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Headline: Weaving a future ! Kumeyaay tribes struggle to survive
Byline: Katharine Webster
Dateline: SAN JOSE DE LA ZORRA, Baja California
Photographer: The San Diego Union/Michael Franklin
Caption: 1. Maria Espinoza Cuero stands in the doorway of her home in San Jose de la Zorra. She is the last member of a generation who crafted baskets to store acorns and pinyon nuts, staples of the Kumeyaay's traditional diet. 2. Gloria Castaneda de Montes demonstrates the wrapped coil technique employed in the juncus baskets. 3. Two types of baskets: large ones with lids are made of willow branches and leaves, the small baskets are made with dried, soaked juncus grass. 4. The baskets of Celia Silva Espinoza are tightly and evenly woven. (D-6) 5. Adelberto and Patricia Perez Meillon sell Kumeyaay baskets, Pai Pai jars, and painted and polished pottery from Casas Grandes at their indigenous crafts shop in Ensenada. (D-6) 6. Silva's blue ribbon was awarded to one of her baskets at Alicia and Don Bullock's Santa Monica Indian Ceremonial two years ago. (D-6) 7. Morelia Ojeda Melendrez, 9, is learning how to weave the willow baskets, left. A tractor donated by the Tijuana Rotary Club sits in the center of San Jose de la Zorra. The community lacks financing for an irrigation system and other improvements necessary to start farming commercially. (D-7) 8. Armando Melendrez Silva, 36, is the chief of San Jose de la Zorra. (D-6) 9. Maria Espinoza Cuero, below, holds a basket she wove to sell. This type of flat basket was traditionally used to sift ground acorn meal. (D-7)
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SAN JOSE DE LA ZORRA, Baja California -- Gloria Castaneda de Montes, 47, sits at her kitchen table, punches a sardine can's key into the edge of a flat grass coil and begins to weave a basket.

"I learned how to make baskets from my grandmother. I helped her teach classes at the school," Gloria says. "Since giving the classes, I don't like showing people how to make them -- I charge $5 for each stitch," she jokes.

A few years ago, traditional Kumeyaay basketry was on the verge of extinction. In the approximately 13 Kumeyaay communities scattered throughout southern San Diego County and the five in northern Baja California, few women remembered or used the techniques.

In San Jose de la Zorra, only Gloria's grandmother and great-aunts continued to make the baskets, usually when a museum requested samples of their work.

That's changing, now that the Unique Arts Center in Ensenada's Mexican Handcrafts Shopping Center is purchasing the Kumeyaay baskets.

"Fourteen women are making baskets now," says Julia Bendimez, director of the National Institute of Anthropology and History in Mexicali. "Women are the people who conserve most of the cultural things that they still practice, because they stay at home and are the center of activity in the communities -- the men move around so much."

But the baskets are no longer made to hold pinon nuts and acorns -- they are made to sell to tourists and collectors.

Like the baskets, the Kumeyaay communities in Mexico are adapting to economic and social pressures. Over the last two generations, tribe members have abandoned many traditional practices -- and, all too often, the villages themselves.

"All the indigenous groups in Baja California, culture-wise, they're in danger of extinction within a very short time," Bendimez says.

Gloria pulls a blade of juncus grass out of a bucket, where it had been soaking in water. She sharpens one end of the strand with a knife, removes the key from the coil and weaves the juncus through the hole.

At first glance, San Jose de la Zorra appears like any other tiny, impoverished Mexican village. There is a small elementary school, and a secondary school is under construction. A tiny church, with large chunks of plaster fallen away, sits among a few scattered houses and the hulks of stripped cars.

But there are differences.

Most houses are made of stuccoed adobe, each with a little fenced yard and kitchen garden attached. There are no rectangular lots, no grid of streets. The houses are scattered like holes on a dart board -- bunched together near the church, and spreading out towards the perimeter of the village. Connecting dirt tracks curve around gullies and trees.

Except for the gardens and fruit trees near the individual houses, all the land is owned and worked in common.

There is not a single shop, and no utility lines. The black-and-white TV in Gloria's kitchen runs on a 12-volt car battery. Some kitchens have propane-powered stoves, but every house has a wood stove. Water must be fetched from a single well between Gloria's house and the church. The water is murky and inhabited by tiny, but visible, worms.

The schools were built by the International Rotary Club of Tijuana, not the Mexican government, although the government has sent teachers for the last 10 years. A Catholic priest comes to the church only once a month, on a Thursday.

The village appears half-abandoned. There are grandmothers, a few mothers with their children, some young girls, and older men. But with the exception of Armando Melendrez Silva, the community's 36-year-old chief, there are no men between the ages of 15 and 45, and almost no women of marriageable age.

Gloria wraps the juncus around a core of bunch grass, punches a new hole with the sardine tin key, and weaves the juncus through again, wrapping the new coil and anchoring it to the last round.

As late as the 1940s, the Kumeyaay in Mexico depended on a farming and gathering economy. Families migrated to Rosarito for fish and shore plants, to the desert for agave, and then back to their mountain communities for acorns, pinon nuts, rabbit and deer.

