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The Indigenous Knowledge of Fernando Librado Kitsepawit: A Man in Three Worlds

Abstract

This article is based on notes prepared for a talk at the Pomona Valley Historical Society 2013. The primary source is *The Trail to Fernando* by Johnson (1982). The subject is Fernando Librado *Kitsepawit,* a Chumash Indian who lived during the California mission secularization period and the indigenous knowledge that he shared with ethnographer John P. Harrington. His notes serve as the original repository of knowledge on Fernando, and it is the source for the majority of first-hand knowledge of California Indian life during this period. Some Chumash words are included, represented in English as italics, with the (‘) referring to a glottal stop.

Key words: Chumash, indigenous knowledge (IK), Fernando Librado Kitsepawit, John P. Harrington.

Introduction

The historical Chumash lived in a loose conglomeration of villages on or near the California coast from present day Malibu north until the Pismo Beach and San Luis Obispo area (Miller 1988: 11-15). They were, along with the Tongva-Gabrielino, one of the few California sea-faring tribes, and they included villages mainly on Santa Cruz and Santa Rosa Islands. Their villages consisted of a series of round *tule* thatch huts placed around the chief’s or *wot* house, a *temescal* or sweat house, and game field where they gambled and played various games such as hoop and stick.

Most Chumash wore feather skirts and adorned their long pulled back hair and earlobes with seashells, but the nobility might wear a long animal skin tunic reaching to their knees. As with many other California tribes, most of the men kept their facial hair (Miller 1988: passim). Some had facial tattoos, and would paint their faces and bodies with red, yellow, and black during dances and festivals as well as adorn their hair with feather headdresses. Hunting instruments consisted of bow and arrow, snares, throwing sticks, and spears for fishing. Especially near the coast, the diet was mainly aquatic, but would be supplemented by small game and nuts and acorns gathered in elaborate baskets woven by the women.

Fernando Librado *Kisepawit*

Figure courtesy of (Johnson 1982).

Fernando Librado *Kitsepawit* was a Chumash Indian who lived during the California mission secularization period of the early to mid nineteenth century to early twentieth century. He grew up and worked at the local missions and at the nearby ranches as a sheepherder and vaquero. His name is a conglomeration of Spanish and Chumash. Fernando was his baptized name, and Librado was given to him by missionaries partly due to his love of reading books (Johnson 1982). *Kisepawit* is Chumash and the translation is lost to time.

In addition to Spanish and Chumash, Fernando had learned a moderate amount of English by dealing with white settlers who began to encroach on the Ventura and Santa Barbara Missions and ranchos where he primarily resided. He learned second-hand knowledge of the mission period as well as fragments of pre-Hispanic Chumash culture. Because of this, Fernando is considered to be a valuable bridge between the three cultures: Chumash, Spanish Mexican mission, and American.

In this transitory period of less than 200 years the Chumash were moved from pre-Bronze age and into the Industrial Revolution (Miller 1988: 31). Fernando's wealth of knowledge of this period is a treasure trove of information, which might have been lost if not for his partnership with John P. Harrington. Harrington was an ethnographer employed by the Smithsonian in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to study and document the California Indian culture and language before it disappeared (Hudson 1980: passim). His extensive notes are the primary source for most information on Fernando and are the database for the papers referenced in this article.

Following Johnson and to give this article structure, the ethnographic methodology of *who, what, why, where,* and *when* will be used (Johnson 1982). The focus *who* and *what* is the life of Fernando Librado *Kisepawit*, how he bridged three separate and distinct cultures, and was able to function in all of them. The *why* is the research interest in the California mission period and in California Indian culture, of which Fernando is the primary focus.

The *where* is the Santa Buenaventura Mission, where Fernando's birth records are held, the Santa Barbara Mission, Santa Ynez and La Purisima Missions that he frequented, the Las Cruces and La Espada ranches where he worked, and the general surrounding geographical areas (Johnson 1982). The *when* are the years of his life, culminating with his death on June 05, 1915, at Santa Barbara Hospital. For some time, there had been discrepancies on the age and lifespan of Fernando, often exasperated by local tales of his age at being over 100 years old, and by the fact that Fernando would often tell stories of the mission period as a first- hand account.

Johnson (1982) was able to clear up the confusion by performing an in-depth research of the birth and baptismal records of the missions. After some detective work, he was able to find information on Fernando's parents, which in turn helped to accurately calculate the birth and death dates. From the baptismal records at the Ventura mission, Johnson was able to find the names of Fernando's mother and father. His mother, Juana Alfonso, was originally from the village of *Swaxil* on Santa Cruz Island and was baptized in 1816. His father, Mamerto *Yaguiahuit*, was originally from *Nanawani* Village on Santa Cruz Island and was baptized in 1814. According to the mission records they were not married until 1830, so that puts Fernando's birth date as sometime after that year (Johnson 1982).

