

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Quest for Tribal Acknowledgment: California's Honey Lake Maidus. By Sara-Larus Tolley.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4rr7z9m7>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Field, Les

Publication Date

2007

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/>

own government based on republican principles. The Cherokee adopted “modern ways” but intended to remain autonomous. This position did not hold up in connection with the United States’ colonial and imperial power.

In part III, “Regeneration: Readings in Contemporary Cherokee Literature,” Justice pairs and discusses six writers: Marilou Awiakta (*Selu: Seeking the Corn-Mother’s Wisdom*) and Thomas King (*In Truth and Bright Water*), Wilma Mankiller (*Mankilled: A Chief and Her People*) and Geary Hobson (*The Last of the Ofos*), and Diane Glancy (*Pushing the Bear*) and Robert Conley (*Mountain Windsong*). He pairs these writers because they represent central spheres of cultural influence. Awiakta and King represent the Beloved Path principle of peace. Mankiller and Hobson represent the Chickamauga consciousness with emphasis on Cherokee resistance. Glancy and Conley braid both of these concepts in their stories of the historical Trail of Tears.

It seems to me that in looking at the Cherokee culture, there is diversity within diversity. Justice makes a clear track through the long struggle to establish Native literature and literary criticism by Natives. It is difficult because Cherokee tribalism has no clear-cut definition. It is hybrid and syncretistic. The Cherokee could be called “the general Indian.” Justice believes that it’s the fire of words that survives the storm of loss and erasure. Here is a Cherokee speaking for the Cherokee. These are the issues that matter in the many-sided truth of intermarriage, dilution of bloodline, assimilation, acculturation, pockets of traditional beliefs and practices, and fuzziness.

Diane Glancy
Macalester College

Quest for Tribal Acknowledgment: California’s Honey Lake Maidu. By Sara-Larus Tolley with foreword by Greg Sarris. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006. 300 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

Sara-Larus Tolley’s *Quest for Tribal Acknowledgment: California’s Honey Lake Maidu* offers an excellent example of how anthropologists can shed light upon a particular case to illustrate analytically a phenomenon of broad applicability and importance. That is, Tolley’s description and analysis of the Honey Lake Maidu’s struggle to achieve federal recognition instantiates a much broader critical review of the Federal Acknowledgment Process (FAP) as it bears upon the struggles of unrecognized Indian tribes in the United States. Tolley’s book accurately illustrates the kinds of work that anthropologists do nowadays, far from the halls of academe yet intimately entwined in the historical legacies of anthropological scholarship and its political undercurrents and applications.

The strange and contorted history that led many Native American peoples into the bizarre yet indispensable designation of “federally recognized tribe” after the implementation of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and left probably just as many outside that category is rooted in British colonialism, which began well before the United States existed. The case of California’s unrecognized tribes presents a particularly nasty chapter in that history, a

chapter characterized by the genocidal impulses and imperatives on the part of federal and state authorities and by the intricate inefficiencies of a bloated bureaucracy. Tolley emphasizes how important genocide is in the history of California's tribes and in her work with the Maidu people who consider the Honey Lake area in the northern sector of the Sierra Nevada their aboriginal home. Just how important her book is to unrecognized California tribes can be judged by the fact that the foreword to the volume was written by Greg Sarris, the chair of one of the few unrecognized California tribes to win federal acknowledgment in the past decades. In the case of his tribe, the Federated Coast Miwok, that success did not result from the formal FAP process, which underscores the tortuous nature of the FAP and how information about each tribe's experience has value for all tribes engaged in this struggle.

