Urban Clan Mothers: Key Households in Cities

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American Indian communities in urban areas are characteristically fluid networks based on relationships. Residence is dispersed, but nodes on the community network include the many American Indian organizations found in urban areas, seasonal or intermittent events or activities, and sites that hold connotations of special significance. In many instances these “sites” are the “key households” headed by older respected and influential Indian women, here referred to as Urban Clan Mothers. It is these key households that provide a degree of permanence in the swirl of constant shifts and changes in the highly fluid urban Indian communities. These household gathering spots often provide short term or extended housing and food for many people, health and healing practices and advice, a location for ceremony, emotional and spiritual support, entertainment, and transportation and communication resources. They are also often vital spots of linkage with more rural communities and tribal homelands. The women who head these key households and extend many services to urban community members are strong but low-profile activists. They are the focus of this article. Their presence and sustaining actions are one of the essential foundations for community stability and vitality.

A summary discussion of social context and the structuring of urban Indian communities is necessary here in order fully to understand both the role and the importance of women who come to function in urban areas in ways that are similar to that of clan mothers in many traditional tribal homelands.

Although each urban Indian community is distinctive, there are a number of common features or characteristics that are found in most urban
Indian communities. The salient characteristics of the Bay Area Indian community and many other urban Indian communities are that they are multtribal and therefore multicultural; dispersed residentially; comprised of a network of individuals, families, and organizations; encompass a number of economic levels; are multigenerational; and extremely fluid. On a general level, urban Indian communities answer needs for affirming and expressing identity; create contexts for carrying out the necessary activities of community life; and provide a wide range of circumstances and symbols that encourage “Indian” relationships at the family and community level. The fluid, and therefore flexible, nature of the urban Indian community contributes to its resiliency and persistence, as well as its invisibility from an outside perspective. Indian people living in urban areas rarely cluster in ethnically homogeneous geographic locations, unless there are historically-established villages or communities that have been engulfed by the expanding metropolis.1 In sum, Indian urban communities differ substantially from more visible ethnic-based neighborhoods.

The role of Urban Clan Mothers and why they and their households are so crucial can best be understood within the context and through a clear delineation of urban Indian community social structuring and community dynamics. Indian people living in urban areas understand this structuring; their survival often depends on it.2 The discussion that follows summarizes the rationale for having a clear picture of the nature of urban Indian communities, as well as some of the characteristics of urban communities.

This discussion is based on long-term fieldwork since the 1970s in the San Francisco Bay Area American Indian community and less extensive work in other urban Indian communities throughout the United States. The fieldwork includes the standard anthropological tradition of immersion, that is, through participant observation, extensive note-taking, and interviews, but more importantly through years of applied work in a number of Bay Area Indian organizations. This has allowed me to more fully gain insights into relationship dynamics, process, appropriate cadence, and protocols, while at the same time making a contribution to community well-being through collaborative project work. Though the majority of the research on which this discussion is based was carried out in the San Francisco Bay Area, much of what is presented here can be generalized to reflect urban Indian communities in the United States and Canada.
The San Francisco Bay Area is the home of approximately 50,000 American Indian people according to the 2000 census. This is a large, diverse, and active Indian community that, although long established, began to increase in numbers during the 1950s as a result of the federally sponsored relocation program. Many of those now living in this multiracial Indian community in the Bay Area are the descendants of those who came to the area during the relocation period. In the 2001 San Francisco Bay Area American Indian Resource Directory there were fifty-seven Indian-run organizations. These provide social services, educational activities, health care, recreational, and cultural activities, as well as job training. Every weekend there are events and activities that bring the community together: powwows, workshops, concerts, demonstrations, and healing ceremonies.

The structuring of urban Indian communities as essentially a network of relations is in contrast to the more commonly held conceptualization of a community seen as a geographically based cluster of residences and commercial enterprises with accompanying shared cultural attributes. The application of this standard definition of community to urban American Indian communities by researchers, including the U.S. Census Bureau, distorts reality and limits an understanding of many aspects of community dynamics, including the essential role played by Urban Clan Mothers.

