

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Is Urban a Person or a Place? Characteristics of Urban Indian Country

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32r5j9m0>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 22(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Lobo, Susan

Publication Date

1998-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Is Urban a Person or a Place? Characteristics of Urban Indian Country

SUSAN LOBO

Is urban a person or a place? Urban is a place, a setting in which many Indian people at some time in their lives visit, "establish an encampment," or settle into. Urban doesn't determine self-identity, yet the urban area and urban experiences are the context and some of the factors that contribute to defining identity. The intent of this article is to delineate some of the general structural characteristics of urban Indian communities in the United States, and to indicate the ways in which urban communities interplay with individual and group identity. While most of the focused research for this discussion has been carried out since 1978 in the San Francisco Bay Area, and the principal examples given here are specific to this region, many of the comments also are applicable on a general level to other urban Indian communities such as those found in Seattle, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The work, for example, of Garbarino and Straus on Chicago,¹ Liebow on Phoenix,² Shoemaker on Minneapolis,³ Bramstedt and Weibel-Orlando on Los Angeles,⁴ Danziger on Detroit,⁵ and Guillemin on Boston⁶ indicates par-

Susan Lobo, a cultural anthropologist, is a consultant emphasizing research, advocacy, and project design, working primarily for American Indian tribes and community organizations in the United States and Central and South America. She has been the coordinator of Intertribal Friendship House's Community History Project since 1978, and has taught at the University of California at Berkeley and at Davis.

allels and counterpoints to the regional focus of this article. The next step beyond this current article is delineating the specific ways in which urban communities in different parts of the United States are unique and how they came to develop, as well as taking a comparative approach to understanding the extent and nature of parallels that do exist among widely distant urban Indian communities. It should be noted, however, that an in-depth comparative study of various urban communities is long, long overdue.

This article is based on long-term applied work, research, and personal engagement in the San Francisco Bay Area American Indian community. I began in 1978 as a cofounder, and then have continued as the coordinator of the Community History Project at the Oakland American Indian Center, Intertribal Friendship House (IFH). The Center was established in 1955, and along with the Chicago Indian Center, is one of the oldest urban Indian centers in the United States. It was founded in response to the federal relocation program and to the incipient demographic shift from rural to urban that was then getting underway. As one of the early urban Indian institutions nationally, Intertribal Friendship House and the Oakland Indian community overall continue to loom large in the Indian country cognitive map. IFH is identified by many as the emotional "heart" of the Bay Area Indian community. It is the ideal urban Indian community crossroad from which to see and gain a perspective on the overall Indian community structure and dynamics.

The IFH Community History Project, which started as a narrowly defined oral history project, has grown to the present into an extensive Indian-controlled and community-based research unit and archive of taped oral histories, photographs, videos and films, documents, and ephemera focusing on the Bay Area American Indian community from the 1940s to the present. This is, to my knowledge, one of the very few and also the most extensive archive emphasizing contemporary Indian history within an urban area. It is also a working archive, open to the Indian community as well as to outside researchers, and it is actively circulated, added to, reformulated, interpreted, and used for a wide array of educational and advocacy purposes. Immersion in this material, participation in the continual flow of community events and activities, and a joint working relationship with Indian community members on an ongoing basis on a variety of community projects provided the foundation for the description and analysis that follows.

Methodologically, this kind of deep, long-term and unabashedly personal involvement in a community allows for an understanding both of those aspects of the community that shift and those aspects that persist over time, sometimes stretching across generations. For example, there are delicate balances of power, informed by kinship and tribal affiliation, and routes that leadership and alliance formation take, all unfolding fluidly over long periods of time.

THE COMMUNITY

For American Indians living in the Bay Area and for our definitional purposes here, the Indian community is not a geographic location with clustered residency or neighborhoods, but rather it is fundamentally a widely scattered and frequently shifting network of relationships with locational nodes found in organizations and activity sites of special significance. It is a distinct community that answers needs for affirming and activating identity; it creates contexts for carrying out the necessary activities of community life; and it provides a wide range of circumstances and symbols that encourage "Indian" relationships at the family and community level.

