

An Overview of Ohlone Culture

By Robert Cartier

In the 16th century, (prior to the arrival of the Spaniards), over 10,000 Indians lived in the central California coastal areas between Big Sur and the Golden Gate of San Francisco Bay. This group of Indians consisted of approximately forty different tribelets ranging in size from 100–250 members, and was scattered throughout the various ecological regions of the greater Bay Area (Kroeber, 1953). They did not consider themselves to be a part of a larger tribe, as did well-known Native American groups such as the Hopi, Navaho, or Cheyenne, but instead functioned independently of one another. Each group had a separate, distinctive name and its own leader, territory, and customs. Some tribelets were affiliated with neighbors, but only through common boundaries, inter-tribal marriage, trade, and general linguistic affinities. (Margolin, 1978).

When the Spaniards and other explorers arrived, they were amazed at the variety and diversity of the tribes and languages that covered such a small area. In an attempt to classify these Indians into a large, encompassing group, they referred to the Bay Area Indians as "Costenos," meaning "coastal people." The name eventually changed to "Coastanoan" (Margolin, 1978). The Native American Indians of this area were referred to by this name for hundreds of years until descendants chose to call themselves Ohlones (origination uncertain).

Utilizing hunting and gathering technology, the Ohlone relied on the relatively substantial supply of natural plant and animal life in the local environment. With the exception of the dog, we know of no plants or animals domesticated by the Ohlone. Some plant species were, however, cultured by deliberate pruning, burning, and reseeding that encouraged the growth of selected plants for use as food, herbs, medicines, and manufacturing in their material culture.

Plants utilized by the Ohlone cover a wide range of grasses, shrubs, and tree forms, but the mainstays in the daily diet can be narrowed down to a few major examples. Acorns were probably the most important of the plant foods, with tanbark oak, black oak, valley oak, and coastal live oak supplying the acorn meal that came to be predominant in the Ohlone diet. Other plants recorded as being part of the diet included: buckeye and laurel nuts, and the seeds of dock, tarweed, chia, holly leaf cherry, and digger pine. Among the berries gathered and consumed are blackberries, elderberries, gooseberries, and madrone berries. Roots, shoots, and the bark of a number of other plants were also used as food and herbs.

Hunting, trapping, and in some cases, poisoning game were common pursuits for most of the adult males in Ohlone culture. Larger game animals that were hunted included deer, elk, bear, and antelope, with whale, sea lion, otter, and seal also being hunted on the coast. Smaller animals that were occasionally eaten included rabbits, tree and ground squirrels, rats, skunks, mice, moles, dogs, snakes, and lizards. Many species of birds were hunted or trapped; among these were geese, ducks, doves, robins, quail, and hawks. Along the major freshwater ways on the coast, fish were a regular food item. The more important fish included steelhead trout, salmon, sturgeon, and lampreys. Shellfish were

extremely important to the Ohlone. For the people who lived near Monterey and San Francisco bays, the most commonly eaten shellfish were mussels, abalone, clams, oysters, and hornshell from the tidelands.

A few animals were never eaten by some or all of the Ohlone, apparently for religious or supernatural reasons. These creatures included eagles, owls, ravens, buzzards, frogs, and toads.

We see reflected in the subsistence patterns and the food available, the development of specialized tools for food acquisition. The tools and diagnostic pathologies in the skeletal remains of Ohlones encountered in burials allude to this. Grinding implements such as mortars, pestles, metates, and manos substantiate the manner of acorn and other seed processing. Scrapers, drills, and knives fashioned from sharp stones indicate the working of skins and vegetable materials, whereas dart and arrow points were used for hunting and warfare. Anatomical patterns displayed in skeletal remains are frequently found as dental wear (i.e. extreme abrading of teeth from the sand in stone-ground food), or pathologies in the long bones caused by periodic starvation.

The Ohlones were skilled in crafts and made useful and aesthetically pleasing tools, weapons, and items of adornment. They made projectile points, scrapers, and knives from Monterey—banded and Franciscan chert, obsidian, and other hard-substance rocks. They also used bone, shell, and wood for much of their material culture (Heizer and Whipple, 1971).

Finely cut, chiseled, and polished shells were turned into beautifully designed necklaces, pendants, and earrings; they were also applied to belts, baskets, and clothing. Feathers were used in great quantities in the making of cloaks, head-dresses, belts, and baskets.

