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## Chapter 3

### Religion of the Luiseños

THE SUN, THE MOON, THE STARS, the wind, the surf, the mountains, the trees—all had special meanings to the natives of the San Luis Rey. Most of these objects of Nature were closely related by blood to the people of the San Luis Rey, having been begot by the same progenitors, as we shall see. But like the white man who has largely replaced them, the natives believed in one supreme God. Their name for God was *Chungiebnish*. The one-God concept seems to have been universal among the many tribes.

The similarity of their religious beliefs with those of present-day religions is pronounced in many facets. Included in their rites were confirmation, or initiation, of children, and mourning ceremonies for the dead. In death, they believed, all was not ended. A future life after death awaited them. Before the Spanish *padres* came to exert their influence the natives cremated their dead in reverent ceremonies. After the mission was established they buried their dead. Like the Pueblos of the Rio Grande they believed in the visitation of spirits from the underworld.

Elder surviving tribesmen in the early part of the

Twentieth Century related that the Chungichnish religion of the Luiseños came down to them from the north, by way of Santa Catalina and San Clemente Islands—known to them as *Harasa* and *Kimki* respectively—and from there to San Juan Capistrano, and finally to the valley of the San Luis Rey. The coastal Indians of the San Luis Rey carried the religion upriver to Pala, Rincon, La Joya, Kupa, and eventually even to the neighboring Diegeño tribes at Mesa Grande and Santa Ysabel. When this migration of a religion occurred is not known.

Of supreme importance among the ceremonies carried up the river was the *Mani*, or *Naktamush* rites. *Naktamush* is the Luiseño word for "jimson weed," a plant that grows along the river's course. The Spanish name for the weed is *toloache*. After drying, *toloache* roots have the effect of a narcotic and were used in the ceremony.

The *Mani* ceremony was an initiation of boys into young manhood. Within an enclosure built of brush the boys were allowed to drink a mixture of powdered *toloache* root and water from a *Tamyush*, or *toloache* bowl. These bowls were believed to have been created divinely at the time man was created and to have the ability to walk alone to the accompaniment of chanting. The ceremony, performed at night, was featured by feather headdresses, eagle feather skirts and the *paviut*, a sacred stick with flint at its end. No woman was admitted to the ceremony who was unclean, unchaste, or who was menstruating.

Under the supervision of the *Hechicero*, medicine man, to each boy a man was assigned to instruct in the virtues of the religion. The powdering of the dried *toloache* root was accompanied by a repetitive chant of "*Chanyoko, yoko.*" After much marching to the chanting of "*Tamyush nova kwoya,*" meaning "*Tamyush* (ceremonial bowl) walks by itself," the dancers would crawl while making the sounds of various birds and animals. They were credited with the ability of talking in the languages of

hawks, owls, ravens, weasels, and others of the animal kingdom. The raven was a sacred bird and the messenger of Chungichnish.

After the effects of the narcotic had worn off dancing continued during the entire night, the participants painted with white clay and black charcoal. At dawn the dancers, chanting "*Tukaina wonipa*," "Go off," would return to the brush enclosure where the ceremony had begun. Use of the narcotic was followed by fasting, and the boys abstained from the eating of meat and salt for two or three weeks.

Another phase of the initiation ceremony consisted of a jumping and balancing test. Three round, flat rocks, gathered from the beach at the mouth of the river, were placed in a trench and enclosed in a crude outline of a man made of milk-weed rope. The figure represented *Wanawut*, one of the First People born of the Earth Mother. *Wanawut* was a symbol of *Piwish*, the Milky Way, the Spirit to whom all spirits go after death. The Milky Way was put in the sky as a sign that men would live on earth only a short time.

The boys were required to place one foot on the other and jump from rock to rock. Failure to maintain balance was taken as an omen that the boy who failed would not live long.

A third phase of the ceremony was a demonstration by the boys of sand painting. At times the boys were required to undergo the ant ordeal, when ants were sprinkled over their bodies and boys and ants covered with earth.

An important part of the ceremony was the introduction of the boys into the mystery of miracles, of which many were performed by their elders. One instructor in the rites cut out his tongue. With blood streaming from his mouth and down his chest, the instructor held the severed tongue high for all to see, after which he replaced it in his mouth. The tongue assumed its former position

and the wound was immediately healed. The miracle performer then resumed his dancing and singing. Others, attired in feathers, jumped into the fire, said to have been as big as a house. While the audience watched entranced, inhaling the odor of burning feathers, the performers walked unharmed from the flames.

When time came to put out the fire the men rushed in to beat out the flames with their bare hands and feet in which there was no feeling. The use of water for this purpose was prohibited.

During all of the ceremony, which lasted several days, the older men assigned to teach the boys were instructing them in the Chungichnish rules of life. While details of the rites may seem absurd when viewed after the passage of so much time, the moral lessons taught are remarkably similar to rules of other religions. The boys were taught that they must not eat immediately upon arising, but should wait a sufficient time for their spirits to join them. Similarly, upon returning from a trip into the hills they must await their spirits before eating. Both of these rules, like the biblical rules regarding the eating of certain foods, and of fasting, could easily have been based on theories of healthful eating.

