research value for the scientific community be turned over to us for proper reburial.

6. And finally, if the assessment (of which we are awaiting the final results) does suggest that some of these ancestral remains do indeed have additional research potential prior to reburial, then we desire that the scientific community generate their research designs and propose their scope of work within a reasonable time frame. We desire as much as anybody else to know more about our ancestral lifeways and heritage. We want people to communicate their scientific proposals to us so that we can work with these scholars. We have proposed a partnership with the scientific community based upon mutual respect and sensitivity. We want those people who are most critical of our position to send us copies of their publications and communicate directly with us the scope of their concerns. We believe that there should be good research and this must be done in an atmosphere that is sensitive and respectful. Our ancestors were buried by their loved ones. They have patiently resided in the ground over the thousands of years. Even in death, they can still offer knowledge to the world around them. We feel that it is our duty to be the stewards of our ancestral people and heritage. We also believe that our rich history should be celebrated and not stereotyped. These bad feelings, accusations and corruption of the truth are a desecration of our traditions and a blemish on the face of academia and the scientific community. By creating a working partnership with the scholarly community, and by making intelligent and sensitive decisions concerning our ancestral past, we have the opportunity to enjoy our cultural revival and ensure the survival of our people well into the 21st century.

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Editors’ Note: The success of the negotiations between Stanford University and members of the Costanoan/Ohlon community regarding the return and reburial of human remains has reverberated throughout the country. The Smithsonian Institution has taken steps to allow the return of certain remains in its possession, and the Lowe Museum of Anthropology in Berkeley, after an initial display of reluctance, seems ready to alter its policies.

At a recent meeting of the World Archaeological Congress in Vermillion, South Dakota, the World Indigenous Congress recommended the adoption of the following:

1. Ensure that grave robbing and pot hunting done in the name of scientific inquiry, academic freedom, and professional development be ended immediately.

2. Those individuals, institutions, and governments responsible for the disinterment and curation of indigenous remains and grave goods bear the full cost of reburying same.

3. Advocate passage of enforceable laws which protect indigenous cemeteries, grave sites, and burial mounds.

4. Return all curated indigenous remains and associated sacred burial possessions to appropriate indigenous groups.

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