CREATING A DANCE CIRCLE AT **Metini**, **Fort Ross State Historical Park, California**

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**Su Nu Nu Shinal**

In 2013, a dance circle was constructed at the ancestral Kashia place known as Metini, within Fort Ross State Historic Park. The circle is located just outside the front gate of the reconstructed Russian Compound, where the Russian American Company based their mercantile operations in 1812-1841. Since its creation, numerous dances and other special events have occurred within the circle. The Kashia dance group, Su Nu Nu Shinal, proposed and constructed the dance circle and play hosts to the events that occur there. In this presentation, they explain the circle’s significance and how it enables the persistence of indigenous culture.

**PART I. PERSPECTIVES OF AN ARCHAEOLOGIST**

My name is Breck Parkman. Until recently, I was a Senior State Archaeologist with California State Parks. I retired from State service on February 1, 2017, after 36 years as a State Archaeologist. Over the course of my career, I participated in some very exciting and important projects. Few, however, were as rewarding as the building of the Kashia dance circle at Fort Ross State Historic Park.

In the summer of 2012, the late Liz Burko toured Russia, with a group organized and led by Robin Joy, a Park Interpreter at Fort Ross. At the time, Liz was the Superintendent of the Sonoma-Mendocino Coast District of California State Parks, a jurisdiction that includes Fort Ross. Among those in the tour group were several members of the Kashia Pomo tribe, the traditional owners of what is now known as Fort Ross, a place the Kashia call Metini. Kashia elders, Billyrene and Lester Pinola, participated in the tour.

While in Russia, Liz and Billyrene got to know one another and, somewhere along the way, Billyrene shared with Liz how she dreamed of holding a traditional “Bigtime” at Metini. A few weeks after the group returned home to California, Liz phoned me and said that there was someone she wanted me to meet. She told me about Billyrene and of her dream about a Bigtime at Fort Ross (Metini). Liz said that she’d like for the three of us to meet and discuss the possibility of having a Bigtime. I agreed and a week or two later, the three of us met at a local café. Billyrene outlined her proposal and then Liz asked me if it could be done. I told Liz that with her backing, we could make it work. I told Liz and Billyrene that I would find one or more areas within the park that would work from the perspective of park management and resource protection, locations that Billyrene could then inspect and decide on.

A few weeks later, I traveled to Fort Ross with Brendan O’Neil, the District’s Senior Environmental Scientist. Brendan oversees Natural Resource Management at Fort Ross. We spent the day surveying the coastal terrace immediately south (seaward) of the Russian Compound. The area was bounded on one side by a Russian-era Kashia camp and, on the other, by the historic site termed the Native Alaskan Village by archaeologists. A large area between these two archaeological sites appeared devoid of cultural resources, based on the various surveys that had been conducted over the years. I thought it would be possible to locate a dance circle within this area, providing there were no natural resource concerns. Brendan surveyed the area for rare and endangered plants, some which occur in the general area. We found a few places where plants were a concern, but most of the area that we looked at passed Brendan’s inspection.

The following week, I met Billyrene at Metini. She was accompanied by Lester Pinola, Jerry Pinola, and several other family members, all whom belonged to the Kashia dance group known as Su Nu
Nu Shinal. In Kashia, *Su Nu Nu Shinal* means “Huckleberry Heights.” That is the native name of the place where the Stewarts Point Rancheria is located, home of the federally recognized Kashia Band of Pomo Indians.

I pointed out the area that I thought would work for the dance circle, from the perspective of State Parks. Billyrene, Lester, and Jerry looked it over and then walked downcoast to the edge of the area that Brendan and I had surveyed and that’s where they found the place that felt right to them to build the dance circle. It seemed as if their ancestors had guided them there. Brendan had already cleared the area regarding natural resource concerns and I felt it was unlikely that we would encounter cultural resources here, either. I phoned Liz Burko and with her blessing and the ancestors support, we decided on that location for the dance circle.

Jerry had brought along some tools, including shovels and rakes and I was able to secure our use of the park’s lawnmower. Jerry used the mower to delineate the dimensions of the dance circle. My arrangement with the State was that we would mow the grass to delineate the circle and that we would not remove the grass itself (Figure 1). The circle required a central fire pit and that necessitated excavation. I monitored the work as my Kashia companions shoveled out enough soil to create a respectable fire pit (Figure 2). The soil proved culturally sterile and for that I was happy. My happiness, however, paled in comparison to what the Kashia were feeling as the dance circle took shape (Figure 3). Kashia dance reluctantly departed *Metini* almost 200 years ago. It was a long time returning.

With a dance circle created, Billyrene set about organizing a Bigtime. Several dance groups came and danced along with *Su Nu Nu Shinal* (Figure 4). I was there, observing. I observed a small part of the world made right that day. The sound of the clapper sticks echoed off the tall redwood plank walls of the Russian Compound and reverberated across the terrace on the way to the sea. I felt as if the ancestors were accompanying the singers and dancers (Figure 5). I watched as the fire was lit in the pit before the start of the dancing and I observed Kashia elders feed the flames near the end (Figure 6). I realized that the firepit was a living thing and not just an inanimate hole in the ground. Although the State had expected the firepit to be removed at the end of the day as part of “re-beautifying” the area, I realized that the beauty was in the existence of the firepit and that we would not remove it. It took some doing, but I finally convinced the park staff that the firepit had to stay. My position that day, and today, is that the firepit created by the Kashia for the first Bigtime in 2013 is a significant archaeological feature. It is as important as any other cultural feature within Fort Ross SHP. The firepit marks the place where the Kashia brought their culture back to *Metini*.

