

Addie Beck, Henry Gula, Shanti Reddy

Professor Olin Bjork

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### Chumash and Christian Cosmologies: Different Worlds

Various civilizations around the world viewed the outer universe and night sky as a home after leaving their lives on earth. The Chumash, a Native American tribe, were some of the first people to inhabit North America. Their rich spiritual heritage has been documented through their magnificent petroglyphs and legends. The Chumash credited the existence of the universe and night sky to many of their gods and mythical heroes. The cosmos was a place that held powerful gods, feared demons, and admired heroes. The famous Chumash legend “Sparks of the Sun” tells the tale of how light is shone on Earth. The Sun carries a torch across the sky and, at the end of the day, throws the sparks into the heavens, creating the stars. This is only one example of the many beautiful Native American legends that illustrate their culture. The Chumash religion and creation stories differ greatly from Christianity, whereas their methods of practicing cosmology share some similarities.

The Chumash are one of many original Native American tribes who incorporated their beliefs about the night sky and outer universe into their daily lives, their distinct religious rituals, and the mythologies and legends that they handed down from generation to generation. Virtually all Native American Indian tribes believe in an all-powerful, all-knowing deity. In their religion, this spirit is believed to have made the universe. Their beliefs and traditions of the dynamics of the universe continued to spread from generation to generation. They “believed in a great and powerful universe, full of mystery and supernatural forces. Reality was a delicate equilibrium

between a number of opposing forces and a place in which humans played an essential role in the balance of all things” (Miller 119). Many tribes have concepts and myths that explain how the universe came into existence. One theme found within the Chumash mythology is the



**Figure 1 Chumash Mural**

[http://media.independent.com/img/photos/2009/11/05/Chumash-Mural-Sample2\\_t479.jpg?6626f76dcd72edc2e28f46812c7026450162bdb2](http://media.independent.com/img/photos/2009/11/05/Chumash-Mural-Sample2_t479.jpg?6626f76dcd72edc2e28f46812c7026450162bdb2)

composition of the universe in multiple layers.

Specifically, they “believed that the universe was divided into three worlds each laid on top of the other like coins stacked in a dark void” (Miller 119). These three worlds were flat and circular, connected and yet separate. The world of the Chumash universe was not infinite but had set boundaries that could be traveled if a person was possessed of the correct rituals. The most

powerful entities of the universe were the Gods who resided in the Upper World. The Gods in the Upper

World were supported by the wings of a giant, powerful eagle. They believed in the cosmic sweep of the eagle’s wings that act as the motor that pushes the heavenly bodies along their paths.

The Middle World was known as “the world of the people” which was initially inhabited by the First People until a catastrophic flood changed the face of the universe. This flood brought death to some of the *Nunashish* of the Lower World and a great transformation to the First People; some became elemental forces of water, thunder, and wind and others became animal and plant spirits. The flood brought the creation of man who would live in the Middle World, and with “man came life and death which led to the Chumash belief that all earthy things are in flux in a natural cycle of reincarnation” (Miller 120). These Chumash legends are the universal



**Figure 2 Chumash Native American**

[http://www.chumashindian.com/pics/chumash\\_photo.jpg](http://www.chumashindian.com/pics/chumash_photo.jpg)

characteristics of human cultures. These Indian legends were passed from one generation to the next for thousands of years and the main story is the tale of the three worlds. There is one each above us and below us, and there are animals that keep the universe intact. The serpent holds our worlds together, while the eagle stretches his wings to keep the phases of the moon in motion.

Chumash philosophers taught that the stars and planets were souls. As translated in the Chumash cosmos, the Milky Way was believed to be the celestial path of the

dead, a place where the souls of humans would eventually go. Chumash theologians taught that the souls would've completed their celestial journey upon entering Point Conception—the gateway through which began the journey in the afterlife.

The cultures and religious views of the Chumash Native Americans can be compared and contrasted to the modern views that most Christians believe. First and foremost, most modern Christians believe in the existence of one God who created the entire universe. One God that can be interpreted in three forms: the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit. The Chumash believe in multiple worlds with multiple gods and the ability for humans to transform into natural elements. One similarity the two religions share is that Christians believe in the creation of man by God and the Chumash believe in the creation of mankind by their gods. Their religion is called Christianity where humans are given the choice on believing and accepting the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Their fate after death will depend on where they will spend

eternity. Although these two religions and cultures differ greatly, they share one similarity: the creation of man. For example, “the question of man's origin has been debated for thousands of years. All men, regardless of race or religion (even atheists) have a creation story that accounts for man's existence. Most Indian tribes attribute this creation to a Creator, and their stories show great similarities to the creation story outlined in the book of Genesis” (Johnson). Their religious viewpoints after death differ with the Chumash because Christians believe their souls will either be in Heaven or in Hell forever depending on who and what they believe, and the Chumash believe that their souls will all go to one place in the Milky Way.

All relationships with gods or a God must start somewhere, and many religions use creation stories to provide the foundation of these relationships. Creation stories are some of the most important aspects of any culture’s cosmology. They not only give the culture roots, but also give the people of the culture a story to fall back on and remember in times of hardship. This is especially true for the story of the Chumash people.

The Chumash story began with a natural disaster in the form of a flood, which wiped clean the earth, and saved only a few spirits. The Sun God, Morning Star, Moon, and Slo’w the Great Eagle met with Sky Coyote to discuss the appearance of the new race of people that they were to create. They argued over what the new people’s hands would look like, ready to imprint their decision on a white rock. There was a lizard listening in on the proceedings, and slyly imprinted his own hand on the rock. Coyote was angry, but Eagle and the Sun God approved of the new design, so human hands thus look somewhat similar to those of lizards.

