

AN ARCHAPE/PELAGO IN THE VALLEY: ON CULTURAL LANDSCAPES OF THE SOUTHERN TULARE BASIN

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At the southern margin of the former Tulare Lake stands a range of loose dunes, locally known as Sand Ridge. It was a uniquely stable, defensible position within the otherwise ephemeral boundaries of the lake, from the Paleoindian Period onward. As late as the 1870s, it represented a characteristically resilient refuge for the Lake Yokuts. Spanish colonists knew Sand Ridge as the ranchería of Bubal, which figures as a center of native resistance in Hispanic records. Anglo topography refers to an archipelago, including Pelican, Hog-Root, and most infamously, Skull Island. However, by 1898, Tulare Lake had become desiccated and Americans tilled, then settled, the once-archipelago. In this manner, the transformation of ecological landscapes, and the reterritorialization of cultural landscapes, were innately tied to each other and the more general settler-colonial dynamics of North America. Contemporary scholars recognize the dry bed of Tulare Lake as an environmental disaster. Such a view, while accurate, proves myopic. Little attention, if any, has been given to this event as an instrument of settler-colonialism. Ethnohistorical and critical archaeological methods can elucidate the social history of the Tulare Basin, in particular, how settler-colonial dynamics are entwined with environmental catastrophe.

archipelago. *Noun.* A group of islands. Ultimately from Ancient Greek ἀρχή (arkhḗ) “authority” and πέλαγος (pélagos) “sea” to denote the Aegean Sea.

archae/pelago. *Noun.* An ancient group of islands, once-archipelago. Back-formation from Ancient Greek ἀρχή (arkhḗ) “origin, beginning” and πέλαγος (pélagos) “sea.”

The Tulare Basin was unimaginably rich before colonial settlement. William Preston christened it an “aboriginal cornucopia,” holding tens of thousands of Indigenous Californians dependent on the lake and swamp ecosystems (Preston 1989, 1990). Indeed, the lower Central Valley was likely one of the densest population centers north of Mexico before 1492 (Cook 1955). The most prominent feature of the Tulare Basin was the eponymous Tulare Lake, a shallow sheet of brackish water covering most of present-day Kings County. Having been strangled and eventually drained, with brief flooding sojourns, this region today is primarily cottonfields and salt scrub. Practically no sign of the lake survives on its former bed, other than ghostly visages in aerial maps, skeletal ditches outlining ancient waterways, and increasingly rare toponyms.

For the Lake Yokuts, members of a larger patchwork indigenous to the entire San Joaquin Valley, Tulare Lake was once the center of lifeways, and today still occupies a place of high reverence. The late tribal historian of the Santa Rosa Rancheria, Raymond Jeff, would lament he had “never even seen the lake – all [he] did was read about it” (Finger 2021). In Tachi oral tradition, the lake was the site of the primordial oak trunk, the *axis mundi* around which the world emerged from under its primordial waters, as mud carried by divine avian figures (Judson 1994).

Widely, the annihilation of Tulare Lake is seen as an environmental disaster. This is generally viewed in isolation from the wider social, cultural, and political context within which the desiccation occurred. In particular, the draining of Tulare Lake should not be seen merely as the excess of a rapidly industrializing and naive West – though that was undoubtedly true – but properly as a component of the wider pattern of Indigenous displacement in the Southern San Joaquin Valley. This reading is most vividly represented at Sand Ridge, a relatively high strip of sand that once held the only permanent settlements of the immediate region. During times of high water, this was an archipelago, and thus uniquely defensible. Known to the Spanish authorities as the *rancheria* of Bubal, from a Salinan word for the Wowol Yokuts indigenous to the southern lake area (Milliken and Johnson 2005), today it is the site of Alpaugh, California (Latta 1977). Until about 1870, it was an important refuge for natives fleeing ethnic cleansing at the hands of cattlemen and the United States military. As the lake receded and agriculture encroached the formerly impenetrable tules, this refuge was excised. Environmental catastrophe and settlement reveal themselves as inextricably entwined.