One other thing I observed that day was the hardness of the ground the Kashia were dancing on. The grass stubble and hardened root balls made for an uneven and unpleasant surface for those dancing barefoot. Jerry confirmed this fact and asked if he could remove the grass down to the soil, the next time *Su Nu Nu Shinal* came to dance. Again, it took some doing, but eventually the State allowed for the removal of the grass. Slowly over the years, the dance circle has evolved into what it was meant to be.

In 2014, I accompanied *Su Nu Nu Shinal* to Russia. The group had been invited to participate in the 4th Annual Krasnoyarsk International Music Festival of the Asia-Pacific Region. The event was billed as "a cultural conversation of the people of Asian-Pacific region [establishing] bridges of friendship, mutual understanding and creative cooperation between representatives from different countries." Performers from 26 countries took part in the festival. *Su Nu Nu Shinal* went to represent the U.S. Billyrene asked me to accompany the group as far as Moscow, the first stop on their three-week trip. *Su Nu Nu Shinal* was scheduled to dance at the new Jewish Museum and Cultural Tolerance Center in Moscow and the Russian officials had requested that the Kashia present a public lecture about themselves while there (Figure 7). That is what Billyrene asked me to do. Speaking to the Russian people on behalf of the Kashia was one of the greatest honors ever bestowed on me.
Figure 1. Jerry Pinola mowing the dance circle at Metini, 5-29-13 (photo, Breck Parkman).

Figure 2. Creating the firepit at Metini, 5-29-13 (photo, Breck Parkman).
Figure 3. The dance circle at Metini, c. 2014 (photo, Breck Parkman).

Figure 4. Su Nu Nu Shinal dancing at Metini, 2013 (photo, Su Nu Nu Shinal).
Figure 5. Bigtime at Metini, 2013 (photo, Breck Parkman).

Figure 6. Fire burning in dance circle at Metini, 2013 (photo, Breck Parkman).
PART II: THE KASHIA PERSPECTIVE

My name is Jerry Pinola. I’m a citizen of the Kashia Band of Pomo Indians from Stewarts Point, California (near where Fort Ross is located). I’m going to talk briefly about the Kashaya dance circle that we created at Metini and the process that was involved. Now when I speak of Metini, please note that this is the Ancestral Kashaya name for this land, which is known as Fort Ross State Historic Park. The idea to create this dance circle at this site, was more on a spiritual level, a calling if you will. My Aunt and Uncle will talk more about that in a minute.

In the summer of 2012 we approached Breck with the idea of creating a dance circle at the sacred Kashaya land of Metini. In 2013, we met with Breck at Metini and he pointed out some locations that he knew would be archeologically safe to put the dance circle.

We chose a location that was directly outside the Fort compound walls that overlooks the Pacific Ocean. A beautiful spot, one that our ancestors viewed every day, for thousands of years.

Initially, we were allowed by the State Parks to only mow the grass into a circle pattern. We could cut it very short but could not expose the dirt. I mention this because in our Kashaya culture, it’s important for our feet to make contact with the dirt when doing cultural dances or ceremonies. The concern from State Parks was, that by removing the dirt, that this circle would become an eye sore on the landscape. Breck advised us to just give it time and that he would work towards building an understanding of why we needed the grass removed. One of the initial points that we made was, “the Fort was surely an eye sore to our ancestors, but in the interest of compromising, they allowed it.” What you see as dirt, we see as every bit as valuable or sacred as the Fort Ross compound itself.

Regardless, we held our first Bigtime (like a pow wow) that same year. It’s the first time that Kashaya would dance on this sacred land in over 170 years. Very special moment. Breck was able to convince the State Parks department personnel, to allow us to remove the grass which we did in 2014. Immediately upon doing this, the dance circle came to life. All this spiritual Weya that had been left here by our ancestors had been released.
The following year and half or so, was an exercise in patience for us. In order to continuously maintain the circle from the weeds growing back, it was necessary to work the ground every two months or so (Figure 8). Every time that we needed to do this, we needed approval from State Parks. In the beginning, requests to do this were granted, but months would go by before we would get a response back. Three different times the grass had grown back completely, to the point where you could not see the circle at all. Devastated!! That is what we were feeling. The weeds had to be scraped off using square tip shovels, painstaking labor. It was extremely important for us to be here and to stay here, so we just did it.

Over time and being persistent, we were able to build a good relationship with the State Parks personnel and presently have almost an open invitation to come up when needed. We have held many Kashaya events here and we also dance for the Fort Ross Conservancy at their annual events.

I want to point out that it is important to build allies in whatever your cause is and that you must be patient. Sometimes those allies are not directly connected to decision making in general. We befriended and gave our complete trust to the Fort Ross Conservancy personnel. They are responsible for funding events at Fort Ross but do not make decisions about Parks property nor are they Parks personnel. However, they are deeply respected by State Parks because of their commitment to telling the complete Fort Ross story and their love for this piece of land. They were instrumental in helping and advising us of the best possible direction to take involving State Parks, as they are very familiar with the process there.

In closing, I would like to give many Thanks to Mr. Parkman. Breck shared our vision and passion right from the start. Without his help and influence, I’m not sure we would be standing here today. Thank you.

I would like to introduce my Aunt Billyrene and my Uncle Lester. They would like to say a few words about what the dance circle means to them (Figure 9).

[Note: Our presentation concluded with comments by Billyrene and Lester Pinola. We did not record what they had to say. They were the kinds of words meant to be heard in the moment and not read afterwards. ebp]
Figure 8. Maintaining the dance circle at Metini, c. 2014 (photo, Su Nu Nu Shinal).

Figure 9. The dance circle at Metini at the end of the day, c. 2014 (photo, Su Nu Nu Shinal).