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Blackburn, ed.: *December's Child: A Book of Chumash Oral Narratives*

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Author

Anderson, Eugene N.

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been well received by members of the Cahuilla community (personal communications, Cahuilla members of the Malki Museum).

To the outsider (read anthropologist) this clear, factual account has an additional dimension of interest. As specialists in California anthropology know, the Cahuilla, along with so many California peoples, present an intriguing exception to the usual generalizations about hunting-gathering cultures. The problems posed by these differences are only beginning to be dealt with, and further work requires considerable detailed and reliable data. *Mukat's People* contains a well-documented and detailed discussion, to cite only two examples, of the elaborate Cahuilla kinship system, including as it does lineage, sib, and moiety groups, and of Cahuilla concepts of land ownership which we have learned to consider "atypical" for hunter-gatherers. This work then provides for and compels a new look at the hunting-gathering adaptation and, at a minimum, the reevaluation of old hypotheses. At the same time, Bean's repeated assertions of the ecologically adaptive value of each aspect of Cahuilla practice and belief, convincing in the context of Cahuilla culture, become problematic in a wider comparative context. Bean is at his best when demonstrating the facilitating role of world view and ritual in relation to the exploitation of environmental resources. He is aware of the importance of the Cahuilla data to larger comparative understandings. The reverse also applies, however, and it is in just those puzzling areas of social structure and economic relations that comparative considerations would give Bean's own analysis a finer edge.

Mukat's People also explicitly tests a series of hypotheses concerning the relation of religion and ideology to ecological adaptation. Although Bean convincingly demonstrates their positive adaptive role among the Cahuilla, this part of the book is somewhat wooden in construction, and lacks the rhythm,

subtlety, and sensitivity that characterize the remainder of the work. No matter; the reader remains impressed by the book's many merits and by its expression of Bean's genuine relationship with the Cahuilla people and their culture.



December's Child: A Book of Chumash Oral Narratives. Thomas C. Blackburn, ed. and analysis. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1975. \$12.95.

Reviewed by EUGENE N. ANDERSON
University of California, Riverside

A child born in December is "like a baby in an ecstatic condition, but he leaves this condition" (p. 102). The Chumash, reduced by the 20th century from one of the richest and most populous groups in California to a pitiful remnant, had almost lost their strange and ecstatic mental world by the time John Peabody Harrington set out to collect what was still remembered of their language and oral literature. Working with a handful of ancient informants, Harrington recorded all he could—then, in bitter rejection of the world, kept it hidden and unpublished. After his death there began a great quest for his scattered notes, and these notes are now being published at last. Thomas Blackburn, among the first and most assiduous of the seekers through Harrington's materials, has published here the main body of oral literature that Harrington collected from the Chumash of Santa Barbara and Ventura Counties. Blackburn has done much more: he has added to the 111 stories a commentary and analysis, almost book-length in its own right, and a glossary of the Chumash and Californian-Spanish terms that Harrington was prone to leave untranslated in the texts.

