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COMMENTARY

## The Ob-Ugrian/Cal-Ugrian Connection: Rediscovering *The Discovery of California*

IMRE SUTTON

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If comprehensive findings would turn speculation into fact, and those facts would identify an important scientific reality, then a wider, more diverse audience should be better apprised. By revisiting a less well-known published study, this brief review article has just this in mind.<sup>1</sup> Its focus is on the linkage between language and migration as related to the place of origin of the Indians of central California. I would point out that this journal is not the obvious outlet for studies in Indian language and linguistics; to date, only a half dozen articles have been published. Thus I would not expect that linguistic scholars would turn to this journal to report their findings. Yet a larger readership should be informed because *The Discovery of California* is more than a linguistic treatise, for it demonstrates how comparative historical linguistics as the paramount research tool, supplemented by ethnography, archaeology, and field investigation, has ascertained that contemporary indigenous Asian peoples in Siberia are relatives of Penutian stock in central California.<sup>2</sup> Keep in mind that I am not a linguistic scholar and must leave the final evaluation of this work to others. But the book needs to be put “out there”, as it were, so that its findings receive appropriate evaluation.

Over the decades—indeed, since the nineteenth century—there has been considerable speculation, debate, and published theories and findings as to the Asia-to-North America migrations of the ancestors of contemporary

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Native Americans. Whether by land-bridge treks (Bering Straits) or by transoceanic voyages, it has been contended that Proto-Indians or their ancestral stock reached the New World by various routes. Until recently, our best evidence only relates to the Arctic movements of Inuit (Eskimo) peoples who inhabit both the Old and New Worlds. Otherwise, it has not been readily possible to confirm linkage between Asian peoples and Native Americans. While we have archaeological evidence in abundance on this side of the Pacific, we have not amply cross-documented evidence with Asian locales and peoples. As for transoceanic voyages, they are hard to confirm except by evidence in the New World, such as by the archaeological findings of Japanese-Ecuadorian archaeologists or similar groups. And, of course, the direction of transoceanic movements has been disputed.<sup>3</sup> As for the prevailing land-bridge theory, controversy over its validity as a route during interglacial periods persists, even to the extreme that the theory has been rejected outright, despite considerable evidence.<sup>4</sup>

Let's turn our attention to the coastal movement of ancient fisherfolk and seafaring peoples who, one might contend, would normally want to keep land in sight and periodically beach at one place or another. A remarkable correlation exists in just such an instance. Over a long time period—from about AD 700 to AD 1300—fisherfolk, with entire families and total possessions—coursed down the Ob River in Siberia and reached the edges of the Arctic Ocean, and then followed the Siberian coast eastward. Eventually they happened to make their way via the Bering Straits to the coast of Alaska and south to central California (see figs. 1 and 2).

It is believed that they hunted for salmon and came about as far south as these fish have always flourished. Obviously, many fishing groups from the Ob River Valley had to engage in such movements; no doubt, some were lost at sea either in the Arctic region along the Kamchatka coast of Asia or in the open ocean south of the Bering Straits. But more than enough of these peoples eventually reached California and perhaps parts of the Northwest. We are speaking of Voguls and Ostyaks in Siberia, who, the findings suggest, eventually became the New World relatives—the Penutian groups of California.

Several decades ago, Professor Otto von Sadvoszky, while a graduate student at University of California, Berkeley, learned of the Miwok language (a branch of the Penutian speakers), his first encounter with American Indian linguistics. He was then surprised to discover that countless words in Miwok were very similar to those in his native tongue, Hungarian, and even more closely associated with branches of the Finno-Ugric language community such as the Voguls and Ostyaks. As he was seeking a doctoral topic in comparative linguistics, he chose the Penutian speakers and ultimately took his doctorate at University of California, Los Angeles, which was more interested in the comparative approach. His research in various parts of central California led him to discover words about environmental, material and technological culture, as well as social and familial subject matter that cut across a wide native realm. As it happens, Hungarian is one of two major languages of the Ugrian group of the Finno-Ugric family of languages in Asia. The other is Ob-Ugric, spoken by Vogul and Ostyak peoples. Sadvoszky took on the task of

