

INDICATORS OF WEALTH IN A LATE PATWIN VILLAGE

Peggy Badovinac
Department of Anthropology
University of California
Davis, CA 95616

ABSTRACT

The Patwin village of *T'saki*, also known as the Miller Site, has been excavated three times in the past 50 years. These excavations yielded a large collection of shell beads and ornaments. These traditional indicators of wealth are interpreted as the visible effects of the articulation of the modes of production. As such, they are used to address the issue of distortion of the native economy as a result of contact with the Euro-American economic sphere.

Why do we see such uneven economic development worldwide? While a few nations dominate the marketplace, others, particularly in the third world, fall farther behind all the time. Some political economists like to explain this phenomenon as the outcome of the articulation of the modes of production. When an indigenous economy comes in contact with capitalism, a process is set into motion which leads first to intensification of the native culture, then distortion and eventually the collapse of the native economy, as it is absorbed by capitalism. This process, simplified here, is frequently offered as an explanation for the uneven economic development in modern third world nations. But articulation of the modes of production has been occurring for several hundred years. Which raises the question: Is it possible to see, in the archaeological record, the effects of the articulation of an indigenous economy with a capitalist one? I believe that it is possible to see these effects. I offer as evidence, the artifacts associated with a single burial, which were recovered more than 20 years ago, and overlooked until recently.

The burial I speak of comes from the Miller Site, Colusa I. The Miller site, which may be the

ethnographic Patwin village of *T'saki*, has been the subject of three archaeological excavations. Evidence suggests that this village was occupied from at least 1,700 B.P. to A.D. 1872 (Henry Schulz, personal communication, 1992). The projects carried out here have yielded large collections of artifacts and faunal remains which are now being recatalogued and analyzed, as part of a U.C. Davis repatriation project. Because this site was occupied well into the historic period, the collections from the Miller Site also provide useful information about the effect of contact on the Native American economy. Large numbers of clam shell disks, *Haliotis* ornaments, and glass trade beads were found here in a single burial, that of an infant. In another context, this association might suggest evidence of differential status, often seen as indicator of evolving social stratification. To offer such an interpretation in this particular context is to miss the point. The contents of this single burial encapsulate the cultural intensification and distortion which was the result of contact with the Euro-American economic sphere.

The Miller site is on the west bank of the Sacramento River, approximately 35 miles north of Sacramento, about one quarter mile from the

present-day river bank. Like most known aboriginal village sites along the river, the Miller site is a mound which - in 1935, when it was first excavated - rose some 9 ft above the valley floor, a natural accumulation of midden resulting from occupation over a long period of time (Heizer 1936). Before Euro-American settlement, the banks of the Sacramento river were lined with gallery forests of valley oaks, alders, and willow. This riparian woodland extended several hundred yards on each side of the river. Just beyond the forest were the grasslands of the central valley, which were not suitable for habitation, but were very important to the subsistence of the villagers. In the drier times of year, these plains were an abundant source of seeds and grazing area for elk and antelope. In the wet season, when the plains turned into marshes, huge flocks of waterfowl gathered here, and were taken by the natives using decoys and nets (Powers 1877). The river itself was a rich source of fish, featuring annual runs of steelhead trout as well as spring and fall salmon runs (Baumhoff 1978).

The Miller site was excavated first in 1935 by a crew under the direction of Robert Heizer. The objective of that excavation was to identify cultural affiliations (Heizer 1936). At that time, 55 burials were excavated. About one-third of the burials had no associated artifacts and the remainder contained approximately 2,200 *Olivella* sp. beads, 5,900 clam shell disks, 67 *Haliotis* sp. pendants, and one glass trade bead. Heizer's report on the distribution of the *Olivella* sp. beads and *Haliotis* sp. ornaments notes one burial that contained 650 *Olivella* sp. beads, and another that included 267 *Haliotis* sp. ornaments. The distribution of clam shell disks is less clearly reported, but one burial seems to have included 2,325 clam shell disks. Heizer (1936) does note that infant burials were more carefully done and tended to contain a greater variety of ornaments than those of adults.

A subsequent excavation was conducted in 1963 by Martin Baumhoff and Walter Brown. Most of the records from this project were lost, but it is known that 11 burials were excavated.

The artifacts associated with these burials are summarized in Table 1. While the data are meager, it is apparent that no lavish displays of wealth were included in these burials.

