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# Were the Chumash Whale Hunters? Implications for Ethnography in 1974

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I HAVE seen recently two statements that the Chumash of the Santa Barbara mainland and Channel Islands hunted and killed whales, presumably the common one of the region, the California Gray (*Eschrichtius gibbosus*), which is a big and difficult animal to capture at sea. The Nootka, Makah, Quileute, and lesser tribes of Vancouver Island and the Washington state coast took the California Gray, but it was a maximal effort for them even though they were equipped with large dugout canoes adapted to ocean conditions as well as big harpoons, heavy lines, and inflated sealskin floats which made it possible for them to maintain a connection with the harpooned animal (Heizer 1968).

The only documentary source for Chumash whaling appears to be the statement by the Reverend Stephen Bowers (who may probably be ranked as the most industrious pothunter and grave-robber of California in the last hundred years). Bowers was no doubt an intelligent person, but he appears to have spent more time in the mid-1870's plundering graves than bible-thumping and hymn-shouting. He seems to have been genuinely interested in the Chumash and their archaeological remains, and in several published articles he provides us with useful firsthand information gleaned from then-living Chumash Indians.

Bowers (1878:318-319) wrote that the Santa Rosa Islanders "had canoes made from the skins of sea lions" and "used spears in killing the whale, the blubber of which they ate raw." Bowers' information is attributed by him to a Santa Rosa Island native named Omsett who was removed from the island in 1816 "by the priests of the Romish missions to the mainland." It seems quite possible that Bowers' information, which he says he secured secondhand from J. L. Ord of Santa Barbara, originally came from the same person who was interviewed in 1884 by Henry W. Henshaw, who took down a vocabulary and ethnographic notes from a man he calls Pa-hi-la-tcet, a native of Santa Rosa Island (Henshaw 1955:87). At about the same time, J. L. Ord wrote a brief record of information which he says he secured from a Santa Rosa Island native who he names as Pajilacheet (Henshaw 1955:87). It thus seems probable in view of Ord's statement that this man, "the last of the *Chumas* and *Papuma* (?) tribe of the Indians of the Islands off the coast of Santa Barbara," and Bowers' Omsett were the same person. Neither Ord nor Henshaw mention Santa Rosa Island Chumash whale-hunting, and Henshaw's word list indicates that his informant did not even recall the word for whale (Henshaw 1955:107).

The ethnographic record given by Bowers,

attributed by him to Omsett, and secured by Bowers through Dr. J. L. Ord reads:

He represented his tribe as being very numerous previous to the advent of the Spaniards. They were strong, well built, good swimmers, and fine fishermen. They made their hooks from the shell of the *Haliotis*; had canoes made from the skins of sea-lions, and also from the pine and large redwood logs found on the beach; used spears in killing the whale, the blubber of which they ate raw. According to this old Indian's account, their idea of a future state was somewhat obscure. They worshipped the sun, the crow, and the swordfish. The sun they worshipped morning and evening, and as the source of light and heat. The sword-fish they worshipped because it brought them the whale, and they were numerous, and united with the "orca" or killer (whale), in killing or driving these monsters ashore. Their object in worshipping the crow is not so clear [Bowers 1878:318-319].

If the passage just quoted from Bowers is compared with the notes made by Ord and Henshaw, based on their face-to-face interviews with the reputed sole surviving native of Santa Rosa Island, some duplications will be found. Ord says, "The swordfish was also one of their principal (deities) of the sea, as they killed the whale and they came on shore, which (i.e., whales) they eat raw as they did their fish or seals."

An interpretive essay by Mohr and Sample (1955) makes the suggestion that the Chumash considered the swordfish and killer whale as helpful intermediaries in the procurement of whales for men, and that the archaeological finds of stone effigies of swordfishes and killer whales reflect this belief.