Much of the literature from the 1960s and 1970s focused on questions of assimilation and carried with it an assumption that Indian people living in cities cluster in particular neighborhoods, most frequently termed ghettos or Indian enclaves. This body of literature followed on the increased migration to urban areas by Indian people as a result of the federal relocation program, and often had an implicit agenda of assessing the pros and cons of the effectiveness of the relocation program. This was done not by evaluating the program itself, but by looking at the degree to which Indian people had “successfully” assimilated, in terms of the goals and standards generated by the program. In many instances there was a blaming-the-victims approach when aspects of the relocation program failed to attain its goals. Political policy and funding was tied to and reflected this body of literature. The majority of those carrying out research and writing in the years following relocation applied many assumptions,
such as the nature of urban Indian communities, and some utilized long-
standing stereotypes about American Indians that biased their work. When
the funding for relocation and research related to assimilation themes
died, most of the research and writing on Indians living in urban areas
ceased to exist as well. Only in the mid-1990s has a fresh, primarily quali-
tative approach to urban research emerged.5

The assumption by some researchers that Indian people in cities must
live clustered in urban neighborhoods, ghettos, or enclaves, and that this
is synonymous with an Indian community, still continues to persist, how-
ever, as with Fixico’s frequent reference to “the Indian Ghetto.”6 Utilizing
this standard definition of community and the assumptions on which it
is based can have profound and potentially negative impacts, not only on
discerning reality as Indian people know it and live it, but on policy as
well. For example, in addition to the influence on relocation policy and
the relocation program discussed above, Lobo indicates the ways that
United States census methodology—based on assumptions that urban
Indian communities are located in circumscribed neighborhoods simi-
lar to urban Chinatowns—rather than being dispersed and network-
based, has been a key contributing factor to census undercounts and mis-
counts of Indian people in urban areas.7

Urban Indian communities may, because they are dispersed and based
on a network of relations, for the most part, be invisible or misunder-
stood from the outside and to outsiders, but they are anything but invis-
able to those who participate in them. They are viable communities, but
structured on an American Indian-derived model of community or tribe
rather than a European-derived one. Likewise Jojola notes, “This ‘invis-
ibility’ [of Indian people in Albuquerque] is consistent with findings from
other major urban centers including reports developed for the urban In-
dian populations in Los Angeles, Oakland, and St. Louis, to name a few.”8

Two important factors that shape urban communities and are crucial
to understanding the role of Urban Clan Mothers are, first, whether an
urban area was a destination city of the federal relocation program and,
second, the degree of proximity to reservation homelands. Those cities
such as Oakland, Los Angeles, and New York that were relocation sites
tend to have a more tribally heterogeneous population, compared to those
that were not relocation cities and that grew through self-motivated mi-
gration from nearby reservations. Also those urban Indian communities
such as Tucson, that are close to reservation homelands tend to have a
different configuration of Indian organizations, compared to those that are more distant to homelands, since the availability of services such as health care may be found nearby “at home,” rather than “in town.” For these urban Indian communities there is the opportunity for frequent participation in nearby reservation tribal activities, politics, and family responsibilities, compared to those urban areas that may be hundreds or thousands of miles from “home.” The creation of multitribal communities far from tribal homelands, as seen in the Bay Area, has led to a proliferation of greatly needed community organizations in these urban Indian communities. The support provided by Urban Clan Mothers in urban Indian communities distant from tribal homelands is as vital to community well being as are the formal organizations.

Fluid Indian Communities, Individual Mobility Patterns, and Urban Clan Mothers

Community-wide patterns of fluidity and mobility patterns of individuals are also closely tied to the role of women who head key households. These households are the stopping points, the locations of stability for highly mobile individuals and are situated within communities that are structurally very fluid. Social scientists who have worked in urban contexts have mentioned in passing the very fluid nature of urban Indian communities. These same authors have also documented, to some extent, the individual mobility patterns characterized by the coming and going from home reservations to cities for employment and education, and the returning to reservation homes for ceremony and family responsibilities. In all urban Indian communities, people frequently travel back and forth from city to home. However, those living near tribal homelands have the opportunity to do so most frequently, or even as Jojola describes in reference to Albuquerque, to commute daily from a home pueblo to work in the city.

