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AmDes Research and Publishing
Sandpoint, Idaho

November, 2018

Linguistic Evidence Suggests An Independent Development Of the Chumash Plank Boat

Terry Jones and Kathryn Klar published “Diffusion Reconsidered” in *American Antiquity* in 2005. In this article they presented linguistic and archaeological evidence for pre-historic Polynesian contact with Southern California. The wooden plank boats of the Chumash and Tongva [Gabrielino] were the focus of this paper which proposed that Polynesian contacts led to the development of these ocean-going crafts.

Six years later Yoram Meroz published his lengthy critique of the Jones/Klar proposals, providing careful analysis of their claims and concluding that: “Jones and Klar have presented what they consider archaeological, ethnological, and linguistic evidence for a Polynesian origin of the plank canoe of Southern California. I have shown here that none of that evidence is valid. There is nothing to show that the Chumash *tomol* and the Gabrielino *ti’at* were inspired by external contact.”

I support most of Meroz’s findings. His 2011 article provided the most comprehensive critique of the Jones/Klar diffusion hypothesis to that date. But it was not complete, in that Meroz did not address their central claim that there was no matrix of words associated with *Tomol*, the Chumash word used to identify a wooden plank boat. If a matrix associated with *Tomol* could be identified, then the Jones/Klar argument would be greatly weakened. The translations of associated terms might help us accurately translate *Tomol*. Most importantly, the existence of a cluster of associated Chumash words would strengthen the claim of Meroz and others that the Chumash plank boat probably evolved long before the expansion of humans into eastern Polynesia. It would also throw into question the age of origin of the Tongva wooden boat.

Such a matrix does exist, and features a number of terms associated with placing an object above another object. The key to a proper assessment of the Chumash term *Tomol* lies not in the type of material used in the construction of a plank boat, but rather in the technique of stacking wooden planks or reed bundles to make sides for a boat. If it

can be shown that *Tomol* refers to the building up of sides for a boat, then those made of stacked reed bundles and all wooden plank boats should be associated with this terminology; and debates whether the term *Tomol* was used to identify yellow pine boats (as opposed to redwood boats) would be demonstrated to be only a protracted scholarly distraction.

Tomol is not a foreign word for the Chumash, as claimed by Jones/Klar, but has a number of associated terms including the root term *Lomol* which means ‘to be over’ in the Samala language and ‘to be piled up’ in the closely related Tsmuwich language. Associated terms include: *Wisuqolomol*, *Sunoqolomol*, *Nuqolomol*, *Milimol*, *Mipolomol*, *Woslolomol*, *Qololomol*, *Oxlolomol*, and ‘*Oqs’olomol*. These terms all have the connotation of gaining height through stacking, piling, layering.¹ *Tomol* belongs to this grouping and we can conclude that *Tomolin*, which has been translated as ‘to make a boat’, is not restricted to a particular material used for a boat hull but refers to the technique of stacking material to make raised sides. Moreover, if *Tomol* is an old term with deep roots in the Chumash language, then we can also assume that its association with the construction of plank boats should not be dated as late as 1,300 B.P. as Jones/Klar assert.

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It is ironic that the title to Jones and Klar’s 2006 article responding to Atholl Anderson included a call for “open minds.”² While they asked their readers to seriously consider their arguments for diffusion from Polynesia to California, Jones/Klar did not hesitate to denounce other academics for defending diffusion. They dismissed the transoceanic diffusion research of a number of scholars as bordering on the absurd.³ From such strong language, it seems reasonable to conclude that Jones/Klar considered the debate to be a narrow one, focused on their Polynesian research interest but excluding other possible sources of diffusion such as China, Japan, or even Southeast Asia.

Common sense should play a larger role in our ongoing deliberations about the Chumash heritage, especially in the field of linguistics. It is a dubious practice, for example, to blindly rely on definitions given in any dictionary. The two published dictionaries in the Tsmuwich and Samala languages are products of field research by John Harrington working with remnant elders surviving deliberate genocide by Spanish, Mexican, and American governments. The Chumash who worked with Harrington deserve our deepest gratitude and also our sympathetic appreciation for the difficulties of their task. Careful study is needed, however, to reveal the flaws in translation and also the ethnocentric biases of both Harrington and his Chumash colleagues. The Samala dictionary, for example, is deeply flawed by Catholic bias against Samala traditional

1 Translations and commentary on this matrix of Chumash terms appear in “This Linguistic Argument Won’t Float”, John Anderson, AmDes Publishing, Fall 2017.

2 “On Open Minds and Missed Marks: A Response to Athol Anderson”, Jones & Klar, *American Antiquity*, 2006.

3 (Klar/Jones, Diffusion Reconsidered, *American Antiquity*, 2005; the research of Ekholm, Kelly, Meggers, and Tolstoy “borders on absurd”).

religion. Yet this partiality is not acknowledged in the text, leaving dictionary users with false understanding of basic spiritual vocabulary. Moreover, entries under **Boat** and terms related to boat technology remain in need of examination by a wider source of opinion including Chumash active in the modern Brotherhood of the Tomol.⁴ Consulting a broader community would have transformed a scholarly preoccupation cloistered in academic journals into a debate of interest to many people, most significantly the Chumash themselves.

˘ In 1998 Kehoe and her colleagues called for open debate on diffusionism and defended academic collegiality. Nineteen years later, Jones and Klar apparently desire to push the door ajar on the diffusion issue, but not to open it wide.

4 A number of Chumash organizations were not apparently contacted by Klar/Jones or any of their colleagues during this decade-long debate over the source of the Chumash plank boat technology. I spoke to Marcus Lopez (Barbareno) who confirmed his council's isolation from this debate. Yet Lopez confirmed that his council respects scientific research and would benefit from frequent and thorough consultation. Moreover, he informed me that neither the Chumash nor Hawaiians seek exclusive credit for plank boat technology.

In the decades ahead, new archaeological evidence may or may not ascertain transoceanic contact. Regardless, both the Chumash and Hawaiians will embrace one another as members of the pan-Pacific native cooperation sphere which respects science as a fact-finding tool with limited application in disputations involving cultural values.