Polar View

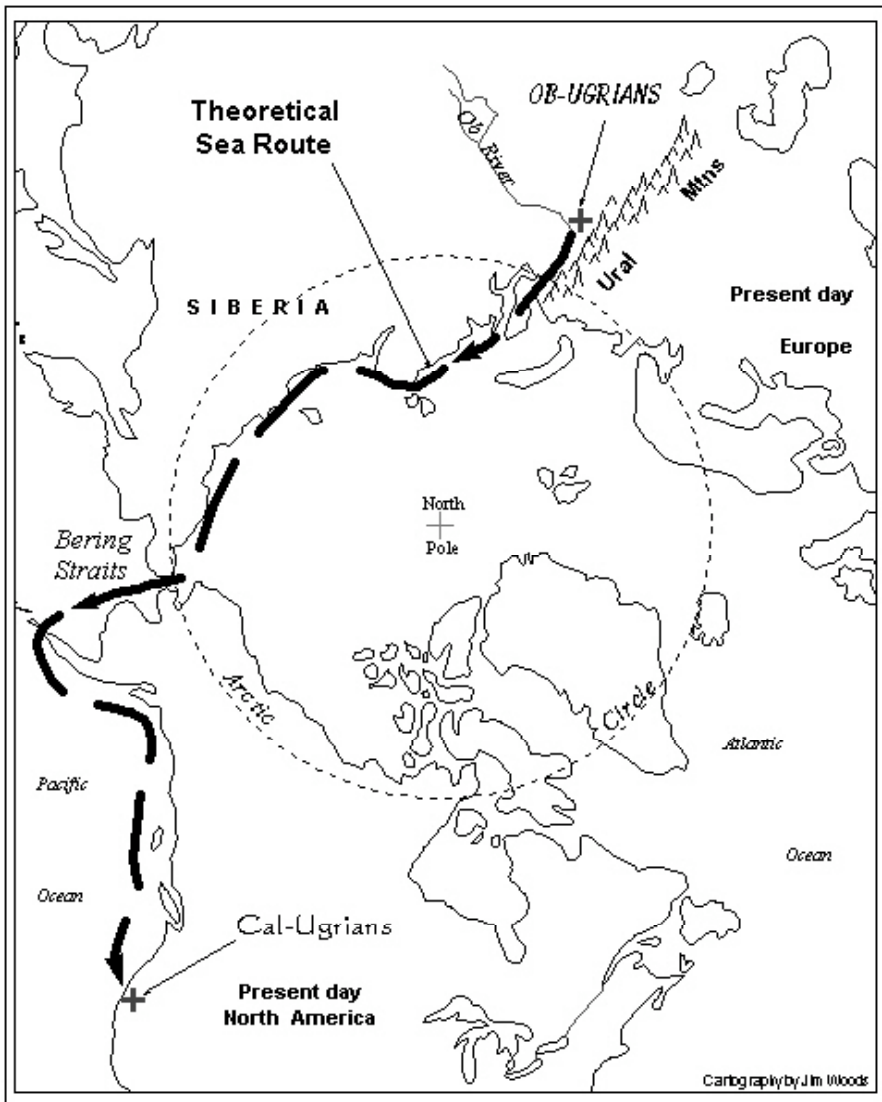


FIGURE 1. Map by James A. Woods.<sup>5</sup>

exploring the origins of the various Penutian, or as he has identified them, Cal-Ugrian, communities by engaging in fieldwork several different times on the Ob River at the encouragement of the Soviet Union. He had earlier been a student of Indo-European and Finno-Ugric languages before coming to the United States. He knew the European scholars and publications dealing with the languages related to Hungarian.

