

# Descendants of Mission Indians await permission to rebury remains

The Tap Pilam Coahuiltecan Nation is nothing if not patient.

Its members are descendants of the indigenous people who populated South Texas and Northeast Mexico and built San Antonio's Spanish colonial missions, now seeking World Heritage-site recognition from UNESCO.

If approved, all five — Concepción, San José, San Juan, Espada and the Alamo — will be listed alongside the Statue of Liberty, the Tower of London and the ancient Temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia for their significance to world culture.

It has taken time to appreciate the rich heritage of the missions, the land on which they rest and their builders.

For American Indians, they've always been sacred places, places where their people rest.

The Tap Pilam isn't alone. Other Coahuiltecan tribes, linked linguistically, roamed Texas before the Spanish arrived, long before the Pilgrims reached eastern shores.

Though once in doubt, today it's generally accepted that the descendants of Mission Indians still roam the Earth. It's a sensitive subject for Tap Pilam, whose members are among the Mexican American families still living near the missions and whose ancestors are buried at those missions.

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In the 1960s, when the Archdiocese of San Antonio allowed archaeologists to excavate human remains there, no one asked descendants for permission, or even an opinion.

More than 100 human remains were desecrated, which now is a federal crime, said Ramón Vázquez, executive director of the Tap Pilam's nonprofit American Indians of Texas at the Spanish Colonial Missions.

He said protests were waged. He acknowledged, stoically, that Native Americans and archaeologists haven't exactly been allies.

It's no secret American Indians feel demeaned about remains being "studied" like dinosaur bones, as if, like them, they're extinct. The archdiocese, archaeologists and the National Park Service have been criticized equally.

After a protracted battle, in 1999 the remains were reinterred. American Indians gathered to grieve and honor them. They were reburied at San Juan, in the old church ruins.

Every year at Thanksgiving, the Indians hold an overnight vigil to remember them. Soon, they'll gather for another ceremony.

Last summer, the skeletal remains of about 15 people were uncovered at San Juan during renovation work. The remains, none intact, included those of infants and young children buried near the church door.

UTSA archaeologists will deliver a report on the case this spring. Vázquez says he's withholding judgment on how it was handled.

"I can't say anything was done right or wrong. What I can say is that what was done right is we were included in the conversation."

Vázquez says there's more unfinished business. UTSA must return artifacts, and Tap Pilam would like the park service to erect a marker at the burial site.

He hopes that "We could figure out a way to be proactive with this as we move forward." As UNESCO work continues, "We have to have good relationships."

For now, the Tap Pilam is waiting to hear when they can rebury, grieve and honor those remains. They're

being patient. They've had a lot of practice at it.

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