We are beginning to see more in-depth inquiries into what is meant by this term “fluid.” For example, research by Ackerman, Bonvillain, and Salo are some of the ethnographic works on American Indian mobility patterns. Knack also speaks of “social fluidity.” Jojola’s survey of the urban Indian population of Albuquerque describes the cyclical return patterns to home reservation areas. A longtime participant in the Bay Area Indian community often referred to it as a “floating craps game”: always
action, always moving, never the same on any given day from what it was the day before, yet with shared knowledge of the underlying rules and protocols. It has been noted by Lobo as well as Straus and Valentino, that in some respects urban Indian communities reflect pre-reservation and pre-European contact, or more traditional structural characteristics. Because urban Indian communities are not bounded geographically as a reservation community is, the community itself may exhibit physical fluidity to expand and contract geographically as resources become available, to move into resource-rich niches and to reflect seasonal opportunities. Also in urban areas social and political boundaries are less rigid and more fluid than on reservations because, for example, membership is not tied exclusively to a charter of blood quantum or genealogical criteria. Nor is there a formal overarching political structure, equivalent to a tribal council that governs the entire urban community.

In the Bay Area Indian community it is principally the Indian-run organizations, a few other non-Indian organizations, and events and sites of significance that constitute the nodes on the social network. As Ramirez says in relation to the Indian community in San Jose, California, which is part of the Bay Area community, “These gathering sites support agency, structures of feeling, and social change. In these gathering spaces the imagination is freed to create an inclusive, democratic world, which people can work to realize.” The majority of the Indian organizations in the Bay Area, and in other urban Indian communities, were primarily founded by and are currently staffed by women, but most organizations are in continual flux, able to disassemble and reassemble. Many women move from organization to organization as each closes, shrinks, or expands, yet these women in the long run continue to provide needed core services within the Indian community. Most often it is the women who staff and are on the boards of these organizations, whether as cooks, receptionists, counselors, or directors, and who also in more informal ways maintain key households and function as Urban Clan Mothers. Thus, there are multiple ways in which people are linked and are in contact with one another. Through all this motion, this fluidity, an underlying network of connectedness allows for social and cultural continuity.

In addition to the patterns of fluidity of the community itself, individuals in the Bay Area American Indian community and other urban communities are highly mobile as well. This pattern is reflected in
longstanding cultural traditions held by some tribes and is similar to what is found on many reservation homelands. Ackerman in reference to Colville reservation residents says, “The latter are still living by the rules that most hunter-gathers employ—you have a home territory, loosely defined and encompassing a wide area, but you move around a lot; not just inside home territory, but often outside it in order to make a living.” When there is movement, there are also the places where one stops moving, for a day or for extended periods. These are the key households, headed by women in urban communities that provide the anchor points where those on the move stop over. As one individual indicated in the Bay Area in reference to his aunt’s home where he frequently stayed for long periods of time during visits from South Dakota, “This is our encampment out here.” Poverty, lack of affordable housing, ceremonial and social responsibilities, and the complications of substance abuse and other health-related issues are strong underlying factors for mobility in many cases. Yet, for many there is also an active cultural and personal preference to remain on the move. Ramirez in reference to the Indian community in San Jose, California finds that much of the social science literature dealing with American Indian migration to cities and movement within cities is ethnocentric and based on the negative concept of “rootlessness,” rather than appreciating the positive associations of mobility held by many Indian people.

**Key Households Provide Stability in a Highly Mobile Population**

As with other aspects of the urban Indian community, household composition itself is fluid. Household shifts are common and expected as relatives often make prolonged visits to and from rural and reservation homelands, as single mothers take in boyfriends, or as nieces or nephews stay temporarily or for long periods of time. Children may leave crowded situations to go to stay with grandparents, or with aunties or uncles, or other relatives, either in the city or elsewhere. Some adult couples, who live on the streets or in vehicles, may place their children to sleep over with relatives. Household size and composition also has a seasonal aspect since many Indian people living in the Bay Area are “on the road” during the late spring and summer months, and relatives from tribal homelands likewise visit the city: on the powwow circuit, attending ceremonies, or visiting relatives.
Some of the following types of mobility noted by Salo in the Indian community in Los Angeles include,

frequent and lengthy stays with relatives on reservations and in various urban areas, as well as attendance at powwows, tournaments, rodeos and ceremonial events. Many also participate in migratory labor, including fishing in Alaska, and agricultural work and fire fighting throughout the western states.¹⁸