A final excavation was conducted in 1973 by a crew directed by Peter Schulz. Ten units were excavated. Sixteen features were uncovered, including hearths, structure floors, post holes, storage pits, and a cache of freshwater shell. A very large collection of tools and faunal remains was recovered (Schulz, personal communication, 1992). Three burials were also excavated. Table 2 provides a summary of these burial data.

Of particular interest is burial #2, which contained some 4,785 clamshell disks, 166 *Haliotis* pendants, and more than 24,000 trade beads. When you compare these figures with the numbers of artifacts associated with all other burials at this site, it can be seen that burial #2 represents a notable intensification of traditional behavior in this village. The number of artifacts found in any other burial at the Miller site represents only a fraction of the artifacts associated with burial #2. We know that this child was interred before 1872 when the village was abandoned, and no earlier than 1867, because an 1867 coin is included in the grave goods. The large quantity of trade beads, as well as the coins, suggest extensive economic interaction with the Euro-Americans. Clamshell disks, on the other hand, were an important medium of exchange among Native Americans in late prehistoric times. Their presence here in such large numbers may suggest the continuation of a viable native trade network well into the historic period. But there are other possible explanations.

What do we know about the people of this region and the early historic period that can be used to explain this unusual accumulation of wealth? The people of the Miller site were River Patwin. The designation Patwin was first applied by Powers (1887), who saw these people as a linguistically and culturally distinct southern branch of the Wintun. The Patwin occupied a territory on the west side of the Sacramento Valley from Suisun Bay to approximately the Colusa/

Table 1

Burial Artifacts - 1963 Excavation	
Artifact Type	Quantity
Steatite Beads	1
<i>Olivella</i> Beads	7
Bird Bone Tubes	5
Bone Fragments	25
Shell Fragments	35
Stone Fragments	1
Baked Clay Fragments	1

Table 2

Summary Burial Data - 1973 Excavation					
	<i>Olivella</i> Beads	Clamshell Disks	<i>Haliotis</i> Pendants	Flaked Stone	Other Artifacts
Burial 1	-	4	-	1 biface	1 bone awl
Burial 2	-	4,785	166	-	1 leather bag 24,000 trade beads 1 magnesite bead
Burial 3	-	4	1	-	53 trade beads 1 metal pin 4 basket fragments <i>Atriplex</i> seeds

Glenn county line. The Patwins were active traders, who imported obsidian, salt, bear hides, sinew-backed bows, shell beads and clam shell disks (Davis 1961). They also exported salmon, game, otter pelts, bows, and shells disks. Some of these items were bartered and some were paid for with clamshell disk money. The prehistoric Patwin occupied a territory rich in natural resources. They participated in an extensive exchange network. They often acted as middlemen between their linguistically diverse neighbors. They were probably multilingual, and possessed many skills which would have helped them deal more effectively with the Euro-Americans under different circumstances.

The Native Americans of the Sacramento Valley were not heavily influenced by Euro-Americans until rather late in the history of California. The River Patwin escaped missionary

influence, but, by 1828, the Hudson Bay Company had begun annual trips through the Sacramento Valley seeking furs. The first recorded contact with the River Patwin was by J.J. Warner, who was part of a trapping expedition which traveled south, through the valley, in 1832 (Green 1880). In his journals, Warner commented on the many villages along the river banks and the large native population. Hudson Bay Company policy was to do most of their own trapping in California, instead of trading for furs with the natives. Nevertheless, some trade did take place, and the River Patwin obtained direct access to Euro-American goods for the first time. But trade goods were not the only thing which the trappers brought with them. In 1833, a major epidemic, thought to have been malaria, swept through the central valley, decimating the native population. It has been estimated that prior to this time there were 15,000 River Patwin, but that the combined

affects of the 1833 malaria epidemic and the 1837 smallpox epidemic reduced this population by as much as 75% (Cook 1955).

There is no doubt that a much smaller, severely disrupted native population was encountered by the wave of Euro-American immigrants who entered the valley soon after. In 1844, John Bidwell led an expedition up the Sacramento River. He surveyed large tracts of land, which became Mexican land grants, for himself and a number of others (Rogers 1891). By 1845, a few individuals were settling on their land, and Peter Lassen and W.C. Moon were making stones for grinding wheels near Stony Creek in the north of Colusa county and selling them in Sacramento and San Francisco. For the next few years, there was a steady trickle of settlers.

