

The lessons ishi, the
last californian
"savage," taught the
world essay sample



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In the mid-19th century, Indians in California were being massacred severely. In general, Native Americans have been regarded as inferior to European colonizers for many centuries. Indians were thought to lack intellect, human and citizenship value, to say even more, the very right to exist. Being conceptualized as “savages” and “criminals,” Native tribes were put on the brink of extinction. The Yahi-Yani tribe of California served a vivid example of such genocide. Cook perfectly described the case as “the physical and social conflict between the White and the Red races,”[1] which resulted, as the other researcher specified, in “military campaigns, massacres, bounty hunts, debt peonage, land grabbing, and enclosures by Anglo settlers and ranchers.”[2]

The blind extermination of Native People happened, in part, because white community treated them as savages, who would not adapt to “modernity.” The discovery of Ishi, the last survivor of the Yahi-Yani tribe, which happened in 1911, forced academics to broaden and to re-think the questions of Native American culture, intelligence and adaptability. The story of “the last wild Indian in America,”[3] in which an anthropologist Alfred Kroeber played a meaningful role, raised a lot of complex and important-to-solve problems.

To learn more about the aforesaid problems on the questions of national identity and genocide, we need to analyze several points. First, we need to recall those false and dangerous beliefs, which white colonizers held about Native Americans. Second, we shall try to analyze the reasons for such a

neglectful attitude on behalf of white American society towards Californian Native Americans in the 19th century. Third, it seems to be appropriate to reveal the insights, which were gained from Ishi's case.

According to Karl Kroeber, during the first stage of Indian-white relationships, which lasted since October 1492 up to the middle of the nineteenth century, European colonizers used "conquest and destruction"[4] towards New Worlders. To be specific, in 1850 California government issued several laws, according to which California Indians became completely devoid of freedom and human status. To add even more dim facts to the case, during the second half of August 1864, the Yana population was reduced from about three thousand people to several hundred in the chain of cruel massacres. California Indians were murdered regardless of age and sex because they were thought to be dangerous.

Strikingly, it was found out after the massacre that the Natives of California were "the most harmless of human beings." [5] To be honest, the Yahi-Yani tribe of Northern California was far from being blood-thirsty and aggressive. The Indians of that tribe worked eagerly for white settlers for modest wages. It was strange, therefore, how the nineteen-century white Californians could conceptualize Native People as martial and malicious.

The genuine reason for genocide could be another misconception about Indians, which dealt with the question of progress. American ethnologists often made remarks that California Indians were "more primitive [...] than the majority of the natives of North America." [6] Such a treatment of Native People as uncivilized, non-progressive, and even retarded made white

settlers think that Indians possessed no social value. Meanwhile, in the end of the 19th century white-American society developed at rapid pace. The progressive nature of white community was proved by the Gold Rush and scientific discoveries; and the extermination of aborigines was regarded as “the inevitable consequence of social evolution and ‘progress’.”[7] It was obvious that white colonizers needed natural and territorial resources of the new land, while Indian tribes were viewed as obstacle on the path of technical progress. As Clifton and Karl Kroeber put it, “a large floating and mining population in Northern California [...] ‘had no use for Indians’.”[8]

Strikingly, the aforesaid prejudice about Indians’ regressive nature was spread both in the illiterate and scientific community. In 1911, Alfred Kroeber, the famous curator of the Anthropology Museum in San Francisco, who contributed so greatly to the discovery of Ishi, the last survivor of the Yanas, called Native People “entirely wild and uncivilized Indians.”[9] In the same letter by Kroeber the Yanas were depicted as having demonstrated “unusual tenacity and stubbornness” while socializing with white settlers. It was written that Indians “resumed hostile operations” towards white community. Therefore, the latter had nothing left to do than to exterminate aggressive Natives for the goals of safety and progress.