There are many forms of mobility: mobility by those living in established residential units, but who travel extensively for weeks or months at a time for important lifecycle, ceremonial, or kin responsibilities. As they travel through the Bay Area, they know there are key households and Urban Clan Mothers that will welcome them in their journeys. There are those who are without an established home and are highly mobile, living on the streets and staying from time to time in the homes of women who have taken on the role of Urban Clan Mothers. There are those who have ambiguous residences or consider themselves as having a number of simultaneous residences, perhaps one being in a key household. Others may cycle between various institutional settings and the streets, relatives’ homes, or those of Urban Clan Mothers. People travel for fun as well, and to see new places or visit friends and family.

In the Bay Area Indian community there is wide latitude of acceptance of the many ways that individual mobility takes place. Although tribes differ regarding the degree of affinity for travel, movement is frequently spoken of in the Bay Area Indian community as “just a part of our way of life.” To be on the move is valued, unless it is the result of extreme duress.

There are some Indian people who travel widely because of a spiritual and cultural dedication, and who consider the Bay Area their home, or at least one of their homes. These are the people who are respected for their cultural understandings and the necessary work they do for Native rights or the spiritual well-being of Indian people. One such woman said, “All of my travels are for political, personal, spiritual, and professional reasons.” When she is in the Bay Area the key households extend their hospitality to her.

Some people have set up a long-term routine of movement within the Bay Area that includes frequent stops at a key household and a special kin-like relationship with the woman whose house it is. For example, “Antelope” is one of those people. Now in his mid-forties, he has lived a traveling life throughout the western states and in his old childhood neigh-
Here he sleeps on the streets, rotating between two secret spots, or stays at the home of an elderly woman who is an Urban Clan Mother and has known him since he was a child. At her home he often sleeps, eats, and hangs out, talking to friends and watching the television. Though Antelope is not a consanguineal kinsman of hers, this household is what he calls his extended family. She keeps track of his coming and going and general well-being, and she also feels free to ask for his assistance with the grandchildren or in doing some shopping and carrying the groceries for her. He wrote a poem:

My life is freedom, and it’s lived that way,
My goal is peace and it stays that way,
I don’t need violence, and I don’t really hate.
I’m like a spirit that rides the wind,
I just drift in and out again.

Many American Indians, both on rural and reservation lands and in urban areas, view themselves as having multiple homes, so that one lives simultaneously in more than one place. This may include cycling between rural and urban areas, or within the urban area itself, and often a key household is one of their homes. Bonvillian, in regard to the St. Regis Mohawk Reservation says, “Other people may live simultaneously in more than one household on a temporary, fluid basis. They can claim rights to residence in multiple houses because of established kinship relations.”

Ramirez, writing of two Indian women living in San Jose, California, says,

They seem to have multiple homes. Jane and her two sisters describe their journey from Fresno to San Jose to Farmington as “follow the leader.” For them, there is much travel between different urban areas and “home,” their reservation. Thus, their senses of culture and community cannot be bounded in space to include only San Jose, but includes many points of location.

In the Bay Area Indian community, Indian families, especially extended families may utilize the resources of a number of residential spots with a wide array of often shifting and flexible sleeping, eating, and financial or general living arrangements. An extended family may share a household, or may be spread throughout the city in various households. Most often an Urban Clan Mother’s home, a key household, may be the central home base for this shifting set of extended kin.
In urban areas there are many forms of activism carried out by American Indian women in addition to the more visible and standard definitions of activism such as public speaking and organizing demonstrations or occupations. For example, Hoikkala discusses the prominent role played by many Indian women in creating and sustaining Indian organizations in Phoenix, particularly those focusing on education, health—including substance abuse prevention and treatment—and family welfare.21 Some-what less visible, but just as crucial as expressing a form of social activism, are the key households that have been created and sustained by women. These households play a vital function for the extended family, for highly mobile individuals within the urban Indian community, and for those who circulate through or visit the city. The stable households they have created and maintain serve as fixed and welcoming anchors in the otherwise highly fluid and complex urban Indian community.

