

Ishi and the War Against Civilization

Chahta-Ima

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The emergence of eco-extremism and the tactics that it uses have caused much controversy in radical circles internationally. The criticisms that the Individualists Tending Toward the Wild (ITS in Spanish) and other aligned groups have received range from accusations of ultraradicalism to insanity. One major aspect of this polemic centers around the idea of indiscriminate attack. Inflamed rhetoric on the part of eco-extremists may exacerbate hostility towards these tactics among the already skeptical.

From how some talk, however, it would seem that ITS or other eco-extremists are engaged in the bombing of pre-schools and nursing homes, that is, random targets, rather than targets of specific importance to the techno-industrial system (laboratories, government ministries, etc.) It must be admitted right off the bat that many who engage in polemics against eco-extremism have an a priori negative bias against any argument no matter how well crafted, as they themselves admit that the maintenance of civilization and domestication is in their own self-interest. There is no point in arguing with them. On the other hand, eco-extremism still has much to say, so those who have ears to hear, let them hear.

The more sympathetic would ask why ITS and its allies feel that they must “double down” on the idea of indiscriminate attack. Why harm the people you are trying to help? In other words, civilization and the destruction that it unleashes upon the world are the fault of a small section of modern society, and we must focus on convincing the vast majority that is not at fault in order to have the balance of forces needed to overcome the evils that presently beset us. Aside from that, it’s just bad form. It’s understandable that “bad things” happen even in well-planned actions. The least that those who carry them out can do is say that they’re sorry. That’s just good manners. It’s better, as some Chilean anarchists did recently, to explode noise bombs at four in the morning when no one is around in order to express “solidarity” with whoever international anarchism has been asked to pray for... I mean, express solidarity with this week. But if you have to do something, the least that you can do is minimize harm and express regret if something goes amiss (but mostly you should do nothing...)

Of course eco-extremism rejects these objections as childish and hypocritical. Are these people expressing their moral superiority while playing with fire crackers in the middle of the night and then dedicating it to someone halfway around the world for no apparent reason? Do they want a cookie or a sticker for being such well-behaved children? Eco-extremism will readily admit that devout anarchism is more pious and holier than it is. It doesn’t want its help anyway. If left-leaning anarchists want to win the popularity contest in the insane asylum of civilization, by all means eco-extremism forfeits. Congratulations in advance.

There have been lectures to eco-extremists that this is not how a war against civilization is waged. Very well, let’s go ahead and take a closer look at an actual war against civilization. The editors of *Revista Regresión* have already written an extensive series of articles on the Mixton Rebellion and the Chichimeca War that swept much of Mexico in the 16th century, and we heartily recommend their work here. In this essay, we are going to augment their arguments by having recourse to a well-loved example of a “cuddly” and tragic Indian, Ishi, the last of the Yahi tribe in the state of California in the United States. In this exercise, we don’t pretend to know everything about those members of a Stone Age tribe that was hunted to extinction by the whites. Insofar as any historical analogy is flawed ipso facto, here we will at least try to take the lessons from how the Yahi fought, their attitudes toward civilization down to the last man, and how the shape of their culture problematizes anarchist and leftist values held over from the Enlightenment. This essay hopes to show that the Yahi’s war against civilization was also indiscriminate, devoid of

Western values of solidarity and humanism, and was a duel to the death with domesticated European life. In other words, it is a model for how many eco-extremists see their own war carried out from their individuality. Ishi, far from being a model “noble savage”, was the last man standing in a war against the whites waged with the utmost amount of brutality and “criminality” that the now extinct Yahi could muster.

The Yahi

On August 29th, 1911, a naked and starving brown man of around fifty years of age was found outside of a slaughterhouse near Oroville, California. The man was soon taken into custody and locked in the town jail. At first, no one could communicate with him in any known language. Soon, anthropologists arrived from San Francisco and found that the man was Yahi, the southernmost band of the Yana tribe, known locally as “Digger Indians” or “Mill Creek / Deer Creek Indians”. It had long been suspected that a small group of “wild Indians” still lived up in the inhospitable hill country of northern California. The anthropologists made arrangements to take the last “wild Indian” with them to San Francisco to live with them in their museum and teach them about his culture. Having found an (imperfect) Yana translator, they could not get a name from the Indian other than “Ishi”, the Yana word for man. And that is the name he was known by from the time of his capture until his death four and a half years later.