While it is difficult, with any assurance, to second-guess these pioneer amateur ethnographers of the Chumash a century after they wrote, I suggest that Bowers' statement that the Santa Rosa Islanders killed whales has absolutely no basis in fact, or even in reliable

Indian testimony. Bowers, I further suggest, either invented this surprising item of Island Chumash culture, or (if we wish to grant him innocence of this charge) he was confused and extrapolated without sufficient evidence from the facts which J. L. Ord communicated to him. There is a third possible explanation to account for Bowers' flat statement on Chumash whaling, and this is that he was combining what he had heard about North Pacific whaling techniques with the reports of activities of Aleut-Koniag fur hunters stationed by the Russians and Americans on some of the offshore islands of southern California. In short, Bowers may have been a confused and not very precise person who did not realize that what he dashed off might be taken seriously a century later.

It is possible that Pajilacheet (or Omsett?), some time before 1877, was telling J. L. Ord at Santa Barbara a tale of culturally mixed ethnography, and that the report of "canoes made of the skins of sea lions" and of people who "use spears in killing the whale, the blubber of which they ate raw" refers not to native Chumash Santa Rosa Islanders, but to the skin canoes and whale hunting methods of Alaskan native sea otter hunters who were brought by Russians to the offshore southern California islands and who were stationed there for some time until they were relieved, their sojourn being spent in collecting sea otter pelts (Ogden 1941). Spears, not harpoons, were used by the Aleuts and Koniag for whale hunting (Heizer 1943), and the skin-covered canoes were, of course, hunting bidarkas.

The Chumash, although they had plank-built canoes which could negotiate the Santa Barbara Channel open water, and which were used for fishing, are not reported to have possessed the kind of equipment necessary for harpooning large whales. Father Ascensión's account of Vizcaino's expedition of 1602 describes for the Santa Catalina Island natives

long slender poles and a long strong line "like twine" for taking "large fish, or one of reasonable size." This seems to be the common Pacific Coast harpoon with retrieving line, but not the kind or of the size of gear necessary to secure a whale like the California Gray.

Of the prehistoric California harpoons recovered and preserved in museum collections, there is nothing either heavy enough for whale-hunting, or of a type suitable for that purpose (Bennyhoff 1950).

In northwestern California, among the Wiyot, Yurok and Tolowa tribes, sea-lion hunting expeditions which ventured some miles offshore are reported. These people had large and seaworthy dugout canoes and were able to navigate these in the open sea. The admirably detailed study of fishing in northwestern California published by Kroeber and Barrett (1960) shows that even these peoples, who must have heard about the whale-hunting of the Makah, Quileute and Quinault to the north, never hunted the whale. There is one quite unsupported statement that the Indians of the northwestern coast of California hunted whales (Russell 1861), but it is quite obvious that Russell, despite the title of his article, is describing the Nootkan-type whaling with large harpoons, retrieving lines, and inflated sealskin buoys. The Yurok and Tolowa managed to harpoon and secure sea lions, but this was apparently a hazardous and maximal effort in taking sea mammals in the open water. Nothing known or credibly reported indicates that the northwestern California tribes ever attempted to hunt whales in the ocean.

I believe that we may with confidence dispose of Bowers' claim that the Chumash hunted whales. That most coastal Californians welcomed as a special gift to their larder a stranded whale whose death was due to natural causes or to having been attacked by swordfish or killer whales is well known (cf.,

Yates 1957:38; Kroeber and Barrett 1960: 122-126).

It seems to me that any reasonably informed California anthropologist of today should have sufficient knowledge and judgment to ignore, as so improbable that it was wrong, Bowers' allegation that the Chumash were skinboat-using ocean whale hunters. But this assumption does not seem to be supported. One may ask why. For one thing, in 1974 the intimate connection (i.e., "identification") between the inquiring ethnographer and his live Indian informant is a rarity for the reason that interviewing Indian informants for data about the aboriginal (i.e., pre-white, truly native) way of life is a thing of the past. We have to admit that the truly native or aboriginal California Indian culture is an extinct operational social phenomenon. White domination ("acculturation") has been so persuasive and so overwhelming that in 1974 all of the old native culture is quite gone. As an aside I state my belief that we today may have missed a unique opportunity to learn how an abundance of people living in a small area could survive for many thousands of years. We might, if we had been sufficiently aware, have been able to learn something from those California natives who had survived or lived beyond the pale of the Franciscan missions and the American-inspired genocide of 1848-1870, something real and very important to mankind as a whole about how to live with neighbors of different speech and cultural practices. I suggest that in the process of killing off the American Indians the Europeans may have unwittingly eliminated one source of information on the human experience of learning to live together which might provide some kind of lead to the way out of the dilemma we face today in a world which is composed of increasingly nationalistic political entities, and of which an alarming number are equipped with weapons of unimagined power.

