

The Chumash People

"Our Ancestors' Gift Across Time: A Story of Indigenous Maritime Culture Resurgence" *News from Native California* Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1998) by **Roberta Reyes Cordero** [Learn more about Chumash History](#)

Summer 1993. The water laps gently on the pebbled beach. The moon spreads her fullness across the water, silhouetting the giant fir and cedar trees on the opposite shore. Full-throated singing raises goose flesh over my entire body as the pullers in their ancestral cedar canoes paddle across the midnight waters. I cannot see them--they must be in the watery forest-shadow--but the rhythmic drumbeat of their paddles on canoe edges marks their joyous passage. Neither can I see from here the modern pier at the Heiltsuk village of Waglisla, nor the cars and electric lights. For a breath, I exist within the 10,000 years before "history" touched Bella Bella, this beautiful island in British Columbia. For a week, the Heiltsuk band hosts an international festive gathering of First Nations' canoe peoples. We tell each other the heartbreaks and victories of being indigenous peoples in a modern world. We say we will do this again in four years and widen the circle to include absent canoes, like the Chumash and Tongva plank canoes, and the Hawai'ian voyaging canoes. **June 1995.** Shilshole Bay, Seattle, Washington. A thousand people are gathered in the chilly morning fog to greet the Hawai'iloa and the Hokulea, Hawai'ian canoes recently arrived by cargo ship in Puget Sound to begin historic voyages. Observing timeless protocol, the captains ask permission of the Duwamish and Suquamish peoples to land on their shores. In stately ceremonial speech, drumming, and song, the Hawai'ians are welcomed not only by those indigenous to Washington, but

also by hundreds of their own people--island people marooned for now on the mainland. By the time all come ashore, the sun is beaming off the blue, blue water. We shake off the cold as we witness the ancient ritual chant and dance kept alive by the Hawai'ians' cultural diligence. Later, we hear contemporary Hawai'ian music--complete with slack-key guitar and amped-up sound systems--as we stroll the food and vendor booths set up pow-wow style. This is the big city. The canoes together will visit Pacific Northwest maritime nations and then other coastal nations, each in her own direction--Hawai'iloa to make a grateful journey north to Juneau, Alaska, and Hokulea to sail south to San Diego with a stop in Chumash land.

September 1995. Twenty or thirty of us have been waiting for hours. Where are they, why are they so late arriving? We hear from one of the early returning support boats that Mo'omat Ahiko (Breath of the Ocean) left Two Harbors late. Much later we hear that navigational difficulties added some ten miles to the journey. Some of us have brought beadwork and other crafts to busy our hands, and we are content to wait in the shade of palm trees lining the harbor beach at Avalon on Catalina Island. We talk and laugh and tease one another while we watch on one side the endless promenade of tourists and, on the other side, the harbor crowded with yachts, sailboats, cruisers, ski-doo's, kayaks, you name it. But we know that the hot California sun is actually shining on the island of Pimuw, ancestral homeland of our cousins and hosts, the Tongva people. Late in the afternoon something in the universe shifts, sending ripples across the harbor to us. They're coming. I stand transfixed as I glimpse droplets of water sparkling off first one raised end of the paddles and then the other, as they are dipped in unison first on one side of the plank canoe and then the other. Avalon harbor falls away as Mo'omat Ahiko brings her crew safely home. Built about five years ago, Mo'omat Ahiko is the first ti'at in two hundred years. She is the first plank canoe I have seen in the water, an experience I did not know to hope for and yet long

awaited. Unwittingly, most of us reenact the ancient Chumash ritual weeping, tears streaming down our smiling faces when the canoes return home.



Pagaling. Luis Ramirez, Roberta Cordero, Wonono Rubio, Alan Salazar, and Marcus Lopez paddling 'Elye'wun in Santa Barbara Harbor, 1997.

November 1997. Thanksgiving weekend in Santa Barbara, 505 years after. We are still here. Like the Heiltsuk, Hawai'ians, Duwamish and Suquamish, and the Tongva, we are gathering the fragments of our culture. Like them, we hear our ancestors telling us that the canoe is central to our understanding of who we are. We were unable to join 'Elye'wun to the great canoe gathering during the summer at La Push, Washington, but one of our board members and her son were there to represent us. Today, we ceremonially present 'Elye'wun (Swordfish) to the Chumash community and to our guests from Tongva and other nations. She is the first tomol in decades to belong to the Chumash people. My heart is in my mouth as she glides through the harbor, paddle blades glinting under the changeable November sky. She is tiny,

fragile against the backdrop of some of the world's most luxurious yachts, an anomaly. And yet she is the one at home here, dancing through the waters near Syuxtun, our ancestral village and hers. She is the only one I see.