Highly informative to the archaeologist are the trading patterns that occurred in Ohlone culture. They have left a tale of movement and interaction over central California, and even the West Coast. Several hundred different types of trade items have been documented for California Indians and discussed in the categories of food, beads and ornaments, household wares, clothing and attire, raw materials, finished articles, and miscellaneous goods (Heizer, 1978). Shell and shell beads were the most frequently reported trade items by native informants (Davis, 1974). The shell trade items indicate extensive trade networks from central coastal California to as far as the Great Basin of Nevada, where a string of Olivella beads dating to 8,600 B.P. was found. Specific sizes and shapes of shell artifacts are so standard for Ohlone and other cultures in California that they prove to be sensitive time markers when found in an archaeological context.

Another important trade item to the Ohlone was the highly coveted cinnabar which was quarried at the New Almaden area of Santa Clara County. Cinnabar expeditions came from as far away as Walla Walla, Washington to trade or fight for the prized pigment. Mission records from Mission Santa Clara note that the Indians of Santa Cruz and Santa Clara seemed to have been fighting incessantly over the rights to the cinnabar deposit. In 1841, Indians from Tulare and Sacramento came as a regular cinnabar expedition to the quarry and one of the intruders was killed by the Santa Clara Ohlones.

Included in other important trade goods imported or exported in Ohlone culture were abalone shells, projectile points, obsidian, dogs, tobacco, hides, bows, baskets, salt, acorns, and fish (Davis, 1974).

Eight social groups in the lands of the Ohlone were separately distinguished ethnic units. Contrasts in dialect or language, customs of dress and ornamentation, particular religious beliefs, kinship patterns, and to some degree, subsistence mainstay distinguish these units. From north to south, the eight subethnic groups recognized in protohistoric times were the Karkin, Chochenyo, Ramaytush, Tamyen, Awaswas, Mutsin, Rumsen, and the Chalon.

From the studies of Levy (1970), we arrive at the following estimated populations for the eight Ohlone groupings as of 1770.

Subgroups or Language Groupings	Location	Estimated Population
Karkin	South edge of Carquinez Strait	200
Chochenyo	East of San Francisco Bay, Livermore Valley, Mission San Jose	2,000
Ramaytush	San Mateo and San Francisco Counties	1,400
Tamyen	South San Francisco Bay and Santa Clara Valley	1,200
Awaswas	Between Davenport and Aptos in Santa Cruz	600
Mutsun	Pajaro River drainage	2,700
Rumsen	Lower Carmel, Salinas, and Sur Rivers	800
Chalon	Upper Salinas Drainage	900

Population and Location of Ohlone in 1770 A.D.

In the vicinity of the Alma-Adobe site and CA-SC1-1, the language group at the time of missionary contact would have been the Ramaytush. From information available, we may also assume that the particular tribelet at the site was the Puichun.

Ohlone culture is seen in this ethnographic sketch as a world in which the people had a close physical and psychological bond to the environment and to the customs of a small society. For some village members, their entire existence might be spent within a radius of ten to fifteen miles of their natal village. Each rock, spring, tree, and creek was known intimately. A heritage of thousands of years lay under the Ohlones' feet as most of the major villages contained deep deposits, built from the debris of daily life, that sealed the remains of the Ohlone past. The ethnographic story of the Ohlone is occasionally rich with knowledge about a life that was so incredibly different from the civilization that now stands in its stead; while on the other hand it is an incomplete story, or only a rough outline, with gaps as yet undiscovered and untold.

Sources

- *This article is an excerpt, originally called "Ethnographic Background", from a 1991 report titled, The Santa's Village Site CA-SCr=239. This report was the result of an archaeological dig by the Field Methods in Archaeology Class of De Anza College, which was led by Robert Cartier. The report was prepared by Robert Cartier with Laurie Crane, Cynthia James, Jon Reddington, and Allika Ruby. RAP-ed. Copyright 1991 Robert Cartier. Reproduced by permission of Robert Cartier. The other sources are references from that article.*
- *Davis, J.T. Trade Routes and Economic Exchange Among the Indians of California". California Publications of Archaeology, Ethnography, and History, No.3. Ramona: Ballena Press, 1974.*
- *Heizer, R.F., ed. Handbook of North American Indians: California, Vol. 8. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1978.*
- *Heizer, R.F. and M.A. Whipple. The California Indians, a Source Book. Second Ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971.*
- *Kroeber, Alfred L. Handbook of Indians of California. Berkeley: California Book Company, Ltd., 1953.*
- *Levy, R. "Coastal Internal Relationships". Paper presented to the Ninth Conference on American Indian Languages, San Diego; Manuscript in Levy's possession.*
- *Margolin, M. The Ohlone Way—Indian Life in the San Francisco Monterey Bay Area. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1978.*

The content of this article is the responsibility of the individual author. It is the Library's intent to provide accurate local history information. However, it is not possible for the Library to completely verify the accuracy of individual articles obtained from a variety of sources. If you believe that factual statements in a local history article are incorrect and can provide documentation, please contact the Webmaster.