The Yahi were the southernmost branch of the larger tribe called the Yana found in northern California north of the town of Chico and the Sacramento River. Before the Europeans came, there were perhaps no more than 3,000 Yana on their traditional lands bordered by the Maidu to the south, the Wintu to the west, and the Shastan tribe to the north. They spoke a Hokan language the roots of which they shared with tribes throughout North America. As a tribe, the Yana in particular were much smaller than their neighbors, but still had a reputation for savagery towards their neighbors. There is also speculation that the Yana may have lived in the more productive lowlands first before being driven into the less hospitable hill country by their much larger and wealthier neighbors to the south in particular. As Theodora Kroeber comments in her book, *Ishi in Two Worlds*:

“The Yana were fewer in numbers and poorer in material comforts than were their valley neighbors, whom they regarded as soft, lax, and indifferent fighters. Like hill tribes in other parts of the world the Yana, too, were proud, courageous, resourceful, and swift, and were feared by the Maidu and Wintu peoples who lived in the lowlands.” (25)

M. Steven Shackley, in his essay, “The Stone Tool Technology of Ishi and the Yana,” elaborates concerning the Yahi relationship with their immediate neighbors:

“Because of having to live in such a marginal environment, the Yahi were never on good terms with any surrounding groups for any length of time. Regional archeological evidence suggests that speakers of Hokan languages, probably what could be called proto-Yana, lived in a much larger territory that included the upper Sacramento River Valley as well as the southern Cascade foothills until the ‘Penutian intrusion’ at some point 1000 years ago. These groups speaking Penutian languages were the ancestors of the Maidu and Wintu / Nomlaki who lived in the river valley at the time of Spanish and Anglo contact. Considerable violence is suggested at this time in the archeological record and the proto-Yana evidently did not move into a smaller, more marginal habitat willingly. Violence at the hands of outsiders was not new with the coming of the Anglos

after 1850; the Yala had maintained long-term enmity relationships with the groups speaking Penutian languages who had forcibly removed them from bottom land and surrounded them for some time.” (Kroeber and Kroeber, 190)

In general, however, the Yana lived as did most tribes, clinging to the cycle of the seasons and with little societal stratification. The one major difference among the Yana is that they had sex-duality in language, that is, a different form of the Yana language was used by each sex. As Theodora Kroeber explains, “Infants of both sexes were cared for by the mother with an older sister or grandmother helping. Their first speech was that of the womans dialect, always spoken by women, and by men and boys in the presence of girls and women. As a boy grew older and was independent of nursing care, he was taken by his father or older brother or uncle wherever they were going, for longer and longer times each day. By the age of nine or ten, well before puberty, he was spending most of his waking hours in male company and was already sleeping in the men’s house. Thus, he learned his second language, the men’s dialect.” (29-30)

Kroeber explains that female speech was often a “clipped” speech, with male words having more syllables. Though women only used one dialect of the language, they knew the male variant as well. Theodora Kroeber speculates that far from being a linguistic curiosity, the strict division of speech may have made Yana culture far more intransigent to interference from the outside world. She writes, “There remains a psychological aspect of this language peculiarity which is not subject to proof, but which should not be dismissed. The surviving Yahi seem never to have lost their morale in their long and hopeless struggle to survive. Could the language have played a role in this continuing tension of moral strength? It had equipped its speakers with the habit of politeness, formality, and exact usage freighted with strong feeling for the importance of speaking and behaving in such and such a way and no other, a way which did not permit slovenliness either of speech or of behavior.” (ibid, 31)

Theodora Kroeber examines this aspect of Yana life later in her book when describing Ishi’s relationship with his first half-breed Yana interpreter, Sam Batwi:

“Ishi was a conservative whose forebearers had been men and women of rectitude; whose father and grandfather and uncles had carried with dignity and restraint the responsibilities of being principal men of their villages. Ishi’s own manners were good; Batwi’s smacked of the crudity of the frontier town, which was what he knew best and which, by the custom of the time, he knew from its least enlightened citizens... It may well be that upon first meeting, Ishi and Batwi recognized that they were from different strata of Yana society, Batwi’s the less well regarded...” (153)

