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Is CSULB really on an Indian burial ground?

BY: LAUREN WILLIAMS



When Cassandra Vitale was in her Parkside dorm one fall night her freshman year, a fleeting image appeared before her: an intricate indigenous-looking mask "shaped like an upside down tear drop, rounded at the face and tapering into a point at the chin," vivid with detail and hard-to-describe colors, engulfed in lines and complete with a place for eyes and a mouth. It was 2003, and despite the lapse in time, Vitale recalls the day five years ago vividly.

"I totally thought I saw this mask, spirit thing," Vitale said in her California Indians anthropology class late one afternoon last October.

When she told her resident assistant about the incident a few days later, she was told for the first time about the sacred American Indian site that is within sight from most dorms: Puvungna.

Vitale's experience is not a unique one. According to Cindi Alvitre, a professor in American Indian studies and anthropology, students have told her numerous stories about having nightmares in the dorms or feeling haunted and relating that and other rumors to Puvungna.

Alvitre is not new to American Indian issues. She is a Tongva descendent of the Moompetam, or salt water, clan, was the first woman chair of the Gabrielino-Tongva tribal council, and has served other positions including the director of the Gabrielino-Tongva maritime organization, the Ti'at Society. She was also the co-founder of the Mother Earth Clan, according to information from the Indigenous Knowledges Conference of 2005. She and her family have been activists for Puvungna for decades.

In the California Indians anthropology class last semester, another student, Chad Allison, a senior anthropology major, mentioned that during SOAR tours students are told that the site is a burial ground.

"Each year we have to correct them," Alvitre said, sitting on the countertop beneath the windows in LA3-106 last fall.

For Alvitre and other Gabrielino-Tongvas, the terminology for Puvungna is significant, and the difference between "burial ground" and "sacred site" is an important one. For them, Puvungna is where the world was created. The site was not a cemetery.

But the mythology surrounding Puvungna's history didn't begin in 1972, when the remains of an Indian boy were discovered there.

The creation story of the Gabrielino-Tongvas places the beginnings of the universe on the grounds that California State University, Long Beach now inhabits.

According to Gabrielino-Tongva mythology, the world was not created from a swirling ball of gases and particles, and life did not originate in some remote part of Africa, but on the land that is now occupied by CSULB.

Although today the remaining 22-acres of Puvungna are densely covered with dry weeds, little landscaping and few markers indicating its past, the land upon which CSULB now rests was once very fertile, rich land, with many signs of inhabitation.

According to Barbara Smith, the main docent at the Rancho Los Alamitos ranch on Bixby Hill road, two miles east of the campus' entrance, bears, deer, and other animals lived in the area, which once was a thriving coastal community.

According to literature from Rancho Los Alamitos, the Gabrielino-Tongvas lived in what is now Long Beach since 500 A.D., but the extent of the area that the Gabrielino-Tongva community occupied can't be determined for sure.

The name given to the collective group of tribes that inhabited what is now CSULB was "Gabrielino," given to the group by Spanish settlers, according to Alvitre, who arrived in the area in the late 1700s and later relocated the indigenous community to missions around Southern California.

"The name Tongva is what we've chosen to use in the present," which means "people of the Earth," Alvitre said in her office one day, early last fall semester. "There was no one tribe called 'Tongva.'"

At least 10 Gabrielino-Tongva-related communities exist in the Southern California area, each with at least 15 members, with the Gabrielino-Tongva community stretching from Los Angeles to San Gabriel.

In 1972, parts of the remains of a young Indian boy were discovered on the land while workmen were digging on the site. The remains of the boy were placed in an archeology lab on campus. In 1974, the site was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 1979, students at Puvungna reburied the partial remains of the young boy.

On the first Earth Day after Puvungna was established as a sacred site, April 22, 1970 (although some people believe it was in 1971, according to Eugene Ruyle, a former anthropology professor) organic community gardens were established on Puvungna, something that Alvitre and other members of the Gabrielino-Tongva tribe say they "never saw as incompatible."

According to an e-mail from Ruyle, the gardens "covered about two or three acres just to the west of Earl Warren Drive and to the north of State University Drive," which is now Beach Drive.

Later, in 1992, the organic farm was torn down when the university, under then president Karl Anatol, was trying to develop a strip mall, as later President Robert Maxson characterized it. According to a portion of the CSULB website run by Ruyle, the organic garden was the first part of Puvungna to go in order to make room for a temporary parking lot.

In 1993, a spiritual vigil was started by a Juaneno Indian elder, Lillian Robles, to prevent the development of Puvungna, according to Ruyle.

"She was joined by hundreds of Indian supporters, but not all were there at all times," Ruyle wrote. "Lillian was on the land [continuously] for several weeks. There were always at least a half-dozen supporters with her; at ceremonies that number would increase dramatically."

In the fall of 1993, the university was under court order not to obstruct the access of the indigenous to the land.

Later, the university entered into a lawsuit with Gabrielino-Tongva Indians who were represented by the international American Civil Liberties Union, according to Alvitre, who, with her family, occupied the land for a brief period.

A study was commissioned by the university to verify whether or not the site was once occupied by the Gabrielino-Tongvas, but was strongly opposed by the indigenous group as well as archeologists at the school. According to Ruyle's website, the ACLU obtained a preliminary injunction preventing the dig. Later, an appellate court denied the school the right to sue, according to Alvitre, because the school didn't have legal standing.

Soon after the legal dispute between the university and the indigenous people was dismissed, President Robert Maxson assumed the role as president of CSULB and vowed not to disturb the site.

"When I went to Long Beach State as president there was a plan to build a strip mall on the land which is called Puvungna at the entrance to the university. I didn't think that was an appropriate use of that land," said Maxson, who is now living on a small island between Seattle and Vancouver, Canada. "I said as long as I was president we would not build anything on that land."

However, I would not make any decision that would tie the hands of future presidents. That would be a decision that he or she must make."

After Maxson left the university, his promise to the Gabrielino-Tongvas went with him. After he had retired from the position, President F. King Alexander assumed the role without making the same agreement, but Alvitre assures that the relationship between the university and the Gabrielino-Tongvas has been a cordial one, saying that the university has never interfered with the group's activities on the land.

"There's a continuing conversation," Alvitre said in her office. "We're all aware of it," she continued referring to the land.

The land has remained in an awkward limbo, between university ownership and its indigenous history for sometime. While the university recognizes the land bordering the Bellflower entrance as the "22-acre lot," students and staff often call it by the indigenous term: Puvungna.

Because of the precarious relationship the indigenous people and the university have with the land, the 22-acre lot has been left largely neglected. While the land is on university property, it also remains a historic site on the National Register of Historic Places.

In the California Indians anthropology class last semester, a student asked Alvitre why there hasn't been an effort to landscape the area, and Alvitre noted that the land is neither entirely the university's, nor entirely that of the Gabrielino-Tongva Indians, so it's neither fully maintained by the university or the Gabrielino-Tongvas.

As it remains, there are two major landmarks on the land, left there by the indigenous community: a memory stick painted with a bundle of sage, a Christian cross, and plastic red and pink mittens, as well as a cross with four long pieces of cloth hanging from its limbs, red, white, yellow, and black - the same vague blur of colors Cassandra Vitale remembers seeing five years ago.

President Alexander was not available for comment regarding this article.