

Teacher Background: The Kumeyaay Indians

(Note: The past tense is used to place the Kumeyaay culture in historical perspective. However, many of the activities presented are still a part of the culture today.)

The Kumeyaay (pronounced koo-mee-EYE) have a rich history that predates both the Spanish and Anglo arrivals in the region by thousands of years. They devised creative methods for using local plant life such as acorns and the agave plant. Most plants were used for shelter, food, tools, medicine, and clothing. And they used the natural resources of wood, plants, rocks, shells and bone to provide tools for hunting, domestic tasks, and protection for their families.

Reservations Today

Today, there are more than 20,000 Kumeyaay descendants in San Diego County. About 10 percent of the population – more than any other county in the United States – lives on a reservation located in San Diego County. Fourteen of the eighteen Indian reservations in San Diego County are in Kumeyaay territory. The tribes of the Kumeyaay Nation are made up of the following reservations in San Diego County:

- Barona – band of Mission Indians
- Campo – band of the Kumeyaay Nation
- Capitan Grande
- Cuyapaibe
- Ewiiapaayp – band of Kumeyaay Indians
- Inaja – Cosmit
- Jamul – Indian Village
- La Posta
- Manzanita
- Mesa Grande
- San Pasqual – band of Indians
- Santa Ysabel – band of Diegueno Indians
- Sycuan – band of the Kumeyaay Nation
- Viejas – band of Kumeyaay Indians

The local map published by the U.S. Dept. of the Interior Bureau of Land Management, is the best map for locating the tribal areas for each reservation. Historical maps of the Kumeyaay Nation are available at http://www.kumeyaay.info/kumeyaay_maps/

The coming of American settlers seriously affected most of the Kumeyaay along the emigrant trails. By the time gold was discovered in Julian, California in 1869, the Spanish, Mexican, and American governments and settlers had changed the Kumeyaay's way of life forever. In 1875, much of the inland Kumeyaay property was taken. Their plight was ignored until publicity generated by the Indian Rights Association and the Sequoia League forced the Bureau of Indians Affairs to set aside land of the Cuyamaca, La Posta, Manzanita, and Laguna Mountains in the early 1900s.

Physical Location

Note: Each of the following areas can be located on the *California* map, South Portion, published by the American Automobile Association (AAA).

The location of the Kumeyaay Indian villages varied from the ocean, to the high mountains, to the desert and to the Colorado River. There are three subdivisions of the Kumeyaay – the Tipai, Ipai, and Kamia. The **Tipai** lived south of the San Diego River into Baja south of Ensenada and eastward to the Laguna Mountains and beyond Mount Tecate. The **Ipai** lived in territory extending from the San Diego River (approximately State Highway 78), and eastward through Escondido to Lake Henshaw. The **Kamia** lived in Imperial County and over the mountains east of San Diego County. The Kumeyaay reached the San Diego area from the Colorado River more than 2,000 years ago.

Refer to *Lands of the Kumeyaay Nation – Turn of the 21st Century* on the back cover of this guide and to “Map of the Kumeyaay” on page 15 of *The Kumeyaay Nation*, Harcourt School Publishers

Because of the abundance of natural resources, the bands of the Kumeyaay settled along waterways from the San Diego coastal region, east through the Cuyamaca and Laguna Mountains to beyond the Salton Sea, and south beyond what is now Ensenada, Mexico.

Kumeyaay Indians had a tendency to stake out their tribal territory so as to cover several life zones. Life zones include various combinations of elevation, rainfall, climate, and certain plants and animals. By being able to freely hunt or gather in more than one life zone, the Indians could secure a much greater variety of plant and animal foods. In 1990, some tribal leaders formed the Campo Environmental Protection. The purpose of this agency is to assist in the restoration of native flora to help the Kumeyaay to preserve their culture.

Food

The Kumeyaay people moved with the seasons. In the spring they gathered flowers, fruits, seeds, grains, and bulbs. Fall was the time to gather acorns and other nuts.

A variety of **large game** and **small game** were hunted by the Kumeyaay men. The large game included the antelope, mountain sheep, and deer and the small game included the rabbits, mice squirrels, raccoons and the woodrat. Many species of **birds** were an important part of the Kumeyaay diet. Quail and other small birds were regularly hunted and provided a significant portion of the diet year round. Seasonal birds such as ducks and geese were more difficult to acquire. Most birds in the area were eaten except for the eagle or raven which were significant in Kumeyaay rituals. Generally, hunting, butchering and skinning were done by men and cooking by the women. The Kumeyaay women gathered a variety of plants for food, medicine, and other purposes. Reptiles eaten include numerous **snakes** (rattlesnakes were a particular favorite), **lizards** (such as the chuckwalla) and **tortoises**. **Insects**, including ants, grasshoppers, cricket pupae, cicadas, and moth larvae. and **worms** were also a source of food. The Kumeyaay caught **fish** in the ocean and rivers and gathered grunion and mollusks on the beach.