Some trading families migrated continuously, while others usually remained in the mountain valleys, moving to the desert during a harsh winter or migrating to the shore when hunting was scarce.

Recent Mexican settlement on the lands which once supported the Kumeyaay economy has forced the men to become migrant ranch hands, wood-cutters and grape-pickers.

"Those men who have large families with lots of children have to leave to earn a living," says Melendrez, who is unmarried. "I have to stay here. My responsibilities (as chief) are here. But I don't have any income."

Now that the residents of San Jose are cut off from most of their traditional gathering grounds, their main hope of self-sufficiency is through commercial-scale farming.

Although the community of 90 people has sufficient land, it lacks capital and equipment. Two tractors donated to San Jose by the Tijuana Rotary Club sit idle next to Armando's house. The community is unable to obtain government loans to purchase seed, livestock and fencing, or to have wells dug and pumps installed for irrigation.

By law, the national government must recognize indigenous communities' claims to their historical settlements and farmlands, explains Juan Ramon Valdez Flores, director of the government's National Institute of Indigenous Affairs (INI) in Ensenada.

But due to bureaucratic bungling, San Jose de la Zorra has not yet achieved official recognition.

In 1976, the Mexican government created an ejido, a self-governing agricultural community for non-indigenous settlers, which accidentally included the territory of San Jose de la Zorra within its boundaries.

To correct the mistake, INI petitioned Mexico City to partition Ejido El Porvenir and create a separate ejido for San Jose. The partition process should be finalized by the end of this year, Valdez says.

"They can't receive credit (for agricultural loans) because they aren't recognized" as a legal entity by the government, Valdez explains. "Meanwhile, since they weren't recognized, other private individuals have come and taken ranch lands in San Jose de la Zorra. Once the partition is established, the land invaders will be evicted."

When the partition is complete, Valdez says, he will work with the residents of San Jose to formalize their governing structure and to obtain agricultural development loans. With a viable farm economy, he hopes the disintegration of the community can be reversed.

Outside Gloria's house, more juncus soaks in a solution of dark earth, soot from the chimney of her woodstove, and bark from the oak tree in her yard. A month of soaking will dye this juncus a soft black, for weaving contrasting designs.

Profitable farming would bring the men home, but it will not keep young women in the village. While the men must leave to find work, the women must leave to marry men who aren't their relatives.

Maria Concepcion Montes, 24, and her mother are talking and smoking cigarettes in Gloria's kitchen. Maria is home from Ensenada, where she was working as a maid, after breaking up with her boyfriend there. She is dressed in tight jeans -- her mother and Gloria both wear skirts -- and wears a clip in her hair.

"I will probably marry outside the village," she says shyly. "Here we are all related. There are a couple of men who aren't (my relatives), but the majority of us are cousins. I would like to live here, but it's necessary to leave."

Traditionally, when a Kumeyaay man married he moved in with his wife's family, often in a different Kumeyaay community, many time across the U.S.-Mexican border.

When the seasonal migrations ceased and the international border became more restricted, young people began marrying sweethearts from their own villages. Over the last two generations, almost all the residents within each village have become related.

Maria Montes' generation faces a difficult choice -- remaining unmarried, or leaving the village and their culture behind. Most young women choose to leave.

And because there are no young women in the community to marry, the men also must marry outside the tribe, or remain single. Since they can't support a family while living in the village, those who marry usually live outside the community.

"They're about where we were 40 years ago, but things are moving a lot faster," says Ron Christman, a resident of the Viejas reservation near Alpine and chairman of the Kumeyaay cultural-historical committee. "Their basic frame of mind is to accept the mainstream and jump into it, as the only visible way of surviving. They haven't yet recognized the importance of keeping their tradition alive.

"I think it would be really beneficial to them, and to the people up here, to have more contact. It would be a little bit of foresight for them, and hindsight for us."

Traditionally, the tiny rounded juncus baskets with lids were used to hold seeds and spices, Gloria explains, and larger, flatter baskets were used to sift acorn meal. A much bigger basket and lid was made from willow branches, leaves and all, to store the acorns and pinon nuts which were staples of the Kumeyaay diet.

Patricia Perez Meillon, co-owner of the Unique Arts Center, has achieved considerable recognition for the Kumeyaay baskets in the United States. She has exhibited the baskets at galleries and Native American art shows in California, and she and her brother Adelberto sell them to U.S. tourists and collectors who visit their shop in Ensenada.

But taking the baskets to the United States is easier than bringing their creators. When Perez attempted to bring two basket-makers from San Jose to a festival in Alpine last September, she had to accompany them to the U.S. consulate in Tijuana three days in a row.

Each day they dealt with a different official, Perez says, and each day hey were told a different story. Finally, they got a one-time-only ermission to visit.

The Kumeyaay see themselves as a single nation divided by an arbitrary order. Until the late 1960s, U.S. Border Patrol officials usually were Tenient, Christma says, allowing the Mexican Kumeyaay to cross the border in the company of their stateside relatives.

ut around 1969, the Border Patrol put an end to that easy access.

d Kelliher, assistant district director for the Immigration and laturalization Service in San Diego says that Kumeyaay born in Mexico are treated as Mexican nationals.