These households are similar to what Ackerman identified on the Colville reservation as “anchor” households and are headed by women functioning as clan mothers. Similar arrangements and social roles for middle-aged and elderly women are typically found as well on many other reservations throughout the United States. Women providing for the community well-being have taken on an urban form.22 In the Bay Area Indian community these key households are headed almost exclusively by mature women of long-standing respect and influence in the community who have become house-owners or have arranged for secure long-term inexpensive leases. They are most frequently women with large extended families. Many of these women are also active in leadership positions in the local Indian community organizations or work in the organizations as well, though this is not always the case. Some women who have established key households focus their efforts in making their homes a safe and stable haven for many people and many activities. The number of people sleeping in one of these key households can be extremely high. One woman commented that, “every morning I’ve got my alligator farm to look at when I get up” in reference to the number of people rolled up in blankets on her apartment floor. Temporary visits by those who are considered “couch surfers” may become permanent, or at least as permanent as any living arrangement in the Bay Area Indian community.

Many people float or circulate through these households, knowing they will be welcomed with a place to sleep, if only on the floor, and a meal and shower. People on the road, know that these households are depend-
able stopover points. One such house has a sweat lodge in the back yard, and another an extensive vegetable garden. There is a strong correlation between home ownership and the continuity of these key households. This fact further underlies the economic basis for household stability or instability. Those who purchased houses years before now have comparatively low housing costs, and a sense of housing security; while those who pay the current high rents face housing insecurity and tend for that reason to be forced to move frequently.

There is no generic label used in the Bay Area urban Indian community for key households. Rather they are referred to as “Sarah’s house,” or Clara’s or Magee’s. One person in the community commented that these houses where people congregate in the city are like “our Clan Mother Camps that we set up back home when we come together [during summer Sun Dance].” As noted by Jojola and also seen in the Bay Area, “informal and casual networks” serve many of the basic survival needs of those who are homeless, either by choice or economic circumstances and who prefer “to maintain their anonymity rather than bear the scrutiny of non-Indians” at social service agencies.23 These key households in the Bay Area fulfill many of the necessary survival functions that otherwise might be carried out by non-Indian social service agencies.

For example, one woman who is the head of a key household migrated to the Bay Area as a young woman. She worked as a formally trained social worker at various Indian organizations for many years. Now she is a grandmother and great grandmother. Defining her role as a community member and elder along with that of a social worker, she carries out her professional mandates to encompass the values of the community. Her home is not only the place where her children, sometimes their spouses, her grandchildren, and great-grandchildren call home, but also the place where traveling visitors from “back home” always are welcomed, and where some of her clients live who are in need of a temporary place to stay. Although she declines to consider herself a politically involved person, she ran for the board of a prominent Indian organization. As a reflection of the recognition and respect for her long service within the community and her role both professionally and personally, she received many more votes than any of the other candidates. The basis for her leadership vote of confidence was an acknowledgement of the respect and influence that she has earned. The women who are the heads of these key households provide shelter, food, and other necessities of a home in the
same way that a mother or auntie would “back home” on the reservation. These key households are an important nexus in the Bay Area Indian community network, and crucial to understanding the structuring of the community.

One Urban Clan Mother, although owning a house where many people often stayed, carried out most of her activities, not at home, but in the kitchen of one of the major Indian organizations where she was the cook. “Delphina’s” kitchen was known throughout the Bay Area Indian community as the place to go to dip into the stream of information and communication that constantly flowed. Others might have referred to it as gossip, but women who spent hours in the kitchen knew that it was important for them to remain informed about who was doing what, when, where, and with whom, in order to assist in keeping the community in balance and to play a mediating role should conflicts develop. During the day, and often in the evening, Delphina’s kitchen was the place to go to find out what was happening in the community. Delphina never spoke in public, nor sat on boards. Yet, she held great influence and respect in the community, and her kitchen was a key or anchor point. She was a grandmother who everyone knew, and someone who had seen and experienced “everything” in life.