Based on these same mission records, it shows that in 1839 Mamerto and Juana had a child named Bernardo, but due to difficulties of Chumash pronunciation of the letter *B*, it was morphed into Fernando (Johnson 1982). This later birth date also means that Fernando was not alive during the mission period, but more than likely was acquainted with older Chumash who had first-hand knowledge of the period.

In addition, many pre-Hispanic cultural aspects still existed, possibly subjugated under the more dominant Spanish culture but there nonetheless (Heizer & Whipple 1971: passim). Fernando absorbed all these influences and created a multi-cultural palette to paint his own portrait of life during these times. Besides being a shepherd at the local ranches, Fernando held a variety of occupations at the secularized missions. One job he was particularly fond of was squirrel hunter, where he was hired by the local priest at the Santa Buenaventura Mission to shoot with his bow any squirrels found around the kitchen and food preparation areas[1] (Hudson 1980: 15-16).

John P. Harrington

Included in what, *who*, and *why* of this article is the story of John Peabody Harrington. Brian Fagan of UCLA has compiled a biography of Harrington, which includes the history of his work with the Chumash and other California tribes. It seems that Harrington was a bit of an eccentric and might have been thought of in modern terms as a bit of a hoarder (Johnson 1982). He began his career at Stanford, but never went on to earn a PhD, instead teaching languages at Santa Ana High School.

[1] Actually Fernando was not a squirrel killer but heard about it from older Chumash who lived during the Mission period.

During this time, he also began to study the California tribes, concerned that their indigenous knowledge would be lost to the years. Harrington had accumulated over 100,000 pages of notes including over 3,000 pages just on Chumash plank canoes alone (Johnson 1982). It was rumored that he had a working knowledge of 40 Native California languages, and was the first to record any of these languages on wax cylinders. He had lived with the Chumash form the years 1912 to 1915, the year of Fernando's death. From that time until his own death in 1961, Harrington continued to study and accumulate field notes while working for the Smithsonian.

To this day, a significant amount of his field notes has not been published. But as researchers continue to mine through them, more and more ethnographic gems are discovered. The real treasure may not be to the ethnographers themselves but to the present-day Chumash descendants, who have watched their language and culture fade away, and their racial solidarity diluted with the blood of Spanish and Anglo immigrants.

Fernando and Chumash Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge (IK) is a form of scientific, cultural, and historical knowledge developed by Native and indigenous communities and tribes (Gardeazabal et. al 2012). IK is normally contrasted with Western or reductionist scientific knowledge in that there is a holistic and circular approach to acquisition and dissemination. Indigenous knowledge does not distinguish between scientific and religious types of information and is used to focus on the relationship between these attributes.

In addition, the framework of IK includes the belief that Native Americans and other tribal societies possess a form of scientific, religious, and cultural knowledge that is unique to them and should be preserved. As with most Native peoples, the IK of the Chumash is circular and complementary, with both good and bad aspects being different sides of the same underlying conceptual structure that need to be kept in balance. These unending cycles of birth, death, and re-incarnation mirror the natural cycles found in the universe surrounding them (Heizer and Whipple 1971: passim).

There is no central single deity in Chumash cosmology, and the universe is divided into three distinct worlds. The first upper world *'Alapay* is the home of the Gods of the Sun and Moon, the spiritual First People, and is supported by eagle's wings. The second middle world *'Itiashup* is an island where a great flood came and man was created. This is also the home of the elementals water and wind formed from the First People, and the plant and animal spirit beings. The third lower world *C'oyinashup* is analogous to the Christian Hell and is populated with evil spirits who prey on humans during the night (Miller 1988: 119-120). It was the responsibility of the Chumash to keep these worlds in balance by performing festivals and dances.

The harvest festival *Hutash* was a time to gather and collect food for the colder and less bountiful times to come. During winter solstice the *Kakunupmawa* or sun festival was held on sacred hidden dance ground *Siliyik,* where feathered poles were placed in a circle and a smaller stick with a sand dollar on top was used to track the sun's rays (Miller 1988: 121-125).

The festival was presided over by the *'alchuklash*, a group of astronomer-priest shaman that were separate from the more common *'antap* cult shaman, who was in charge of the medicines and talismans of the general population as well as the nobility [2]. Part of their responsibility was the administration of *toloache (Datura wrightii)*, also known as Jimson Weed, in order to converse with the dream world during rites of passage or to help heal injuries.

