The changing economy of the Kumeyaay

Michael Connolly Miskwish
Campo, California

The Kumeyaay people of the California-Baja California area live in one of the most diverse environments of North America. As such, the culture and economics of traditional Kumeyaay society were flexible and adaptive. This allowed for the rapid incorporation of favorable elements of Spanish, Mexican and American cultures when it strengthened their opportunities for survival. This flexibility and adaptability is evident in present-day Kumeyaay society.

In the pre-contact Kumeyaay society, governmental organization was primarily based on the *sh'mull* or *sh'mulq* (also known as clan, sib or gente). The *sh'mull* was headed by a *kwa-pai*. Religious and scientific expertise was normally the province of the *kwassiai*. Organization on a higher level usually would take the form of a number of *sh'mulls* organizing under a *kachut g'tay* or a *kwa-pai* council for a particular purpose. One of the most notable instances of higher organization was the attack on the San Diego mission in 1785. In general, the *sh'mull* alliances were extremely complex. Territorial delineation was based on familial ties, military strength, alliances against common enemies and spiritual power.

The lack of a trader class within Kumeyaay society obviously did not prevent trade from occurring. Coastal products such as abalone were traded far inland, while desert obsidian found its way far from its source. A barter system was the basis for commerce between the *sh'mulls*, although gift-giving to promote and solidify allegiances was also significant. Periodic contacts at the boundaries of territories would provide opportunities for trade. Large gatherings, known as *mut-ah-yum*, would also provide venues for exchange through barter and gambling. Involuntary exchanges were also an important part of the Kumeyaay economy. Raids on rival *sh'mulls* or neighboring tribes are recorded in both the written record and the Kumeyaay oral history in song. Raids targeted women, crafted products and spiritual power.

The acquisition and enhancement of spiritual power was a pervasive element of Kumeyaay decision-making and social structure. *Sh'mull* raids for spiritual power may focus on a stone or crystal amulet possessed by the resident *kwassiai*, particularly if the raiders credited the amulet with good health, large harvests and plentiful game.

The Spanish period

When the Spanish priest Junípero Serra approached present day Tijuana in May of 1769, he was met by Kumeyaay who showed him cloth and beads that had been traded with the ships in San Diego harbor. The founding of the mission in San Diego brought a significant new element into the socioeconomic mix of Kumeyaay society. Traditional Kumeyaay society first treated the Spanish as it would a *sh'mull* without allegiances. This attitude was gradually replaced as Kumeyaay began to develop a new context for the fledgling mission. The Spanish, too, adapted to the Kumeyaay social structure, learning to play on the loyalties and allegiances of the *sh'mulls*. This was especially evident after the attack on the mission in San Diego in 1775. In the reports developed after the attack, Spanish officials noted village and *sh'mull* allegiance in

their reports.

Spanish industry brought an increase in trade for a variety of resources. Metal products and textiles were rapidly incorporated into Kumeyaay society. Conversely, a population of neophytes began to gradually populate the mission area. These neophytes provided the basic labor for the mission. The Spanish also brought contact with tribes further afield through Spanish intermediaries. Initial efforts at agriculture in the mission area were not very successful. Reports of large-scale erosion and flooding showed a lack of understanding of the environment. Gradually, livestock grazing and agriculture began to take hold in the mission area. With the successful establishment of the agricultural base, the Spanish were able to further increase their credibility and influence among the Kumeyaay population. Yet, despite the increasing effect on Kumeyaay society, over two-thirds of the Kumeyaay lands remained outside the control of the Spanish. Commerce continued between the Kumeyaay territories and the Spanish-controlled lands through the neophytes acting as intermediaries. Periodic raids on Spanish targets were followed by Spanish raids into Kumeyaay territory. Occasionally, sweeps of Kumeyaay villages were conducted to round up defecting neophytes for return to the mission.

The role of the Spanish priests was mirrored in Kumeyaay society, and they were therefore more likely to be viewed as different practitioners of the same religion. It took a concerted level of indoctrination for the neophytes to accept the Christian religion as fundamentally different. Consider some of the similarities:

Bird songs	Chants
Talismans	Crosses, medallions
Kwassiai	Priests
Fasting	Fasting

The balance of raiding and trading with the coastal lands gradually established a new economic order in the Kumeyaay lands. As the Mexican revolution unfolded during the 1810s, low-grade conflict permeated Kumeyaay society.

The Mexican period

The early Mexican period represented a consolidation of the governmental structure in 1820s California. Kumeyaay who had been integrated into Mexican society performed most of the labor and were spreading across the trades. Kumeyaay of the mountain and desert regions maintained their independence while adapting to trade with the coastal Mexican society. The raiding culture began to develop into an important element of Kumeyaay society as sheep and cattle ranching began to push further inland. The raiding culture found its peak in the time following the establishment of the ranchos.

