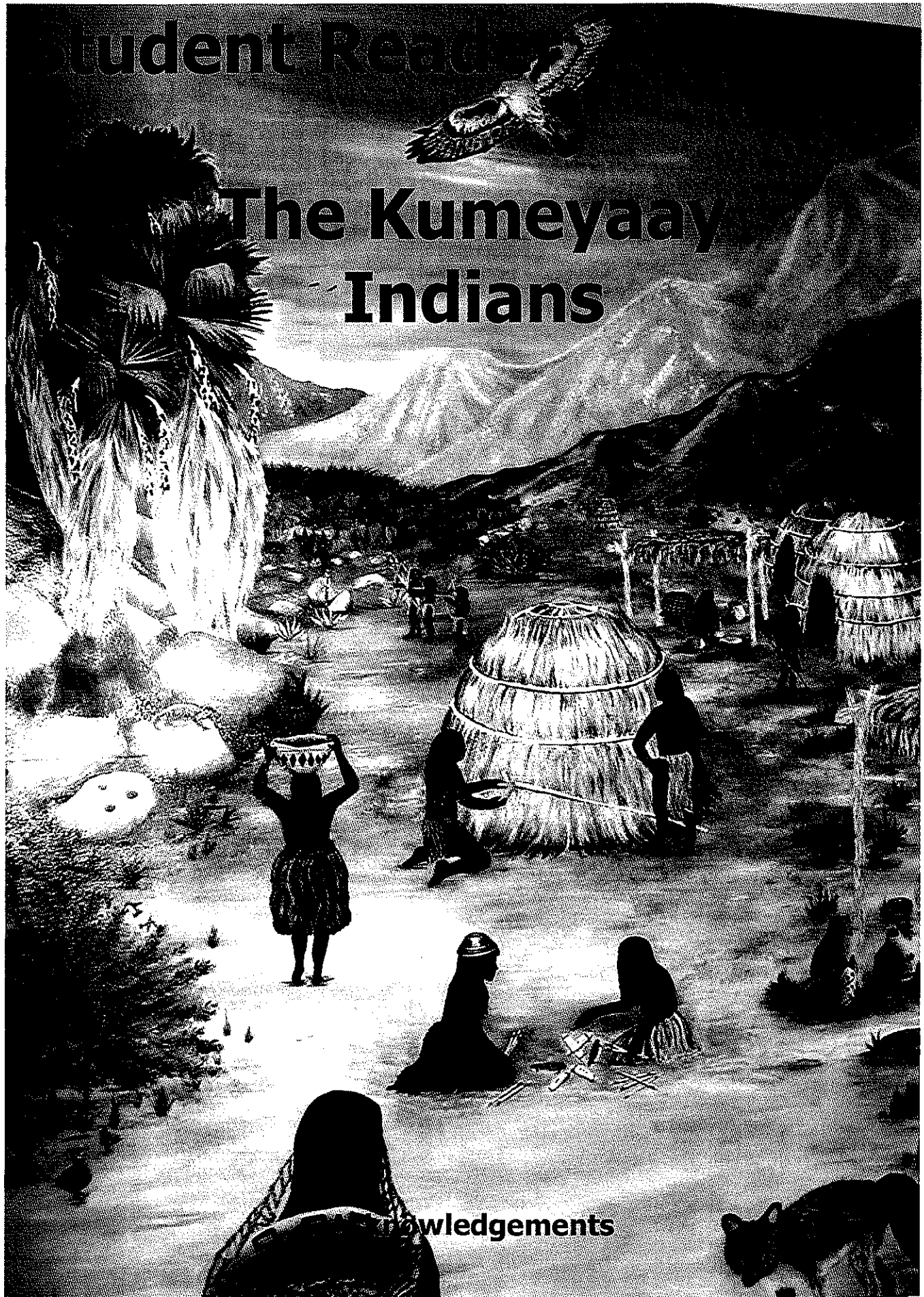


Student Reader

# The Kumeyaay Indians



Knowledge

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**Special recognition goes to Amiya Sawyer** of the Palm Springs Unified School District for her initial design and organization of the student reader.

**Appreciation is given to the following teachers for their contributions to *The Kumeyaay Nation* (Harcourt School Publishers) upon which this booklet is based.**

Pam Martin

Louwana Spetter

Cathie Hays

Del Mar Union School District

**Special gratitude** is extended to Harcourt School Publishers and to the San Diego Unified School District, including Kirk Ankeney, Linda Gohlke, Lucy Laudate and the Grade 3 teachers of the History-Social Science Leadership Team.