[2] The *'alchuklash* were considered a subgroup of the *'antap*. Both groups were considered to be nobility (Miller 1988: 121-125).

Charms or talismans called *'atishwin* included power stones and animal parts and were used for both healing and harm. One could influence the weather, make the wearer invisible, or use them to pass back and forth within the dream realm (Miller 1988: 125-126). Some would use a poisonous concoction called *'ayip* possibly made from certain minerals that could be used as a love potion or raise the dead. Fernando spoke of an *'antap* member named *Sapak* who used *'ayip* to raise a skeleton to life. Other medicinal cures include red ant (*tsutilhil*) stings, of which Fernando received as a child to cure fever, and the *temescal* sweat ceremonies practiced by other Native cultures (Hudson 1980: 35, 75).

Fernando was familiar with many other aspects of Chumash IK. He and Harrington worked together to preserve as much of it as they could. Some of this preservation was focused on the traditional dances. The Swordfish Dance *'Elye'wu'n* is a sacred dance performed only by the members of the Swordfish moiety or clan. By performing it they would invoke the swordfish spirits, who they believed were humans living in caves under the water.

The dancer would attach egret feathers to their head to represent the sword. Another is the Bear Dance, which the Chumash believed could invoke magical powers to the dancer, even turning them into actual bears by singing the *Pimpim* song (Hudson 1980: 124-126). Fernando had witnessed how the bear costume is made from the hide, feet, and head of the bear. The bear suit was also worn by shaman who used it supernaturally to travel great distances and who controlled it by pulling on strings attached to the paws. As with other traditional Chumash dances, there were no drums, only flutes, whistling, and chanting in rhythm as accompaniment.

As stated earlier, the religious and medicinal IK of the Chumash included the belief that certain *'atishwin* could control and predict the weather, such as the coming of the rains and storms. Fernando claimed to have done so and would sing the song his grandfather taught him to bring on the rain. Fernando would also serve as a *ksen* or messenger during fiesta and dance times at the local missions. He would ride into the villages and loudly proclaim to the inhabitants about the latest event. The *wot* or chief-captain of each village would hire and pay him for the duty (Hudson 1980: 132). Once the announcements were made, Fernando would join in the slaughter of a few goats and help prepare for the festival.

The Chumash built plank canoes or *Tomol* that were used in fishing expeditions and to travel between islands and the mainland. One such canoe, based on the plans of Fernando, was constructed in 1912 and Harrington's team and is still on display at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History (Johnson 1982). The present-day Chumash used this *tomol* as a template to construct their own modern versions, which they in turn have actually used in sacred ceremonial excursions to Santa Cruz Island.

Fernando told Harrington that the *tomol* builders developed into their own group of seers and visionaries who would consume *toloache (Datura wrightii)* to have "canoe dreams" and carve small *tomol* effigies. When the dreamers died these effigies were placed in their graves (Miller 1988: 68-69).

The area where Chumash IK was especially intertwined with the culture of the Spanish Missions was religious belief involving the grafting of Catholic doctrines and festivals over the existing Native ones. This was a common practice of the clergy, who in an effort to convert souls would use concepts and representations that were familiar to the Native population. One example is when he was called to help heal another Chumash who had some form of stomach ailment. Fernando had the patient drink sea water to flush his system, and then he made an offering of tobacco to the four directions. After the ceremony he realized the patient was Catholic, so Fernando proceeded to make the sign of the cross and offer a prayer in Spanish (Hudson 1980: 66-67). Other times the Chumash would perform distinctly Catholic ceremonies, such as the sprinkling of a sick person or a home with holy water.

Fernando also witnessed many traditional dances held at the missions, including the Swordfish Dance, the Barracuda Dance *Nukumpiyash,* and the Blackbird Dance *Chok'*, who's name imitated the bird's chirping sounds. These dances were especially present during the blessing of a new church or on a saint's feast day (Hudson 1980: 25). During the dances most men would wear headdresses or feathers intertwined in their hair and paint their faces with alternating red and black stripes. Traditional Chumash music consisted mainly of flutes and whistles along with call response types of singing and wood clappers.

With the advent of the missions, the priests and clergy brought with them violins, guitars, and brass instruments that they taught to the Chumash for use in the Catholic mass. The Chumash, in similar fashion to the Mexican Indians, took the instruments to their villages and used them in their own festivals (Hudson 1980: 48-50; Miller 1988: 113-116).

Conclusions

Fernando Librado *Kitsepawit* was a man who lived in the tumultuous and transitory times of the California Mission secularization period. His wealth of Chumash indigenous knowledge as well as mission culture was a source for the copious research of John P. Harrington. The partnership between these two men will serve as a basis for native California ethnographers for years to come.

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