Most of Yahi culture was very similar to the indigenous cultures of California in general. The efforts of the men were centered on hunting game and fishing in the streams, particularly for salmon as seasonally available. The efforts of the women focused on gathering, storing, and preparation of acorns and other plants as a part of their staple diet. Anthropologist Orin Starn, in his book, *Ishi’s Brain: In Search of America’s Last “Wild” Indian*, states the following concerning the Yahi’s conservatism in particular (71):

“Yet the Yahi were also an ingrown community set in their ways. They may have intermarried with neighboring tribes (and sometimes kidnapped women in the mid-nineteenth century), but outsiders were absorbed into the Yahi way. Elsewhere in Native America before Columbus, there was volatility and change – disease, war, migration, cultural invention, and adaptation. In the Southwest, for example, the legendary Anasazi cliff dwellers suddenly vanished in the twelfth century, for reasons still debated. Over time, however, the Yahi showed more continuity and sta-

bility than these other groups. Relatively little modification occurred in fashioning spear points, laying out a camp, pounding acorns, or other routines of Yahi existence. By all appearances, Ishi's ancestors followed more or less the same way of life of many centuries."

As they were far north, snow and lack of food were often factors in the lean times of winter. Nevertheless, the Yana knew how to thrive on the land which they were given, as Kroeber summarizes in her picture of Yana life and its relationship with the seasons:

"Winter was also the time for retelling the old history of the beginning of the world and how the animals and men were made, the time to hear over again the adventures of Coyote and Fox and Pine Marten, and the tale of Bear and Deer. So, sitting or lying close to the fire in the earth-covered house, and wrapped in warm rabbitskin blankets, with the rain falling outside and the show moon bringing a light fall down Waganupa as far even as Deer Creek, the Yana cycle of changing seasons completed another full turn. As the food baskets emptied, one by one, and game remained hidden and scarce, the Yana dreams turned to a time, not far off, when the earth would be covered with new clover. They felt an urge to be up and about in an awakening world, while far away in the great ocean which they had never seen, the shining salmon were racing toward the mouth of the Sacramento River, their goal the Yana's own home streams." (39)

Starn also cites a chant sung by Ishi to the anthropologists summarizing Yahi fatalism. (42): Rattlesnake will bite. Grizzly bear will bite and they will kill people. Let it be this way. Man will get hurt falling off rock. Man will fall down when gathering pine nuts. He'll swim in the water, drift away, die. They'll fall down a precipice. They'll be struck by arrow points. They'll be lost. He'll have wood splinters get in his eye. They'll be poisoned by bad men, They'll be blind.

The Yahi at War

As could be expected, the invasion by Europeans could make even once peaceful tribes openly hostile to outright savage. As Sherburne F. Cook stated in his book, *The Conflict Between the California Indian and White Civilization*:

"The general effect of these events was to bring about a shift in the entire social horizon of the natives, particularly that of the Yokuts, Miwok, and Wappo. The disruptive forces, previously discussed with reference to their influence on population decline, had also the effect of generating an entirely new kind of civilization. To put it in essence: a peaceful, sedentary, highly localized group underwent conversion into a semiwarlike, seminomadic group. Obviously this process was by no means complete by 1848, nor did it affect all component parts of native masses equally. But its beginnings had become very apparent." (228)

Nevertheless, not all Indians reacted energetically to the white Anglo invasion. The Maidu, the valley neighbors of the Yahi immediately to the south, seemed to have not put up much of a fight to the onslaught of whites coming onto their land, as one Maidu writer, Marie Potts, indicated:

"As more white men came, they drained the land. Ranches developed so fast that we, having had this country of mountains and meadows to ourselves, were left to become either laborers or homeless wanderers. Being peaceable and intelligent people, we adapted the best we could. Sixty years later, when we awoke to our situation and presented our case to the United States Land Commission, our claim was settled for seventy-five cents an acre.