The American Indian community in the San Francisco Bay Area is characterized here on a general level as a social group in which: (1) community members recognize a shared identity; (2) there are shared values, symbols, and history; (3) basic institutions have been created and sustained; and (4) consistent features of social organization have emerged such as those related to social control and the definition of distinctive and specialized gender and age-related roles.

Certain geographic markers around the Bay set the stage for community activities: the enclosing hills, the bay, the bridges that connect the East Bay with San Francisco. However, these geographic features only set the stage for the "Indian map" of the area of shared abstract connotations, where people speak of "going to New Dawn," or nodding with the head to the north of downtown Oakland and saying, "over by CRC," an American Indian family and child assistance agency. People in the Indian community know where these points of reference are; those not participating in the community would not know. Or, for example, when an Indian person comments, quite possibly totally out of context, "You going to Stanford?" the ques-

tion is not, "Do you attend Stanford University?" but rather, "Will I see you at the Stanford Powwow this May?" Or when someone says, "I saw your niece up at Hilltop," the reference is to a high-profile Indian bar, not to be confused with a shopping mall of the same name. Each of these examples illustrates one of the ways in which Indian people in the Bay Area talk about or interpret their environment, which is both a setting for community as a place and also deeply intertwined with the network of relatedness that ties the community members together as a community. Theodoratus and LaPena express this idea well in reference to Wintu sacred geography, "It (this paper) is about topographical features that are the embodiment of Wintu expression of an ordinary and nonordinary world. It is about a concept of land and interpretations of that natural universe that translate into a coherent world."⁷ In the case of the Bay Area Indian community vision of community, it is both the topographical features and the built environment that are a part of creating this "coherent world."

This physical environment, while the backdrop and the grounding for much of the community activity, is not "the community," which instead finds its focus in relationship dynamics and the more abstract realm of shared knowledge that informs and shapes actions. Nor is an urban Indian community situated in an immutable, bounded territory as a reservation is, but rather exists within a fluid region with niches of resources and boundaries that respond to activities, perhaps reflecting a reality closer to homelands prior to the imposition of reservation borders. For example, with the development and flourishing of D-Q University, an Indian-controlled community college, the Bay Area Indian community extended sixty miles to the north to include this institution as an outlying entity.

On tribal homelands a major source of identity is embodied in the land. As Basso notes, "Knowledge of place is therefore closely linked to knowledge of the self, to grasping one's position in the larger scheme of things, including one's own community, and to securing a confident sense of who one is as a person."⁸ Yet in an urban community there essentially is no land base, except for those few recently purchased buildings and properties. On the other hand, as someone recently pointed out to me, "all of it is our urban territory." In this situation, the urban Indian organizations come to powerfully represent Indian "space" or "a place that is Indian" and are intimately tied to identity. Consequently, the control, the programs, and

the guiding values of these organizations are under constant scrutiny, negotiation, and adjustment by core community members who act as community arbitrators.

To many outside the urban Indian community, it is an invisible population, both because of the abstract and non-geographically clustered nature of the community and because of the continued existence of a series of stereotypes regarding Indian people. A widespread and mistaken assumption held by the general public is that American Indians have "vanished" or live overwhelmingly on reservations in rural areas. In reality, this is an expanding population, and the majority of Indian people live in urban areas. From the perspective of much social science literature, in federal and state policy as well as in criteria frequently utilized by funding sources, there is an oft-cited externally imposed dichotomy between urban and rural, based on the lingering stereotype that "Indian" is synonymous with rural and that urban is somehow not genuinely Indian. While there are certainly differences in these two types of settings, establishing rural/urban as the defining characteristic of identity is not realistic from an Indian point of view, serving further to alienate Indian people officially from homelands. Conversely, for many Indian people the urban areas are visualized on one level more as an extension of home territory or, as one person put it, "our urban encampment out here." For those living in the city, even those a few generations removed from tribal homelands, these strong linkages to "back home" are, for the most part, not broken. One simply extends the sense of territory, often keenly aware that sacred places are found at home and that after death one will very likely be buried there.