The most extensive food-producing tree for the Kumeyaay was the **oak**. The black oak, coast live oak, and canyon oak were the most productive and palatable of the species. From this one resource, they created different foods. Shawee is a dish made from acorns that is still enjoyed today during special Kumeyaay ceremonies. The Kumeyaay were supplied with a large annual food resource of acorns which matured during a two-to-three week period in October or November. Properly shelled, crushed, and leached, the acorn meal was the major staple of the Kumeyaay diet, and was eaten in combination with various other foods and condiments. Acorns can last up to five years when stored properly.

Agave or mescal were harvested beginning in the spring and again in midwinter. The flower bud, usually called the mescal head, was rich and juicy. Preparing the heads and leaves required a considerable amount of time. Groups of men and boys traveled to the agave areas, camped for several days, excavated baking pits, harvested and prepared the food by baking it.

Another food producing tree for the Kumeyaay was the **mesquite**. These plants produced edible blossoms in June and seed pods in July and August. The blossoms were roasted in a stone-lined pit and then squeezed into balls or sun-dried and placed in water to produce a refreshing beverage. The pods were eaten fresh or mashed in mortars and mixed with water to make a drink. The beans were dried and eaten directly or ground into flour which was stored in the form of cakes. Pinyon trees also provided a source of food but it was a more erratic source.

In the desert areas, there were a variety of edible **cactus** that were gathered in early spring just after the rains. The leaves, stalks, fruit, and seeds of cacti were used for food. They were collected by women and children. The barrel cactus produced the largest quantity of edible fruit. **Yucca** provided an additional food source: the blossoms and stalks. They were collected between April and September by the women and children although sometimes men returned from hunting expeditions with loads of blossoms and stalks.

Mesquite produced edible seed pods that were collected from May to September and baked or collected fresh and dried and then pulverized into flour. Numerous **fruits and berries** of the area added taste, variety, and nutrition to the Kumeyaay diet. An important source of starch in the Kumeyaay diet came from **tubers and roots** that were collected by women using digging sticks to pry plants from the soil. **Seed-producing plants** provided variety to the Kumeyaay diet and included seeds such as sunflowers, chia, wild squash, and juniper.

Types of Shelter

Kumeyaay homes varied in size and shape depending upon the family's needs. Most were circular, dome-shaped structures called "awas". Some structures were rectangular. Plants such as willow branches or thatched rush were supported by sycamore poles. Arrowweed, the sturdy leaves of the fan palm, willow and tule provided the desert Kumeyaay with building materials.

A smoke hole was built into the roof to allow the smoke from fires to escape the awa. Animal skins provided door covers, and grasses of the coastal chaparral were used to soften the floor. Some houses were large from 15 to 20 feet in length and perhaps as wide; others might be described as small brush shelters. Most living complexes were a cluster of two or three houses interconnected with armadas or thatched arbors and wind breaks, which sheltered people from rain, the summer sun, and winds as they worked on domestic chores.

In the mountains, their shelters were triangular-roofed and covered with bark. These protected the Kumeyaay from the cold temperatures and snow.

Types of Clothing

The Kumeyaay women wore bark shirts. Bark strips were pounded and sewn into two apron pieces. One was tied to cover the front and the other to cover the back. Men wore a belt of agave for the purpose of holding tools for hunting and gathering. Although the Kumeyaay usually went barefoot, they would sometimes to walk over rocky or thorny areas, they wore sandals woven from the sturdy fiber of the agave plant.

During the cold weather, men and women wore capes made from rabbit fur or deerskin. Capes also doubled for blankets. The women and some men wore basket caps to protect them from the sun.

The clothes-burning ceremony is still practiced by the Kumeyaay. This private ceremony is done three days after the death of a tribal member. After a night of mourning the loss of a loved one, a large fire is built and the guests dance around the fire. The deceased person's clothes are brought to the fire. After three special songs are sung, everyone faces the fire and clothes and other personal belongings are thrown into the fire. Afterward, a large banquet is served for those who come to pay respect.

Appearance

The Kumeyaay were physically strong, of medium height, and stocky build. Long hair parted in the middle was a tradition for Kumeyaay men and women. Only the women wore their hair down with bangs. The men's hair was either gathered at the crown or left loose. In time of mourning, the Kumeyaay cut their hair off short. This cutting is still practiced today by some of the Kumeyaay. The cut-off hair would be saved for a special ceremony one year after the relative's death.

