

# Point Conception: The Chumash Western Gate

[Commentary By Dr. John Anderson]

1999

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The Samala Chumash historian named Maria Qiliqutayiwit reported to John Harrington, of the Smithsonian Institution, that Point Conception was a sacred place for the ancient Chumash. It was, she said, a gateway for the souls of the dead to enter the heavens and begin their celestial journey to paradise (*Similaqsa*).

Qiliqutayiwit's statement can be read in December's Child, which was edited by Thomas Blackburn and published by the University of California Press in 1975. In the quarter of a century since the publication of this book, a great deal has happened at Point Conception as it has become a point of contention between many competing factions trying to influence the development or non-development of this relatively pristine part of the California Coast.

## **Point Conception As the Chumash Western Gate?**

Qiliqutayiwit described a "gate" associated with Point Conception, which is one of the westernmost points of land in the ancient Chumash territory. Many contemporary Chumash call Point Conception the "Western Gate" and believe that this region deserves to be kept from development, because it is a holy place linked to the souls of the dead. In fact, many traditionalists believe that it is one of the most sacred places in the Chumash territory, deserving of the same protection of other sacred places such as *Iwihinmu* (Pine Mountain), *Toshololo* (Frazier Mountain), *Wasna*, *Zaca* lake, and other holy places.

But not all American scholars agree with this assessment, nor the many economic interests which have tried to develop the Point Conception area for economic reasons. Early developers included Spanish and Mexican cattlemen awarded land grants in the vicinity. Later came the American railroad (now called the Southern Pacific) that built a coastal line immediately next to the point, along with the federal government which built a light house on the point and confiscated the nearby lands.

In time, other development schemes were proposed for this region including loading docks, an oil line,

and a massive liquefied natural gas facility. It was the gas facility which sparked the first major protest from traditional Chumash, who came to the Point Conception area to protest its desecration in 1978.

### **Need for a Chumash Religious Sanctuary**

#### **At Point Conception?**

After the development plans for the liquefied natural gas facility was dropped, the point came into public awareness during construction of a oil pipeline. Various real estate interests proposed housing developments, golf courses, and other planned community schemes for the area. And in more recent years, it has been impacted by the development of a commercial California Spaceport nearby on the Vandenberg Air Force Base.

The Spaceport facility proved a quantum jump in potential negative impacts on the Greater Point Conception region, which the Chumash call *Humqaa*. I became concerned about the potential negative impact of a the commercial spaceport if it grew to even a fraction of the size its backers predicted, so I published an article in the *Earth Island Journal* [Fall 1998] documenting the powerful coalition of state and local politicians, aerospace interests, Air Force, and local chambers of commerce which were working to promote the spaceport. I questioned whether the coalition had done an adequate job of bringing all of the various Chumash factions into the consultation and planning process, especially the Traditional families who did not live on the nearby Santa Ynez Reservation.

[Anderson, 1999]

### **Impact of a National Seashore?**

Nathan Post maintains a web page on the proposed National Seashore, which would protect the remaining relatively undeveloped portion of Santa Barbara County including the Point Conception area. This federally protected coastline might, according to some advocates, stretch from Goleta to Point Conception. See *Seashore* for more information on the proposed federal seashore.<sup>1</sup> This webpage states: "It is important to remember that Point conception is a highly revered Chumash Indian site. The Chumash believe that this is where the souls of their dead ancestors depart for the spirit world."

The Gaviota Coastal Conservancy, founded by Bob Keats, is an advocate of the National Seashore plan, citing the fact that the Gaviota Coast represents the last significant stretch of relatively undeveloped coastal land of its magnitude remaining in Southern California. For additional information, you can reach Nathan Post at [npost31229@aol.com](mailto:npost31229@aol.com)

### **Private Landowners**

One of the concerns expressed by Nathan Post on his National Seashore web page is that the owners of large private estates in the Point Conception area may not want to abandon any potential development rights without expensive public compensation. One of these large landowners is the Hollister Ranch,

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<sup>1</sup> This (Anderson) web page is located at [angelfire.com/id/newpubs/seashore.html](http://angelfire.com/id/newpubs/seashore.html).

and the other is the Cojo Ranch, which is located immediately at Point Humqaq and includes a number of important Chumash sites located nearby.

