

# The Chumash Indians As A Modern People of Southern California

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*Dr. Brian Haley and Larry Wilcoxon generated a considerable reaction from both scholars and native Californians, with the publication of their controversial 'modernity' commentary in a December 1997 article in the journal of Current Anthropology. The Chumash Indians of southern California were the focus of their observations.*

*I exchanged a series of emails with Brian Haley and Chumash Indians during the year 1998, wherein we discussed planning and zoning development projects impacting Chumash Indian sites such as the Jonjonata freeway interchange (being built near the town of Buelton) and the new California Spaceport (near Point Conception) in the context of the disputed modernity model.*

*In the commentary that follows, I examine some of the social/political implications of the modernity model and explain why I think many people, both Indian and non-Indian, are getting involved in this increasingly quarrelsome debate. At stake, throughout these claims and counterclaims, may be the future right of the contemporary Chumash to participate effectively in the protection of their ancestral sites against newly proposed development.*

## **CHUMASH MODERNITY**

Brian Haley emailed me on October 12, 1998 to discuss the modernity issue. Haley expressed some concerns about a web page I had recently placed on

the internet, featuring the scholarly debate that followed the publication of his article. He explained [if I understand him correctly] that his journal statement about "equally modern" status for all Chumash was meant as a commentary on terminology.

He proposed that one of the problems facing scholars and native Americans trying to understand Chumash ethnohistory is that the phrase "Chumash" when used to refer to a single cultural unit was "created by anthropologists" in the 1960's. Prior to that date, according to his argument, there was no cultural unity among the Chumash speaking peoples. Instead they had "a plurality of identities, social units, and cultural diversity."

I agreed with Haley on the point that the Chumash enjoyed wide cultural diversity in ancient times. I also agreed that they had a plurality of social units, especially during the periods of great social stress caused by the plagues introduced by European sailors. But it is important to recognize that this diversity was not permanent nor absolute, reducing each town, for example, to an autonomous socio-political unit without meaningful ties to other communities.

The Chumash historian F.L. Kitsepawit, for example, provided a great deal of information about the Antap Council which emerged from a period of mass deaths to unite the island and Santa Barbara Channel towns into a unification government. This government had its center on Santa Cruz island, and later shifted it to the mainland seaport at Mugu and even later to the town of Saticoy. And in the interior, the Mountain (Tejon) Chumash built a second major alliance, which included not only Chumash but Uto-Aztec and Penutian neighbors hostile to Spanish colonization of the California coast. Moreover, there is evidence that the coastal Antap, acting as an underground resistance among the missionized Chumash, cooperated with the Mountain Chumash to strengthen Chumash resistance to Spanish and later Mexican imperialism.

So, one might reasonably argue that traditional Chumash were disunited, and most decidedly so during the Spanish and Mexican eras of the California missions. But, I don't think the interesting issue concerning ethnohistorians studying this period of California history is whether to drop the term *Chumash* from our modern vocabulary. This term serves the same useful purpose as the term *Apache* does in the Southwest and *Iroquois* does in the Northeast. The use of such terms is in referring collectively to a group of people who, regardless of their factionalism, recognized one another as sharing the same linguistic family and therefore sharing ancient ancestral ties.

If Haley and Wilcoxon's commentary about Chumash modernity could be reduced a debate over phraseology, then it would be relatively insignificant. And I doubt that it would have generated so many negative responses from colleagues in the field of Chumash Studies expressing strongly worded concerns. There was much more at stake in the Haley/Wilcoxon article, however, than a simple terminology debate. A number of unusually heated responses appeared, for example, in a series of rebuttals in the August/October 1998 edition of the journal of *Current Anthropology*. Persons interested in contemporary Chumash society should read these responses, to expand their understanding of the modernity issue.

It seems to me that the whole field of Chumash Studies is undergoing a healthy self-examination, as a result of the Wilcoxon and Haley article. Its strong criticisms of many anthropologists and archaeologists who have written about the Chumash could not be ignored by either the academic nor Chumash groups. This forced them to examine a number of difficult problems concerning the relationships between university scholars, government agencies responsible for protection of Chumash archaeological and heritage sites, and the various Chumash bands. Underlying much of the resulting debate is the MODERNITY ISSUE, since it impacts so many other areas of Chumash scholarship. Some critics of Haley and Wilcoxon, like myself, have questioned the logic and also the pragmatic purposes of the authors. A number of these critics, for example, have no objections against using the term *Chumash* when writing about the ancient peoples of this region. They find Haley and Wilcoxon's terminology suggestion unnecessary and of questionable utility. I use the term *Chumash* to refer to the speakers of the Chumash languages in my writings. And I also use the phrase *Chumashia* to refer to all of the ancient territory once occupied by Chumash speaking peoples. Use of such terminology is convenient and straightforward. Anyone can grasp the idea quickly, and I dare say they prefer such terminology over repeated use of longer and more convoluted language.