Once the image of the human was decided upon by this method of committee, a female creator goddess, named Hutash, planted seeds that were to sprout the first humans on an island off the coast of Southern California called Limuw, or, as it is known today, Santa Cruz Island.

Hutash was married to the Sky Snake, who made lightning with his tongue and lit the first fire. The people used this fire for warmth and cooking purposes while they multiplied, eventually filling the entire island. Hutash was unable to sleep with all the noise, so she became annoyed and built a bridge, called Wishtoyo or the Rainbow Bridge from a mountain on the island to a mountain on the mainland. She instructed the people not to look down as they were crossing, and those that did fell off into the water and were turned into dolphins to prevent them from drowning. Since then, the Chumash people considered dolphins to be their brothers. They have made a tradition to honor Hutash in September with a harvest festival.

The Chumash creation story has its similarities and differences with that of the modern Christian tradition communicated in the Holy Bible. The first strong similarity that comes to mind regards a single creation deity. Christianity has God and the Chumash have Hutash. In the Judeo-Christian story, God creates humans in his likeness. While the Chumash do not believe humans were created necessarily in the likeness of the animals, the piece on the lizard's hand shows that there was some belief that certain aspects of the human body were created in the likeness of the creation architect animals and spirits.

The key difference between the Chumash and Christian creation stories is that the Chumash deity did not create humans herself, and according to the Bible, God created humans in his likeness. Hutash was the one to plant the seeds that sprouted humans: however, she herself did not create the humans. While venerated as the creation goddess, the idea was not hers originally. In Christianity, God is the one and only creator, and one hundred percent of the creation work is attributed to him. Aside from that, the Chumash were polytheistic. They believed that the earth already existed, and that the Chumash spirits and Gods merely created

humans. Christians believe that God created the earth and elements along with the people and everything on the earth.

Creation stories often mark the beginning of time, and time keeping is an important aspect of any civilization. Particularly for Native Americans, astronomy plays a significant role in their perception of time. These two concepts—time keeping and astronomy—often influence



**Figure 3 Chumash Cave Painting**

<http://www.sbnature.org/research/anthro/chumash/image/pcredux.jpg>

the cosmology and mythology of the Native

American culture itself. For the Chumash, tracking the stars was an integral part of their time keeping methods. For example, around the time of the winter solstice, a Chumash “shaman would lead the people in a ritual that was believed to give new life

to the Sun and return the Sun back to a northerly path” (Penprase 145). To pull the Sun back onto

course, they incorporated “dances, chants, and songs” (145). Additionally, the Chumash took observations of the sun by using rock caves into which a beam of light would pass on the day before the solstice. Tracking the Sun was extremely important for a people whose existence relied upon crops and seasonal hunting and fishing. The solstice marks the end of the year; after that, the Chumash lunar calendar begins. Each month is named for the changes in nature that occur during that time. The fact that they divide the year depending on the Earth’s cycle further shows the tribe’s close relationship with nature.

While the Christian tradition does not place as much emphasis on natural occurrences as the Chumash did, there are some similarities between the two. For example, Christmas, the largest Christian holiday, takes place on December 25<sup>th</sup>. In the Julian calendar, the 25<sup>th</sup> is the date

of the solstice, rather than the 21<sup>st</sup> as in the Gregorian calendar, so the Church decided to assign December 25<sup>th</sup> as Christ's birthday. The origins of the winter solstice celebration are pagan: it began as a feast day for Mithra, the sun god. Since Christ was often referred to as the "Sun of Justice" ("Origin of Christmas"), the Church associated him with the sun god's day. Today, the internationally accepted calendar is the Gregorian calendar, also sometimes called the Christian calendar. The tradition of celebrating Christ's birth on December 25<sup>th</sup> has remained despite the switch in calendars. The winter solstice is an important date for many native cultures, particularly those for whom nature plays a significant role.

In addition, modern experts have gathered that the Chumash kept records in petroglyphs and arborglyphs: carvings and paintings on rock walls and trees. Paleontologist Rex Saint Onge identified the "West Coast's only known Native American arborglyph" (Kettmann) in the Santa Lucia Mountains. He concluded that the carving was Chumash. After close observation, he also noticed that the carving strongly resembled Ursa Major and its relation to Polaris. It is very likely that the Chumash used the constellation to help track the seasons.

Similarly, the Bible states that God intended for humans to use the stars to keep track of time. God said, "Let there be lights in the expanse of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark seasons and days and years, and let them be lights in the expanse of the sky to give light on the Earth" (Gen. 1:14-15). In fact, one of the Bible's most famous stories centers around using the stars for guidance. When the wise men go to visit baby Jesus, they track a star in order to find him. God's statement regarding the "lights in the expanse of the sky" reinforces the universality of reading the stars: the Chumash *and* the first Christians turned to the sky in order to better understand nature.

The Chumash and Christian practices are not so different as they first might appear. Most significantly, they both use the stars to keep track of important events. On those holidays, both traditions hold a type of celebration: the Chumash have their solstice rituals, and Christians attend mass. Despite the geographical distance between their origins, the Chumash has much in common with Christianity.

The Chumash religion and creation philosophies have influenced their civilizations for many generations. The Chumash were intensely interested in and aware of the movements of the cosmos. Astronomy played a significant role in their methods of time keeping and cosmological ideologies. Because their world was seen as instable, the Chumash gained the ability to interpret the direction of heavenly bodies. The Chumash people held a sense of knowledge that helped them discern the cosmic power all around them.



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