There were no uprisings in Maidu country. The white settlers who came to our area were glad to have Indian labor, and the records show some fair dealing.” (Potts, 10)

As indicated above, the Yahi were hostile even to the Indian tribes around them, and brutally so. As Ms. Potts states concerning the Yahi’s relations with the Maidu:

“The Mill Creeks (Yahi) were what we called ‘mean’ people. They had killed a lot of our people, even little babies. They watched, and when our men were away hunting or working they attacked the helpless women and children and old people. One man returned once from hunting to find his wife dead and their baby lying on the ground, eaten by ants. After the Mill Creeks had killed a number of whites, they found out that the whites were gathering volunteers for a raid to punish them. Therefore, they set up an alarm system to warn themselves, living as they were in the canyons of their rough, unproductive country.” (ibid, 41)

When the white settlers arrived in connection with the finding of gold in California in the late 1840s and early 1850s, they brought with them the modus operandi of “the only good Indian is a dead Indian”. There was no love lost between them and the Yahi, and the Yahi were persuaded to hone their austere and intransigent ways in a guerilla war of terror against the whites. Stephen Powers, writing in 1884, describes the Yahi in the following passage:

“If the Nozi are a peculiar people, these [the Yahi] are extraordinary; if the Nozi appear foreign to California, these are doubly foreign. They seem likely to present a spectacle which is without a parallel in human history – that of a barbaric race resisting civilization with arms in their hands, to the last man, and the last squaw, and the last pappoose... [They] inflicted cruel and awful tortures on their captives, like the Algonkin races. Whatever abominations the indigenous races may have perpetrated on the dead, torture of the living was essentially foreign to California.” (Heizer and Kroeber, 74)

The California anthropologist Alfred Kroeber further speculated concerning the warlike tendencies of the Yahi:

“Their warlike reputation may be due partly to the resistance offered to the whites by one or two of their bands. But whether the cause of this was actually a superior energy and courage or an unusual exasperation aided by a rough, still thinly populated, and easily defensible habitat is more doubtful. That they were feared by their neighbors, such as the Maidu, argues them a hungering body of mountaineers rather than a superior stock. The hill dweller has less to lose by fighting than the wealthy lowlander. He is also less exposed, and in time of need has better and more numerous refuges available. All through California, the plains peoples were the more peaceably inclined, although the stronger in numbers: the difference is one of situation reflected in culture, not in inborn quality.” (ibid, 161)

Jeremiah Curtin, a linguist studying California Indian tribes in the late 19th century, describes the “renegade” nature of Ishi’s tribe:

“Certain Indians lived, or rather lurked, around Mill Creek, in wild places somewhat east of the Tehama and north of Chico. These Mill Creek Indians were fugitives; outlaws from other tribes, among others from the Yanas. To injure the latter, they went to the Yana country about the middle of August, 1864, and killed two white women, Mrs. Allen and Mrs. Jones. Four children were also left for dead by them, but the children recovered. After the murders the Mills Creeks returned home unnoticed, carrying various plundered articles with them.” (ibid, 72)

One chronicler detailed a Yahi atrocity in the following passage:

“The killing of the Hickok children was in June, 1862. The Hickok children, two girls and a boy were gathering blackberries on Rock Creek about three-quarters of a mile from their home when

they were surrounded by a number of Indians. They first shot the oldest girl, she was seventeen years old. When found she was entirely nude. They then shot the younger girl, but she ran to Rock Creek and fell with her face in the water. They did not take her clothing as she was in full dress when found. Just then Tom Allen came upon the scene. He was hauling lumber for a man by the name of Keefer. They immediately attacked Allen. He was found scalped with his throat cut. Seventeen arrows had been shot in him and seven had gone partly through so that they had to be pulled out the opposite side. (ibid, 60)

Mrs. A. Thankful Carson, once a captive of the Mill Creeks or Yahi Indians, also described other instances of Yahi brutality:

“A boy about twelve years old was killed in a most barbarous way: they cut off his fingers, cut out his tongue, and were supposed to have buried him alive, but when he was found he was dead. On another occasion a man by the name of Hayes was out herding sheep. Some time during the day he went to his cabin and found it surrounded by fifteen Indians. They saw him coming: he turned and ran, but the Indians followed shooting arrows at him as he went from tree to tree. Finally they shot him with a gun through the arm. He managed to escape capture by a narrow margin.” (ibid, 26)

Another local chronicler, H.H. Sauber, described the reasoning behind hunting the Yahi to extermination:

“Once they murdered three school children within ten miles of Oroville, and more than forty miles from Mill creek. Soon after, they killed a teamster and two cowboys in one afternoon, and were clear away and scudding through the hills loaded down with stolen beef, before anyone guessed that they had been out. Other victims, too numerous to mention, had fallen by their ruthless hands. In short they never robbed without murdering, even when the crime could aid them in no earthly way, in fact could only more inflame the whites against them.” (ibid, 20)

Alfred Kroeber echoed this sentiment in a 1911 essay on the Yahi, where he stated,

“The Southern Yana, or Mill Creeks, met with a much more romantic fate than their kinsmen. When the American came on the scene, took up their lands for farming or cattle raising, and at the point of the rifle drove them off if they interfered, as happened before ten years had elapsed after the first gold rush, the Mill Creeks, like so many of their brethren, resisted. They did not, however, after the first disastrous conflict taught them the overwhelming superiority of the white man’s firearms and his organization, tamely desist and accept the inevitable. Instead, they only hardened their undying spirit of tenacity and love of independence and began a series of vigorous reprisals. For nearly ten years they maintained unflagging warfare, destructive mainly to themselves, but nevertheless unparalleled in stubbornness, with the settlers of Tehama and Butte counties. Hardly recovered from one blow, the survivors would raid in another direction, and in such cases they spared neither age nor sex. Atrocities committed on white women and children roused the settlers’ resentment to the highest pitch, and every Indian outrage was more than requited, but still the diminishing band kept up the unequal struggle.” (ibid, 82)

Theodora Kroeber tries to temper these accounts with her own reflections on Yahi brutality and “criminality”:

“The Indians meanwhile took horses, mules, oxen, cows, and sheep when and where they could, wasting no part of these animals which were food and clothing to them. They made blankets and capes of the pelts, tanned the hides, and made “charqui” or ‘jerky’ of such of the meat as was not eaten fresh. In other words, they treated the introduced animals as they did deer, bear, elk, or rabbit. They seem not to have realized that the animals were domesticated, the dog being

the only domesticated animal they knew. They stole and killed to live, not to accumulate herds or wealth, nor did the Indians really understand that what they took was the private property of a single person. Many years later when Ishi was past middle age, he blushed in painful embarrassment whenever he recalled that by white standards he and his brother Yahi had been guilty of stealing.” (61)

Theodora Kroeber in her work does not seem to address the Yahi’s brutal style of warfare in depth, emphasizing the exigencies that they confronted during the massive white invasion into their lands.

Ishi

In spite of having “home field advantage” and an exceptionally energetic approach to attack on their enemies, the Yahi were gradually hunted down and destroyed until there were only a handful left. In 1867 or 1868, a massacre at Kingsley Cave killed 33 Yahi men, women, and children, which was the last major blow by the whites to the last wild Yana. As Theodora Kroeber states,

“Ishi was a little child of three or four years old at the time of the Three Knolls massacre, old enough to remember terror-fraught experiences. He was eight or nine when the Kingsley Cave massacre took place, old enough, possibly, to have taken some part in the cleaning up of the cave and in the ritual disposition of its victims. He entered the concealment in which he would grow up at not more than ten years of age.” (ibid, 91)

With the open military defeat of the Yahi, the savage began a time of concealment, which A.L. Kroeber would classify as, “the smallest free nation in the world, which by an unexampled fortitude and stubbornness of character succeeded in holding out against the tide of civilization twenty five years longer even than Geronimo’s famous band of Apaches, and for almost thirty five years after the Sioux and their allies defeated Custer.” (Heizer and Kroeber, 87)

The remaining Yahi hid, hunted, gathered, and stole all that they could under their difficult circumstances. They lit their fires in ways that could not be seen from far distances, they had their settlements distant from where whites would normally travel and frequent. Soon their presence became a rumor and then a mere legend. That is, until a few years before Ishi walked to civilization, their camp was found near Deer Creek in 1908. Ishi and some remaining Indians escaped, but within three years, Ishi was all alone, which made up his mind for him to walk to the enemy where he was sure that he would certainly be killed, as had the rest of his people.