A hypothesized disunity is critical to Haley's argumentation. He states quite explicitly in his article, for example, that the Chumash speaking peoples "were never united into a single or even a few overarching polities prior to their complete incorporation into the Spanish mission system by 1804" (767). This is one of the most important points made in his article, and it can be easily be overlooked. It is, in my judgment, a serious misinterpretation of the evidence handed down to us (and it is shared by a number the leading scholars in the field). Yet, the evidence points to a contrary reality. Linguistics, economics, politics, and other elements of a 'shared' culture did in fact bring the Chumash together in various broad coalitions such as the Brotherhood of the *Tomol*, the *Antap* Council,

and in later years at Tejon where local mountain and exiled coastal Chumash joined ranks in opposition to Spanish, Mexican, and American threats to their freedoms. And the Chumash coastal underground united in their 1824 uprising against the missions which is an event still commemorated by many Chumash descendants. In each of these cases, the Chumash speaking peoples joined together in common cause. They put aside their differences, and worked for a common good.

This is the model of Chumash history presented in my 1998 report to Caltrans on the western Chumash site called *Jonjonata*. I submitted this paper separate from Dr. John Johnson of the Santa Barbara Museum because we could not agree on many fundamental issues concerning Chumash history. In my report to Caltrans, I spoke of the Mountain Chumash as working in common cause with one another and with the Chumash underground in the missions against the abuses of European colonialism. They survived as a viable fighting force right up to 1851, when remnant groups signed the Tejon Treaty.

### **Are All Chumash 'Modern' [So That All Chumash Traditionalist Families Are Extinct?]**

Haley does not hesitate to use the term "modern" in his analysis of contemporary Chumash life. He has argued, for example, that the Traditionalists Chumash are more modern [and discontinuous] than the Catholics and other members of the historic local Indian communities. This claim has puzzled many readers, including the Chumash themselves.

It is odd, indeed, to contend that Chumash Catholics are more Traditional than the Chumash who identify culturally with their older ancestral heritage. The key to understanding Haley's model is the qualifier of "continuity" of tradition. If I understand his argument, he believes that ALL Chumash lost continuity of tradition in the early decades of the mission era. As a result of this [mistaken] chronology, the only true continuity of culture lies in the Catholic Chumash tradition. And it is the Santa Ynez Reservation population, therefore, that Haley points to as having the most legitimate claim to this Catholic heritage.

Both Chumash and non-Chumash critics of Haley's model protest against the classification of all Santa Ynez residents as conventional Catholics, lacking any continuity to an older cultural heritage. Some Chumash who have been in contact with me have identified themselves as Traditionalists in the old sense, and point out that some of the Santa Ynez residents also identify with the pre-Catholic

culture. A good number of Chumash I have talked to say that their parents and grandparents refused to reveal their Traditional religious beliefs to white anthropologists and Catholic church officials. They behaved differently in a public setting, as opposed to how they behaved in the privacy of their homes when surrounded by trusted relatives.

### **THE REVITALIZATION OF CHUMASH CULTURE**

Most of the Chumash with whom I am in contact these days prefer to talk in more straightforward language than Haley and Wilcoxon. Typically, such traditionalists find Haley's statement about non-traditional Chumash being 'more traditional than the Traditionalists' as less enlightening and than aggravating. They point out that it is Haley who chose to classify the reservation Chumash as non-traditionalists, even after he acknowledges in his report that they consider themselves Traditionalists.

"No one identifies as non-traditional," Haley proposed in his 1997 article (787). But this goes against common sense, which suggest that some Chumash surely identify themselves as converts to Catholicism and not adherents to the religious beliefs of the ancient Chumash. It is my impression that Haley is wrong; there are actually a number of Santa Ynez residents and their descendants who consider themselves faithful Catholics and thus obviously non-traditional Chumash.