TULARE LAKE ETHNOGEOGRAPHY

Tulare Lake was ringed by a several-mile-wide thick band of tule rush. It was bounded by the Kettleman Plain to the east, dense riparian oak woodland to the west, Sand Ridge to the south, and valley grassland to the north. In periods when it was connected to the mainland, Sand Ridge separated the lower Tulare Basin into two reservoirs (Mitchell 1997). Three groups of people are native to the Tulare Basin, all speaking Yokuts dialects. The Tachi are indigenous to the northern and northwestern Tulare Lake region, the Chunut are indigenous to the eastern region, and the Wowol are indigenous to the southern region (especially Sand Ridge) (Latta 1977).

A uniquely important Yokuts historian is Yoimut (Josie Alonzo), a Chunut woman of Wowol descent who lived during the early American period and whose story was recorded by Frank F. Latta and A. H. Gayton. Several chapters of Latta's *Handbook of Yokuts Indians* (1977) are verbatim quotations of Yoimut's account, much of it concerning the Tulare Lake archipelago. During the 1860s, Yoimut and her relatives lived in a Wowol village on the eastern end of Sand Ridge, reinhabited after fleeing from forced resettlement attempts (Latta 1977). Yoimut named this village Chawlowin (Latta 1977) and named another village, Wititsolowin, which contained a tremendous number of human bones left from a plague (Gayton 1948). The Wowol principal village was located near present-day Delano and was named Sukwutnu (Latta 1977).

European exploration of Tulare Lake began in 1805. Fray Martin, the first European to see Tulare Lake (Cook 1960), arrived in Wowol territory following a three-day trip from the coast. Martin would later petition Don Jose Joaquin de Arrillaga:

Sir, why do you wish to place missions where they are not wanted? And why do you neglect the villages of Bubal, Tache, Chuntache, Notonto, and Telame, which do want them? [Cook 1960:243].

According to Martin's account, he was met with a crowd of Indigenous mothers offering their children for baptism, but was stopped by a native Wowol leader named Chapé (Cook 1960). In 1816, Chapé appeared again in Spanish expeditionary accounts. At that time, Luís Antonio Martinez reported a brief skirmish at

a village below Bubal, where the Wowol attacked the Salinan interpreters, screaming “kill the Playanos!” (Cook 1960:272). The following day, Martinez razed Bubal.

Martinez’s actions were seen as cruel even in his own day. Fr. Juan Cabot, who was present on this expedition, publicly chastised and harshly criticized Martinez for his actions. Cabot reports that Martinez burned the village, scattered their grain, and smashed their jars and grinding stones. He attempted to stop the people from escaping, but since they could not, they were dragged out with lassos and driven to the village. In terror, the women and children tried to go into the water. They were held back with clubs and infants were thrown into the water or on the ground (Cook 1960).

The exact placement of Bubal is a matter of contention for archaeologists and ethnographers, no doubt exacerbated by the variable shoreline. In 1814, Fr. Juan Cabot left Mission San Miguel and traveled over a plain, reaching Bubal on the west side. In contrast, later anthropologists, notably Gifford and Schenck (1926), placed Bubal on the eastern side. Mitchell (1997) suggested that Sand Ridge was used as a road by Spanish explorers to cross Tulare Lake. Indeed, a map of California from 1854 depicts such a landform, a “natural road 500 ft. wide,” separating the basin in two (Eddy 1854). On this discrepancy, Cook (1955:44) wrote:

From these accounts it is very clear that the original site of Bubal was on the west, not the east, shore of the lake and that because of the depredations of the Spaniards the inhabitants fled into the lake itself, where they made at least temporary settlements. That these became their permanent home is attested by the fact that no later than 1826 Pico stated that Bubal was situated on an island in the lake. Subsequently contemporary writers as well as the modern ethnographers agree that the principal village of the Wowol was on Atwell’s Island.

A separate matter is the apparent conflation between Sukwutnu and Chawlowin. Gifford and Schenck (1926) identified Bubal as Sukwutnu, but placed it on Atwell’s Island. Yoimut, however, seemed to make a distinction in her accounts between these villages. It is possible that the principal settlement moved from the less defensible Sukwutnu (on the shore) to Chawlowin (on Sand Ridge) during the early period of European incursion.