## California View

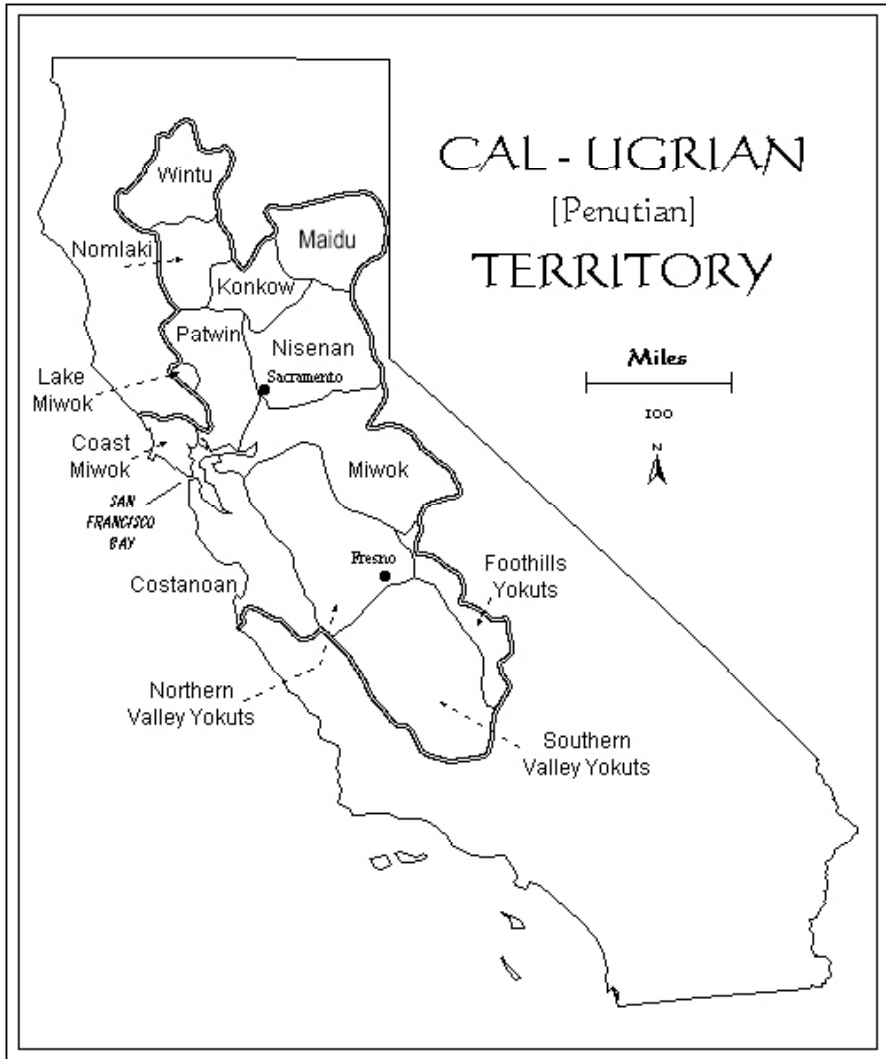


FIGURE 2. Map by James A. Woods.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately Sadowsky was able to demonstrate that historic linguistics provides the best evidence connecting these peoples and their cultures. He published extensively in the linguistic literature abroad, but did prepare a more popularized article on his findings.<sup>6</sup> Much later, he produced a book that restates the general theory, recounts his fieldwork, and reports findings, followed by a detailed comparative linguistic analysis of Ob-Ugrian and Penutian.<sup>7</sup> Regrettably, this is a somewhat obscure publication, not known to a broad audience interested in Native America.

Linguistic scholars tend to agree that the oldest language group in California consists of Hokan-speakers. According to William F. Shipley, "They were then disrupted by the incursion of Penutian, which, spreading through the great central valley, forced Hokan to the periphery"<sup>8</sup> (fig. 2). Numerous scholars, beginning with Alfred L. Kroeber, identified the Penutian group. Shipley reported that some students see a link to some indigenous language groups in Oregon, also along the coast of British Columbia and in southern Mexico. But no one had advanced any theory regarding Old World links to the Penutians. As to archaeological evidence, Richard E. Hughes quotes from an early paper by Kroeber that "None of the peoples of the state possess any traditions of migration or of foreign origin."<sup>9</sup> Evidence to the contrary awaited the field research of another generation of ethnological and linguistic scholars. Hughes restates the findings of Kroeber and others that "Hokan was the most ancient linguistic stock in California and that Penutian-speaking people entered the region somewhat later in time."<sup>10</sup> As background, Hughes is useful to us because he further develops the so-called "Wintun Invasion," proposed by Kenneth Whistler in 1977, who believed that these speakers entered California between AD 700 and AD 1100. But he asserted that they had entered the place we find them today from northwestern California or southwestern Oregon.<sup>11</sup> Still no speculation about Old World origins. Most of Hughes' discussion of the Wintun Invasion focuses on occupation of the Sacramento Delta and parts of Central Valley into areas thinly occupied by Hokan speakers. The study does not advance any theory of historic Old World migrations into California.