"The pressure and demand on the ports of entry wasn't nearly as great until the '60s, and it may have been a laissez-faire policy towards the Indians," Kelliher says.

umeyaay born on the U.S. side of the border have little trouble crossing the international boundary. But communities on the Mexican side are hard to each -- the dirt road into San Jose de la Zorra can be impassable for weeks at a time during the rainy season.

"Since they're not allowed to come up here, and since the roads down there are pretty bad, we've lost a lot of contact," Christman says.

Celia Silva Espinoza, Gloria's mother, sits on a wooden chair outside her house and finishes a tall, straight-sided juncus basket without a lid. The contrast design is a thin rectangle coming to a sharp point -- the basket is designed as a pen- and pencil-holder.

It's not easy being a Kumeyaay chief -- especially today.

Until the early 20th century, each Kumeyaay chief was chosen by a gathering of Kumeyaay chiefs in communities on both sides of the border, then approved by the village where he would reside for life as the political and ceremonial leader, Christman says.

Each chief was trained from childhood in the traditional spiritual ceremonies -- puberty rites for men and women, solstice ceremonies, funerals, and an annual cleansing for all the people.

A newly-appointed chief would leave the village of his youth and marry into the community where he became chief -- he would thus be expected to exercise less favoritism than someone who had grown up there.

When the U.S. government stopped recognizing traditional leaders in favor of elected "tribal chairmen," the breakdown of the traditional chief system affected communities on both sides of the border. But in Mexico, the system changed because of economic pressures as well.

Now the chief of San Jose de la Zorra is chosen from within the community, Melendrez explains. Most of the men will serve at one time in their lives, because being the chief is a financial hardship -- he cannot leave the community to work.

If a man volunteers for the post, as Melendrez did, he serves for a year. If there are no volunteers, the community will call its members home for an election, and the elected chief must serve for three years.

Melendrez calls meetings, mediates disputes within the community and advises people about various problems. He is also "deputized" by the national government to resolve legal disputes and to represent the community in any dealings with the government or other outsiders. But he does not preside over or perform the spiritual ceremonies.

"The two roles (political and ceremonial) have been separated because there are two different needs now: one person who can speak the language of the outsider, and one who can perform the traditional ceremonies," says Florence Shipek, a San Diego anthropologist who has worked with Kumeyaay in Mexico and the United States.

"Traditional ceremonies used to last four to five days -- can you imagine an opera lasting night and day for four days, and one guy has to do the whole thing? Now they don't have time -- they have to be in school or earning a living during the time they used to learn the ceremonies."

The only man from San Jose who still knows how to perform all the traditional ceremonies is 104 years old and no longer lives in the village, Melendrez says.

Gloria and other adults learned the ancient songs and dances as children. But the scattered community now gathers infrequently for ceremonies, and the children are not learning them.

"If only someone would teach them," Melendrez says. "The people want to listen, and they understand (the language), but they don't want to sing or dance, they don't want to learn the ceremonies."

Shipek says another reason for the decline of the ceremonies is economic -- a family hosting a wake and funeral, for example, would feed hundreds of people dinner, coffee and doughnuts, a midnight supper, breakfast and lunch.

As a leader of the Kumeyaay Bird Singers, Christman has performed traditional songs and dances. He has traveled to Mexico to sing the funeral ceremony and the anniversary mourning ceremony held one year after a person's death.

"I was called down there by a lady to go sing for an anniversary -- her husband had died a year ago," Christman says. "There were upwards of 75 to 80 men out there dancing with us, and maybe only 20 women. The men were unable to find any women to do what they would consider a step backwards, to go live on the reservation.

"Years ago we'd go down to do things like that, and entire families would show up from all over. The last 10 years it has really changed."

At a Native American crafts show held in Santa Monica two years ago, one of Celia's baskets took first prize.

The blue ribbon greatly increased Celia's self-confidence, Perez says, and inspired her to experiment with her art. Now, Celia makes everything from traditional baskets to candleholders and fancy breadbaskets.

Maria Espinoza Cuero, 75 years old and Gloria's great-aunt, has held the funeral and anniversary ceremonies several times in the past few years. She is the last survivor of four sisters: Estanislava died several years ago; Vicenta, Gloria's grandmother, died almost two years ago; and Sara died just nine months ago.

Patricia Perez has a sort of memorial altar to Sara in her store, a display of three of Sara's baskets surrounding a black-and-white photograph of their maker.

Maria is the last of a generation who made the traditional baskets for their own use. She still eats pinon nuts and roasts them to make a coffee-like hot drink, and she still makes a thin hot cereal, atol, from acorn meal.

Maria lives alone now, in a house with a dirt floor surrounded by an immaculate yard with flowering fruit trees and geraniums. She understands and speaks some Spanish, but she prefers to speak Kumeyaay, or let Gloria speak for her.

Most of the time, she sits next to her cast-iron wood stove, her eyes half-closed. She doesn't like having her photograph taken.

"Maria is the last full-blood Kumeyaay, the last traditional basket-maker," Perez says.

Perez has begun marking Maria's baskets "Not For Sale."

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