Anglo-Americans began entering the Tulare Basin in 1826, including trappers such as Jedediah Smith (Menefee 1913). Sand Ridge enjoyed a colorful toponymy in this period. The classic Anglo-American description of the archipelago, as transmitted through an 1876 map, is as follows: a set of three thin Pelican Islands on the eastern edge, a small triangular Bird Island roughly in the center, and a large tear-drop shaped Root Island to the West (Baker 1876). One infamous account of the Tulare Lake archipelago is that of the *Water Witch*, a schooner originally docked in San Francisco Bay that served an expedition including J. W. A. Wright, a former Confederate general (Mitchell 1997).

The easternmost island in the Pelican chain was Skull Island. It was known among American settlers for the large quantity of bleaching human bones that could be seen eroding out of the sand. Latta collected settler folklore describing an “Indian battle” with the Mexican state at the site, which left an unburied quantity of human corpses. More fantastic stories include that the skulls “exceeded in size that of any human being” (Anonymous 1877:2) and some theorized that inspection of the lake bottom “will show traces of a submerged city” (Anonymous 1880:86). Polymath Gustav Eisen undertook excavations on the Sand Ridge, probably in 1878.

Latta, however, had also recorded eyewitness accounts of a pandemic in 1833, a period of intense illness, probably malaria, among the California Indians of the eastern San Joaquin Valley, severely depopulating the region. Some of Latta's informants specifically noted that bodies were too high in quantity for the living to bury them (Latta 1977). As previously mentioned, Yoimut's account of the plague, given to Gayton, describes an island in Tulare Lake with a tremendous number of human bones bleaching in the sand and containing a village called Witi'tsolo'win, which she visited with her mother by tule boat. (Gayton 1948). This village was almost certainly on Skull Island. It would become apparent throughout the nineteenth century that Tulare Lake and its islands represented a unique refuge for the Lake Yokuts to escape the encroachment of Europeans.

YOIMUT'S STORY

What follows is a paraphrasing of Yoimut's autoethnography as recorded by Latta (1977), with minor digressions for context. Yoimut was born around 1855, four miles south of Waukena, California, at the Chunut village of Heuumne. Her mother, Tetawecot, was born at Chawlowin. The previous year, American soldiers drove the Lake Yokuts, including Yoimut's parents, briefly to the Fresno River Reservation, then to Fort Tejon. Her family fled and hid along the foothills until they met the Kaweah River, then they went to the Telumne village of Watot Shulul, now within Visalia city limits. A plague caused Watot Shulul to be abandoned shortly after 1862, at which point they resettled near Farmersville. Here, her father died.

Tetawecot remarried and the family briefly resettled in Armona, where she was informed of the Wowol returning to Chawlowin. On the edge of Tulare Lake, her family worked to build a boat of tule reeds, called *tutoi*. As Yoimut attested, it was 25 feet long, eight feet wide, and three feet tall. In the center was a hole about a foot across used to spear fish. Using poles called *iyahish*, they pushed against the lake bottom to propel the craft. With this sort of boat, traditionally the lake nations navigated the *tulares* to make their livelihood in fish and game birds. After this particular boat was built, her family moved to Chawlowin, which had been recently resettled by some Wowol.

After nearly becoming shipwrecked deep in the lake after a three-day journey, Yoimut's family arrived at Chawlowin, where all of her mother's family had relocated, nearly all refugees from the Tule River Reservation. This was sometime in the 1870s. Here, they constructed clandestine tents out of tules, or *tumlus*, not traditional Wowol round-houses, to stay out of the sight of settlers. These *tumlus* were made of a patch of tule, hollowed out in the center, with the outer tule tied together at the top.

