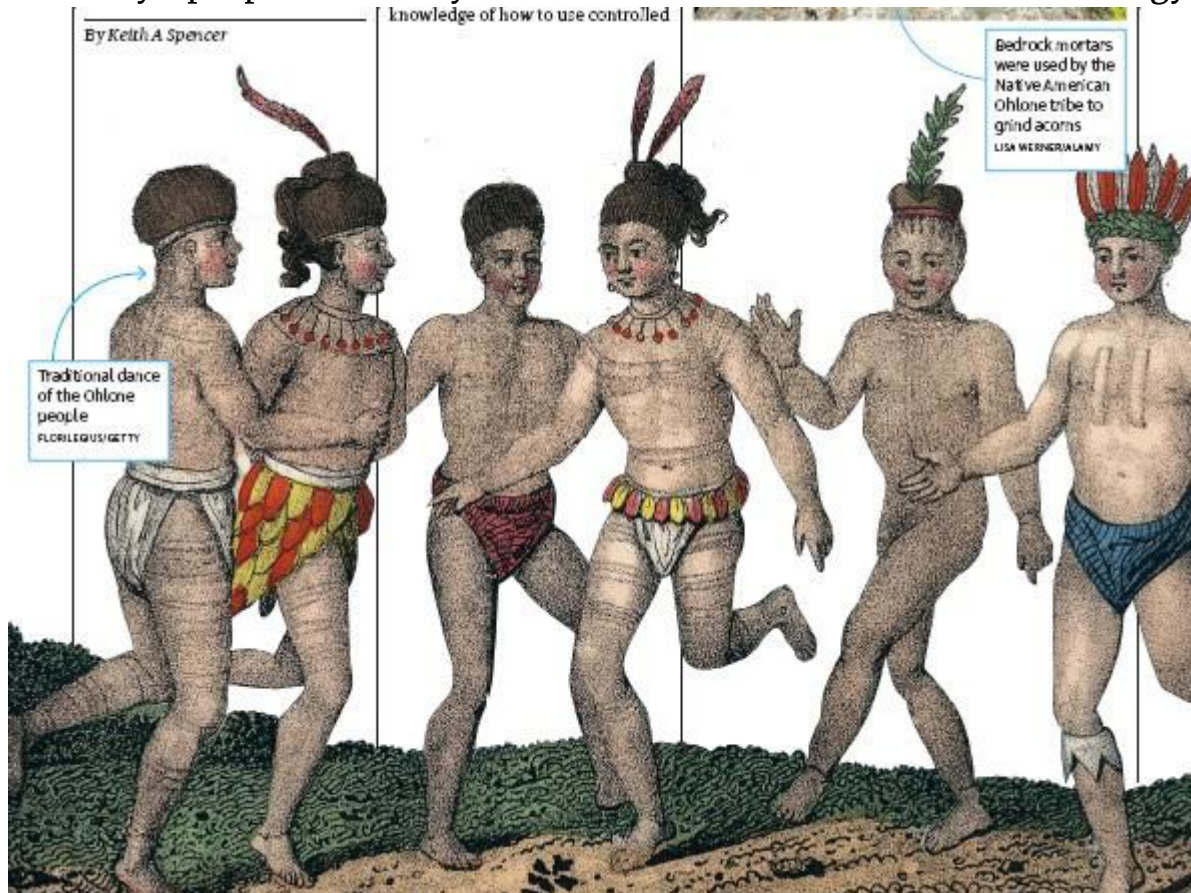


Silicon Valley's original innovators

The methods of the Ohlone people prove that modern technology doesn't always make us more advanced

The Guardian Weekly · 18 genn. 2019 · By Keith A Spencer KEITH A SPENCER IS THE EDITOR OF SALON AND AUTHOR OF A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF SILICON VALLEY

There was a point in time, before colonisation, when the San Francisco Bay Area was dominated by a people with a way of life that did not revolve around technology.



Five hundred years ago, this swath of northern California was populated by the Ohlone peoples, about 10,000 of whom lived in the stretch of land that we call the Bay Area. So rich in plant and animal life was this region that the Ohlone were able to survive without farming or animal domestication; indeed, western explorers, when they eventually arrived, were amazed at the quantity of wild animal life.

The Ohlone lived off acorns from all the different varieties of oaks, blackberries and gooseberries, chia, shellfish and the roots of many plants. They hunted squirrels, rabbits, elk, bear, whale, otter and seal. They did not “farm” in the western sense of the word, though they had a complex knowledge of how to use controlled

You can no longer survive in the Bay Area on acorns and wild trout
burns to cultivate plant and animal food sources.

Though they are called Ohlone now, at the time they did not think of themselves as a contiguous group: there were at least eight different languages between their small tribelets, each one spoken by about a thousand people. One might walk 30km and be unable to un-

derstand the local tongue. Their laissez-faire social relationships were alien to the hierarchy-obsessed Spanish missionaries, who commented that “in their pagan state no superiority of any kind was recognised”.