The underlying sense of community, if viewed fundamentally as a network of relatedness in tribal homelands that has become subsequently structured into formalized, federally prescribed tribes, reemerges in the city. In contrast to the more fluid network of relatedness, the rigid corporate social body demanded by federally recognized tribalness falls away. The federal government's image of tribes as corporate entities within rigidly demarcated territory or reservations, governed by a body of elected officials, and having stringently designated criteria for membership is not transferred to urban Indian communities where the social entity is reconstituted with a structuring based on a network of relatedness, where the fluid territory has nonspecific and changing outer limits, where there is no over-arching formalized governing body, and where mem-

bership is defined by a series of strongly situational and, to some degree negotiable, criteria.

The most striking urban parallel to the corporate tribal structuring found on rural reservations is the legal nonprofit status of many urban Indian organizations in which there is a governing board of directors, bylaws, and possibly membership lists. However, Indian people in the city, in contrast to the situation in a reservation tribal setting, are not governed by these organizations as criteria for community membership, and they may choose whether to become active in any particular organization at any specific time.

Although structured differently, the urban community comes to hold many connotations for Indian people similar to those of the tribe. The urban community gives a sense of belonging, a need to look inward to this social entity, and a feeling of responsibility to contribute to the well-being of the members via support of the continuity and flourishing of urban institutions. In the Bay Area, one occasionally hears joking reference to the Indian community as "The Urban Tribe."

One of the underlying objectives of the federal relocation program initiated in the 1950s was the assimilation of American Indians into an envisioned mainstream. Yet to many Indian people in the Bay Area, the existence and resiliency of the Indian community is an expression of resistance to pressure and domination by the non-Indian world. One factor in this persistence is the fluid network-based social structure. As Indian people often explain it, the community itself has the potential for regeneration. The community is ephemeral in nature as Coyote has taught people to appreciate, with the power to continually take new forms and thus endure. Or it is described as being like the old-time warrior's strategy to disperse, vanish, become invisible, and then to regroup to fight again another day. This dynamic is a familiar one to Indian people, who throughout the history of Indian-White relations and before have sought ways to persist as individuals and as peoples. The institutions in the Indian community are in continual flux, able to disassemble and reassemble. Yet through all of this motion, there is an underlying network structure that allows for persistence.

The urban community, in addition to its tradition as the doorway to jobs and education, also functions as a doorway and a refuge for those who have unsolvable problems or who are deemed undesirable in their home reservation area. The vil-

lain Emo in Silko's classic novel *Ceremony* is last mentioned leaving New Mexico, "They told him to never come back around here. The old man said that. I heard he went to California'.... 'California,' Tayo repeated softly, 'that's a good place for him.'"⁹ The urban community is also a gateway for those, such as Jackson discusses, who have been alienated from their tribal roots and who wish to re-identify as Indian.¹⁰ There are also those with hazily defined distant Indian ancestry who create a niche for themselves in the urban Indian community and who are generally accepted if they make a substantial contribution to the community well-being. Increasingly, the urban community is a doorway into Indian country for Indian people who were "adopted out" in infancy and who seek to reestablish their Indianness in adulthood. Some of these mechanisms of re-identification have been discussed by Snipp in regard to the increasing U.S. census count of American Indians.¹¹

Also, the American Indian community is characterized by a geographic mobility as people move in and out of the city, make return visits to their rural home territories or reservations, or sometimes return there for good. People speak of circulating through or of establishing a temporary urban living situation as a way of indicating that living in the Bay Area is viewed as an extension of their original territory. At the same time, people often speak longingly of "back home," and there are shared in-group and tribally specific understandings of the connotations that "back home" holds. These are expressed in jokes ("You know that one about the Doggy Diner down on East 12th and the two Sioux guys who just come into town?"), in music ("Without Rezervation," the name of Oakland's Indian rap group), and in reference to aspects of the natural world. Movement through space, as movement through time, is a part of living.

In addition to increasing dramatically in population during the past fifty years, the Bay Area Indian community, as is characteristic of many urban Indian communities, has become increasingly diverse and complex in the following ways.

