

SAVING OUR STORIES

SUSTAINING CALIFORNIA INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE

By Sonia Tamez



California tribal cultural heritage,

conveyed by storytellers, elders, family members, researchers, community guests, and others has historically assisted tribes healing from trauma while supporting tribal identity, language, and the surrounding ecosystems, including those containing cultural

resources such as basketweaving material and native food sources. This knowledge has been passed on in various ways—sometimes directly, verbally from person to person; other times it preserved and conveyed through media that range from written records to

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Louis Trevino (Rumsen Ohlone) with elder Gloria Castro (Rumsen Ohlone) at the 2018 Breath of Life Workshop at UC Berkeley. Scott Braley, Photographer 2018

audio and video recordings, photographs, and other media. Once recorded, heritage materials can be saved in archives for future generations.

Linda Yamane, Rumsen Ohlone scholar and artist, expressed it well:

“For thirty-plus years, I’ve been using archival resources to help me re-open the world of Ohlone language, songs, stories, basketry, and other ancient technologies. Without these archives, both here and in Europe, I could never have learned my Rumsen Ohlone language, reconstructed our traditional stories, been able to sing my ancestors’ songs, or become a master Ohlone basketweaver. I am forever grateful for these collections and the institutions that keep them safe and make them available for us today.”

There are dozens of current programs and projects that support cultural transmission and revival using archives. For example, in the Breath of Life workshops, Native American community members and linguists work together with archival material to restore and revitalize indigenous languages. These workshops were launched at the University of California, Berkeley in 1996. Other Breath of Life Workshops have spread widely to various communities across the United States and in Australia over the past 24 years

A number of museums have found the value of partnerships and are working more closely with the current generation of tribal members such as in the example below.

Merv George, member and cultural practitioner of the Hoopa Valley Tribe spoke of his tribe’s work with the Smithsonian’s Museum of the American Indian:

“We worked with the Smithsonian to help them get the true history of what ceremonial items were in their holdings. We used our relationships with them to bring back, on loan, some of the items for our use. The Smithsonian knew they wanted to accurately reflect what we do in Hoopa and they were gracious to reach out. It was both humbling and an honor to help with the exhibit.”



Merv George at the “Our Universe - Hupa Exhibit”, Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian. Leslie Courtright, Photographer. Summer of 2019.

The Challenges

While many existing formal archives keep documents, language recordings, cultural items such as baskets, and other materials secure and accessible, additional archival sources of tribal knowledge and history, often those in private hands, are in danger of being lost. Images and labels in family albums crack and fall away as the photos age. Ink on old letters fades until it is impossible to read; paper documents turn to dust. Cassette and video tapes of elders singing and recounting tribal history can disintegrate in storage lockers while waiting for transcription. Sketches, journals, and other items of cultural heritages and legacy are scattered when their original makers and holders walk on. Ultimately these items may be forgotten or lost altogether.

In some communities, families have established their own archives to protect their precious information for current and future generations. Dick Charley (Dunlap Band of Mono Indians) talked about the significance his family’s archives:

“My family’s letters, photos, files, and records are a treasure. We are here because of those who came before us. It’s why we are still here, in our land, with our family and our community. Our family archives—our letters, photographs, files, and records—reflect that history.”

In some places, archives are not within the community, and access may be difficult. There could be generations of stories, songs, photos, letters, and other materials stored in existing archives, without being known to tribal communities.

Rick West, founding director of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian, former President and CEO of the Autry National Center of the American West, says, “My concern is that not only are the creators slipping away, even those who know where it all is are slipping away.”

Saving Our Stories: The California Institute for Community, Art, and Nature Archives Project

We need to ensure that archives are protected and accessible.