We will never be able to learn what we might one day want to know about how California Indians in the "bow-and-arrow stage" managed themselves. But persons who are concerned today with the problem of the survival of humanity itself in the "H-bomb stage" of weapons technology, may in time want, and even need, to know how the California Indians managed to be successful human beings before they were "civilized" by the Spaniards, the Mexicans and the Americans. Well—nobody will ever know how it was, because each new generation always has its own problems, and in the 1850's and 1860's in California nothing could have seemed less important than the idea that the California Indian exemplar could be, at some time yet to come, an important datum in the great panorama of human experience. No generation, it seems, can foresee what the next, or the second-next, will want to know about the past.

But as long as men are concerned about the problems which arise between societies, they will always look back on the record of earlier societies for some hints about how these managed to operate, or what causes led to their decline. For this information we can only look to the recorded facts in documents of a wide variety. There comes a time when knowledge based on experience becomes dissociated from early (and at times unreliable) reports. This stage may have already been reached in some degree in California ethnography when presumably informed individuals accept Bowers' statement that the Santa Rosa Island Chumash hunted whales as an ethnographic fact.

What concerns me most is the knowledge that there is a huge amount of incorrect data about California Indians already in print, and that in the future there may be increasingly less informed judgment applied to this body of report.

I cite as one example that of the Ameri-

can Indian Films made under the direction of S. A. Barrett. These films are described in the University of California Extension Media Center catalogue and in the films themselves as though they depicted the native, aboriginal procedure being presented, among these being the cooking of buckeye mush, gathering and preparing pinenuts, and making a sinew-backed bow. These last three (catalogued as Nos. 5766, 5768 and 5767) I mention because I have seen them. In every case, it is obvious to anyone who has conducted or read California ethnography, or who knows this in some detail, that these films are *not* accurate depictions of aboriginal practices, but are those with native Californian "actors" who were doing the best they could at this degree of remove from aboriginal times.

After I saw the first showing of the buckeye leaching and mush cooking film, I said to Barrett, "That leaching basin simply will not work," and he answered, "Yes, the Indian did not know how to make one so I instructed her and when it did not work I bought a plastic sheet and put it under the plant greens and then it worked." Pity the school child interested in Indians who tries to emulate the leaching process using this "aboriginal" film as a guide! The lugging of the baskets of water up from the stream shown in the buckeye film surely is also wrong—such a basket would not survive more than a few such trips under such brutal treatment. If we were to take the painstakingly slow gathering of pinenuts by the Washo as shown in the film on this subject as true, we could conclude that if these people really had anciently gathered pinenuts in this fashion and had depended upon them as a basic food resource, they would long since have starved to death. And, Barrett's (1961:157-158) own recounting of the expertise of the Yurok bow maker is clear in indicating that this was memory knowledge and not aboriginal-style, learned-from-practice procedure. How close the bow making shown

in the film is to the completely aboriginal technique I do not know or venture to say, and in fact believe that this question cannot be answered. The man made a bow, and he is shown shooting such a bow he made (not the one shown in the film), but whether it was an aboriginal bow as regards choice of the wood, shaping tools employed, and the like is rather to be doubted since Barrett himself opines that no bows had been made by the Yurok for the last 75 or 80 years.<sup>1</sup>

I do not offer these comments to be picky or critical of Barrett, who realized that the real native culture was gone. But at the same time Barrett was getting National Science Foundation funds by arguing the importance of filming the last of the surviving aboriginal activities before they disappeared once and for all, and in using this argument he may have unwittingly overstated the aboriginality of remnant aboriginal practices. What concerns me is that future generations of school children, and even college students taught by professors with the best of intentions, may believe what they are shown and told in the films, and that this is not accurate. It would be desirable, it seems to me, to add to these films some kind of evaluative warning note that the practices shown are close to, but not necessarily wholly authentic or completely accurate, in the details of how things were done in California before the whites came.