Yoimut and her family lived relatively peacefully at Chawlowin. Here, she attested a wealth of first-hand ethnographic and ecological data on the life of the Lake Yokuts. She described Lake clam bakes, methods of Yokuts habitation, massive jackrabbit drives, island elk hunts, and all different varieties of game fish. It is important to note that this period of habitation on the islands coincided with Anglo-American settlement of the area. Yoimut noted that there were feral hogs at Chawlowin, "gone wild." The American namesake of Atwell Island, Judge Allen Atwell of Visalia, had previously brought pigs to the archipelago on a schooner named the *Mose Andross*. For a short period of time, this venture was profitable, but as the hogs became accustomed to the freshwater clams, their meat took on a fishy flavor and buyers from the Bay Area stopped purchasing. Atwell then abandoned the hogs (Mitchell 1997).

Sometime during Yoimut's stay, settlers brought cattle to the island. They had been driven westward during a time of low water, when Sand Ridge connected to the mainland. It is then that the reinhabited village was discovered by settlers. When the settlers got wind of the resettlement of Chawlowin, Yoimut

says her family immediately began to have trouble. Vaqueros, fluent in Wowol or a similar dialect, communicated the threats of the settlers. Fearing the dry tule would be set alight – a common natural occurrence during the dry season – and their family burned alive, they fled to Tejon Ranch. She visited the lake several times after these events, but never returned there to live.

After Yoimut's departure from the islands as a child, there does not appear to be any evidence of indigenous settlement on Sand Ridge. Yoimut married a Mexican man after Tetawecot died, and had many children. She died in Hanford in 1936, as the last speaker of Chunut.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this short history of the Tulare Basin, it becomes increasingly apparent that the process of the lake's desiccation is more intimately related to the California genocide than most modern accounts would imply. Before her death, Yoimut told Latta,

You ask me, 'Will Tulare Lake ever fill up again?' I got only one thing to say. Yes. It will fill up full and everybody living down there will have to go away. I like to see that time myself [...] All my life I want back our good old home on Tulare Lake. But I guess I can never have it. I am a very old Chunut now and I guess I can never see the old days again [...] Cotton, cotton, cotton: that is all that is left. Chunuts cannot live on cotton. They cannot sing their old songs and tell their old stories where there is nothing but cotton. My children feel foolish when I sing my songs. But I sing anyway [...] [Latta 1977-729-730].

Settlers lauded the desiccation of Tulare Lake, or acted callously towards the lake itself. Skull Island, surrounded by wheat fields, was eventually raided and the bodies were taken away as souvenirs. The *Daily Delta*, reporting on two tourists from Minnesota who stopped in the Visalia area to see the lake, wrote that Tulare was

[a] good sight to visit if one wished to induce an ungovernable impulse to suicide, but not otherwise [...] The ladies leave tonight for Los Angeles where they will see plenty that is worth seeing. Tulare lake is not [Daily Delta 1900].

Even after exploring the lake by steamboat and undertaking excavations on the islands, Eisen (1898:19) wrote:

In my opinion the drying up of Tulare Lake is a good thing. The land will be good for crops and there will be less sickness in the vicinity. The sloughs and marsh land in the old days used to be full of malaria that will now be a thing of the past.

Colonial incursion on Sand Ridge drastically shifted the cultural, linguistic, ancestral, and ecological relations of the Lake Yokuts. It is impossible to separate these threads. The ecological disaster of Tulare Lake can only be viewed as a facet of this settlement.

Tulare Lake retains a ghostly, or perhaps spiritual, presence. Latta (1977) believed that Yoimut was vindicated, seeing brief floods in the Basin after her death. Mitchell (1997) called Tulare "the phantom

lake,” a name which has stuck in the vernacular of the valley. Finger (2021:19) described Tulare Lake as a prime example of ghost acres, or a “complex seasonal network of food production homogenized into uniform suppliers of western capitalism.” John P. Harrington recorded a *tripni* (supernatural) song performed by Tachi doctor Bob Bautista in 1923, which Bautista said came from the lake itself: “the resonance of its singing voice and lyrics allows its absence, and its past presence, to be remembered and heard nowadays” (Alarcón-Jiménez 2021). The Tulare Basin is stained by time and the reverberations of Tulare Lake are felt more than a century after its extinction, in memory, literature, and song. Thus, the Sand Ridge as *archae/pelago*: a once-archipelago, an ancient group of islands, a geography where time is out of joint. Yoimut’s words are most pertinent: “I sing anyway.”

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