(1) *There has been a proliferation of organizations*, the crucial nodes in the network of community. This array of organizations has become increasingly specialized as community needs become apparent and funding and human resources become available. For example, the generalized multi-service Indian Center has spawned a now separate preschool and a number of other educational efforts, as well as many specialized cultural

arts and social activist and social service-focused organizations and projects.

(2) *The community is now multigenerational.* Whereas those first to move to the Bay Area through relocation in the 1950s were primarily young single people and young families, since relocation the infant fourth generation is now often seen playing at their mother's feet during meetings. This generational layering means that experiences, urban personal histories, and orientation toward both urban and rural contexts have become increasingly varied. The urban angst expressed in the now classic and still enjoyed Floyd Red Crow Westerman songs of the 1970s such as "Quiet Desperation" and "Going Home" are contrasted with the contemporary Indian rap group, "Without Rezervation," which is characterized unequivocally on its compact disc cover as coming from the "mean streets of Oakland."

(3) *The community is multitribal,* and as intertribal marriages continue to occur, the children and grandchildren are themselves often multitribal. This has the potential to enrich each child's identity, but also to create complexities related to tribal enrollment and tribally based cultural knowledge. Recent research in the Bay Area in which 290 women were interviewed indicated ninety tribes represented: thirty-five in-state tribes and fifty-seven from out of state.¹²

(4) *The community is linked* in increasingly diverse ways to often geographically distant peoples and places in Indian homelands. The term *Indian country* has come to include the urban communities. Family members visit from home, and visits to home are made to attend funerals, visit relatives, or to take children there for the summer. Some older people decide to retire back home. Medicine people frequently come out to the city for ceremonies, or people return home for ceremonies. There is the recent and increasing presence in the city of the nearby "casino tribes" via their in-town offices and staff. There are also those living on the streets who follow an annual seasonal route between various cities and rural areas.

(5) *There is increased economic and class diversity* in the Bay Area Indian community, some resulting from educational opportunities that first became available in the late 1960s and some the result of business and professional successes. There are those living hand-to-mouth on the streets, and those arriving in splendor at the gala annual American Indian Film Festival at the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco. There are the many whose education does not include high school grad-

uation, and those completing their doctorates in ethnic studies, anthropology, or education at the University of California or Stanford, or those taking advanced computer courses at the community-based United Indian Nations in Oakland.

(6) *There is now a recognized urban history* and a community persona that is frequently referenced and that creates a framework for shared identity. A series of events and people, tied to dates, is shared in the minds of community members as symbolically significant. For example, particularly memorable are the occupation of Alcatraz, the Bay Area Princess competitions, the old Intertribal Friendship House Music Festivals, and the annual Stanford powwow. Remembrances are filled with shared connotations. "Remember when they drew the ticket for that raffled car, there was standing room only, and it was the director's girlfriend who got it!" "Ah, yes. And what about the meeting twenty-three years ago." "And your grandmother stood up and in front of everyone said *that* about my aunt at that board meeting." Everyone gives "that look," remembering this event well; if they weren't there they certainly heard about it in detail. A well-known activist leader recalled recently to a group, "And we started right here. We started the Longest Walk to Washington, D.C. right at this door." Many nodded in agreement and remembrance. These are parables of life in the city and a means of validating the shared historical content of urban living as a community.

IDENTITY

Defining "Who is Indian?"—which raises the issue of who does the identifying—is an emotion-laden topic anywhere in Indian country, with its implications of inclusion and exclusion. For example, there is self-identity, identity externally imposed, situationally appropriate shifts in identity, and shifts in identity which may occur over a lifetime. In urban areas, although no role exists comparable to tribal roles, there are a number of other ways that one is identified by self and others as a community member and as Indian. The urban Indian community is most frequently invisible to the non-Indian world, both informally in the general public mind that has not discarded the stereotype that everything Indian is rural and in the past, but also formally via institutions such as the U.S. Census Bureau that has yet to adequately count urban Indian people.¹³ Likewise, the federal emphasis on ances-

try as the outstanding defining criteria, represented in a "blood quantum" model, is a much narrower and limiting criterion than that found in urban Indian communities.

