

Chumash

Autumn Equinox

[A Book by Dr. John Anderson] ¹

Introduction

This text explores social and spiritual beliefs about the autumn equinox, as expressed in the traditions of the Chumash Indians of southern California. Their equinox ceremonies were held on September 21. This was the exact moment in time when day and night are of equal length.

September is the ninth month of the solar year. It is the time when Mother Earth bears the fruits of her womb and provides prosperous crops of seeds, fruit, and animal meat. In this sense, the earth mirrors the physiological pattern experienced by human females, whose gestation period is also nine months. Prayers, songs, verse, and political orations associated with equinox gatherings frequently touch upon the importance of Mother Earth and of the Sun and other celestial bodies that impact human life during the fall season.

They are rich in inspirational locution. Many phrases enriched public discourse during this season, including poetic-mythological references to the Eye of the Sun, the Beauty of the World, the Flower of the Wind, the Children of the Sun, and enigmatic discussions of the Sun's Shadow and the Walnut Shell Enigma. One of the purposes of this text is to introduce the reader to the turn of mind that produced such inviting phraseology, embodied in public pronouncements of hope qualified with overtones of foreboding and redemption.

The fall equinox is one of the four major astronomically determined holidays of the Chumash calendar. The spring equinox, and the two solstices, complete the quadraseded ceremonial year. The fall equinox is characterized by a season of harvesting, plus the beginning of the darker days of approaching winter.

¹ This webpage written November 2000

F. L. Kitsepawit was one of the leading Chumash historians of the early twentieth century. He used John Harrington of the Smithsonian Institution as a consultant. Together, they preserved important information on Chumash equinox traditions. The Kitsepawit/Harrington field notes included, for example, tantalizing passages about the teachings of I. Suluwish, concerning the equinox and what he described as the Shadow of the Sun. This text begins with a background discussion of the shadows created by the sun, and how an analysis of the cosmic duality of shadow/light contributes to our understanding of traditional Chumash theology.

To understand the phrase Shadow of the Sun it is helpful to examine the meaning of 'shadow' in Chumash teachings. Clearly the sun is not a shadow, but rather the mirror opposite. It's rays drive away shadow! Throughout this text, therefore, the role of the Sun as illuminator is a reoccurring subject of discussion. Secondary shadow themes associated with the approaching winter months include dusk, dark, shade, insubstantiality, foreboding, and demonology.

Speeches made at Chumash equinox gatherings often emphasized the need for caution. The day after the equinox, the sun began a six month period of declining power. With each setting sun, the length of the day was diminished, and the length of the night increased. Family elders warned against the approaching winter. They did not let themselves be lulled into thinking that the hot days and good weather would last much longer. The Thanksgiving feast that followed the equinox was a time of joy. But the educated Chumash knew that the approaching winter months would test both individual and communal spirituality.

[July, 2001]

The Flower of the Sun

"One Chumash home where a Sun Ceremony was held in the nineteenth century was adorned with a particularly interesting object. It was a whale bone, upon which an elaborate solar symbol was painted. This symbol is called the *Tspe'wy Kamumpumawa* meaning the Flower of the Sun.

Kitsepawit reported that the body of this solar symbol was painted purple, using the juice of a cactus fruit mixed with pine pitch. And the twelve rays that extended from the Sun, with small split ends, were painted in a dark rose color. These rays represented the twelve months of the year.

The color purple apparently symbolized the rising sun, whose color is masked by the haze and moisture of the lower atmosphere in the early morning.

Following the songs, all of the audience rose as a gesture of respect, as women with suckling babies came into the room and held their children up to see the Sun Flower. They made this fourth gesture of gratitude to the sun, in expression of appreciation for their newborn children and

the daily giving of life sustaining warmth by the sun, upon which future generations of animals, plants, and humans fully depend.

The Symbolism of the Whale Vertebra

Kitsepawit provided no explanation of why the Flower of the Sun was painted on a whale vertebra. A bone like a vertebra is not an easy surface on which to pain a complex image, so it is reasonable to assume that it was chosen for important symbolic purposes. The coastal Chumash were well acquainted with whales, and surely recognized them as the largest of animals. Their boatmen routinely encountered whales in their trading and fishing expeditions. And whale bones, such as the ribs and hip bones were used in house construction and burials, each with unique spiritual connotation. It would be surprising, therefore, if they chose a whale bone to represent the largest celestial object known to man, the sun. But why a vertebra? Perhaps this particular bone was used to symbolize the equinox theme of balance between night and day? For all members of the vertebrate family, including humans, balance themselves with their backbones. They shift their weight, i.e. maintain equilibrium, with flexible muscles attached to these bones which also protect their spinal cords.