By 1911, however, through the victors’ problematic benevolence, Ishi went from a sworn enemy to a minor celebrity, moving to San Francisco and having a constant stream of visitors coming to the museum where he stayed. People were fascinated by this man who was the last true Stone Age person in North America, someone who could knap and carve his own tools and weapons from stones and sticks. Ishi made “peace” with civilization, and even made friends. He developed his own preferences for foods and other goods, and meticulously kept his property as he had when he lived nearly forty years in hiding. Nevertheless, within less than five years of arriving in civilization, Ishi the last Yahi succumbed to perhaps one of the most civilized diseases of all: tuberculosis.

Nevertheless, there were some rather interesting details that are rather indicative of Ishi’s attitude towards life in civilization. Ishi refused to live on a reservation, and chose to live among the whites, in the city, far from the corrupt Indians who had long ago given into the vices of

civilization. As T.T. Waterman stated in one indirect reference to Ishi in a journal article that he wrote,

“It has always been supposed that remnants of several tribes made up these Mill Creek renegades. From what we have recently learned, it seems unlikely that there was more than one tribe involved. In the first place, the only member of this hostile group who has ever been questioned [i.e. Ishi], expresses the liveliest dislike for all other tribes. He seems, and always has seemed, more ready to make friends with the whites themselves, than with the neighboring groups of Indians. In the second place, all the other Indian tribes of the region profess the liveliest horror for the Yahi. This awe extends to even to the country to-day which the Yahi frequented. Even the Yahi and the Nozi, though they spoke dialects of one language (the so-called Yana) express the most unrelenting hostility to each other. In other words, the Indians who lurked about in the Mill Creek hills for several decades after the settlement of the valley, were probably the remnant of a comparatively pure group, since there was little likelihood of intermixture.” (Heizer and Kroeber, 125)

[It should be noted here that Orin Starn rejects the idea of the ethnic purity of the Yahi in the historic period, but gives no real reasoning behind it (106). This theme will be discussed below.]

In his voluntary captivity in civilization, Ishi was noted for his sobriety and equanimity toward those around him, devoted to the duties assigned to him at the museum at which he lived, and also to showing the manufacture of artifacts he used for survival. Theodora Kroeber describes Ishi’s general attitude toward his civilized surroundings,

“Ishi was not given to volunteering criticism of the white man’s ways. But he was observant and analytic, and, when pressed, would pass a judgment somewhat as follows. He approved of the ‘conveniences’ and variety of the white man’s world – neither Ishi nor any people who have lived a life of hardship and deprivation underrate an amelioration of those severities, or scope for some comforts and even some luxuries. He considered the white man to be fortunate, inventive, and very, very clever; but childlike and lacking in a desirable reserve, and in a true understanding of Nature – her mystic face; her terrible and her benign power.

Asked how he would, today, characterize Ishi, [Alfred] Kroeber says, “He was the most patient man I ever knew. I mean he has mastered the philosophy of patience, without trace either of self-pity or of bitterness to dull the purity of his cheerful enduringness.’ His friends all testify to cheerfulness as a trait basic to Ishi’s temperament – a cheerfulness which passed, given half a chance, into a gentle hilarity. His was the way of contentment, the Middle Way, to be pursued quietly, working a little, playing a little, and surrounded by friends.” (239)

For the eco-extremist or anti-civilization perspective, Ishi’s latter years appear problematic, even contrary to the desired narrative. Even Theodora Kroeber uses Ishi’s seeming magnanimity as graciously accepting defeat and accepting the ways of the white man to be a supporting of the ideas of humanism and progress (140). However, this is a mere matter of interpretation. One cannot judge a person who lived forty years in hiding, seeing all of his loved ones die either violently, of age, or of illness, and pass judgment especially when he was at the point of starvation and death. Through it all, Ishi clung to the dignity and sobriety that is, ironically enough, the essence of Wildness as Ishi saw it. Most of all, however, Ishi bore witness to that Wildness, he communicated it, and shunned those who had turned their back on it and embraced the worst vices of their conquerors. As the editors of *Revista Regresion* stated in their own reply concerning the Chichimecas who “surrendered” to the whites in the 16th century in the article, “On Ritual Magazine”, “San Luiz de la Paz in the state of Guanajuato is the last registered Chichimeca set-