Likewise, the Ohlone lived in a communal society – which vaguely resembled a gift economy – that shocked the missionaries. “They give away all they have ... [and] whoever reached their dwelling is at once offered the food they possess,” one missionary said.

There was no obvious form of government. Status and competition were not important to the Ohlone; generosity and family were. This led early missionaries, who were subject to powerful European governments, to conclude that the Ohlone lived in “anarchy”.

In the late 18th century, the newly arrived Spanish quickly set up missions in California, and began forcibly taking Ohlone subjects into the missions – ostensibly to convert them. Yet the Ohlone were held against their will and forced to labour for the Spanish, who separated men and women, lashing and hitting them when they refused to act as the missionaries pleased. One firsthand account describes the Spanish missions as indistinguishable from slave plantations.

In addition to violence against the Ohlone, the missionaries brought diseases with them, which killed many Ohlone independently. Various epidemics in the 1790s killed hundreds at Mission San Francisco and Mission Santa Clara. And over the course of the 19th century, the Native population of California dropped from an estimated 310,000 to 100,000. This mirrors what was happening in the rest of North America: there were an estimated 10 million Native Americans living “north of Mexico” when Columbus arrived, a number that eventually fell to less than 1 million.

As the Spanish established their missions, they also imposed their technological ideals on the land. By 1777, Mission Santa Clara (in presentday Santa Clara, California, now home to the Intel Corporation) had a farming and livestock operation that included pigs, chickens, goats, roosters, corn and wheat: mostly non-native species. Despite re-shaping the landscape to their technological whims, the missionaries were surprised at how the Ohlone continued to “nourish themselves” on acorns, trout and other wild harvests. The Spanish did not understand why the Ohlone did not have reverence for their “superior” systems. ‘For one who has not seen it, it is impossible to form an idea of the attachment of these poor creatures for the forest,’ wrote Basque missionary Fermín Francisco de Lasuén. “[Outside the mission] they are without a roof, without shade, without food, without medicine, and without any help. Here they have all of these things to their heart’s content. Here the number who die is much less than there. They see all this, and yet they yearn for the forest.” It was unfathomable to missionaries like Lasuén that the Ohlone might prefer a world without the rigid hierarchies and controlling attitude towards nature that the Europeans possessed.

The differences between the Ohlone and the Spanish ways of life reveal the contradictions inherent to our presentday idea of “technology”. To borrow the Silicon Valley business-speak of today, who possessed more advanced technology? The Ohlone or the Spanish? Who was more innovative? The deep knowledge of the maintenance of the landscape, and the communal lifestyles enjoyed by the Ohlone, meant that the Bay Area remained in a relatively stable ecological state for a thousand years. The incursion of the colonisers dis-

rupted this; they imposed their technological whims and their agricultural logic on the landscape and enslaved and exploited the Ohlone. You can no longer survive in the Bay Area on acorns and wild trout and blackberries, as the Ohlone did; much of the plant and animal life has been extirpated to make way for western civilisation.

Hence, the notion that the Spanish were more “advanced”, technologically speaking, is arguable. I am reminded of a recent news story about a newly released consumer product called the Juicero : a \$400 so-called juicer whose parent company is backed by \$120m in investment capital, including money from Google. It is a wifi-enabled juicer that connects to the internet to inform you of your juice’s origin as you drink.

Despite being termed a “juicer”, it doesn’t really juice anything; you can’t drop a carrot, apple or orange inside it. It can only make juice by wringing out pre-sealed packages shipped by the company. A mini-scandal erupted after a Bloomberg reporter discovered that one could use one’s hands to wring juice out of the juice packs, and fill a glass with juice much faster than the machine can.

Shortly thereafter, the company ran out of money and shut down.

Human hands are not thought of as particularly hi-tech. But in this case they were, from a technological standpoint, superior to the \$400 Juicero.

The Juicero saga attests to the fact that sometimes technology doesn’t make us more advanced, or intelligent, or make our lives better or faster at all. Sometimes it merely makes us dependent on new, more resourceintensive systems, while casting aside those that are incompatible with so-called economic logic.

While the overall number of Spanish missionaries in California had been small, American settlers began arriving in droves in the 1840s.

The American settlers were cruel and genocidal towards the remaining Native Americans, perhaps more so than the Spanish or Mexicans. As one historian wrote, the American incursion into California marked “one of the last human hunts of civilisation, and the basest and most brutal of them all”. There are still some people alive today who personally knew those involved in the slow-moving genocide of the Ohlone and other Native groups.

My grandfather, still living, who grew up in the Bay Area in the 1920s, recalls as a child hearing adult men talking about heading out to the woods to hunt (read: murder) American Indians. It is not so distant an era.

So it went that over the course of a century, the indigenous Ohlone peoples – and other Native Americans of California – were killed and displaced as the Spanish, Mexicans and later Americans rebuilt California into an edifice of western society.