From within the urban community, one finds a very different prospective membership than that found on tribal homelands, which are structured by federally imposed criteria. As with the fluidity of defining the urban "territory," membership in the urban Indian community and the link to Indianness, as defined by the community, is likewise fluid. Membership in the Indian community is known and agreed upon through informal consensus. Indian people feel comfortable with this approach. Participants share an understanding of the social boundaries of the American Indian community, as well as the membership within the community. These boundaries and the community membership are fluid, however, and always under review and negotiation. Those non-Indians who do not participate, who are external to the community, are not aware of these dynamics that tie the community together and mark who is "in the community" and who is not. Defining Indianness in the city is released from the burden of the formalized documentation imposed on federally recognized tribes. For example, recently in preparation for the board election at one of the urban organizations in the Bay Area, as a strategy to channel the election outcome, a board member sent a letter indicating that in order to vote community members should bring documentation proving they were Indian. Many people were acutely offended; the strategy backfired and the board member was roundly criticized for taking an inappropriate stance, and her request was ignored at the polls.

Another example in an urban setting of the rejection and disdain for federally imposed tribal formula emanating from governmental demands for enrollment numbers was demonstrated by a group of Bay Area Indian artists in protest of laws requiring proof of Indianness in order to exhibit their art as Indian artists. One artist, Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, took a series of defiant photographs of herself with numbers painted across her forehead. In essence these people are asserting, "I am Indian because I say I am." "I am Indian because you know me and my family and see me participate in the community." "And I am Indian because I know what it is to be Indian: the protocols, the jokes, the knowledge of shared history, the racism and struggle that is a part of who we all are." Thus, in urban areas Indian identity is defined through:

- (1) *Ancestry*: Does a person have Indian relatives and ancestors, and function as a member of an Indian extended family?
- (2) *Appearance*: Does a person "look Indian"?
- (3) *Cultural elements*: Is the person knowledgeable about the culture of his or her people and of those pan-Indian values and social expectations shared within the urban Indian community?
- (4) *Indian community participation*: Does the person "come out" for Indian events and activities in the Indian community and contribute to the community well-being?

The weight and combination given to these elements vary situationally to determine Indian identity and, to some extent, are always under community assessment, shifting with the changing times. For example, many people accepted in the Bay Area Indian community may not "look very Indian" or may not have verifiable documented Indian ancestry, yet through a long history of active participation in and contribution to the community well-being, as well as demonstration of a thorough understanding of Indian values and protocols, will be deemed without hesitation to be a member of the Indian community--until a conflict arises; then this combination may be critically scrutinized.

Also, in an urban area there is an element of choice as each individual determines to what degree and in what circumstances tribal membership and urban Indian community participation is actualized. Thus, situationally, individuals may choose which criterion of Indianness may be activated and when. Some Indian individuals living in the Bay Area are affiliated with a home tribe, but do not choose to participate in or identify with the urban Indian community during a particular time in their life. Others are actively engaged as members of their home tribe and are also participants in, and identify with, the Bay Area American Indian community. Others may not be enrolled or be active participants in their home tribe, yet they may be very involved and active in the urban community. Obviously, there are also some people who though identifying as Indian do not participate in or identify with the urban community or a home tribe. Some people have chosen at some point in their life, as a result of racism, assimilation pressures, or out-marrying, to pass as a non-Indian, for example, as Mexican, Italian, or White. Increasingly, many of these individuals are choosing to reevaluate their racial self-identity,¹⁴ and to reestablish their American Indian identity through reinte-

grating into and becoming active in the Bay Area Indian community.