Caution Over Approaching Darkness

Next on the agenda after the honoring of the Flower of the Sun were oratorical presentations by community leaders. These speeches dealt with the changes that will take place after the equinox when the balance between day and night would change. Though varied in content, all of these speeches were lined by the themes of preparation for the upcoming dangers of winter, the need for moral behavior, and the need to make preparations for the quickly approaching Harvest Festival, which would be a time of joy and thanksgiving. Following this thanksgiving festival, the people would enter a period of increased darkness, when the light of the sun wanes and the shadow of night grows stronger. In response, they needed to shift from their secular preoccupations of food gathering and processing into a period of relatively spiritual meditations.

Before the congregation lay the mystery of a growing shadow into which they entered cautiously. But the orators had to be careful that they did not cower their audience, and instead sought to reinforce its courage."

Sun: Beauty of the World "The Chumash called the Sun, with its amazing light, by the ritual name *Cenhes Heisup* which means the Beauty of the World."²

[Glossary, 57]

Note that the context of such praise is beauty on *Itiashup*, the surface of the earth and the lower sky. *Heisup* means 'this world'. "This realm is only part of the physical realm" (*Chumash Cosmology*, Anderson, 72).

Balance "At the Autumn and spring equinoxes, the time of day and night are equal, i. e. are in balance. In rare surviving field notes on fall equinox oratory, Kitsepawit described a sun symbol painted on a whale vertebrae. This symbol probably was associated with the concept of balance, which was central to the fall equinox"

[Glossary, 48]

Antap Official

Twelve *Antap* officials served under the Sun Priest at the equinox gathering. Each represented a month of the solar year. Presumably, the beginning of this Sun Ceremony ended the official work of six of the attending *Antap* officials and ushered in the period in which the remaining six *Antap* officials became more active. The ritual obligations of the spring and summer *Antap* officials had focused on secular issues. But the newly active fall and winter *Antap* would focus the people's attention on spiritual issues concerning communal unity in the face of winter confinement, death, and rebirth.

The Role of the Sun in Chumash Theology

To this date, no consensus has emerged among American academics writing about Chumash theology. In the early part of the twentieth century' Christian bias, and a heavy reliance on Catholic mission archival materials led to a pandemic denigration of Chumash traditionalism. When the field notes of John Harrington became available in the second half of the century, however, a vast amount of new data stimulated an academic reassessment of Chumash theology. But Harrington's field notes were not self-explanatory. Exegesis of his vast Chumash data continues, therefore, and a consensus remains an elusive goal because so many statements made by the Chumash working with Harrington led to the publication of commentary presenting contradictory or at times erroneous explanations of Chumash metaphysics. Kitsepawit told Harrington on one occasion, for example, that the sun was the "chief" god of the Chumash who

2 (Blackburn, December, 341; also see 96 where Timi uses this same phrase).

"adored" the Sun. Unfortunately this commentary led Hudson and Underhay to conclude that the Sun was the Chumash supreme supernatural being. But this is clearly incorrect, for the supreme Chumash supernatural was the creator deity who I have described in other texts as living at [behind?] the North Star. This creator was the "Invisible One" who is misidentified by Hudson and Underhay as the Sun.³ But it was Eagle who served as the celestial guardian of the invisible deity's pure realm which was located at the apex of the cosmos, while the Sun remained far below in a less pure level of the sky.

The Chumash called their solar deity "uncle". In a Samala narrative, he is depicted as an old widower with two unmarried daughters. These daughters presumably are the Morning Star and the Evening Star. But in a Lulapin Chumash narrative told by R. Timi, they are depicted as the wives of the Sun.

Like the uncle in Chumash family life, the Sun was a stern disciplinarian, who did not allow his nephews to indulge in their greed or become lazy. He watched over all daily events, with his great solar eye which "sees everything." But this did not mean that the solar deity saw everything that transpired in the cosmos, only that he saw what transpired on the earth when he was traveling in the sky on his daily journey from east to west. When twilight came and night fell, the solar power diminished dramatically as the sun disappeared at sunset, moving into the western portal which leads into the underworld.

The celestial Eagle, Coyote, and Morning Star became active in the night sky, as they gambled with one another to determine the fate of humanity. Yet somehow the Sun participated as the fourth member of this gambling contest, allied with the celestial Eagle who was the sun's superior. How the sun managed to be active in the night sky, without driving away the night lights, is unknown.