An electronic version of this unit is available online at [http://pdc.csusb.edu/Porter\\_Room.htm](http://pdc.csusb.edu/Porter_Room.htm)

Note: In this *Student Reader: The Kumeyaay Indians*, 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.

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Cover photograph by Jeanette Janik

# **Location of the Kumeyaay**

The location of the Kumeyaay Indian villages varied from the ocean, to the high mountains, to the desert and 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.

# Appearance

The Kumeyaay were physically strong, of medium height, and stocky build. Both the men and women had long black hair parted in the middle. Only the women wore bangs. The men's hair was either gathered at the crown or left loose.

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.

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. For the body painting designs the main colors were red, black and white.

## Food-Plants

The Kumeyaay Indians used their environment to provide food, clothing, and shelter. The oak tree produced the most food for the Kumeyaay. From this one resource, they created different foods. Shawee is a dish made from acorns that is still enjoyed today during special Kumeyaay ceremonies. Acorns were usually gathered during a 2 to 3 week period in October and November. Men, women, and children would all help gather acorns. After gathering the wild acorns, the women used mortars and pestles to grind the acorns into flour. The tannin in the acorns had to be washed many times before they could be eaten.

The Kumeyaay also ate agave, yucca, cactus, fruits, berries, tubers, roots, and seed-producing plants such as sunflowers, chia, wild squash, and juniper. The mesquite produced edible blossoms in June and seed pods from June to September.

## **Hunting for Food-Animals**

The Kumeyaay ate a variety of large game such as antelope, mountain sheep, and deer. Small game included rabbits, mice, squirrels, chipmunks, raccoons and the woodrat.

Generally, hunting and skinning were done by the men and cooking was done by the women.

## **Food- Other Animals**

Birds were a very important part of the Kumeyaay diet. They ate quail and many other species of birds. Seasonal birds, such as ducks and geese, were more difficult to acquire. They would not eat the eagle or the raven because these two were used in Kumeyaay rituals.

Reptiles, including rattlesnakes and lizards, were a source of food. They also ate insects such as ants and grasshoppers, cricket pupae, cicadas, and moth larvae. They caught fish in the ocean and rivers with arrows, spears and nets and gathered grunion and mollusks on the beach.

## **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. To make an awa, 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 the 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.

# 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.

## 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.

The **bow and arrow** and the **throwing stick** were used to kill game. Bows were made of willow or mesquite; arrows were made of cane, sagebrush, and arrowweed. Arrows had stone or wooden points of different sizes. They also used nets, fire, and clubs to hunt their food. **Nets** were made and owned by men. They were placed along game trails to catch small animals or birds.

## **More Tools**

Mortars were made from rock and were used with a pestle to grind acorns into flour. 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. **Stones** were made into pounding tools.

The Kumeyaay used obsidian and other hard **rocks** to make arrowheads and scraping tools. Rocks were sometimes thrown at game. **Flints** were used as arrowpoints and small drills. **Animal bone** was carved into awls for piercing holes in baskets, leather, and shells. **Pottery** containers were used for boiling dried and fresh seeds, fruits, blossoms, and meats. **Tortoise shells** were used for making household utensils and rattles.

# Tools Made from Plants

**Plant fiber** was used for making carrying nets, nets for hunting game, animal traps, articles of clothing, and threads and twines for sewing hides and weaving rabbit-skin blankets. 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. 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 tattooing.

## Baskets

Some foods were cooked in baskets. Hot rocks were put into a basket to make the liquid boil. Baskets were used for many other purposes such as carrying baskets, storage baskets, flat baskets for serving food, leaching baskets to prepare acorn meal, cages for birds or insects, and cradles to carry a child. Foods were dried and stored in large basket granaries.

## **System of Government**

The Kumeyayy have a tribal system 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 make up the tribal council Board of Directors.

## **The Economy**

Each person in the village had his or her share of work. The women cooked, provided acorn meal, raised the children, and made baskets. The men hunted, traded, and made rope, nets and string from long grasses. The children gathered yucca plants, acorns, and other plants used in their diets. All of the food was divided and shared evenly.

Trade was important to the Kumeyaay way of life. Shells were a valuable trade item. They were used to create beautiful jewelry, bowls, and fish hooks. The coastal Indians would trade dried fish, sea otter skins, asphaltun, 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 included a major trade route, the Yuman Trail. It led from the current-day city of Yuma across the Borrego Desert to San Diego.

# Lands of The Kumeyaay Nation

Turn of the 21st Century



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