The position of children in the urban community is a telling one. In an urban community as tribally diverse as the Bay Area, after two or three generations, a number of children who, while undeniably Indian genetically, may come to have difficulty becoming enrolled in any one particular tribe. Also, some children with a mother from a patrilineal tribe and a father from a matrilineal tribe may not be recognized by or enrolled in either tribe. These children of mixed tribal heritage and those of Indian/non-Indian heritage often, nevertheless, are active and accepted participants in the urban Indian community. Indian parents who are involved in the Bay Area community and whose children, for one of the reasons sketched here, do not have strong ties to a home tribe often express concern that their children will lose their identity as American Indians. A major theme of activities in the Bay Area Indian community is that participation validates and heightens Indian identity, and parents frequently facilitate their children's participation, knowing that this participation will foster a strong sense of Indian identity. For instance, children may join in special educational efforts such as attending Hintil Ku Caa's preschool and after-school programs, may participate with the family in intertribal powwows and other activities, or may come with their families to events such as the Wednesday Night Dinner at Intertribal Friendship House.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article raises the caution that a much used concept such as "community" may not be as simple, or as one-dimensional, as it appears. It is important to pay close attention to the ways that people and communities of people perceive and define their environment, both the physical and social aspects. Some of the fundamental ways in which the complex urban Indian community in the San Francisco Bay Area has constituted itself and in turn how this community structuring relates to identity have been delineated here. Conceptually, the community here is primarily abstract, based as it is on a series of very dynamic relationships and shared meanings, history, and symbols, rather than based on the more commonly assumed clustered residential and commercial neighborhood. Although most Indian peo-

ple living in the San Francisco Bay Area are by and large adept users of the roads and freeways, take advantage of the recreational opportunities the parks offer, and live in a wide range of apartments and houses, this physical environment—while providing the backdrop and the physical grounding for much of the community activity—is not “the community” which instead finds its focus in relationship dynamics and the more abstract realm of shared knowledge that informs and shapes actions.

NOTES

1. Merwyn S. Garbarino, “Life in the City: Chicago,” in *American Indian in Urban Society*, ed. Jack Waddell and Michael Watson (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1971); Terry Straus, “Retribalization in Urban Indian Communities” (San Francisco, paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Meetings, 1996).

2. Edward B. Liebow, “Urban Indian Institutions in Phoenix: Transformation from Headquarters City to Community,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 18:4 (1991).

3. Nancy Shoemaker, “Urban Indians and Ethnic Choices: American Indian Organizations in Minneapolis, 1920-1950,” *The Western History Quarterly* (November 1988).

4. Wayne G. Bramstedt, “Corporate Adaptations of Urban Migrants: American Indian Voluntary Associations in the Los Angeles Metropolitan Area,” unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of California, Los Angeles, 1977); Joan Weibel-Orlando, *Indian Country, L.A.: Maintaining Ethnic Community in Complex Society* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

5. Edmund Jefferson Danziger Jr., *Survival and Regeneration: Detroit's American Indian Community* (Detroit: Wayne State Press, 1991).

6. Jeanne Guillemin, *Urban Renegades: The Cultural Strategy of American Indians* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975).

7. Dorothea J. Theodoratus and Frank LaPena, “Wintu Sacred Geography,” in *California Indian Shamanism*, ed. Lowell Bean (Menlo Park: Ballena Press, 1992), 211.

8. Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 34.

9. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 260.

10. Deborah Jackson, “Urban Indian Identity and the Violence of Silence,” paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Meetings (San Francisco, 1996).

11. C. Matthew Snipp, *American Indians: The First of this Land* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1989).

12. Dorie Klein, Elaine Zahnd, Bohdan Kolody, Sue Holtby, and Loraine T. Midanik, *Pregnant and Parenting American Indian Study* (Berkeley: Western Consortium for Public Health and San Diego State University Foundation, 1995).

13. For discussion of the Indian undercount in the Bay Area see Susan Lobo, *Oakland's American Indian Community: History, Social Organization and Factors that Contribute to Census Undercount* (Washington, DC: Center for Survey Methods Research, Bureau of the Census, 1990). *Ibid.*, *American Indians in the San Francisco Bay Area and the 1990 Census, Ethnographic Exploratory Research Report #18* (Washington, DC: Center for Survey Methods Research, Bureau of the Census, 1992).

14. C. Matthew Snipp, *American Indians: The First of this Land*.