In the result of suppression, the remnants of Indian tribes were pushed into the lands, where there was no fertile soil to grow plants. Besides Indian survivors were too scared to work for food and clothes as they used to do. No wonder that Native refugees tried to snatch provision and utensils from the local farms. Meanwhile, white ranchers started hunting for a few Indians, as

if the latter were animals. Settlers entered those difficult-to-penetrate lands, where Indians were hiding, to look for the Indian artifacts. The hunters ran several times across the weak and scared Yanas in their poor refuges. There the whites took Indian bows and skin-blankets as souvenirs. They never bothered to think that those things were not souvenirs, but life-necessary equipment.

To put it in a nut-shell, in the first period of Indian-white relations, Native People were viewed as inferior to the larger white community of European colonizers. Indians were thought to be cruel and aggressive criminals, first; non-progressive and retarded half-beasts, second; the vanishing makers of curious artifacts, third. The trigger point in changing the aforesaid attitudes was the event, which happened on August 28, 1911. The last survivor of the Yahi-Yani tribe Ishi was found in the corral of a slaughterhouse, where he searched for food. The Indian was put into a jail in Oroville, California. Then he was taken to the Anthropology Museum in San Francisco, where he stayed till his death of tuberculosis in 1916. Ishi unveiled the most part of prejudices against Native People.

In the beginning, judging by the words of some white authorities, Ishi was viewed like some curious animal. Charles Davis, the regional supervisor of farming, wrote that the Native was *captured*. His poor clothes in the form of a canvas tunic were stolen from some farm in the neighborhood. Ishi "*bore no arm*", and "*made no resistance*". Defenceless and terrified to death, he was exposed to a *curios* crowd, whom he could not communicate with.[10]

The scene looked too much similar to the scene of capturing a wild beast.

Special Agent Kelsey stressed Ishi's nakedness, his desperate braveness in penetrating into the corral, which belonged to white ranchers. The degree of Ishi and ranchers' alienation is vivid in Kelsey's remark that "[t]he men who discovered him were almost as much frightened as the Indian." [11] We may understand how negative the reaction towards Indians was, if we recall that Ishi was put into a cage. Thus, for the majority of contemporaries he was the member of "the band" which "has long annoyed the community in the vicinity of their haunts by robbing camps and isolated cabins of foodstuffs and small articles." [12]

Dr. Kroeber and his assistant Mr. Waterman were the first to understand Ishi's ethnographic value. Kelsey, meanwhile, was proud to report that he had to "exceed[... his] powers a little" [13] to release Ishi from the jail. The "wild" Indian was taken to the museum in San Francisco because Dr. Kroeber and Mr. Waterman "have been endeavoring to get from him the story of his life and the basis of his language." [14] Thus, Ishi stopped being treated as an animal or a criminal. Instead, he started being regarded as an object of scientific interest. The Indian appeared to be the last bearer of knowledge about the extinct Native tribe.

There was a hot argument, whether Ishi could adjust himself to civilization. The first distinctive feature of a civilized man was thought to be intelligence. In this regard, nobody denied that Ishi was a thinking being. Even Davis, who sounded rather superficial when describing Ishi, acknowledged that the "Indian is seemingly *quite intelligent*, [...]. "[15] Kelsey also admitted that Ishi "seems to be a very intelligent Indian and learns fast." [16] On the other

occasion, however, Kelsey remarked with disappointment that " he makes very little progress." [17]

Therefore, another feature of a civilized person, the ability to adjust quickly to the unfamiliar surroundings, to learn new skills, has been overlooked in Ishi for a long time. Davis wrote that Ishi was " *quite cheerful,* " as if the Indian was a kind of animal. The regional supervisor of farming emphasized that Ishi was the son of Nature, so far as he was evidently lost in the civilized world, but was able to demonstrate the primeval skills of imitating animals' calls. Kelsey also stressed that Ishi was " in excellent physical condition, very strong and quick," as if he described a wild beast. However, the special agent wrote about the key characteristic of Ishi - harmlessness. In his opinion, Ishi was " evidently much at a loss to understand some of the things he sees in a civilized community," [18] but he faced it " with aboriginal stolidity," producing a lot of laughing to hide his natural feelings. Thus, Kelsey acknowledged Ishi's ability to adapt to the environment.