Another small example of incorrect data is the casual statement by Bowers about Island Chumash as ocean whalers. I do not think the particular point important, because nobody really cares about what the Island Chumash did, or did not do, about whales. What does concern me, however, is the apparent increasing loss of adequate evaluation of earlier reports. I see a new generation of California archaeologists and ethnohistorians who are actively engaged in research. They are, by and large, intelligent and dedicated individuals, and they are doing their

best. At the same time, I see (or think I see) a group which occupies that position which is chronologically in limbo between those armed with the assurance of having known California Indians and, through this, possessing the means of achieving informed (though not by any means infallible) judgment of reported fact, and that future state, not yet achieved, when we will have developed techniques for the accurate evaluation of earlier reported fact.

By accident or design archaeology was for long relegated to the task of excavating and classifying potsherds and arrowpoints and graves and trying to organize these into "cultures" which were in turn ordered in time. Archaeologists did what was expected of them—they dug, collected, classified, and sequenced their extinct cultures. But to merely discover, name, and time-order the material remnants of past cultures began to be seen as a self-limiting procedure. It is almost as though archaeologists who were trained as anthropologists were being dominated by those anthropologists who conceived of ethnology as the *real* anthropology, and prehistory as something to be tolerated, but not very important, since its product was impersonalized and restricted to a few imperishable items which had managed to survive in the ground.

As the fiction of the "ethnographic present"<sup>2</sup> became increasingly difficult for ethnographers to create because the older Indians were dying off, social anthropology and acculturation studies emerged as the main interest of the surviving earlier ethnologists and their successors. Archaeologists came to see themselves as now even further dissociated from the mainstream of anthropology, and a new generation (the proponents of the "new archaeology") of prehistorians is now trying to develop methods for the social and behavioral interpretation of the archaeological evidence which was for so long assumed to be wholly

(or nearly so) lacking in these qualities.

The strong reaction of adherents to "processual archaeology" against interpretation through ethnographic analogy will, I believe, be modified as time passes. The earlier ethnographers and archaeologists assumed that the present provided the key to the past. And they were correct up to a point—otherwise we might not even now be certain that stone mortars were used for grinding seeds and that pointed chipped triangular flints were arrowpoints. On this simple level identifications of descent, residence after marriage, and the like cannot be made in this fashion, and where the older archaeologists recognized this and went on to classifying more potsherds and mortars and arrowpoints, the newer archaeologists are trying to devise methods for testing alternative propositions about descent, residence, and social organization from the scanty and resistive evidence which they dig up. What some of them do not recognize, or do not want to admit, is that this is also a kind of ethnographic analogy applied in a different way.

With the increasingly rapid disappearance of the limited number of accessible native societies in the last 30 years, coupled with the "new anthropology" (i.e., social anthropology) which marks the dominant concern of most university departmental faculties of anthropology, archaeologists have been thrown increasingly on their own to justify their continued presence in departments which are social-anthropology dominated, or at least, mainly so oriented. If this is true, the new archaeology is partly understandable as a development made necessary through adaptive change in a minor field of a major discipline which has had its main or traditional resource (primitive societies) removed.

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## NOTES

1. P. H. Ray (1886:832-833) noted, "The bow-makers of both [the Hupa and Yurok] are specialists, and the trade is now confined to a very few old men. I have seen no man under forty years of age that could make a bow or an arrow, and only one old man who could make a stone arrow-head."

2. A term in wide use until about 1940, which was intended to mean that the ethnographic data in a particular publication referred to those of aboriginal, pre-white times. The fallacy in this was that information was often provided by native informants who were one or two or even three generations removed from aboriginal life.

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