“There are still among us Native elders who in their youth absorbed language, attitudes, and a way of being from the generation before them that was born in the 19th century. Before the memory of their world fades away... we feel an urgency to make sure that the stories and archival records of that time are preserved.”—from www.californiaican.org

From his involvement with Native California as a writer, publisher at Heyday Books, and—as he describes himself—a “friend of the family,” Malcolm Margolin has long been aware of the need to preserve a record of the past. Over the years he has witnessed the passing of a generation of elders. As they walked on, it became increasingly apparent to Malcolm that this rich reservoir of beauty,



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: JIM SUMER, MIKE ANDERSON, HARRY BEECHER, JOHN CHARLIE, JOHN ANDERSON, BILL WILSON, JIM WALEY, AND CHARLIE ALEC

Dunlap Band of Mono Indians, Photographer and Date Unknown. From left to right Jim Sumer, Mike Anderson, Harry Beecher, John Charlie, John Anderson, Bill Wilson, Jim Waley, and Charlie Alec

The questions focused on three key groups of questions:

1. Are there archival materials being held by your family and/or community? What are your community and family's priorities for the protection of these archival materials at present and into the future?
2. Are you aware of other California Indian archives (tribal and nontribal) being held around California? Have you used them? Are they securely stored and accessible? Is assistance needed?
3. How can we support you and/or others that you know of to ensure that diverse holdings of California Indian archives are both secure and accessible in a culturally appropriate manner?

Please visit californiaican.org/savingourstoriesurvey to see the survey (which is now closed) and updates on the survey results and associated projects. Future articles will aim to discuss examples and best practices for eliciting and recording stories, songs, and protecting cultural heritage. We will also provide information on current resources such as the annotated listing of museums, archives and libraries contained in *Living Traditions: A Museum Guide for the Indian People of California*.

We will continue to reach out to the California Museum and Cultural Center, the California Indian Heritage Center, The California Native American Heritage Center, The Association of Tribal Archives, Museums, and Libraries (ATAML), tribal archivists, and others to bring you the latest information on technical and financial assistance and other resources for archival protection and access. If you have suggestions about the project or if you would like to be involved with the project in any way, please contact: Sonia Tamez, California I CAN Senior Advisor at: sonia@californiaican.org or leave a message at the California I CAN office at (510) 859-9180.

Author Sonia Tamez has been working with tribes and indigenous groups for over 40 years. She served as a Forest Service Tribal Relations Program Manager in California. More recently, Sonia has worked for intertribal and other nonprofit organizations in support of tribes. She is currently volunteering as the Senior Advisor for the California Institute for Community, Art, and Nature.

meaning, and understanding of the world could be lost. The magnitude of the potential loss was brought home to him in 2019 by the passing of his two dear friends, artist and ceremonial leader Frank LaPena and photographer Dugan Aguilar. Both of these men were widely respected and had worked closely with Malcolm for over thirty years on a number of projects that documented the cultures of California Indians. They both left behind substantial archival materials.

In April 2019, under the auspices of his recently created organization, the California Institute for Community, Art, and Nature (California I CAN), Malcolm convened a meeting to discuss what might be done to help preserve these and other archives before it was too late. The meeting was co-hosted by Mark Johnson, a professor of Fine Arts at San Francisco State University, who for many years curated exhibitions, wrote books, and worked to promote Native California artists.

Among those who attended were Jennifer Bates (Mewuk), Basketweaver and California Indian Market Coordinator; Anne Bown-Crawford, Executive Director of the California Arts Council; Dr. Ira Jacknis, Research Anthropologist at UC Berkeley's Hearst Museum; and Rick West, founding director of the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian in Washington DC and more recently Executive Director of the Autry Museum in Los Angeles. As a result of the meeting, California I CAN was charged with reaching out to California Indian individuals, organizations, and communities, and as well as to non-Indian scholars, institutions, and individuals to determine the extent and nature of individual archives and what is needed to support them.

As an initial step in this direction, California I CAN developed a simple online survey of 12 questions, inspired by the surveys of the Association of Tribal Archives, Libraries, and Museums. We are very grateful to the tribal members, tribal archivists, and other individuals who helped us refine these questions and who responded to the survey.