## **Kuta Teachings**

In 1997, Dr. Brian Haley and Larry Wilcoxon published an article in the journal of *Current Anthropology*. Out of interest in the many issues being raised about the role of Point Conception in the traditional Chumash religion, I responded to Haley/Wilcoxon's speculations through reference to my short book on the Chumash Path of the Dead. This book is called *Kuta Teachings*.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Point Conception Occupation**

Many members of the Coastal Band of the Chumash Nation participated in the *Humqaq* Occupation. See Mike Khus' article in *News From Native California* on the 1978 occupation of the Point Conception area by Chumash and other native Americans trying to save it from development by a liquefied natural gas company.

Western Gate More than one 'gate' (opening, portal) into the celestial world is described in surviving Chumash narratives. Other gates include *Iwihinmu* mountain, *Wasna* mountain, and *Zaca* lake. What makes Point Conception special to the Traditional Chumash is that it is the only one in which an elder explicitly identified as a "gate" used by the souls of the dead! And since it was located in the westernmost area of the Chumash lands, it came to be called the Western Gate.<sup>3</sup>

Point Conception See *Point Humqaq*

Point Humqaq The Traditional name for Point Conception is *Humqaq*, which means the Raven comes. In *Kuta Teachings*, the role of the Raven in Chumash mythology includes giving the souls of the dead their 'celestial eyes' needed for traveling on the Path of the Dead. Only by discarding the 'earthly eyes' of their previous lives, can the souls of the dead reach the heavenly paradise from which they are reincarnated.

[Anderson February, 1999]

Point Humqaq: Greater Religious Area In *Kuta Teachings* the argument is presented that *Humqaq* was not a single site but rather a religious 'complex' that included a number of features located away from Point *Humqaq* itself (the exact point where the modern lighthouse is located today). This text also provides commentary on the documented religious sites located near the California Spaceport which are part of this larger religious complex.

Raven See *Point Humqaq*.

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2 *Kuta Teachings* was first published in 1998. Excerpts from this text can be accessed at [angelfire.com/id/newpubs/kuta.html](http://angelfire.com/id/newpubs/kuta.html).

3 In later editions of *Kuta Teachings*, this commentary by M. S. Qiliqutayiwit is assessed so as to clarify the Western Gate terminology. The conclusion is reached that the field notes of anthropologist John Harrington are ambiguous on the identity of Qiliqutayiwit's "gate". It is speculated that the gate in question is the Christian gate to heaven [pearly gates theme] and not a gate at *Humqaq*. Note that this issue will be addressed in book four in the *Kuta Teachings* series. This unpublished book will be called *Similaqsa: The Land of Renincarnation and the Chumash Indians of Southern California*.

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## More Commentary

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Point Conception is considered by many contemporary Chumash Indians of Southern California, to be the Western Gate through which their souls enter the heavens after death.<sup>4</sup>

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### Theo Radic

#### Correspondence From Sweden

"Your generous sites were quite accessible and have provided me with valuable information to add to many years of private studies on Native Californian cultures, for which I thank you. I have camped often at Jamala and made the four-mile walk to Humqaaq with reverence, sharing the fear of the Chumash that it may one day be laid waste like the coastline between Los Angeles and San Diego has been laid waste."

"Reading your websites I feel compelled to write considering the threat of the spaceport and the horrifying prospect of this splendid coastline becoming "little Los Angeles" like the San Fernando Valley."

[Letter to John Anderson, from Theo Radic, April 14, 1999]

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Theo Radic is the author of the book called *The Whetting Stone* which includes a chapter on Chumash music and poetry, second edition 1998, Syukhtun Editions, Stockholm, Sweden. Radic's book called *Hitch Hiker In Hades* also contains Chumash materials, focusing on the coastal town of *Shalawa*, also called Hammond's Meadow in Montecito; located near Santa Barbara. His email is [theoradic@yahoo.com](mailto:theoradic@yahoo.com)).

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

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4 The fifth edition of *Kuta Teachings* (book one; 2020) described Point *Humqaaq* as a "jumping off place" for Chumash souls which fly over the Pacific Ocean to the portal of the setting sun in the west. Book two in this series will follow the soul into the lower world and an eventual ascent to the portal of the rising sun.