These Euro-American settlers were farmers and cattle ranchers. Their activities were disruptive to the traditional Patwin subsistence system. As land was cleared to grow farm crops, or turned into grazing land for cattle, native plant habitats were damaged and invaded by non-native species. This destruction of ecological niches continued a process which had begun with the overexploitation of game by earlier explorers. Traditional sources of food declined; at the same time the native population was introduced to new goods which were only obtainable with American money. The settlers had plans to help the natives get that money.

These first settlers came into the Colusa area as holders of Mexican land grants, and were familiar with the Mexican rancho system. Under this system, natives were required to work, and could not leave their jobs without a written discharge from their employer (Rawls 1984:85). Northern California settlers were happy to use a system which provided them with ready source of cheap labor. Once California became a state, and an antislavery state at that, a system of Indian apprenticeship was adopted, which continued this pattern of easy exploitation. Native Americans worked during the busy seasons, as farm or ranch hands and domestic help, for food, clothing, and

minimal pay, then returned to their native villages and previous mode of subsistence during the off-seasons. Settlers did not have to pay a substantial wage to such indentured workers, as the workers were not free to seek better wages elsewhere. They were, however, "allowed" to maintain their traditional way of life in the off-season, freeing their employers of the need to support a work force year round.

The discovery of gold in 1848 turned the trickle of settlers into a tidal wave of gold seekers. The earliest gold mining activity in California was often performed by Indians, who worked as laborers for Euro-Americans (Rawls 1984:123). Indian workers were often paid only in food and clothing, though some did receive modest wages. John Bidwell and John Sutter employed large crews of Indians in gold mining activities, as did many other locals. As more and more gold-seekers came into California, and the techniques of gold mining grew more sophisticated, fewer employment opportunities in the gold fields were available to the Native Americans. Many Indians, both men and women, panned for gold on their own and then traded gold for other goods. When gold was first discovered, the Indians had little concept of its value, but they quickly became more astute traders and began to demand more in return for the precious metal (Rawls 1984:124).

Employment as farm hands, or domestic servants, mining gold as part of a crew or independently - all of these activities show how contact introduced new potential sources of wealth to the people of the Miller site and can be used to account for the coins and glass trade beads present in burial #2. The presence of a large quantity of clamshell disks, however, requires some further explanation. These disks were traditional Native American currency, used, at least in ethnographic times, in much the same way as American money. They had an accepted exchange value, and were often given in payment for goods, ritual services, and to settle blood feuds (Kroeber 1932:273-274, 292; Powers 1877). These shell disks were strung and sometimes worn as an exhibition of wealth. They were also used in ritual activity. It was

common among the ethno-graphic Patwin to cast shell disks in the grave of a deceased individual during the burial ritual (Kroeber 1925).

Clamshell disks were not accepted as negotiable currency in the American stores, but were used in a secondary trade network which continued at least until the turn of the century. It is possible that a few individuals in the village were continuing their long-standing trading activities and profiting as never before because of access to American goods. However, Native Americans were not the only ones to participate in this network. American traders, for example, might sell a \$15 horse to an Indian for \$40 worth of clam shell disks. These disks would then be used to purchase gold from other Indians, giving the American trader a \$25 profit (Powers 1877). Thus, the Americans used a cheap form of currency to extract valuable labor and goods from the Indians, reaping huge profits on these transactions.

The contact period also saw the introduction of new technology to Native American production systems. Very early, the Pomo, who were major producers of clamshell disks, began to use the pump drill, which they obtained from Spanish missionaries, to perforate shell disks. This made a slow, tedious job quicker. Grindstones were made and used in the valley before 1850 and could also be used to smooth and round out shell disks more quickly than the traditional method. These may have been available to Native American craftsmen. This new technology made it possible to manufacture many more shell disks in the same amount of time, thus increasing the supply of shell money in circulation. There was more money for people to acquire and perhaps it was available to a wider range of individuals than before. Typically, it is the wealthier individual who can best take advantage of new opportunities. Even when dealing with indigenous populations, the rich tend to get richer.