RESOURCES

Association of Tribal Archives Libraries, and Museums (ATALM)

www.atalm.org

ATALM's website highlights its commitment "to preserving and advancing the language, history, culture, and life ways of indigenous peoples." The site references numerous resources, including projects, services, financial support, technical assistance, and a variety of types of training.

Breath of Life Institute and Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival (AICLS)

www.aicls.org

The Breath of Life program is designed to keep indigenous languages alive. During the workshop in Berkeley, native participants work with linguists and archivists the university to get an orientation of the holdings and work on their projects.

The California Indian Heritage Center (CIHC)

www.parks.ca.gov/cihc

The California Indian Heritage Center Foundation

www.cihcfoundation.org

These two related websites provide information about the future of the CIHC and the efforts of the CIHCF to realize the vision. CIHC according to the Foundation website, "... will be a distinctive and honorable place where past, current, and future experiences and achievements of California Indians are recognized, celebrated, and shared." Larry Myers, CIHCF Chairperson and Executive Secretary, California Native American Heritage Commission, Retired.

Elsewhere on the Foundation website, "The CIHCF was created in 2009 to serve California's Native community via support of projects, special events, outreach, and education programs at the State Indian Museum." "The Foundation also supports the planning, implementation, and the construction of the future California Indian Heritage Center."

The California Indian Museum and Cultural Center (CIMCC)

www.cimcc.org

"Weaving Native Culture Into The Future" In addition to their excellent museum, the CIMCC, as discussed on their website, "... provides opportunities for Native Americans to receive training and experience in a variety of fields such as museum direction, curation, design, and interpretation."

The California Institute for Community, Art, and Nature (California I CAN)

www.californiaican.org

As summarized on its website, "California I CAN actively supports California Indian art, culture and heritage. In addition to the California Indian Archives Project, California I CAN is engaged in the campaign to save the West Berkeley Shellmound, is collaborating with basketweaver Jennifer Bates (Mewuk) to produce the 2nd Annual California Indian Arts and Culture Festival in 2021, has transcribed Pomo oral histories, is working with The Nature Conservancy and California tribal members/advisors to present stories associated with California Indian place names in landscapes, and is collaborating with filmmaker Gary Yost's immersive cinema initiative—The Wisdom Project—to record interviews with Native artists and elders in their homes."

The California Native American Heritage Commission (NAHC)

www.nahc.ca.gov

As detailed in their website, "[t]he NAHC catalogs, and protects Native American cultural resources" in many significant ways, including policy development and issue resolution. NAHC also produced in 1971 a comprehensive overview listing of archives, libraries, museums and other institutions that house documents, artifacts and other materials entitled, *Living Traditions: A Museum Guide for the Indian People of California Volumes 1-5*. The series was distributed throughout the state.

The Hoopa Tribal Museum

www.hoopa-nsn.gov/departments/1490-2/museum/

This website discussed the elements that make the Hoopa Tribe's Museum, a "'Living Museum' in that most of the artifact and items of culturally patrimony are still actively being used by members of the tribe for tribal ceremonies and functions.... The museum is for the Hupa people and not just about them."

The Joseph A. Myers Center for Research on Native American Issues

www.crnai.berkeley.edu

The Center hosts the Native American Museum Studies Institute. As discussed on the website, the Institute "in collaboration with the California Indian Museum and Cultural Center and the Phoebe A Hearst Museum of Anthropology, provides a free intensive week-long training in museum skills to staff and volunteers of tribal museums and cultural centers."



California I CAN strives to create a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient society through a deep understanding and love of the cultural and natural heritage of our state via three core programs: working with California Indigenous communities on issues of cultural survival; exploring the powerful connection between nature, place and the arts; and supporting and maintaining the City of Berkeley as a center of cultural and social innovation. For more information about California I CAN, please visit californiaican.org, follow us on Facebook, Instagram, write to us at California I CAN, 2150 Allston Way, Suite 460, Berkeley, California 94704, or email us at info@californiaican.org.

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