The Kumeyaay Nation

The existence and history of the Kumeyaay Nation long predates the existence and history of the United States and the state of California. For many thousands of years, the Kumeyaay people lived free, with their own distinct language, culture, spiritual traditions, economic system, and methods of self-governance. Today, the majority of the Kumeyaay People live on 12 reservations in the United States and 6 reservations in Mexico, located on traditional Kumeyaay lands. Kumeyaay lands in the United States that were wrongfully taken from the Kumeyaay were eventually organized into what is now known as the County of San Diego. In addition to the Kumeyaay, there are three other Indian nations indigenous to this region: the Luiseno, Cupeno, and Cahuilla.
Past Society

Kumeyaay villages were located close to important water sources, and the people promoted the plant life in the immediate area of the village. The Kumeyaay social structure revolved around the Sh'mulq (clan) which was headed by the Kwaipai (leader and peace-maker). The Sh'mulqs often lived far from each other unless some mutual benefit could be gained from a closer proximity. To make important community decisions, the Kwaipai was assisted by a council of Kuseyai (medicine men) who were known for their mental and spiritual strength as well as their wisdom.

At certain times of the year, the Kumeyaay held large gatherings where people could socialize, trade, sing important songs, tell stories, and play games (i.e. the gambling game called "peon"). These social gatherings were also convenient opportunities for a young person to find a suitable marriage partner.

Kumeyaay runners used trade routes to relay information over long distances. Kumeyaay men hunted game, crafted fishhooks, and made much needed tools such as bows, throwing sticks (similar to boomerang), arrows, axes, nets, and other items. Bows were made of willow wood, and arrow points were made of stone. The bow and arrow was the main tool used for hunting and self-defense in the event of an armed conflict.

Kumeyaay women created shelters, traditional Kumeyaay houses ('ewaa'), and harvested acorns which were the main staple food for the Kumeyaay. Kumeyaay women processed acorns on grinding stones in order to make an acorn mush called shawii. The women also made fine baskets, pottery, and clothing items.

The Kwaipai, together with the council of Kuseyai and with the advice of a specialist, would make decisions about such matters as when to hold an important ceremony or when to burn an area to promote new growth. The dense chaparral of today was non-existent. Periodic burnings also cleaned up the area, making medicinal and food plants readily available which also attracted game animals that were hunted or trapped for food. Burnings also prevented harmful wildfires from raging through the country.
Kumeyaay specialists had expertise and very technical knowledge in many areas. They were the ones with knowledge of plants, oral history, songs, ceremonies, environmental management, ocean science, medicine, and healing powers.

Kumeyaay used spears, hook and line, and fish traps for fishing. In addition to fishing the rivers and streams, the Kumeyaay also made reed boats to fish the ocean, the kelp beds, the bay (San Diego Bay), and the marshlands (Mission Bay). The specialist would tell what fish were good to eat, bad, or poisonous as well as when the clams and shellfish were safe to eat (red tides). Specialists also knew the seasons for Grunion.

There are many Kumeyaay song cycles: Bird songs, Lightning songs, and Wildcat songs among others. There are hundreds of traditional Kumeyaay songs that contain important information about Kumeyaay culture and philosophy. The songs teach about Kumeyaay language, food, ecology, geography, history, customs, and social/moral values. Songs are accompanied by gourd or turtle shell rattles, which are filled with various seeds or stones. Each singer makes his own distinctive rattle to keep rhythm as the songs are sung. The People often dance while songs are being sung.
For many thousands of years our Kumeyaay ancestors thrived on the lands of our traditional territory. They lived a free existence with their own unique way of life. Having survived many generations of hardship that resulted from strangers overtaking the vast majority of our lands. We Kumeyaay are still here today.

**Spanish Colonization**

1492 Columbus sails to the Caribbean and, by "right of discovery," claims indigenous lands for Christendom and King and Queen of Spain.

1495 Pope Alexander VI calls for indigenous nations to be "dominated" for the propagation of the Christian Empire. He grants to the Spanish monarchs lands not in the actual possession of any Christian king or prince.