Photo: Frank Magallanes & Althea Edwards

Swordfish ('elye'wun) abalone inlay on bow ears by Cresensio Lopez, 1997.



Photo: Frank Magallanes and Althea Edwards

Two tomol paddles and one ti'at paddle on beach at Avalon Harbor, Catalina Island, 1997. Whale-tail abalone inlay by Cresencio Lopez.

Until the missionization and holocaust of the Chumash people, our

waters were filled with Chumash watercraft, especially the redwood plank canoe, the tomol. Until then, the tomol wove together Chumash coastal and island communities in a complex system of trade, kinship, and resource stewardship. Like the Heiltsuk, Hawai'ians, Duwamish and Suquamish, and the Tongva, our ancestors' stewardship of bountiful natural resources was sustainable over thousands of years and--I have no doubt--would have sustained us for thousands more. Our ancestors were not perfect, but they did not fancy themselves to be dominators over Mother Earth. They did not dare to live outside respect, generosity, and reciprocity, for these are the values of the properly educated human being, these make up the weave of living balanced and productive lives together and individually. Our ancestors did not imagine there was an end to learning from the life-web of which the humans are merely a strand. Sadly, that web is now tattered and tangled because we have been severed from the proper stewardship that is both birthright and responsibility. \

At Bella Bella in 1993, it was told that some of the nations had nearly lost their canoe knowledge. Through sharing and apprenticing with neighbor tribes, they relearned canoe carving. They relearned how to become pullers in teamwork with each other and with the elements. And we heard about the increasing difficulty of finding cedar trees big enough for canoes, the difficulties of accessing materials for basketry and other traditions, the fisheries, and other food sources.



Liz Easter sits in 'Elye'wun as Dan Umaña and Marcus Lopez look on, 1997. Liz Easter said, "I would have gone to that launching if I had to crawl to get there."

In the late eighties, the Hawai'ians decided to build a voyaging canoe using traditional materials and methods. The remnant of the great Hawai'ian koa-wood forest was combed month after month in search of trees big enough for a double-hulled wooden canoe. There were none. In sorrow, they wondered whether to build yet another fiberglass canoe like the Hokulea and others before her. Instead, they went to the Tlingit nation of Alaska and respectfully requested to harvest spruce trees. This was generously granted, and Hawai'iloa was crafted in the old way. The journey she made to Juneau was thus a grateful journey home. We in California--the Chumash and Tongva--have had no less trouble obtaining materials and knowledge. Our ancestors were accustomed to gathering redwood drift logs from island and mainland beaches. Specialists cured, processed, and stored planks for use in building canoes. Pine was also used, but redwood was favored. Others were expert at gathering and processing plant fibers into the mile or so of cordage to be used along with yop (an epoxy-like mixture of asphaltum and pine pitch) to join the planks together. These three were the principal materials comprising the nail-less, peg-less tomol or ti'at, regarded by many cultural anthropologists as among the most advanced technological achievements of North America's indigenous peoples. Sharkskin for sanding, red ochre for staining,

and abalone inlay for embellishment completed this work of high craftsmanship and art. Today, any redwood logs making it to the ocean certainly have not been spotted by any tomol makers we know. Indeed, it is only because scholars researched the notes of John P. Harrington that we once again have tomol makers, novices though we are. Finding red milkweed or dogbane to make high-quality cordage for just one tomol will take a few years' careful planning, as will gathering yop ingredients. And so on. In brief, the encroachment of Euroamerican practices and values leaves indigenous peoples with only shreds of connection to the land and sea from which we sprang, the land and sea which shaped our ancestors' identify and destiny, the land and sea which will surely die without a swift return to sustainable stewardship. The resurgence of indigenous maritime culture invites and signals a return to the traditional indigenous values of respect, generosity, and reciprocity which are integral to sustainable relationships with one another as much as with earth and sea. Learning to use modern boatbuilding techniques and materials to build 'Elye'wun sharpened our curiosity about the tools and skills our ancestors needed to build tomols in the past. We are learning to make cordage for small uses. Maybe in a few years some of us will be so skilled we can make cordage for building tomols. First, many will need to learn plant management for cordage plants to assure plentiful and high-quality fibers. Maybe some of us will learn to tend a stand of pines so the trees will stay healthy while giving enough pitch at the right time of year to help us make yop. Maybe some of our cousins in redwood country will trade with us for wood we can prepare ourselves. Maybe we can firmly weave ourselves once again into the life-web in such a way that all our relations can thrive with us.

Roberta Reyes Cordero is a Chumash Maritime Association member and builder.