Both sexes tattooed their foreheads with vertical or horizontal lines. When Kumeyaay girls reached adulthood, three dots were tattooed onto their chins. During a special ceremony of adolescence, women's chins were tattooed with two or three lines. It is believed these tattoos helped to designate clan relationships. Some experts suggest that this displayed family lines for marriage purposes. Tattoos were made by pricking the skin with a cactus thorn or a needle made from the yucca plant. Charcoal from a yucca cabbage, or juice from certain leaves, was rubbed into the open skin prick to make a blue-black tattoo. Body painting was used mainly during ceremonies. For the body painting designs the main colors were red, black and white.

Types of Tools

The Kumeyaay people used the natural resources of wood, plants, rocks, shells, and bone to provide tools for hunting, domestic tasks, and protection for their families. Although the Kumeyaay were not an aggressive people, they did make wooden clubs with a sharp, carved handle to be used in battle if needed.

The **bow and arrow** and the **throwing stick** were the primary weapons for killing game. Bows were usually made of willow, mesquite, or the stalks of palm fronds; arrows were made of cane, sagebrush, and arrowweed and tipped with stone or wooden points of different sizes depending upon the kind of game sought. **Fire** was also used for killing game. Nests were burned and trees were set on fire to flush the game out. The game was clubbed, netted, or shot with bows and arrows as it fled from the burning area. Several types of **traps** were also used. **Nets** were a significant tool. They were made and owned by men and placed along game trails for whatever small game or birds would be caught within.

The most common method of processing food was grinding. Grinding acorns, seeds, and dried berries was done in **stone mortars** with stone or wooden **pestles**. A **metate** and a **mano** were used like a mortar and pestle to grind seeds and acorns to supply the flour for acorn mush, or shawii, and breads. **Bones** were used for making tools, and tanning hides. Bones were sharpened for awls (hole-puncher), shoulder blades of animals were used for hide-scrapers, and stones were made into pounding tools. **Rocks** were sometimes thrown at game. The Kumeyaay used obsidian and other hard **rocks** to make arrowheads and scraping tools. **Flints** were used for arrowpoints and small drills. **Tortoise shells** were

used for making household utensils and rattles. Arrowhead shafts were straightened by using rocks. **Animal** bone was carved into awls for piercing holes in baskets, leather, and shells.

The Kumeyaay used **pottery** to store food, for boiling dried and fresh seeds, fruits, blossoms, and meat, and to hold the cremated remains of their ancestors. Generally, the pottery was undecorated. If decorations were used, they were plain. The simple decorations were geometric patterns, lines, dots, or stars created using a simple braided twine, plant fibers, or red oxide paint. Cooking was done outside in fire pits using pottery.

Rabbit sticks and long digging sticks were made from **hard woods**, and **flexible woods** were used for making bows and cradles, and as basketry materials. **Plant fiber** was used for making carrying nets, nets for capturing game, articles of clothing, traps and snares, and threads and twines for sewing hides and weaving rabbit-skin blankets. String and cord was made from the stems of plants such as milkweed, yucca, or nettles. The **agave leaf spine** was used as a needle for sewing and puncturing purposes (tattooing, puncturing ear lobes and nasal spectums).

To catch small creatures and birds the Kumeyaay used nets woven from yucca, agave, and milkweed. Nets and woven sacks were also made for storage or to carry belongings. One such burden net, or hapuum, was placed across the forehead to carry articles supported on the back.

Various foods were cooked in **baskets** with liquid to which intensely hot rocks were added for instantaneous boiling. Foods were often dried and stored for future use in large **basket granaries** and **ollas**. Women supported the heavy baskets on their backs using a strip of netting on top of a cap which they wore down over their foreheads. Baskets were used for many purposes. Among the most common basketry forms were:

- Burden baskets that were usually wide-mouthed, conical and finished with sturdy rims. They were usually fitted with some kind of carrying strap.
- Flat trays for serving food.
- Shakers, sifters and seed beaters.
- Storage baskets – used to store and preserve food.
- Treasure baskets and trinket baskets – sometime decorated with shells, beads or feathers to hold jewelry, shells, money etc.
- Leaching baskets – circular, twined shallow sieves used in the preparation of acorn meal.
- Boiling and serving baskets – sturdy watertight baskets for the cooking of acorn meal. Scoops or dippers were used for pouring water over acorn meal during the leaching process and for scooping acorn mush out of the cooking vessel.
- Water bottles – made of twined basketry were sealed with asphaltum or pitch to make them water tight.
- Fish or bird traps – elongated in design to catch fish in small stream currents and to trap woodpeckers which were unable to turn around once they entered the narrow tube.
- Cradles – from the time a child was born until it could walk, it was placed first in a small carrying basket and later in a cradle or cradle board.
- Mats –mats of plaited weaving were woven into long capes worn by both men and women. Mats were used on the floor of the house as sleeping pads and as curtains for partitions and doorways.
- Cages – cages were woven to hold insects and grasshoppers and large enough to raise eagles. (These birds were used as part of a religious ceremony.)