tlement, specifically in the Chichimeca Missionary Zone. Here can be found the last Chichimeca descendants, the Chichimeca Jocanes, who preserved from generation to generation the memory of the conflict that threatened the Viceroyalty during those years. A member of RS was able to engage in conversations with some of the people of this town. We will keep these sources anonymous so as not to have them associated with our ecoextremist group. Those involved in these conversations confirm the fierceness of the ChichimecaGuachiles and proudly emphasize their warlike past. They mentioned that, with the defeat of the last hunter-gatherer nomadic savage tribes, the surviving Chichimeca bands decided to concede and show the Spanish that they now followed the foreign religion; that they adhered to the new commandments and would adapt themselves to sedentary life. They only did this in order to preserve their language, their traditions, and beliefs. The elders as well as the shamans (madai coho), who came down from the mountains after many years of war with peaceful intentions, nevertheless decided to live apart so that their stories and customs would not be erased from memory. Thus they would be preserved as a legacy for coming generations.”

If it were not for Ishi’s walking into civilization instead of choosing to die in the wilderness, we would not know his story, or the story of the last free band of wild Indians in North America. Thus, even in defeat, Ishi’s “surrender” is truly a victory for Wild Nature, one that can inspire those who come after him to partake in similar struggles according to our own individuality and abilities.

It should be noted by way of a postscript that many “revisionist” historians see Ishi’s history as much more complicated than the initial story told by the anthropologists who found him. Some scholars think that because of his appearance and how he knapped his stone tools, Ishi may have been racially Maidu or half-blooded Maidu – Yahi. This would not be surprising as the Yahi often raided surrounding tribes for their women (Kroeber and Kroeber, 192). Linguists have found that Yahi had many Spanish loanwords, postulating that some in Ishi’s band had left the hills in the not-too-distant past and worked for Spanish ranchers in the valley, only to return to the hills once the hostile Anglos came. Though self-preening scholars think they are finding nuance in the Yahi story, in reality many of their insights were in the original reports, even if not emphasized.

Further, Starn himself, otherwise quite the revisionist, admits the possibility that Ishi and his band remained hiding in the hills due to a notable conservatism in their way of life and worldview:

“That Ishi was here so detailed and enthusiastic [in re-telling Yana tales], Luthin and Hinton insist, evinced his ‘clear reverence and love’ for traditional Yahi ways, however difficult life was for the last survivors in the confines of the inaccessible parts of the foothills. Besides their fear of being hanged or shot, the decision made by Ishi and his little band not to surrender may also have measured attachment to their own way of life – a steaming bowl of acorn stew on a chilly morning, the gorgeous starry nights, and the reassuring rhythm of the seasons.” (116)

Lessons from the Yahi War

I have meandered from the original point of this essay but I have done so purposefully. The intention has been to let Ishi and the Yahi, the last wild tribe in North America, speak for themselves, instead of engaging in simple polemics where sloppy sloganeering replaces real in-depth

attention to a subject. What is clear is that the Yahi did not wage war as Christians or liberal humanists. They slaughtered men, women, and children. They stole, they attacked in secret, and they fled into the shadows after their attacks. They were not well-liked even by their fellow Indians, those who should have been just as hostile to civilization as they were. And the prospect of certain defeat did not stop them from escalating their attacks until there were few of them left. Once that point was reached, they literally held out to the last man. In that, eco-extremism shares or at least aspires to many of these same qualities.

The Yahi were a perfect example of what the eco- extremist seeks as outlined in the editorial of *Regression*⁴:

“Austerity: This decadent society makes us want stuff that we don’t need, though some refuse to see this and are enslaved by the endless pursuit of more trinkets. The majority of people are trying to keep up with the Joneses, they dream of making it big, of having the latest gadgets and comforts, etc. For us, all of that is an abomination. Simplicity: making do with what you have and rejecting civilized vices regarding coveting unnecessary things. These are well-known traits of the ecoextremist individualist.”

The Yahi, like many of the Chichimeca tribes of what is now Mexico, lived in “inhospitable” hill country at odds with their more affluent and numerous neighbors in the lowlands; this was the case even prior to the arrival of the Europeans. These neighbors, notably the Maidu, did not fight back against civilization because their relatively affluent life made them more conducive to accepting the civilized way of life. Unlike the Mesoamerican kingdoms, the Maidu did not know agriculture, but they were nonetheless already “domesticated” on one level.