In the offices on the floor above Delphina’s kitchen, the social workers met with clients on a wide range of personal matters. Many clients then frequently came downstairs to help in Delphina’s kitchen. Here they could make fry bread or cut up vegetables for the senior lunch or a community dinner. And they could talk. There was always something cooking, and Delphina was likewise always ready to listen sympathetically, to hear about one’s problems and dreams, and to laugh together with her visitors and helpers about life’s cruel ironies. During this time, working in the kitchen, everyone was working together, contributing to the well-being of the community by preparing food. People always felt warm, safe, and cared for in Delphina’s kitchen.

Another woman who maintained a key household in the Bay Area American Indian community had been very active politically during the 1970s, participating in land takeovers, demonstrations, spiritual runs and long-distance walks for Indian rights. Her house was frequently filled not only with her children and grandchildren, but also with many on the move from distant places. She decided that it was important for the young women in her household and their friends to start a drum. A young
women’s drum was highly unusual, and some felt that this was only a
male prerogative. However, “Darlene” saw this as very important for “her
girls.” She organized the drum and lent her support for many years. It
became generally recognized that the drum and her efforts were in the
best interest of these young women, and she was given respect and sup-
port for her decision to start the drum.

“Bernice” carried out her important role in the community through
establishing and maintaining a household that provided a home base to
many: members of the family and both those in need of temporary shel-
ter and those coming into the Bay Area Indian community to take care of
activities of spiritual and cultural necessity. This particular case study,
derived from research carried out from 2000 to 2001, was funded through
a grant from the U.S. Census Bureau. Bernice and others in various
households who participated in this research maintained a journal of the
activities in their household for a period of six weeks. As a part of the
study, women who were the heads of five key households kept journals,
as well as twenty-seven highly mobile individuals. Interviews were car-
ried out with additional individuals as well. The short case study pre-
sented here is also contextualized as a result of over fifteen years of my
acquaintance with Bernice and her household.

“Bernice” and her late husband, “Clarence,” who passed away six years
ago, were fortunate to have joined a housing cooperative over twenty years
ago. They had a comfortable two bedroom flat in a Victorian duplex in
the Bay Area. Their tenancy was secure, and over the years Bernice was
active on the cooperative board of directors. Although they never had a
surplus of money, they both worked and lived adequately. Clarence lived
in the Bay Area most of his life and Bernice came “out from South Da-
kota on relocation” as a teenager. Bernice was considered one of the found-
ing mothers of the Bay Area Indian community and in the spring of 2000
was in her mid-sixties. Over the years Clarence’s nephew had stayed with
them for periods of time, and the youngest of Bernice’s three daughters
by an earlier “Indian marriage” lived with them since childhood. Bernice’s
two other daughters lived out of town, but one often made extended vis-
ts, along with her three children in order to take care of medical treat-
ment in the city for herself and one of her children.

Bernice’s household was the center of much community activity since
she was repeatedly on the board of a number of Indian organizations and
her housing cooperative. Committee meetings and potlucks, and many
informal get-togethers were held in her flat. Bernice also followed her traditional Lakota spiritual practices and therefore often hosted medicine people who came out from South Dakota for ceremonies, some of which were held at her home. People from throughout the urban community often came to visit her during times of crisis in their lives. During these conversations, often over a cup of strong coffee with donuts or fry bread, Bernice gently gave advice in the form of stories regarding others that had found themselves in similar situations. Relatives from “back home,” especially those who traveled the powwow circuit, often made Bernice’s home their base of operations for months at a time after the first powwow of the season at Stanford University on Mother’s Day weekend in mid-May. Her home was also sometimes a staging area where strategy meetings were held and plans were made for Indian rights actions, occupations, or marches that took place in the Bay Area and internationally.

In this household, Bernice fostered a sense of collective responsibility and hospitality, which are expressions of a strongly-held cultural ideal. She was also well known and respected for providing a safe haven for people who had nowhere else to go. Within the past year Bernice took in a woman of her tribe who was terminally ill during the months she was waiting to be transferred back home to South Dakota to a nursing facility. She also took in a young mother with two small children who were temporarily without a place to stay or a job.