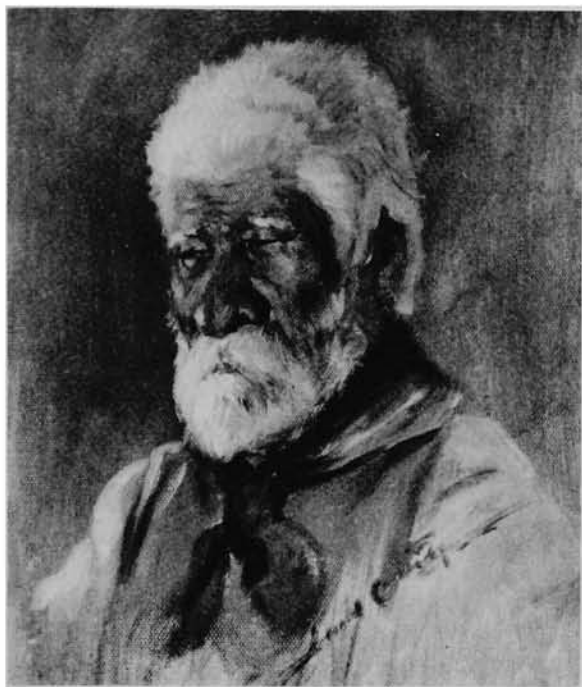
The importance of such an enormous corpus of texts from a major group whose culture was previously little-known needs no emphasis. Not only California specialists but also those interested in mythology and oral traditions will find this book invaluable. Its appearance in well-produced book form, rather than as an obscure monograph, makes it available to the public at large, among whom it should command an audience among all those who are even slightly interested in American Indian culture. The stories are good enough, moreover, to stand on their own as contributions to world literature. In the analysis, Blackburn summarizes the accurate reflections and the distorted representations of Chumash culture that appear in the tales and provides an excellent summary and discussion of the assumptions about the universe and man's proper conduct therein that underlie them. These were teaching stories, as one informant emphasized frequently, and Blackburn has learned and summarized many of their lessons. Many more are still to be learned, for these stories, like myths and legends everywhere, are significant in many ways on many levels. Blackburn holds himself to a conservative analysis, rejecting structuralist methods as too free and not even mentioning psychedelic anthropology—despite the enormous importance of *toloache* (once a woman, grandmother of many heroes), and the powerful native tobacco. A conservative analysis is certainly desirable in this first published major work on Chumash literature, but more speculative approaches should now be in order—though one hopes they retain solid contact with the data.

Several striking points about the Chumash emerge from these stories, e.g., the enormous importance of trade and money; the emphasis on vegetal foods, especially acorns and chia (in a group often considered more dependant on sea foods than these stories seem to show); the diversity of roles among leaders and priests; and the all-important role of *toloache* in deal-

ing with the spirit world. These all tend to clarify speculations about the Chumash.

Of marked interest here is the insight given to the Chumash view of the Spanish. Spanish items of culture (steel, horses) have crept into many traditional tales. More recently-told tales include many that came from Mexico, including the well-known stories of Puss in Boots, Stone Soup, and the famous and incredibly cynical tale of Good Repaid with Evil. These borrowed tales have their own section in the book. Supposedly true accounts of shamanism and evil spirits within the informants' lifetimes often include a "padre," exorcising or allowing the shaman to do so—evidently the Mexican Spanish and the Chumash understood each other perfectly in matters involving devils, witchcraft, and the evil forces around us. The Chumash were apparently relieved to have the Franciscan fathers and their spectacular protective rites. The old shamans evidently tried to maintain independence from this new world order, but gave up in the end, and let their knowledge die with them. One of the reasons for the quick and nearly total collapse of Chumash culture seems to have been a feeling that the power of the Spanish and their followers was due to a superior magic, against which the Chumash magic failed to hold its own.

It is probably because of this belief and still more because of the actual events (massacre, epidemic, forced acculturation and forced labor, rapid destructive change) that encouraged it that these stories tend to be bitter, pessimistic, and cynical. The world reflected in these tales is a hostile one, dominated by the Sun who devours men and the huge eagle *Slo²w* who holds up the upper world and also lives on human flesh. Every night of the year, Sun and *Slo²w* play peón with the Coyote of the Sky and the Morning Star; if the Sun's team wins (as decided by the Moon at the winter solstice) the following year will be hot, dry, and food-poor, while if the other team wins the



Fernando Librado, one of John Peabody Harrington's major informants. From a lithograph made under the direction of John Peabody Harrington.

year will be rainy and rich. It is fairly obvious that the Sun's team is generally stronger: life is a gambling game in which we play at a disadvantage. People, as reflected in the tales, are greedy and cruel; life is brutal and arbitrary. There are redeeming features, and the tragic sense of life is often conveyed in beautiful and poetic imagery, but the essential message is harsh. Much of this is surely traditional, but much must be the result of an acculturation situation that was little better than a prolonged genocide. (I have found a similar phenomenon in comparing Malaysian Chinese religion with that of traditional China; the poorer Malaysian Chinese, in a hostile environment, dropped the optimistic and relatively cheerful aspects of their religion and kept the parts dealing with death and evil. The Chumash must have done something similar and probably did it more thoroughly, given their greater problems.) Humor and lightness are rare in these tales, and when it occurs it is often sadistic—Coyote