The most positive about Ishi's adjustment to the civilized world was Alfred Kroeber. He could witness how fast Ishi got accustomed to the curiosity of scientists and of the dwellers of San Francisco. Since Ishi demonstrated intelligence, there seemed to be another point of argument left. Any civilized man had to earn his living and to take care of himself without external help. Kroeber stated on November 24, 1911 that Ishi left his guardians some hope regarding his ability to perform civilized duties: " he is now being trained in the performance of simple manual labor, such as sweeping, dusting, washing windows, and other janitorial work about the Museum." [19] However, the Indian could not be civilized to full extent. Though Ishi " has conformed very

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willingly," he was "entirely unfit to take care of himself on account of his understanding practically no English and not speaking any whatever. He also has shown no inclination towards initiative, but is ready to take orders." [20] Kelsey was also worried about Ishi making little progress in English, lacking "self support" and being "absolutely helpless without friends to look after him." [21]

In a while, however, Ishi proved that he was able to fit into the existing social framework. Alfred Kroeber acknowledged that the Indian was not inferior to any white man, since his "mental development was in no way stunted or sub-normal." [22] The ethnologist remarked in a few years:

Ishi has taken readily to civilization and has been self-supporting for over a year, serving as assistant janitor and general helper about the Museum. [...] he has learned English slowly, but frequently succeeds in making himself understood in a broken manner. Every month, however, is adding slowly to his command of the language. [...] He has picked up practical matters with the utmost quickness. [23]

Ishi's guardians were worried about his further destiny. Charles Davis, the office's regional supervisor of farming, reported that Ishi was "wholly incapable of protecting himself if left to drift back to the wilds, as he would doubtless commit some act sooner or later that would bring him in conflict with the law. Neither is he a proper person to leave to the charity of the county or local community." [24] Generally tolerant Kelsey equated Ishi with a child, who "can [not] be turned loose," being "wholly unable to earn a living in a civilized style, and it will hardly be possible to return to the

wilderness to live as he has done, partly in the method of the cave man and partly by pilfering from the few white settlers in his native range.”[25]

While the high authorities argued about his destiny, Ishi chose to stay at the Museum. Later researchers were more appraising about Ishi’s ability to adjust to civilization regarding his self-support. As Clifton and Karl Kroebers admitted, “ Although Ishi’s pay was small, he had free housing at the museum and free medical care at the hospital next door, so he was in fact entirely self-supporting and even was able to save money regularly. Because his duties were light, he had a good deal of spare time, some of which he devoted to making artifacts, such as bows, arrows, and projectile points.”[26]

More than that, Ishi was not scared to explore the San Francisco area. He made friends easily, especially with children. The Kroebers stressed “ how successfully this remarkable Indian found the means to create a personal life for himself in a new home and to make new friends within a wholly alien culture.”[27] It is interesting to admit that on the early stages of Ishi’s adjustment to an alien culture he was often compared to a child because he could not understand commonly shared ideas. Later Saxton Pope, the doctor, also used the allusion to a child, yet in a different context. He wrote that Ishi “ looked upon us as sophisticated children.”[28] He observed that white civilized adults “ knew many things, and much that is false. He knew nature, which is always true.... His soul was that of a child, his mind that of a philosopher.”[29] In this quotation we may notice how the attitude to Ishi has changed: he became neither a “ wild” beast nor a retarded half-human.

Instead, the allusion to childhood in relation to Ishi started emphasizing Ishi's sincerity and genuineness.