In researching the history and contemporary social and cultural character of the Honey Lake Maidu, Tolley was responsible for assembling information, working with the tribal leaders, and writing the first version of the Honey Lake Maidu petition for federal acknowledgment. The strongest suit Tolley develops in presenting the Honey Lake Maidu case and her role in developing it underscores a painful and insidious contradiction. The FAP demands that unrecognized tribes substantiate their historical and cultural identities under a set of rules that in every way ignores, discounts, and disregards the very historical processes that led to and shaped that tribe's unrecognized status. These historical processes, which include territorial disenfranchisement and the violent suppression of indigenous ceremonial life, subsistence practices, and spoken languages, have made it very difficult, if not completely unlikely, for an unrecognized tribe to demonstrate its identity according to those rules. Such a tableau is so saturated with mind-numbing double contradictions and frustrations that Tolley repeatedly uses the term *Kafkaesque* to describe the situation facing unrecognized tribes. Tolley does a superb job of showing how this horrendous situation works to accentuate intratribal conflict and tension as well as tensions and confrontations between the unrecognized tribes and neighboring recognized tribes (in this case the Susanville Rancheria Maidus among others), peoples who are in many ways and many times overrelated by lines of kinship.

The more superficial problems in Tolley's presentation of this important and fascinating case could be rectified easily enough. I found insufficient information in the introduction concerning how the analysis was to develop in the body of the book. The introduction should have described explicitly, chapter by chapter, her argument, making clear the analytic and rhetorical strategies she intended to use. Without guidance, the several shifts in style and mode of presenting and analyzing evidence led to a sense of disjuncture as I encountered them. Nothing is wrong with incorporating many different voices and ways of writing and arguing into one volume. In my own work, I have argued in favor of using and combining several strategies, particularly in my work in California with unrecognized and recognized tribes. But the readers need to be prepared for and guided through those shifts and disjunctures carefully so that they will understand how those shifts enrich and advance the book's arguments. For example, I enjoyed Tolley's marked shift into a much more direct ethnographic style in her discussion of the Bear Dance, but the

introduction could have indicated why and where she intended to make that shift. The deployment of the basketball metaphor, in the chapter “Petitioning and Freedom,” did not illuminate or bring into sharper focus the analysis of the evolution of the acknowledgment petition. The appearance of that metaphor came without warning and was not integrated into the overall argument of that chapter or of the rest of the book.

A deeper but more interesting problem is situated at the crux of Tolley’s positionality and the making of this book. Tolley is not a Honey Lake Maidu but is a non-Native American anthropologist doing ethnography with a Native people. Yet the Honey Lake Maidu hired her to coordinate and act as primary author of their FAP petition. In that capacity she became an insider of sorts and was obliged to take a consistent position in support of the Honey Lake Maidu’s struggle to provide them with relevant evidence of their historical and contemporary identity. That she is an anthropologist and partisan creates some quandaries when it comes to key disputed parts of the Honey Lake Maidu petition. Perhaps the most important quandary has to do with establishing the aboriginal boundaries of the Honey Lake Maidu territory, vis-à-vis the Paiutes and other neighboring Maidu groups. Tolley has to navigate such disputes as an (impartial) scholar, on the one hand, and advocate for the tribe as its tribal ethnohistorian, on the other hand. I wondered how Tolley’s critical observations about internal political battles and tensions within the Honey Lake Maidu tribe and between the Honey Lake Maidus and neighboring Indian groups might affect the fate of the petition. Does she reveal too much or not enough? I would have appreciated a more open and thorough discussion of the ethical issues involved in publicly airing these disputes at the same time she was writing the petition. At the end of the book the reader learns that she was not retained as tribal ethnohistorian because of the failure of the petition she authored to move very far through the FAP process. I wonder whether that outcome and the fact that the petition is being completely rewritten and overhauled in effect permits her to air some of the dirty laundry.

Tolley’s book and developing career also suggest some other important questions. Although her graduate education and preparation, and the academic advisement and endorsements her work has received, are of the highest caliber, she did not become an academic anthropologist working in a university anthropology department. Instead, her work as a staff ethnologist and ethnohistorian for the Honey Lake Maidus represents quite accurately the nature of work that many of the newly minted PhDs are doing. I do not say “end up doing” because this implies that these jobs and uses of anthropology are second rate or low down on the scholarship hierarchy (at the top of which are always the prized academic jobs). As more anthropologists and other scholars stake out new terrain working outside of academia, all fields will have to reckon with a whole-scale reevaluation of the meaning and significance of scholarly research and writing. Increasingly, the kind of work Tolley has done and describes in this book will be recognized as profoundly significant.

Les Field

University of New Mexico, Albuquerque