

A CHUMASH CHRISTMAS

THE LIFE ADVENTURES OF A WONDROUS CHILD BORN ON CHRISTMAS DAY

(A small book by Dr. John Anderson)

1995

A Parable for The Christmas Season

This text features the theological teachings of the Chumash Indians of Southern California. A myth by a Chumash Islander named F.L. Kitsepawit is analyzed. It celebrates the virgin birth of a miraculous child born in late December, at the time of the winter solstice.

For readers familiar with European Christmas folkways, this narrative invites them to enjoy their Christian holiday traditions from a multi cultural perspective. The author describes the narrative as a parable, in which the behavior of the cultural hero named *Ciqneq* is compared to the [deep winter, i.e. late December] movements of the solar deity. The beginning and ending of the tale takes place during the winter solstice, which is called Christmas by contemporary residents of the Chumash region of southern California.

From the Introduction

This book follows the adventures of the Chumash religious leader named *Ciqneq*, who was born of a virgin during the winter solstice [Christmas] holiday season. It is based on the traditional teachings of the Chumash Indians of Southern California.

The narrative is deliberately worded in enigmatic language so that listeners have to pay close attention before solving the puzzle presented in the story. Such parables were recited for thousands of years in California, to entertain audiences during the cold (and often rainy) winter months.

I imagine the narrator, F. L. Kitsepawit, explaining how he first heard the story from a respected grandmother, while she entertained a large gathering including her own family members. To the delight of her listeners, she improvised on a traditional plot line, perhaps by reversing its meanings through word-play or mirror imaging. The audience is left uncertain, and welcomes the humorous give-and-take as various persons rise from their seats to offer an interpretation. (J. Anderson, November, 1995)

Further Commentary

"The opening scene in Kitsepawit's narrative celebrates the virgin birth of a supernatural child. This newborn is called *Ciqneq*, and he grows up to perform miracles and overcome the devil. The parallels between the wondrous achievements of *Ciqneq* and the Christian persona of *Jesus* are obvious throughout the story.

Like *Jesus* the Chumash hero *Ciqneq* is tested in his youth and found to be an extraordinary person. While only a child, *Ciqneq* began using his supernatural powers to cast out devils and cleanse the world. Later he is tested by the devil, who cannot confuse him. By the end of the story *Ciqneq* completes his journey and finds peace again.

Some reader might explain this tale as a 'mission era' allegory, in which a Christian narrator has simply substituted the name *Ciqneq* for *Jesus*. My guess, however, is that this narrative is much more complicated. I identify *Ciqneq* as a traditional cultural hero and propose an astronomical solution to Kitsepawit's riddle. The narrative is organized in such a way, according to this solution, that *Ciqneq's* adventures parallel the annual movements of the sun in the sky. Like most good riddles, however, more than one interpretation is possible. (J. Anderson, November, 1995)

Related Text & Critical Commentary

Tales For the Christmas Season: Reader's interested in learning more about the Chumash winter solstice traditions, can also look at the link below called *Chumash Christmas 2*. It features a *Tsmuwich* (Barbareno) folk tale by Luisa Nutu. In this narrative, the miraculously conceived cultural hero is named *Tupnek* which means 'a little child'. The second narrative in this text is from the Mohave Indians, who traded with the Mountain Chumash through the Tejon pass.

Onokok Qilikutayiwit: Onokok is the granddaughter of M.S. Qilikutyaiwit, a leading Chumash historian who is best known by her Spanish name Maria Solares. Onokok is a *Samala* (Inezeno) Chumash and the director of the Inezeno Chumash Revitalization Project.

Onokok emailed me to say that some of the titles of my web pages "made me cringe." One of these cringing titles was this web page on a Chumash Christmas. She wrote: Those stories [from her ancestors] have passed down through many generations orally, and never has the content or meaning been misconstrued until the last thirty years or so. You see [they have not been misconstrued before that] because they have been passed the way they have been [originally told]. That is what has kept them alive, kept us alive, kept us with an understanding of who we are and what we are supposed to do and say and feel.

When you twist them, to make them user friendly, what do you think you are doing? Those stories are for our teachings. And we understand them. We don't need translations; it wasn't meant for anyone else to understand, but us... All we have left as Indian people is what could be told orally. Please don't white-wash it.

For example- if a Chumash person was trying to find more out about who they were and looked at your page, they would come to believe we celebrate X-mas or Halloween. They wouldn't be learning the real reasons why these stories are told. They would settle for something they read instead of seeking out a Chumash person to find out the real stuff. People believe in what people write, especially authors with degrees. There is a whole other world, separate from that which is written about us. I mean this on a spiritual level..."

(December 31, 1998, email)

Response: Onokok has made some good points here, and she is not the first Chumash person to contact me to discuss these and related matters.

One of the problems in trying to resolve this type of criticism is that the focus of most of my books is on a non-Indian readership. The books with Chumash themes are meant to speak to people who have little, and often virtually no, background information about the Chumash. Yet they are interested in learning more, and are willing to overcome the prejudices embodied in the curriculum of California schools for many generations.

Given the fact that most of us who went to high school and college in California were taught that the Chumash were extinct, very often we have shown indifference to their culture out of programmed ignorance. But times are changing, and I get letters and emails from non-Chumash who feel they need some interpretative help in understanding the old songs, poems, folk tales, speeches, and histories written down by anthropologists and other scholars who have worked with the Chumash. Hopefully, my writing provide some help.

The problem goes deeper. Onokok speaks with great sensitivity of the importance of accurate preservation of the Chumash oral heritage. And, as she points out, growing up in a Chumash family gives her and others like her a unique insight into her ancestral

heritage. I acknowledge that I cannot partake of this unique insight, but what I can do is present a view of Chumash traditional culture that is unique to my 'outsider' background.

Actually, many Chumash have struggled with this type of problem for the last two hundred years as they have been forced by a series of European invasions to adjust to an dual cultural existence. Kitsepawit taught that the days between December 21 to December 25 were one of the most important holy periods (holiday) in the ancient Chumash calendar. This was the period of the Winter Solstice, which the Christians adopted as a time to celebrate the birth of their deity called Jesus. The Chumash variant of the Spanish name for Jesus, is *Xesu Kilistu*.¹

In my writings, I discuss how traditional Chumash holiday observances parallel Christian holiday observances, such as the December birth of *Xesu Kilistu*. An understanding of ethno-astronomy helps contemporary Californians of differing faiths reach out to one another in a spirit of reconciliation and mutual respect. The story of the Christian deity's birth mirrors the actions of the rejuvenated Sun which is 'born' on December 24-25. Depending on the observations of local native astronomers, the Sun begins to move again on the horizon on the 24th or 25th, after four days of [solar] inactivity. The ritual Chumash name for the Sun during this sacred solstice period is *Kaqunup'mawa*. This name means 'the radiance of the child born on the 24th of December'² This child is the newborn Sun, and its renewal of apparent motion on the horizon each morning gives evidence of a New Year.

This book is no longer in print. It will eventually be entered in full text for a free download through the John M. Anderson Library Project

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1 (Tsmuwich Dictionary, Yee, 49).

2 (Blackurn, December,97; Kitsepawit).