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The Legacy of Ishi: The Last of the Yahi Tribe

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The Legacy of Ishi: The Last of the Yahi Tribe

This short essay presents the legacy of 'Ishi', the last known Native American from the 'Yahi' tribe. Since the time of American Colonization, almost all of the Indian tribes had to face difficulties while the White settlers were marking their own territory. In this sense, the essay focuses on the real life legend, the last of the Yahi tribe Ishi, who taught the modern world and learnt from the modern world in the brief time he had to live with his new world counterparts. The life of Ishi became a symbolic character in the overall narrative of the Native Americans of United States of America¹. This essay focuses on the origination of Ishi, his ancestors, the way of life they had before they got exposed to the modern world and what did the modern world do to Ishi, the last of the Yahi.

The Yahi was the name of an Amerindian people, now practically extinct, from Northern California (United States), in the upper basin of the Sacramento River, in the center of the Sierra Nevada. They occupied a semi-wild territory of about 40 by 60 miles. The Yahi spoke a Hokana language, called the Yana language. They were organized in small bands dedicated to hunting and fishing salmon was a great source of food for them. They lived in grouped gatherings around four main groups that spoke mutually unintelligible dialects. Coming from the north, from the south, from the center the so-called Yahi had a very unique and interesting lifestyle².

They were decimated by white settlers after the gold rush of 1848, following the discovery of James W. Marshall. The availability of food fell drastically and in 1865, less than 50 Yahi survived. The massacre of Three Knolls (1865) left less than 30 survivors, who retreated to the mountains, with little contact with civilization, for 40 years. The survivors had to bear the

¹ Archuleta, E. 2011. "Native Liberty: Natural Reason And Cultural Survivance; Writing Indian, Native Conversations; Native American Drama: A Critical Perspective".

² Kroeber, Theodora. 2011. Ishi In Two Worlds. Bronx, NY: Ishi Press.

harsh nature when they were forced out and this made them more fearful of the wrath white settlers had against them leaving out any sort of collaboration or a feeling of hope to live the normal lives they were living. Slowly and gradually the numbers diminished when Ishi the last of the Yahi decided to face the evil he ran from all his life³.

It was a hot morning of August 29, 1911 in Oroville, California. A malnourished and unkempt man had been found in a slaughterhouse pen. The people who discovered him did not know what to do with him, so the sheriff locked him in a cell. The man in question is Ishi the last survivor of the Yahi tribe, a branch of the Yana tribe, which settled in northern California. The discovery of this caused a stir. Hundreds of visitors swarmed around the cell to see the 'savage' who was terrified and crouched staring at his 'public'. Among all the visitors two were the anthropologists of the University of California, Thomas Waterman and Alfred Kroeber who, after several attempts to communicate with him in the Yana language, succeeded. The modern man knew that Ishi belonged to the Yahi tribe⁴.

Ishi never revealed his name. In their culture they considered that saying the proper name was only to insult the person that was talking to him. So they called him Ishi, which means 'man' in his mother tongue. Waterman and Kroeber took Ishi to the San Francisco Museum of Anthropology and made him an object of study. Apart from the fascination, the researchers could not let this opportunity go away they recorded his voice, studied his craft skills, and made him the museum's great attraction. More than 24,000 people came to see Ishi as he shot with a bow to a target more than thirty meters far⁵.

³ Kroeber, Theodora. 2011. *Ishi In Two Worlds*. Bronx, NY: Ishi Press.

⁴ Baumhoff, Martin A., and Theodora Kroeber. 1964. "Ishi In Two Worlds"

⁵ Lee, Nella. 1993. "Native American Crime: The Invisible Tragedy".

Although they tried to make him part of the modern society, Ishi never got to conform. He had a room in the museum but he preferred to spend hours in a cave, in a grove near the museum. He did not like the crowds. And his body could not adapt to the civilized life of the white man either. Five years after his 'discovery' he died of tuberculosis in 1916. A disease for which his body was not prepared and was exposed to lifestyle of the modern man Ishi lost his life still clinging on the origination of his life being a Yahi. But it was not until later that Ishi's life caught his attention. Born around 1860 (no one knows exactly), Ishi was part of a community of 400 people, the Yahi of California. Like all Indians, he respected and cared for nature since it was she who provided the sustenance⁶.

When he was very young, his father's town suffered an attack where 40 Indians were killed. The Yahi did not know horses or weapons. Terrified by those monsters with heads and hair, only a small group managed to survive hidden in different river canyons. The isolation and the hard survival caused the last Yahi to die, until there were only four left. In 1909, his place was discovered by technicians of a company in charge of building a hydroelectric dam. The only one that came out alive was Ishi, who was roaming the California moors until, undernourished, he launched himself into civilization⁷.

The history of the Yahi is a tragedy suffered by all the indigenous tribes of California and has an economic and racist component. Around 1848 (twelve years before the birth of Ishi) someone discovered large gold deposits in the area. This discovery unleashed the famous 'Gold Rush'. The miners invaded the indigenous territories, destroying wherever they went. They contaminated rivers; they burned forests, before the 'permissive' look of the true inhabitants who

⁶ OWENS, LOUIS. 1999. "Courting The Stone Age: Native Authenticity In Gerald Vizenor'S Ishi And The Wood Ducks".

⁷ Kroeber, Theodora. 2011. Ishi In Two Worlds. Bronx, NY: Ishi Press.

saw how their homes were destroyed. When the patience of the Indians was exhausted and they responded with force to such abuses, the miners used that pretext to exterminate them. They demanded that the government pay for the expenses of ending the savages. Since otherwise, they could not work safely. And so it happened.

It was between 1851 and 1852 the state of California, paid two million dollars for the settlers to clean their territory of Indians. The rewards started with \$ 5 per head. When the violence reached its peak, the reward was reduced to 25 cents. The natives who were left alive were isolated in reserves, drunk and afraid of the white master⁸. Time later it was shown that Ishi was not the last Yahi. Later, other Yahi were discovered who had mixed with other tribes. Be that as it may, Ishi has become the image of a racist genocide perpetrated by the white man as well as the last free man in the state of California.

⁸ Lee, Nella. 1993. "Native American Crime: The Invisible Tragedy".

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