Bernice herself was not residentially mobile. She clearly had a permanent and stable residence, yet those staying in Bernice’s home were almost constantly coming and going. In the spring of 2000 Bernice’s two-bedroom household was composed as follows: her youngest daughter and her daughter’s husband of a few years were there, along with their three-year-old child. Theirs had come to be a very tumultuous marriage, and for weeks or months at a time, the daughter’s husband left and lived in his car or with various friends. Likewise the daughter, who abused substances, left for days on end, leaving her child in the care of her grandmother, Bernice. Also in the household at that time was a second daughter, who was in the midst of what turned out to be a nine-month visit, along with her boyfriend and her three teenaged children. One of the children was attending school and stayed during the school week with an aunt in a nearby town, coming to Bernice’s only on weekends. The other two children attended a local Oakland school. Usually, eight to ten people
slept overnight at Bernice’s: various combinations of her children and grandchildren, visitors from “back home,” and local community people. This household was a demonstration of the Indian community values of extending hospitality not only to extended family members, but also to others in need in the community, and to those traveling through town.

Unfortunately, Bernice became gravely ill in June and was in and out of the hospital during the summer of 2000. Her youngest daughter’s husband was only intermittently there and her daughter was also often absent. When Bernice became too ill and weak to continue to care for her grandson, he was placed in a temporary foster care home. In late August Bernice passed away, a sad and tremendous loss for the Bay Area Indian community. Without Bernice, her household disintegrated; a location vanished that had, for many years through Bernice’s energies and concern, come to be an important nexus in the community network. Her youngest daughter entered a long-term residential drug treatment program; the husband was “elsewhere,” and Bernice’s grandson remained in foster care. Concern was expressed in the community that since the child had been placed in a non-Indian home, he might be permanently “lost” to his family and tribe. Soon after Bernice’s memorial at an Indian organization, the older daughter returned with her children and boyfriend to the rural northern California community where she had lived previously, and where she felt more comfortable than in the city. The flat reverted back to the cooperative association, and a new non-Indian family moved in.

This article has focused on middle-aged and older women in urban Indian communities who function as Urban Clan Mothers by maintaining a home that welcomes and cares for the basic needs of many. Not only do they provide a home where people, especially those on the move, may sleep and eat, but also often act as role models for younger men and women, act as teachers and counselors, or carry out spiritual responsibilities. In some ways, these women are fulfilling culturally-based traditional roles that have been adapted to urban environments. They are activating widely shared values regarding the role of elders and women in assuring the well being of the community overall through the sharing and circulation of resources and knowledge.

The approach here to understanding the nature of these women’s crucial, yet low-keyed activism has been to place their activities within the
context of overall urban community structuring, and by understanding the fluid nature of urban communities, as well as the mobility patterns of individuals. This descriptive analysis is yet one more illustration of the complex nature of urban American Indian communities and the need on the part of researchers to clearly understand social organization and structural dynamics.

NOTES


5. See for example, Deborah Davis Jackson, Our Elders Lived It: American Indian Identity in the City (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003); Lobo and Peters, American Indians and the Urban Experience; Lobo, Urban Voices; Straus and Arndt, Native Chicago; Sanderson and Howard-Bobiwash, The Meeting Place; and Weibel-Orlando, Indian Country, L.A.

6. Donald Fixico, The Urban Indian Experience in America (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 81, 188.

7. Susan Lobo, American Indians in the San Francisco Bay Area and the 1990
Census (Washington DC: Center for Survey Methods Research, Bureau of the Census, 1992); and Susan Lobo, “American Indian Urban Mobility in the San Francisco Bay Area, Final Report” submitted to the Statistical Research Division, United States Census Bureau (Washington DC: United States Census Bureau, 2001). John Anner, “To the U.S. Census Bureau, Native Americans are Practically Invisible,” Minority Trendsetter 41 (1990): 15–21, has noted some of the problems at a policy level resulting from this misperception of the nature of the urban Indian communities by the United States Census Bureau. He says, “Census figures are used to determine, among other things, who gets what in terms of federal funding and congressional representation. If you are not counted by the census, then, in the eyes of the government agencies, you don’t count. In fact, you don’t exist at all . . . . For Native Americans, the last U.S. census [1990] which science writer James Gleick says ‘seems certain to stand as a bleak landmark in the annals of arithmetic’—deserves the name ‘statistical genocide.’ It has made a lot of people vanish, for the most part people of color” (16).


22. Ackerman, *Residential Mobility Among the Colville Indians*, 8; and “Residents or Visitors.”