1542 Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo makes landfall in the area that would become Point Loma. Cabrillo, a Portuguese adventurer sailing under the Spanish flag, "claims" Kumeyaay lands for Spain.

1602 Sebastián Vizcaíno names Kumeyaay lands and the bay "San Diego.

1769 Father Junípero Serra founds a Catholic mission on Kumeyaay lands in what is now known as San Diego County, one of 21 such missions that would be built in Alta California. Spanish soldiers build a permanent military fort at what is now known as "Presidio Hill.”

1774 San Diego Mission is moved inland from Presidio Hill to its present day location off Mission Road, the Spanish military fort, now called "the Presidio," remains on the hill.

1775 The Kumeyaay consider the San Diego Mission to be an invasion of their territory, accordingly, some 800 Kumeyaay men attack and burn the San Diego Mission one month after it was completed with Kumeyaay forced labor.

**Mexican Period**

1824 Mexican Constitution of 1824 recognizes equality of all Mexican citizens, including Indians. "Indians" was defined as only "Christianized" Indians: “pagans” could not be citizens.

1827 Measles epidemic decimates a large part of the California Indian population.

1838 Smallpox epidemic decimates a large part of the California Indian population.

1848 War between the United States and the Republic of Mexico ends, resulting in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.

1850 California achieves statehood and is admitted into the Union of the United States.

1850-1870’s Whites engage in the wholesale massacre of Indians, particularly in the gold fields of central and northern California.

1851-1852 U.S. treaty commissioners make 18 separate treaties with the Indians of California. Due to pressure from congressional representatives from California, the U.S. Senate refuses to ratify these Indian treaties, and they remain hidden under an injunction of secrecy until the early 1900s.

1852 On January 7, 22 Kumeyaay leaders sign the Treaty of Santa Ysabel. In June, the United States Senate refuses to ratify the Treaty of Santa Ysabel, and places the treaty under an injunction of secrecy, where it remains until 1905.

1859 Indian lands given to non-Indian settlers in Rancho Land Grants.


1869 22,000 Indians have died in less than 20 years from disease and deprivation.

1875 President U.S. Grant issues Provisional Executive Order setting aside Indian lands for the permanent use and occupancy of the Mission Indians in Lower California. The Kumeyaay reservations formed include Captain Grande, Santa Ysabel, Mesa Grande, Sycuan, Ionea, and Cosmopol.

1891 Sycuan Indian Reservation formally established. Congress passes "An Act for the Relief of the Mission Indians in the State of California." This Act provides for the formation of a Commission to arrange a just and satisfactory settlement of the Mission Indians residing in the State of California, upon reservations which shall be secured to them. The Smiley Commission was formed on the basis of this Act.

1893 The Smiley Commission formalizes the boundaries of a number of Kumeyaay Indian reservations. In February, 1893, the federal government issues Trust Patents, thereby placing the Sycuan, Captain Grande, Campo, Iwasapaap, and other reservations into permanent "trust status.”

1924 Congress passes the Indian Citizenship Act, thereby recognizing American Indians as U.S. citizens.

1932 Congress, at the desire of land speculators and unknown to the Indians, granted the city of San Diego permission to purchase the heart of the Captain Grande Reservation upon which many Kumeyaay families had built their homes. Kumeyaay people were forced off ancestral lands on the San Diego River in order for the city to build the El Capitan Dam and reservoir. The federal government relocates Kumeyaay on the present day Barona and Viejas Indian reservations.

1952 Indians get full right to vote in California and are able to vote for local politicians.

1992 Native Cultures Institute begins organizing cross-border travel to reunite Kumeyaay families split by international boundary line between the United States and Mexico.

2000-2001 Proposition 1-A is passed by the voters of California, following this vote the California Constitution is amended to allow for Indian gaming on Indian reservations.

2002 California State Assembly (Assembly Joint Resolution - 60) recognizes the Kumeyaay Nation and the aboriginal territory occupied by Kumeyaay people for thousands of years that includes areas on both sides of the international U.S.-Mexico border.

*The Kumeyaay Nation* was provided by The Sycuan Band of the Kumeyaay Nation

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