The boys were taught that they could never eat before their elders had eaten, and that no young person could eat seed or grain of last year's harvest because this food was reserved for old people. A boy could partake of the meat of deer only after he had grown shoulder-high to his father, and at all times he must eat sparingly so that he would enjoy good health, become a good runner, and live to bring sons and grandsons into the world to arrange mourning ceremonies at his death and to burn his body.

A boy must be kind to the old, and never turn his back on a stranger in his home. When he was blessed with children he must never whip them, for if he did the Spirits would steal the children's spirits and they would die young.

Everyone must take a daily bath. That was a mandate. Supreme among the mandates was secrecy. The rites were not to be discussed under any circumstances.

Unlike some religions, the Chungichnish religion was not so much a religion of fear as of a law of recompense. If a natural law were violated—and the religion was based on Nature—punishment was provided by Nature. While it had no hell-fire and brimstone to offer, retribution awaited those who violated the rules in other ways. Punishment was sickness, or Chungichnish would send *Honwut*, the bear; *Tukuut*, the mountain lion; *Sowut*, the rattlesnake, and *Isiwut*, the wolf, to inflict bites and transgressors would be tormented by *Dbakishva*, stinging nettle. Their transgressions would be heard by *Ejla*, the earth. *Temet*, the sun, would spy on them by day and *Moyla*, the moon, and *Tuknishmut*, the North Star, by night. Even *Tukmit*, the sky, and certain mountains acted in the roles of spies on sinners. There was no escape.

A corresponding ceremony, *Wukunish*, was held for girls at puberty. A fire was built in a hole in the ground and tules placed thereon. Two flat stones were heated on the fire and placed on the abdomen of each girl after which the girls painted symbols on boulders. During the four or five days of the ceremony the girls received religious instructions corresponding to those given boys. They were advised to lead a good life and to provide people with water and food.

Like the puberty ceremonies of the boys, the girls' ceremony was featured by much singing and dancing. An *ashish* song sung by men of the clan began "*non ashka*," "I am menstruating the first time." A woman's *ashish* song, the final song in the ceremony, tells of the visitation of two girls at many places, ending their travels at Elsinore where they had their first menses and where the first *ashish* ceremony was held. When the first ceremony was over the two girls composed the song in a spirit of happiness.

The song also gives a version of the travels of the First People ending at Elsinore.

At the conclusion of this final song the wife of the chief painted the faces of the girls. Bracelets and anklets of hair and necklaces of mica were placed on them. During the following month they were forbidden meat and salt, and they were forbidden to drink cold water for a year.

Mourning ceremonies, like those of initiation, were important events in the lives of Luiseños. Following the death of a tribesman, friends and neighbors would gather and the night would be spent in the singing of songs of mourning. When morning came those who were to perform the ceremonies would retire from the throng in order to have privacy in the making of an image of the dead. The image was dressed as in life. Hair was placed on the head and abalone shells were used as eyes. Images of women were dressed in short skirts made from the branches of elders and willows. The image was then brought back in view of the mourners and placed in a hole in the ground.

To the accompaniment of singing, other sounds were produced by the use of *paiayut*, turtle shells, and the whirling in the air of a flat wooden disk called *momlaxpish* which produced a humming sound. This part of the ceremony was performed without dances, and relatives took no part in the performance. As the image was burned the mourners danced about the fire singing *Sungamish*, the finishing songs. As the clothing was burned, the death song, *Pikmakvul*, was sung. All of the mourning songs told of the burning of the body of *Wiyot*, progenitor of all the First People.

Songs were a very important part of the lives and rituals of the Luiseños, although their songs should rightfully be classified as chants as they had little resemblance to the songs of today. There were songs for every occasion. Families and individuals had their own versions of the various songs which no one else would use. In addition to

songs for rain-making, fair weather, harvest, good luck, doctoring, bad luck, death to enemies, deeds of wonder, and instructions to boys, there were series of songs dedicated to important objects and events.

The *Pikmakvul* series were songs of death; *Temenganesb*, songs of seasons; *Chum Towi* or *Kwinamish*, songs of the spirit; *Kamalum*, songs of the First People; *Kish*, songs of the house; *Nokwanish*, songs of Chungichnish avengers; *Munival*, songs of landmarks; *Nyachish*, songs of people cursing their enemies; *Anut*, songs of the ant ordeal; *Sungamish*, the finishing songs, and *Topasisb*, men's dance songs.

THERE ARE VARIOUS VERSIONS, all more or less similar, of the Luiseño creation and the coming of the First People to the earth. Salvador Cuevas, an aging Luiseño in the early part of the Twentieth Century, gave his version which he said was handed down to him by his father. His story here is in brief form:

In the beginning everything was empty and quiet. *Kivish Atakvish*, unoccupied place, was the first being. He was followed by *Wbaikut Piwkot*, whitish gray, and as in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, from the pair came the *First People*. When it was discovered that *Wbaikut Piwkot* was to become a mother *Kivish Atakvish* was ashamed and went up into the heavens where he became *Tukmit*, the sky. It is not clear whether or not the first pair were in human form, but their offspring were. After the departure of *Kivish Atakvish*, *Wbaikut Piwkot* created two round objects like great balls and in three days these objects came to life and were the progenitors of the First People.