Thus, we may observe a wide range of opinions within a dominating white community about Native People on the example of Ishi. Ishi proved that Indians were not so unable to fit into the civilized surroundings. The dominant society started viewing Native People not as if they were wild creatures. Gradually, they turned to be human beings with original skills and knowledge. The Kroebers, for example, stressed how " everyone else who encountered this ' wild' Indian, [...] was struck by his intelligence and, further, the rapidity with which he gained confidence even though plunged into bewilderingly unfamiliar circumstances." [30] The change in attitudes, however, was not restricted to acknowledging that Indians did not lack intellect or the ability to perform manual labor as civilized people.

" The quincentenary of colonial discoveries," [31] "[the] case [...] of a morbid romantic nature," [32] " an example from popular ethnography inspired by, and married to, classic anthropology" [33] - these are the characteristics being given to Ishi, the last of the Yana Indian tribe. Gerald Vizenor stated that " Ishi is one of the most discoverable tribal names in the world; even so, he has seldom been heard as a real person." [34] It was only in the second half of the 20th century that Ishi became something more than a living relic. That last survivor began to be viewed as the victim of the eternal opposition between civilization and closeness to Nature. Ishi's contemporaries treated him as the embodiment of wilderness, either in a negative or a positive sense. However, in the run of time it appeared that wilderness did not

deserve such a severe extermination. Successive generations took the task to “ establish his iconic role: his symbolic status as ‘ the last of his tribe’.”[35] As Jorge Daniel Veneciano put it:

His story became another instance in the tale of “ the vanishing red man,” or in more contemporary parlance, another instance of the “ extinction” and “ endangered species” syndrome. (The museum’s implication in the maintenance of this syndrome – call it the “ museumification” of the subject – is again exemplified in the story of Ishi.[36]

For a long time Ishi has been treated by ethnologists and anthropologists as the living proof in the argument about the nature of civilization and progress. His cultural background was interesting for researchers because it had ceased to exist. Then, Ishi became a token for Native American to prove the case that “ their populations are expanding and pride in their cultural identity [is] strengthening.”[37] Ishi helped ethnologists to “ assure the [ethnological] survival, at least in the form of documentary records, of Indian cultures.”[38] In the middle of the last century he began to symbolize “ a resurgence, first in Native American populations, then in pride, self-awareness, and assertion of red cultures as distinctively different from those of white society.”[39] Karl Kroeber emphasized that the case of Ishi proved “ an increasingly important role” [40] of Native People in American society.

Yet, there was one more insight, which Ishi brought to Americans. His destiny served a vivid example of genocide, which deeply affected modern civilization. Analyzing Ishi’s story, Native People of America as well as other objects of genocide may learn how to fight racial and social oppression.

Though Ishi managed to adapt to certain extent to civilization, he did not stop being a unique and miserable human being with the unique cultural background. Ishi's tragedy was that he had been torn apart from his natural environment. Ishi appeared to be the last member of the tribe, which has been exterminated because of the meaningless and blind violence of the white community. His example teaches us to value human dignity and uniqueness. Ishi makes us be aware of how important it is to communicate with each other and to respect each other. His life proves that human life is too fragile to experiment on it of scientific or other interest.

To draw a bottom line, judging from primary and secondary evidence, it is true that in the second half of the 19th century Native People were exterminated because of several false beliefs. First, Indians were regarded as wild savages causing harm to white settlers. Second, they were conceptualized as inferior to Caucasians in intellect and skills. Third, Native Californians were thought to be retarded and non-progressive, thus, to delay that time society from technical and economic progress. The aforesaid assumptions contributed pitifully into the extermination of Native tribes. However, the discovery of Ishi, the last survivor of the Yahi-Yani tribe, made the white community change its attitude towards Indians. Ishi proved to possess intelligence and high degree of adaptability to civilized existence. He earned his living and socialized with the representatives of alien culture. After death Ishi became a token of genocide. Modern Native community treats Ishi as the symbol of its struggle to reinforce national identity.

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