It was the harsh and Spartan culture of the Yahi that strengthened their opposition to the Europeans, even when the latter showed superior power, even when it was clear that it was a war of extermination that they would likely lose. They redoubled their efforts and fought their own war of extermination to the best of their ability, sparing neither women nor children. Through cunning, guile, and a superior knowledge of the landscape, they waged a campaign of terror on the whites, a campaign that confounded all who studied the indigenous tribes of the region. Even other Indians feared them (just as other people who say they oppose civilization excommunicate the eco-extremists) as they did not divide the world into neat dichotomies of Indians vs. whites. To them, those who were not with them were their enemies and were treated as such. The Yahi’s war was thus indiscriminate and “suicidal”, just as the eco-extremist struggle aims to be. “Indiscriminate” in the sense that it is not driven by humanistic or Christian considerations. It didn’t take into consideration who may have been “innocent” or “guilty”: it attacked all non-Yahi, all who had surrendered to the genocidal ways of the white man.

The Yahi weren’t aiming to make friends with other tribes: even when Ishi enters civilization, he refuses to associate with the Indians of his region who surrendered so easily to white civilization. To preserve his dignity, he preferred to stay with his conqueror rather than with the conquered. The Yahi war was “suicidal” in that it took no consideration of the future: it aimed to live free in the here and now, and to attack those who were attacking them, without weighing the cost. That is because their way of life was forged on the margins on hostile lands, and much of their dignity centered on attack on those who they considered soft and inauthentic. There was no future for the Yahi in civilization because there was no room for compromise with civilization.

Here I will speculate (purely based on my own opinion) as to why someone would adopt eco-extremist views in our context. Of course, there is much anger, perhaps even rage, involved. I imagine that there would need to be to carry out these actions. However, what does the eco-

extremist love? Modern humans are so alienated from Wild Nature, so callous to a way of life where they don't depend on civilization for their every need, that they lament someone being wounded by an exploding envelope, yet shrug off, or even endorse, the destruction of a forest or a lake or a river for the benefit of civilized mankind. They're so numb to their own nature that they think that Nature itself is a product of their own ingenuity, that trees only fall in the forest so that they can hear them, and that the sine qua non of life on Earth is the continued existence of eight billion hungrier and ever greedier people. If anyone is blinded by hate, it is the humanist, the leftist, and the apologist for "law and order" who makes their own existence the non-negotiable condition for the continuity of life on Earth. If given the choice between the destruction of the planet and their own beloved abstraction called, "humanity", they would rather destroy the world than see humanity fail.

What is even sorer is that most civilized humans won't even be thankful for the noble sentiments of the anarchist and the leftist. To them they will just be snot-nosed bomb throwing punks who should chill out, go to the football game, and stop bothering others with their politics or solidarity. The leftist / anarchist has Stockholm syndrome for masses who will never listen to them, let alone allow them to win them over. They want to be seen in a good light by society, even though society will never pay them any heed, let alone like them. They refuse to see society as the enemy, and that's why they'll perish along with it, not knowing why the dream of the Enlightenment failed, why all men will never be brothers, why the only thing in which civilized humans are equal is in their complicity in the destruction of Wild Nature. They aim to be the star pupils of civilization but will always remain the miscreants, the outsiders, the dirty anarchists who need to get a job.

Eco-extremism will grow because people know that this is the endgame. Indeed, from Muslims to Christians to all sorts of other ideologies, apocalypse is in the air, and nothing can stop it. That's because civilization is a death wish, and always has been. It knows that man cannot be dominated, that the only way to make him submissive is to turn him into a machine, to mechanize his wants and needs, and to remove him further and further from the chaos within himself that is Wild Nature. In this sense, the spirit of Ishi and the Yahi remains, it will always resurface when you least expect it, as a tendency and not as a doctrine, as a cry that fights today without fear for tomorrow. Eco-extremism will have no end because it is the savage attack, the "natural disaster", the desire to let the fire burn and to dance around it. The anarchist recoils and the leftist fears, because they know that they can't defeat it. It will continue, and consume everything. It will burn up utopias and the dreams of civilized futures and leave only Nature in its place. For the eco-extremist, that is a cause of rejoicing and not of horror.

-Chahta-Ima
Nanah Waiya, Spring 2016

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