Haley does address the issue of self-proclaimed Catholic Chumash. He uses the term *Catholic* to describe a "core of families" which have strong social and genealogical links to the aboriginal Chumash speaking peoples of the region. "They are descendants of the Catholic Indian communities in San Luis Obispo, Santa Ynez, Santa Barbara, Ventura, and Tejon" (787). This Catholic core "tends to reject newcomers to Chumash identity who lack firm genealogical credentials" (787). And these same 'Catholic' families object, Haley concludes, to other families calling themselves Traditionalists while the ideologically pure Catholic Chumash families reject them for having what Haley describes as a 'hippie' philosophies which demean Catholicism (787).

What is at stake with all of these discussions of divisions within the Chumash? It is not only philosophical. One pragmatic consideration is the allocation of what Haley and Wilcoxon describe as "rewards." At the most basic level, I believe rewards should include more land for the various Chumash groups, federal recognition for those deprived of legal recognition, monitoring and other jobs

linked to cultural heritage programs, and potential compensation for natural resources taken by whites from their aboriginal ancestors.

### **HOW TO DETERMINE WHO IS AN AUTHENTIC CHUMASH?**

Haley and Wilcoxon provide an interesting list of outsiders who have supposedly influenced modern Chumash into false beliefs about their Traditional religion. This list, perhaps more than any other passage of the Haley/Wilcoxon article, gives the reader a clear insight into the authors' sociopolitical perspective. The list of offenders includes environmentalists (page 769), hippies (787), incompetent anthropologists (769), and non-Indian New Agers (769). I can't help when reading this list but wonder what would be the success rate of contemporary Chumash groups trying to protect their ancestral heritage sites if they isolate themselves from all outside influences except developers, the California Department of Transportation [Caltrans], commanding officers of federal military bases on Chumash lands, county politicians, and the academics hired by them to serve as delineators of Chumash heritage.

The recent victory of the Indian and non-Indian coalition fighting to stop a ski resort on Mount Shasta is a major development in the politics of native heritage preservation in California. The primary lesson learned by those people who worked on this issue is that the native Californians have to avoid factionalism. That includes not only factionalism within a single group, but the factionalism that isolates the native people from the non-native majority. My hope is that the Chumash will overcome their deep divisions and pull together in common cause. In the end, only the Chumash themselves will be the arbitrators of authenticity, group membership, and delineators of a living culture of their choosing."

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### **Chumash Compared to Makah Indians**

" Chumash Indian relations with the mainstream press have never been exemplary, beginning with the early years of the academic press controlled by the University of California Press at Berkeley, and continuing with modern regional newspapers.

The fault lies not with the Chumash but with the racism endemic to American society, which has persistently denigrated native peoples and depicted them as a

'vanishing' problem which will soon go away. Various solutions have been proposed to end the native American problem, from genocidal extermination to assimilation. But the one thing that has been persistent in American treatment of native peoples in public history has been a dogmatic insistence that the Indians lack a legally defensible continuity to the past, and therefore have no legitimate legal [read socio-political] claims to their lands and natural resources which were seized from them by means of military force.

Generations of American school children have been taught that the California Indians faded away, and are no longer of interest to the majority of state residents who are European by training and religious sympathy. The difficulties for local residents, even those highly sympathetic to native American causes, is illustrated in a recent article by a leading educator from the Santa Barbara area, called "Makah's Whaling Rights and Santa Barbara's Chumash," (*Santa Barbara News Press*, October 18, 1998, page G1).

The author compares the non-reservation Santa Barbara Chumash with the reservation Makah Indians of Washington State: " I wonder what the Chumash could have done to keep [their ancestral heritage] .. to maintain their cultural traditions and to keep their tribe's culture alive? Indeed, the traditions of the Chumash are sadly a historical footnote to today's Santa Barbara- a European based heritage and culture having little to do with our local environment nor the indigenous peoples. Our Euro-ancestors did not provide the Chumash the circumstance to maintain their way of life, nor allow them to continue to develop their traditional culture. The Makah, unlike any opportunity provided the Chumash, are a living tribe of Native Americans anxious to survive as a people within the traditions and ways of their people" (Fitzpatrick, Makah, G2).

How insightful it would have been if the author of this article had visited with contemporary Chumash families before writing his article. I suspect that Fitzpatrick would not, after face-to-face discussions with traditional Chumash, have reported to his readers that the Chumash uniquely failed to maintain their way of life in comparison to the Makah. Clearly, the Makah have an advantage over the non-reservation Chumash because they have a land base which has enabled them to maintain continuity of community residency. But I have visited the Makah reservation, and can assure you that its residents suffer from severe cultural assimilation pressures just as the non reservation Chumash. I do not believe, therefore, that the Chumash ["unlike" the Makah] lack significant cultural ties to their ancestral traditions and can be classified as completely "modern" people.

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