The contact period brought new technology, which increased the money supply, and non-native participants in the native trade network. But simply using the native currency was not a suffi-

cient source of profit for American entrepreneurs. There are also accounts which tell of the counterfeiting of clamshell disks by Europeans and Americans. Russian traders attempted to pass off counterfeit disks in 1818, and were killed by the Indians for their efforts (Hudson 1897). In the 1870s, Powers (1877) reports that Americans in the vicinity of the Bear River were using machinery to manufacture shell disks in large quantities. It is difficult to know what to call such disks. In a sense they are counterfeit, as they were manufactured outside the native economic system, and introduced with the intent to take advantage of the users of that system. However, if they were accepted and widely used as genuine, negotiable currency by the Native Americans, they are not truly counterfeit. Whatever we call these disks, they would have the effect of further reducing the value of native currency by further increasing the money supply.

It is very likely that the large number of clamshell disks in burial #2 of the Miller are there because of the rapid increase in the money supply. Many of the pieces appear to have been manufactured using nontraditional technology. In particular, disk edges are heavily beveled or not beveled at all, suggesting they were smoothed using a grinding wheel instead of the traditional slab. Very small center perforations, and unusual perforation shapes, suggest that different methods of drilling were employed. Just how many of the disks in this collection are included in this nontraditional category is the subject of ongoing research.

When contact occurs between an indigenous economy and a capitalist one, it is predicted that an intensification of culture will occur as increased income is used to underwrite ritual activity. Kroeber's report of Patwin burials describes many strings of shell disks being thrown into a grave. The evidence from the Miller site suggests that this may be a post-contact phenomenon among the Patwin. Earlier burials here contain only a few disks. It is likely that, at the Miller site, the large number of shell disks in burial #2 are, in part, a manifestation of this intensification as new wealth

is turned to traditional ritual uses.

Maintaining some form of their traditional economy evidently was important to the native people of the central valley. They continued to manufacture and use clamshell disks, long after other forms of money became available (Hudson 1897). But contact also distorted this money system by fostering a rapid increase in the money supply. The people of T'saki continued to occupy their native village and maintain some of their traditional hunting, fishing, and foraging ways, even though this was made more difficult by the impact of settlement on traditional food sources. While this may have given them some feeling of control or power over their lives, it also allowed the settlers to pay them very low wages, and avoid the cost of maintaining an available work force during the off-seasons. The discovery of gold brought more opportunities for the Native Americans to obtain Euro-American goods, and more opportunities for exploitation by the new arrivals.

At the Miller site, a single burial (#2) is an icon of the period for historic contact in this village. We see the accumulation of wealth, in the form of trade beads and coins, as a result of increased access to new sources of income. Also seen is the attempt to maintain a traditional economy, as represented by large numbers of clamshell disks. The rapid decline in population as a result of disease and hostility is probably also reflected in the large quantity of grave goods. As population dwindled, the remaining few individuals became heir to the accumulated wealth of many. Which brings me back the question posed at the beginning of this paper: Is it possible to see, in the archaeological record, the effects of the articulation of an indigenous economy with a capitalist one? Once again, I believe that the answer is yes. The effects of that articulation process are seen in the contents of burial #2 of the Miller Site.

REFERENCES CITED

Baumhoff, Martin A.
1978 Environmental Background. In

California, edited by Robert F. Heizer, pp. 16-24. Handbook of North American Indians, vol. 8, William C. Sturtevant, general editor. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Cook, Sherburne F.

1955 The Aboriginal Population of the San Joaquin Valley, California. *University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology* 16:31-81. Berkeley.

Davis, James T.

1961 *Trade Routes and Economic Exchange Among the Indians of California*. University of California Archaeological Survey Reports No. 54. Berkeley.

Green, William

1880 *The History of Colusa County, California, and General History of the State*. Elliot and Moore, San Francisco.

Heizer, Robert F.

1936 *Archaeology of the Miller Site, Colusa County, California*. University of California Archaeological Survey Manuscripts No. 94. Berkeley.

Hudson, John

1897 Pomo Wampum Makers. *Overland Monthly* 30: 101-108.

Kroeber, Alfred L.

1925 *Handbook of the Indians of California*. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No. 78. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

1932 The Patwin and their Neighbors.

University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 29: 253-427. Berkeley.

Powers, Steven

1887 *Tribes of California*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Rawls, James

1984 *Indians of California: the Changing Image*. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Rogers, Justin

1891 *Colusa County*. California Travelers, Volcano, California.