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Title

Timbrook: *Chumash Ethnobotany: Plant Knowledge Among the Chumash People of Southern California*

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5wg718xx>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 27(2)

ISSN

0191-3557

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Publication Date

2007

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REVIEWS

Chumash Ethnobotany: Plant Knowledge Among the Chumash People of Southern California

Jan Timbrook

Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History Monographs No. 5/ Publications in Anthropology No. 1. Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2007, 272 pp., 27 watercolors by Chris Chapman, 9 drawings by Jan Timbrook, 9 b/w photographs, 1 map, 3 tables, bibliography, index, \$27.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Diana L. Immel

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Jan Timbrook has gathered a cornucopia of information in her new Chumash ethnobotany. This well-researched book documents many of the plant species important to Chumash culture and offers us a glimpse of life in southern California from pre-European contact through historic times.

The book begins with a short introduction that includes a brief history of the Chumash, the purpose of the book, how the book is organized, sources, and acknowledgements. The “Plant Catalogue,” which makes up the bulk of the text, contains detailed descriptions that go beyond how the plants were utilized by often including information on plant care, harvesting, and preparation along with former distributions and abundances of plant populations, and many other topics as diverse as technology, trade, and astronomy.

The plant species are organized alphabetically by their Latin scientific names. Each species entry lists the plant’s common name in English, California Spanish, and—when known—Chumash in up to six dialects. There are three Chumash language reference tables for plant-related names and words in the back of the book. The first is a pronunciation guide. The second is an alphabetical table listing all of the plants by their Chumash names with their corresponding scientific name and common name in English. The third table lists the Chumash names for specific parts of plants, from acorn to trunk. The extensive index is useful for locating references to the multitude of topics referred

to in the text as well as for looking up plants by their common name, in English and in Spanish. I found the book helpful in clearing up some of the confusion concerning the Spanish common names used for plants in California. For example, the term *aliso* is defined in Spanish dictionaries as alder (*Alnus* spp.). Timbrook tells us, however, that *alamillo* is the Spanish name used for alder in California, and *aliso* refers instead to sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*).

The book draws primarily upon the voluminous and richly detailed field notes and plant collections of John P. Harrington (1884–1961). Harrington relied on ten Chumash consultants whose lives spanned the time from 1865 to 1965; photographic portraits of eight of his consultants are included in the introduction. Harrington’s interviews were conducted over a period of 50 years (1911–1961). During that time he accumulated over three thousand handwritten pages on the Chumash and collected over four hundred and fifty plant specimens. Much of Harrington’s Chumash botanical information has been previously incorporated into portions of the five-volume series on material culture authored by Travis Hudson and Thomas Blackburn (1982, 1983, 1985, 1986, 1987); however, Timbrook’s book is the first proper ethnobotany of the Chumash, with all of the information focusing on and proceeding from plants.

Timbrook began her Chumash research in the early 1970s, working under Travis Hudson at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History (Timbrook 1985). When Harrington’s field notes and plant specimens were transferred to the National Archives of the Smithsonian Institution after his death, Timbrook traveled there to work with photocopies of the original notes; she subsequently published two preliminary reports on the Harrington material which incorporated information that is presented in more detail in this volume (Timbrook 1984; Timbrook 1990).

Timbrook’s determination and dedication to her work are confirmed by her meticulous documentation. The entries are supported by evidence from a wide variety of sources, including modern Chumash consultants, botanical experts, historical accounts written by missionaries and settlers, letters, ethnographic accounts, botanical research

articles, floras, and archaeological reports. Plant uses are further corroborated and supported with documentation from neighboring tribes who use or used the same or related species in a similar fashion. While doing my own research on Harrington for the Salinan people, northern neighbors of the Chumash, I found that—in addition to the Chumash plant collection—Timbrook had also gone through over 450 plant specimens Harrington collected in Salinan territory. Many of the Salinan specimens were annotated (confirming or correcting plant identities) with her initials, “JT,” and the date, 1982.

The book is illustrated with Chris Chapman’s delightful, and often whimsical, watercolor botanical portraits. Chapman’s website states that she is a member of the Oak Group, a preservation-minded organization of artists and conservationists in Santa Barbara. Chapman’s watercolors contrast with Timbrook’s sober russet-colored monochromatic scenes of Chumash life, which are scattered throughout the text. Curiously, Timbrook does not identify herself as the artist, but each contains a small “JT” tucked cryptically within the scene.

Timbrook wrote this book to reach a broad audience and make the information accessible to both interested laypersons and scholars. Regardless of one’s background or intent, an intricate portrait of Chumash life and natural surroundings emerges while one is reading the plant listings. From small girls harvesting the salt crystals on saltgrass to women styling their bangs with soaproot hair gel, and from men sewing tule thatching onto houses using long wooden needles fashioned from toyon or scrub oak to guilds of bow makers setting regulations for the manufacture of bows, Timbrook succeeds in allowing the reader to enter the world of the Chumash through the plants that inhabit or once inhabited their landscape. With this volume, Timbrook makes a valuable and welcome contribution to California ethnobotanical

literature and claims a deserving place on the bookshelf next to Barrows (1900), Chesnut (1902), Barrett and Gifford (1933), Bean and Saubel (1972), and Goodrich, Lawson, and Lawson (1980).

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