gets his comeuppance in the usual unpleasant ways. It is true that similar tales exist throughout California and indeed throughout the world; the point is that the Chumash seem to have no other stories—very few of the “they lived happily ever after” sort, and these few end happily only after many tragedies. Selective loss of humor and delight seems to be a reasonable supposition. The same is possibly true in other California mythologies—the Chumash had been suffering contact with the white man's world for a century and a half by the time Harrington worked with them, and all California groups had had many years of bad experiences before they were “ethnographized.”

The main criticism that must be made of this book is that Harrington's recording of Chumash tales left much to be desired. The highly erratic behavior of Harrington has created around him an aura of legend, much of it based on the staunchly Californian belief that anyone eccentric must be brilliant (a belief that has inspired so many social movements in our time). A few of these tales are adequately recorded, with Chumash texts and literal translations—unfortunately, these are not given in Blackburn's book, but are recast as English narratives without the Chumash; linguistic analysis of the Chumash texts is awaited. Most of the tales exist in Harrington's notes in English or Spanish, and many of them shift from apparently near-verbatim transcription or translation to Harrington's summary of what the informant said; Harrington's notes do not reveal what language these tales were recorded in, what is verbatim, what is his own summary, or anything else of value to scholars. Why did he collect so few full accurate Chumash texts? Did the informants themselves know little Chumash and use Spanish primarily? Did Harrington record them from translations and only later obtain a few Chumash texts? We shall probably never know. In any case, the standard

of Harrington's scholarship in this matter appears to have been well below that of numbers of subsequent California workers. Faced with a vast, scattered, scrappy body of texts, Blackburn has done very valuable work in translating the Spanish texts—and, when necessary, editing the English ones—into fluent, well-written English. It is regrettable that the Chumash texts and the available *apparatus criticus* were not included in this book.

As mentioned before, the analysis of the tales is essentially a conservative one, dealing only with items and themes directly stated in the myths. Use is made of analytic devices such as inversion (a theme is stressed by emphasizing its opposite and the problems therewith, or a sort of Coyotean counterculture is used to tell about our own world) and listing of "existential postulates" and "normative values" basic in the Chumash "world view" as seen in these texts. Blackburn steers clear of more *recherché* analyses. Similarly, comparisons with other Californian and non-Californian traditions, given in the notes, are brief and confined to obvious parallels and cognations. While the analyses are perceptive and appear correct as far as they go, they can be faulted on two counts: (1) there is really no proof of their accuracy, and (2) they could be taken farther without drifting off into the flights of fancy that Blackburn rightly wishes to avoid. Is the Chumash world view best described by a list of axioms? Are these axioms the only ones that can be extracted from the narratives, or simply the most easily extracted? Could they be better

phrased, or more elegantly phrased, with the aid of some structural or grammatical model? Are there other logical possibilities for summarizing the themes in the texts?

It seems to the present reviewer that the tales reveal much more than the general axioms that can be extracted from such search. I have already indicated some possible questions in the area of acculturation that might be investigated. Blackburn notes the way in which many tales clearly deal with shamanistic power and shamanistic soul-travels, but does not pursue this subject very far; comparison with other literature on shamanism among American Indians would be a fascinating next step. The underlying logic of Chumash narrative might also be analysed; one does not have to be as extremely imaginative as Lévi-Strauss to see here a structure of dyads (Sun and *Slo'w* vs. Coyote of the Sky and Morning Star, living vs. dead, vegetal foods vs. animal foods, and many others) and triads (the three main worlds of the cosmology, for instance). Further comparison with California and other mythologies should be done. Many other fields of enquiry could be listed.

This book will keep scholars busy for many years. It represents a major step forward in the study of the Chumash, and indeed of Californian Indian oral literature. It deserves careful reading both by the scholar interested in the logic of myth and narrative and by anyone interested in the strange, beautiful, and dream-like forms of these leaves from a lost world.