Let's now turn to the Ob-Ugrian/Cal-Ugrian connection. Sadovszky reminds us that linguistic scholars have not generally been able to offer advice about the original homelands of Indians in Eurasia. As he put it, "This absence of linguistic argument was most regrettable because it is both the most reliable and the most comprehensive of all arguments—the most natural and simplest way to establish the original homeland of people after they have left their homeland."<sup>12</sup>

His book-length study is introduced by a revised essay on his theories, fieldwork, and findings that significantly demonstrate the relationship between Ob River peoples and Penutian stock in California. The bulk of the book is a thorough comparative grammar and phonology, all of which provides incontrovertible evidence of the connection between these peoples, past and present. Sadovszky, in providing us with cognate words and concepts that relate to homeland and new environments, as well as to various tools, constructions, and other material culture in both parts of the world today, stresses that "the newly arriving Ugrians often utilized their own linguistic inventory to refer to such newly found 'things' as the great California redwoods ... acorn, grizzly bear ... porcupine ... and the mighty California condor."<sup>13</sup> He emphasizes that the most "exciting" arena for comparative study is to bring together linguistics, ethnography, and archaeology. For the latter, he notes that archaeologists here have unearthed perforated bear teeth, assumed to be worn as talismans, just as Ob-Ugrians do. And he offers further evidence of a bear cult in both culture areas under discussion.<sup>14</sup> He also

includes comparative discussion of the Central Californian shaman's Old World origins. It is not my purpose here to spread out a lengthy list of words and discuss linguistics, about which I know only the basics. The book does provide, however, detailed comparative lists of terms for hunting tools, weapons, animals, and so forth.<sup>15</sup> Detailed drawings of hunting and gathering equipment illustrate the book. And he includes a discussion of the time of arrival of these people. Sadovszky concludes that the time frame for arrival in California is still an estimate, but this does not invalidate this comparative linguistic analysis.<sup>16</sup>

I am informed that *The Discovery of California* has not been made readily available and that situation is hopefully going to change despite the passage of six years since its publication. Meantime, of course, scholars interested in the Penutian languages have dealt almost exclusively with the origins and mobility of these speakers within North America, especially in California, the Northwest, possibly into the Great Basin and even farther south into parts of Mexico.

Examination of the broader literature on American Indian linguistics suggests that while several scholars have introduced and/or discussed various theories as to the origins of Indian languages, aside from an awareness of real and potential links between Eastern Asia/Siberia and North America (that is, Inuits on both sides of the Bering Straits who are related), other scholars only infer the migration of peoples from the Old World via the land bridge. Some discussion does undertake to sort variable corollaries to the migration arguments—that is, a single people theory leading to later linguistic diversification within the Americas, multiple peoples and hence many language families, and so on. There is also discussion of maritime migrations, but they tend not to be discussed in the context of the movement of Old World languages to the New World. On occasion scholars have discussed theories such as the Kon-Tiki, in which language (selective words mainly) enters into the debate about origins. In this case, of course, the theory has South Americans making the voyage to the Pacific Islands rather than Polynesians reaching the New World by boat.

Perusal of a number of fairly recent volumes on Native American linguistics reveals that current new research, as well as a review of past findings regarding the Penutian speakers of central California, are obviously unaware of Sadovszky's work, and hopefully this situation will change very soon. This is not to denigrate the research of other scholars. Recent publications by Leanne Hinton and Pamela Munro, Lyle Campbell, Catherine A. Callagan, and Scott DeLancey and Victor Golla do not make any specific reference to maritime migrations of Penutian peoples.<sup>17</sup> Stephen Jett's appraisal of research theories and findings for transoceanic connections between the Old and New Worlds underscores the important arguments for a broader scholarly review of man's capacity to negotiate the oceans. In correspondence with Professor DeLancey, he acknowledged not knowing the book is in print and suggested that he would be happy to consider publishing an appropriate commentary once he has the opportunity to read and evaluate Sadovszky's findings. I also exchanged thoughts with Professor Campbell, who would very much welcome the opportunity to examine the findings.<sup>18</sup> So intrigued by transoceanic possibilities for migration to the New World, Professor Jett has

become the founding editor of a relatively new journal, which hopefully would also report the book in print.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, until this Ob-Ugrian/Cal-Ugrian connection has been better assessed by linguistic and other scholars, the scientific community will not, in my judgment, move forward in the evaluation of evidence that contemporary peoples in parts of Asia are indeed the relatives of extant Native American communities. Sadovszky reveals that comparative historic linguistics is an absolutely essential tool, to be utilized in conjunction with archaeology and ethnography, to make a positive identification of such connections. I would encourage readers to peruse this literature in order to satisfy their curiosity and to answer questions they may have about the methodology and hence the findings.