In 1833, ranchos were established across the Mexican areas and deep into the zones under the control of the Kumeyaay. Disaffected Kumeyaay of Mexican society joined with the independent *sh'mulls* of the mountains and desert, forming an effective force that began to dominate the interior. Kumeyaay raiders began to alter the balance of power, precipitating the collapse of the rancho system. By the 1840s the ranchos had been made non-functional or abandoned. By 1842 raids were being launched against the town of San Diego itself.

The skills and abilities of the disaffected Mexican Kumeyaay were spread across the Kumeyaay lands. Spanish became the language of commerce with other tribes and promoted increasing social and military alliances.

The early American period

Kumeyaay economies from 1850 to 1875 were dominated by a succession of programs designed to exterminate, then to assimilate the Indian populations. Treaties negotiated in the early 1850s were not ratified by the U.S. Senate. This fact was hidden from the California tribes. Amongst the Kumeyaay, attempts to establish rural ranching economies were undermined by the fact that Indian people had no legal standing for maintaining ownership of their land. In fact, some Kumeyaay built ranches that were lost when homesteading Americans filed claims to the land. If they were fortunate, the Kumeyaay family would be allowed to continue to live on the land as hired labor. The raiding culture of the early 1800s had to give way to more surreptitious activities. Smuggling began to become economically important with the creation of the Mexican border. Raids on white ranches had to be swift and undetected to avoid reaction from the ranches or the U.S. military. The leaders of the tribal communities worked hard to police their people, at times capturing and publicly flogging Indian cattle rustlers who became too blatant. Yet the creativity and adaptability of the Kumeyaay continued during this time. One method of supplementing food supplies in the backcountry of San Diego County involved the cinching of the nose of a horse. After the horse died of suffocation the Indian would go to the rancher and report the dead horse. The rancher would investigate and finding no injuries would assume the horse died of natural causes. The Indian would then ask for the dead horse for food, which was usually granted. This deception was used until its discovery in the 1880s.

In the urban areas, Kumeyaay were a significant portion of the labor for the whaling and other industries, yet often lived in squalor on the periphery of society. Indians in California were the target of a massive extermination program in the 1850s. Militias exterminated whole bands of Indians, then received reimbursement for their expenses from the state. By 1860, the population of Indians in the state had fallen by 90%. California also passed a series of laws which provided a legal coverage for the forced servitude of Indian people. Children were routinely taken from Indian families, ostensibly to be adopted into white families. In actuality, the children were used as unpaid domestic help. Often they were discarded or sold into brothels once they neared adulthood. Men were arrested under vagrancy laws and hired out by the counties for sentences of up to six months. They were often rearrested at the end of the six-month period. The effect was a revolving door of involuntary servitude which was slavery in all but name. In a sad irony, the need for Indian labor probably was a significant factor in the tolerance of Indians in California society after the 1860s.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs

Starting in 1875 and continuing into the first half of the twentieth century, the Bureau of Indian Affair (BIA) began to develop policies to integrate Indian communities into American society. (The Bureau of Indian Affairs under the Department of the Interior was the Office of Indian Activities under the War Department until 1891.) Amongst the Kumeyaay, Bureau policy was primarily pursued in the coastal areas until 1900, when they began to work with the tribes of the interior. Indian people were the backbone of the agricultural industry, providing labor for planting and crop-pickers for the harvest. Indian women commonly worked in the domestic industry in the urban areas.

For the self-sufficient communities of the rural areas, adaptation had brought in family gardens supplemented by beehives and domestic livestock. On some of the more productive

lands of the reservations, significant crops of grains such as barley and oats were reported. Yet these successes proved to be short-lived. The fragile nature of the sandy loams of the valley bottoms soon succumbed to desertification as wet meadows were drained for crop land. The result was eventually the loss of farmland and the conversion to marginal livestock grazing land. In some areas of San Diego County, the Bureau created industries such as needlework and lacemaking, created cottage industries for a time. For reservation economies, the lack of roads, distance to the population centers and the marginal nature of their lands contributed to marginal subsistence. To supplement income, many Kumeyaay turned to off-reservation employment at ranches. Employment as labor in infrastructure development was a periodic source of individual income. Kumeyaay people participated in the building of Highway 94, the telegraph line and the railroad. During the depression of the 1930s, Kumeyaay were an important labor force for Civilian Conservation Corp infrastructure projects.

Some Kumeyaay turned to military service for employment. Many Kumeyaay were conscripted for service during World War 1, though technically they were not considered U.S. citizens at the time. Conscription and voluntary service continue to recent times as a viable option for Kumeyaay men and, occasionally, women.