System of Government

The Kumeyaay have a tribal form of government. The Kumeyaay is a sovereign nation. This means it is autonomous and not controlled by outside forces. The U.S. Federal Government and the State of California governments have little control over tribal systems of government. Although the tribal government does not raise armies or print money, it governs all issues involving tribal members.

The tribal council is a level of Indian government. It is a grouping of bands with a common interest who have joined together to promote advisory or program services for two or more bands. Band council members compose the tribal council Board of Directors.

Economy

Although the basic lifestyle of the Kumeyaay was that of hunter-gatherers, the wealth of food and natural resources allowed them to build a complex society of significant economic power and cultural influence. The Kumeyaay economy was based on goods and services, supply and demand and sharing. Each person in a village had a share of the work. The women provided services like raising the children. They provided goods like baskets. The men hunted and traded. They made goods like rope and string. The children also contributed by gathering yucca plants used as a staple in their diet.

Trade was important to the Kumeyaay way of life. Villages were connected by a complicated but well-defined trail complex making movement from village to village relatively easy. These trails also connected villages to gathering and hunting areas.

The villages traded with each other using a system of supply and demand. Shells were a valuable trade item for the Kumeyaay. They were used to create beautiful jewelry, bowls, and fish hooks. The coastal Indians would trade dried fish, sea otter skins, asphaltum, and shell beads with the villages inland who would trade animal skins, including deerskins, acorns, salt and obsidian in return. Pottery and agricultural products were traded with tribes to the east. The Kumeyaay territory was bisected by the major trade route, the Yuman Trail, leading from the city of Yuma and crossing the Borrego Desert to San Diego.

Today, the economy of many of the tribes depends on the sales of energy and land leases to coal, oil, and natural gas companies. To assist in generating electricity, 25 windmills standing 20 stories tall offer evidence of how much the American Indian tribes are rebuilding their economy. The Kumeyaay Wind Project has the ability to generate 50 megawatts. The electricity purchased by San Diego Gas & Electric from this project will power between 12,000 and 15,000 homes. The Kumeyaay will benefit from the royalties of the sale.

Before gaming casinos became successful, the Kumeyaay faced many challenges. Substandard housing and high unemployment were common. Today, unemployment is no longer a problem plaguing the tribes. Through the housing programs, older residences have been remodeled and new homes have been built.

Language

The Kumeyaay belong to the Yuman language family of the Hokan group. It is spoken in the southern part of San Diego County and in the northernmost part of Baja California. Despite the efforts by the Spanish, other Europeans, and American to suppress it, the Kumeyaay language has survived. Each of the fourteen reservations has its own dialect but they were able to communicate with each other.

The Spanish once called the Kumeyaay language *Diegueno* (dee-eg-EH-nyoh) because the language was spoken by the people of Mission San Diego de Alcalá. Elders from the communities of San Pasqual, Mesa Grande, and Santa Ysabel as well as desert bands, mountain bands, and Baja California bands confirmed *Kumeyaay* as the general name. The language is still spoken today, mostly by Kumeyaay. Much attention is placed on teaching younger people the Kumeyaay language.

Because the accent is generally placed on the last syllable, an accent mark is not written. The accent is used only on the few words where the accent is not on the last syllable. For example: ha'awka (hello) is pronounced HAW-kah, not haw-KAH.

Rock Art

To keep a record of religious ceremonies or rites of passage, the Kumeyaay shamens made rock art. Herbs and seeds were used to create a variety of colors of paint. Tribal pictographs (paintings on rocks that express artistic or religious meaning) or petroglyphs (carvings in rock that express artistic or religious meaning) can still be seen throughout San Diego County. This art is an important window to the past for historians and members of the Kumeyaay.

Games

Games were created so the Kumeyaay could practice everyday survival skills. Great pride was felt in their strength, endurance, and skills. Game competitions were looked forward to during special ceremonies. The Kumeyaay enjoyed games of chance. Peon is a game of chance still played today. Two teams try to guess which opposing team's hands hide white bones or sticks. A stone is kicked long distances in a soccer-like game. Children would throw sticks, hoops, or discs. A popular game was to catch acorn caps on the end of a stick.

Music and Dance

Music and dance remain important elements in present-day Kumeyaay culture. Tribal history is told through song. There are specific songs for specific purposes – a good hunt, health, or harvest. In the past, musical instruments provided rhythm for dancers and singers. The shaman in ceremonies used turtle-shell rattles. Other rattles were made from gourds, using small rocks inside to produce the sound. Tribal members also used flutes created from reeds to accompany the dancers and singers. A rattle made from a deer hoof and sinew, decorated with feathers, was used in mourning ceremonies. Songs provided an important way to preserve and communicate with the Kumeyaay spiritual and social beliefs from generation to generation. Dance was their expression of the music. The dance patterns observed the purpose of the ceremony. Today, many of these dances are still performed.

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