### NOTES

1. The idea for revisiting Professor Otto von Sadovszky's findings on the origins of the Penutian peoples of central California is mine. However, as it happens, Otto and I have been colleagues—he is professor emeritus of anthropology and I am professor emeritus of geography at Cal State University, Fullerton. Over a long period, I have felt that a broader audience needs to be informed of Otto's findings because they had been only published in either semi-popular form or in obscure highly technical journals and monographs, especially in Europe. Thus Otto has assisted me by offering ideas and reading various drafts. But the final presentation and its errors are my responsibility alone. As I understand the history of this research, Otto encountered the Miwok language (a branch of the Penutian) while sharing an office with another graduate assistant at the University of California, Berkeley. He was surprised to find that a significant number of words, their meanings and their use in context, could be deciphered from his native language, Hungarian. Prior to this time, Otto had spent many years studying Finno-Ugric languages and was aware of the languages of the Voguls and Ostraks of the Ob River area of Siberia, and recognized that they were in the same language community as Hungarian. Thus began his exploration of Penutian speakers and his later fieldwork in Siberia as a guest of his then Soviet counterparts.

2. Otto von Sadovszky, *The Discovery of California: A Cal-Ugrian Comparative Study*, Istor Books 3 (Budapest: Akademiai Kiadó; and Los Angeles: The International Society for Trans-Oceanic Research, 1996).

3. Cf. Thor Heyerdahl, *American Indians in the Pacific: The Theory Behind the Kon-Tiki Expedition* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1952). Cf. Stephen C. Jett, "Pre-Columbian Transoceanic Contacts: What is the Evidence?" *Journal of the West* 37:4 (1998): 11–18.

4. See Vine Deloria, Jr., *Red Earth/White Lies: Native Americans and the Myth of Scientific Fact* (New York: Scribner, 1995).

5. Figures 1 and 2 modify maps found in Sadovszky, *The Discovery of California*. Figure 1 was originally based on a map for an earlier study: Sadovszky, "The Discovery of California: Breaking the Silence of the Siberia-to-America Migrators," *The Californians*, 2:6 (Nov./Dec. 1984): 9–20, ref. to cover. Figure 2 was originally derived from the frontispiece map in *California*, ed. Robert F. Heizer, vol. 8, *The Handbook of North American Indians* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1978).



6. Sadowszky, "The Discovery of California" (1984).
7. Sadowszky, *The Discovery of California* (1996).
8. William F. Shipley, "Native Languages of California," in *California*, vol. 8, *The Handbook of North American Indians*, 80–90, ref. 81.
9. Richard E. Hughes, "California Archaeology and Linguistic History," *Journal of Anthropological Research* 48 (1992): 317–338; ref. 319, citing A. L. Kroeber, "The Archaeology of California," *Anthropological Essays Presented to Frederic Ward Putnam in Honor of His Seventieth Birthday* (New York: Stechert, 1909): 1–42.
10. Hughes, "California Archaeology", 321.
11. *Ibid.*, 322. A more recent study sustains the observation that the Penutian stock should include parts of the Pacific Northwest, although some scholars question the validity of the assertion. The authors also sustain the position that the Penutians were "later arrivals who pushed the Hokan peoples into peripheral positions." See Shirley Silver and Wick R. Miller, *American Indian Languages: Cultural and Social Contexts* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 304–05, 332–33.
12. Sadowszky, *The Discovery of California*, 2.
13. *Ibid.*, xv.
14. *Ibid.*
15. *Ibid.*, 26–28.
16. *Ibid.*, 270.
17. Leanne Hinton and Pamela Munro, eds., *Studies in American Indian Languages: Description and Theory*, University of California Publications in Linguistics 131 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998); Lyle Campbell, *American Indian Languages: The Historical Linguistics of Native America*, Studies in Anthropological Linguistics 12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Catherine A. Callaghan, "More Evidence for Yok-utian: A Reanalysis of the Dixon and Kroeber Sets," *International Journal of American Linguistics* 67:3 (2001): 313ff; Scott DeLancey and Victor Golla, "The Penutian Hypothesis: Retrospect and Prospect," *ibid.*, 63:1 (1997): 171–202.
18. Email correspondence, 16–17 June 2002. Professor DeLancey is a professor of linguistics, University of Oregon and Professor Lyle Campbell is a professor of linguistics, Canterbury University, Christchurch, New Zealand; Jett, "Pre-Columbian."
19. *Pre-Columbiana: A Journal of Long-Distance Contacts*, Department of Textiles and Clothing, University of California Davis (publication pending funding in early 2003).