Public Law 280, the welfare culture

In the 1950s, Public Law 280 was passed, giving police jurisdiction on Indian lands to the State of California. One result of this law was the abandonment of the Indian lands by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and Indian Health Services. As reports of starvation in the more isolated Indian communities began to get publicity, San Diego County began to send social workers into the communities to encourage applications for welfare. By the 1960s, welfare and public food programs began to become the principal means of living on the reservations.

Traditional foods, most of which involved significant work in preparation, began to fade away as prepackaged staples became freely distributed. A result of the dietary changes was the rapid rise of diabetes on the reservations.

Litigation in the 1960s forced the return of federal Indian programs to California. The BIA and IHS gradually reestablished their presence in California Indian Country. (Indian Health Service refused to establish clinics in California, so California tribes formed consortiums to directly apply for health care funding under the Indian Self Determination Act. To this day, all Indian health clinics in California are run by consortiums.) The return of federal programs to California brought some jobs and grant income to the reservations. By 1970, grants began to dominate tribal economics. Most reservations in the United States continue to rely on grants as the single largest source of revenue outside of gaming.

Self-determination and the present day

In 1975, the “Indian Self Determination Act” was passed by the U.S. Congress. Under the act, tribes were encouraged to develop their own methods for economic advancement. Tribal economies throughout the United States began to explore a wide variety of economic development. Of these, the opening of tribal gaming operations has proven the most lucrative. Some reservations were able to completely eliminate welfare from the economic base. Yet the legacy of years of governmental interference and misguided policies has continued to take its toll.

For one, the recognition of tribal sovereignty by the United States is based on a government-to-government relationship. This relationship focuses on the elected tribal leadership of each individual reservation. Political factions within the reservations have a tendency to fall along the *sh'mull* lines, with votes sometimes more related to *sh'mull* allegiances than an objective determination of the course of action. This tendency is gradually beginning to fade as *sh'mull* identity is replaced with a band identity based on reservation. While it is still a part of Kumeyaay society, it provides the source of some of the more interesting internal battles over economic development policy. It also makes it difficult to attract and hold economic investment, because of the element of uncertainty that changing allegiances can cause to disrupt regulatory stability.

Another inequity in contemporary economics is current U.S. tax policy, which allows the states to extract sales and income tax from reservation lands, with no requirement to share revenues with the tribal government. Local gasoline taxes have long been a source of revenue to county governments, yet not one road has been paved on Indian lands in San Diego County unless it was to serve a non-Indian population. This lack of control of the tax base has severely limited the ability of tribes to pursue alternative forms of economic development. Gaming is unique in that it is only allowed as a governmental enterprise, and recent California law has allowed tribal gaming a unique role in the market.

Kumeyaay in Mexico

The divergence in socioeconomics between the Kumeyaay in the U.S. and Mexico started with the Mexican-American War. Yet transboundary socializations and communications were only mildly affected until the last 50 years. Children in the U.S. have rarely been taught the Kumeyaay language as a first language since the 1950s. The use of Spanish has also fallen dramatically over the same time, making communication more difficult with the Mexican Kumeyaay. The tightening of the border over the last 30 years has further constrained the periodic visits between families separated by the border. Economically, the Baja California Kumeyaay have become distinct from the U.S. tribes. Only in the last 10 years has there been a concerted effort to improve the transboundary relationship on personal, social and economic levels. Kumeyaay in Mexico generally maintain linguistic and crafts skills that are much in demand with the resurgence of cultural interest in U.S. Kumeyaay. The differences in laws applying to Mexican Indians have meant a different relationship with the Mexican federal and state governments. These differences have sometimes interfered with attempts to work cooperatively across the border.

Summary

One of the strengths of the traditional Kumeyaay society has been the *sh'mull* identity, which made the populations resistant to domination from outside powers. However, this identity has contributed to factionalization on some of the reservations. As time consolidates the social structures of the Kumeyaay, opportunities to project political power beyond the reservation boundaries are increasing. The Kumeyaay have adapted to this new-found role by getting directly involved in national and state policy. This has not been without repercussions. Growing elements of non-Indian populations resent the new-found power and wealth of some of the gaming tribes. These groups are increasingly seeking regulatory and legislative constraints on

tribal powers. The sense of national identity among the Kumeyaay bands has grown from a weak, periodic exception to the *sh'mull* structure to a consistent sense of nationality in contemporary society. This national identity has superimposed itself over the band and the traditional *sh'mull* identities. The opportunities to stabilize the relationships between tribes and state and federal governments have grown tremendously in the last decade. For the first time, the potential for permanent recognition and stability is a possibility.