Kakunupmawa is a ritual name for the Sun. According to traditional Chumash lore, all humans were known as children of the Sun, or "sons of *Kakunupmawa*" Yet, even though they identified themselves as sons of the Sun, educated Chumash did not claim full understanding.⁴

A Chumash Sun Ceremony Held in Ventura, California

[Appendix A]

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- 3 The Chumash supreme deity (*Enememe*) is invisible in his realm of Ideas (Chumash Cosmology, Anderson, 87)
- 4 These comments were written in in the year 2000. Subsequent research for *Chumash Cosmology* (Anderson) and *Chumash Psychology* (Anderson) led to a deeper appreciation of the powerful influence on life on the surface of the earth during the daytime when most humans are active. The Chumash call themselves Sons of the Sun in recognition of the embodiment of all human souls. As long as they continue a cycle of reincarnations, humans will remain Sons of the Sun. Note that the sun rules this realm only half of the time. When it is below the horizon at night, however, humans come under the influence of the Moon, planets, and stars.

Kitsepawit documented a Sun Ceremony which was held in the home of the Lulapin traditionalist named Kula, who lived in Ventura, California. Presumably it took place sometime in the early American period, when Chumash traditionalists were forced to go 'underground' due to severe repression of their human and religious rights.

Shuluwish was an old man at this occasion, when he acted as the Master of Ceremonies. Early in his prime, he served as the assistant mayor of the large seaport called *Shisholop* which was located on the Ventura beach. After the reduction of the population of this seaport into the Ventura mission, Shuluwish became one of the last leaders of the *Kamemey* resistance.

Noted guests at this Ventura Sun Ceremony included Kitsepawit, his maternal grandfather R. Timi and A. Chmuya. They and other guest were invited to this ceremony as representatives of local Chumash families representing complex and enduring rivalries.

The ceremony began around 10 o'clock in the morning. The guests sat in the crowded living room, with their backs against the wall. The formal meeting began with the guiding elders revealing the presence of a number of "mysterious" ritual objects which were featured as center pieces for the theological and ethical discussions that followed. Kitsepawit remembered the Sun Symbol, painted on a whale vertebra, most clearly of all of the holy relics.

Chumash ethics was a major topic of discussion at this meeting. One subject that came up was the use ritual title Ray of the Sun, still used proudly by the traditionalist spiritual leaders. Kula spoke on the topic of nobility and advised Kitsepawit that "if a man observed the virtues which belonged to the rays of the sun, he would be like a ray in the world. He would have noble feelings to help his neighbors."

I. Shuluwish was the *Paha*, or master of ceremonies at this gathering He sat in the middle of the room, surrounded by the many mystical objects and began a formal speech which featured archaic religious terms that some members of the audience [including Kitsepawit] found difficult to understand. Shuluwish's oratory was followed by three Rising Sun songs sung by Kitsepawit's grandfather R. Timi. From the west side of the room, Timi faced eastward and sang about a symbolic rising of the Sun, expressing "gratitude" to the Sun.

Shuluwish's Background

Shuluwish was one of the leading politicians of his generation. And, like many other leaders of large Chumash communities, Shuluwish did not live immediately in the town that he helped rule but rather ritually isolated himself in the smaller community of *Kachukuchuk*. This community was located near the mouth of Large canyon a short distance up the Ventura river from *Shisholop*.

Kachukuchuk means a wild dove. The creek drains into the Ventura river from the east, near the modern town of Casitas Springs. One of the reasons that this canyon may have attracted spiritual leaders like Shuluwish is the sulphur hot springs that is located higher up the creek. Such springs were used for medicinal purposes, and were considered sacred [full of healing power] by traditionalist families. Sulphur mountain located next to this spring was called *Qinominomo*.

At Kachukuchuk, Shuluwish and other religious leaders could avoid contact with the mundane affairs of daily living in a bustling seaport. This also gave him an advantage when the Spanish began to force the local Chumash into the Ventura Mission, which was located between Shisholop and Kachukuchuk. At first contact, Shuluwish and Chukauyon resisted Spanish colonialism as leaders of local traditional Chumash. But eventually, under growing pressure from the Catholic priests at the mission and increased death rates from plagues, the once thriving seaport was reduced to a few shacks in the sand dunes for use by fishermen. And *Kachukuchuk* was similarly reduced. It was at this time that Shuluwish relocated to *Kamexwey* which was still functioning as a traditionalist community away from the mission.

Shuluwish was a Limu islander, and therefore would have been welcomed at *Kamexwey* which housed many of the oldest Limu leadership. His name meant "full of birds" Kitsepawit identified him as a member of the *Antap* Council of Twenty One, which asked him to serve as the assistant official of *Shisholop* under mayor Chukauyon.

This web page represents the views of the author, and does not necessarily represent the views of the Chumash Indians, either individually or in a group.

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