Although in human form, the First People represented all the useful items and objects familiar to the Luiseños. Among them were the grinding mortar, beads and stone

knife used as money, bear, eagle, palm tree, yucca, cottonwood tree and the dugout canoe made from the tree, seaweed, pine tree, oak with acorns, deer, certain hills and mountains, and the sun. The list is almost endless.

The Earth Mother dispersed her children to the parts of the world to which they were best suited—east, west, north, south and center. The palm tree was sent east, where it is still seen growing in the canyons bordering the desert; the sea-weed was sent west to enrich the ocean; the oak tree was sent to the center to provide acorns convenient to all the people; Mount San Gorgonio and Mount San Jacinto were sent north and east to form a barrier between the country of the San Luis Rey and the heat of the desert.

One of the First People, *Temet*, the sun, was so obnoxious with his light and heat that the rest of the children were in danger of being burned to death. So *Temet* was sent to the east to give them respite. On the third morning he appeared on the eastern horizon where he has reappeared every morning since.

As the First People traveled forth one among them, *Wiyot*, mentally observed that a fellow traveler, a woman named *Wabawut*, frog, had no flesh on the rear part of her body. *Wabawut* read *Wiyot's* thoughts and in anger cast a spell over him. It appears from the old Indian's story that this was man's first sin and resulted in the condemnation of man to suffering much as related in the biblical story of man's first sin in the Garden of Eden.

*Wiyot*, actually one of the two first beings who had evolved from the round objects created by *Whaikut Piwkot*, and therefore progenitor of all of the First People, was traveling incognito with the group. Until *Wabawut* cast her spell over *Wiyot* the people were unaware of his identity. *Wiyot*, quite ill under the spell, called for his sons and asked that they take him to the hot springs at *Pawi Chawimai*, Cahuilla. When he failed to recover there

he was taken to *Ku- $\beta$ a Kawima*, Warner Springs, and then to Pauma where he died.

But *Wiyot* was a divine character and soon returned to life. He was taken successively to *Nalama Ekapa*, Agua Tibia; *Cberukanukna Jaguiwuna*, Murrieta; and finally to *Etengvo Wumona*, Elsinore, where he died at the hot springs among the tules on the shores of Lake Elsinore and his body was burned; but only after *Coyote*, still in human form, had eaten his heart. Before he died *Wiyot* named all of the months in the year, and his last promise to the First People was to return in three days. On the third day after his death he appeared as *Moyla*, the new moon, casting a pale light over the still waters of the lake and over all the land of the San Luis Rey. Even today when the moon is in eclipse it is a manifestation of *Wiyot's* illness. The end of the eclipse is a manifestation of his recovery when he assumed the role of the moon.

*Wiyot's* death was the signal that all must also, in time, die. The eagle, fearing death and attempting to escape, flew to Mount San Jacinto, circled south to Kupa and westward to Palomar Mountain and Temecula. At Temecula he reported that death was to be seen everywhere and that there was no escape from eventual death. Then the eagle expired. Some of the First People went up into the sky to escape death and became stars. All assumed the forms for which they had been named: *Wabawut* took the form of a frog and disappeared in a pond, and all the other First People who bore animal names took the forms of those animals. Those named for inanimate objects likewise assumed the forms of trees, beads, knives, hills, or any particular object for which they had been named. Thus an order of life in the country of the San Luis Rey was established.

The Luiseños also had their version of a flood. The water fell from the sky in such volumes that soon the valleys, and then the mountain tops were submerged. The top of a

small hill on the river near Fallbrook Creek, which itself was one of the First People and whose name was *Katuktu*, was destined to serve as the ark and as the Mount Ararat of the Luiseños because, miraculously, it was the only dry spot in the land. Some of the people sought refuge on the hill and were thus spared. When the water had run off down the river to the ocean the people again went to Elsinore to reorganize their strength and from there they once more scattered to the four points of the compass to repopulate the land.

#### THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

and practices of the Cahuilla Indians of the mountains and desert canyons were similar in many respects to those of the Luiseños. The most important ceremonial of the Cahuillas was *Hemnukuwin*, the annual gathering at which the tribesmen mourned their dead. Like their neighbors to the south and west they used *toloache* in their religious ceremonies. They believed that what they imagined while under influence of the drug would actually later materialize and that the drug would bring them riches and power. The ceremonial drinking of *toloache* was known as *Pem-pa-wvan Kiksawal*.

A puberty ceremony held for the girls was known as *Pen-iwlu-niwom* and was generally referred to as "roasting of the girls," indicating that, like the Luiseños, the Cahuillas may have placed hot rocks on the girls' abdomens.

The Cahuillas differed from the Luiseños in that rattles were made of gourds instead of turtles. Inasmuch as the Cahuillas never practiced agriculture, it is to be presumed that the gourds were procured by trade, indicating at least limited commerce between them and the agricultural Yumas of the Colorado.

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