

Contemporary Chumash religion

The revitalization of indigenous tradition in Native California

PhD dissertation

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Summary of the dissertation

This dissertation explores different ways in which the religious practice of indigenous tradition has contributed to the cultural revitalization movement that has emerged among the Chumash of Southern California since the 1960s. Based on 15 months of qualitative field research, the dissertation provides a systematic analysis of revitalized religion as it is lived among the Chumash today by identifying core motifs in beliefs and practices as they occur in interviews and observation data. The dissertation consists of five individual papers that analyze different aspects of contemporary Chumash religion. The five papers are summarized in an introductory overview article that presents and discusses recurring theoretical issues, the overall research strategy, the methods employed, and the data collected. The emergent understanding of Chumash religion over the course of my PhD education is that indigenous tradition is practiced within a loosely institutionalized network in which individuals reinterpret religious symbols and traditions in light of contemporary Chumash life. Importantly, the ritual reenactment of precolonial culture provides a space in which groups and individuals may explore indigenous tradition experientially and thereby establish a contemporary Chumash tradition that continues material and oral culture as described in the ethnohistorical record despite the break in historical continuity caused by Euro-American colonization.

Contemporary Chumash religion is shaped by a dramatic post-contact history in which indigenous culture nearly disappeared only to reemerge within years of the death of the last native speaker of the languages that carried its traditions. The first paper of this dissertation entitled *Postmodern critiques still challenge the study of religion* discusses how postcolonial critique and the postmodern critique of established science represent methodological challenges for empirical researchers of the Chumash. The essay argues that the methodological framework of ethnohermeneutics is well suited to study Chumash religion because it situates the researcher as well as the consultant within each of their sociopolitical and cultural contexts. In emphasizing the double context of the research, ethnohermeneutics sees postmodern critique as an opportunity to refine and redefine methodology rather than as a radical call to abandon the fields' core principles of critical analysis.

The second paper entitled *Chumash conversions: The historical dynamics of religious change in Native California* provides the historical contextualization for the dissertation. It ex-

plains how European colonization occurred among the Chumash in 1772 through the establishment of a Catholic mission system. The missions became the Indians' gateway to the new sociopolitical order that solidified all the while introduced infectious diseases and ensuing sociocultural disintegration broke down indigenous society. The paper traces how two centuries of acculturation and political disenfranchisement came to an end when the North American indigenous revitalization movement reached the Chumash area in the late 1960s. Although precolonial religion was hanging by the threads among the Catholic Mission Indians, religious practice of indigenous tradition became a catalyst for cultural revitalization from the outset. The paper describes how individuals braid together local indigenous culture with traditions from other Native American peoples and pan-Indian spirituality, as well as New Age ideas such as astrology, numerology, and holistic conceptions of body and health. Employing insights from conversion theory, the paper provides a historical analysis of the social and psychological dynamics of religious change in the community.

The third paper entitled *Chumash ethnicity: Theoretical incoherence forges indigenous ethnicization* provides a detailed analysis of the different strategies employed by the Chumash to assert indigenous ethnicity. The onset of revitalization provided a context in which descendants of assimilated Mission Indians joined the historically continuous community in asserting Chumash ethnicity. Within a few decades of its emergence, however, the revitalized community was challenged when genealogical analyses showed that some of the religious leaders lacked local indigenous descent. This sparked intense debates among Indians and scholars about what constitute 'authentic' Chumash ethnicity. Although this controversy challenges empirical researchers who wish to examine a broad representation of Chumash, it also provides insights on a remarkable variation of cultural and genealogical variables that invites a systematic analysis of ethnicization processes. The paper uses interviews as well as scholarly debates in social scientific journals as data to explore the different strategies through which Chumash ethnicity is asserted.

The fourth paper entitled *White sage, bears, and territory: Contemporary indigenous religion among the Chumash in a Pagan perspective* provides a detailed analysis of revitalized Chumash religion as it is lived today. When revitalization began, the Mission Indian community belonged to local Catholic denominations. Although Catholicism is still significant in the community, it seems to be losing relevance among the younger generations, and several of my Chumash consultants expressed a wish to raise their children according to revitalized indigenous

traditions. The paper describes how contemporary Chumash religion is practiced within a loosely institutionalized network that allows practitioners to make heterogeneous interpretations of core motifs such as territory, ancestors, animal spirits, and Creator. As such, contemporary Chumash religion provides a firm traditional framework in which individuals practice what they experience as meaningful in their lives. Contemporary Paganism is used as a comparative perspective to argue that religious practice is significant because it grounds Chumash tradition in the natural world of the territory and anchors it in precolonial culture.

The fifth paper, entitled *The ritual reenactment of Chumash worldviews: Embodied cognition and cultural continuity* employs embodied cognition as a theoretical framework to explore the role of ritual in cultural revitalization. During my field research, I observed how material and oral culture was reenacted during rituals to revitalize indigenous tradition. Consultants explained that reenactment functioned as an experiential bridge through which they gained insight into the precolonial experience. The word reenactment is not only useful to describe what goes on during rituals; from a neuroscientific perspective, cognitive reenactment of prior experiences constitutes the very fabric of human understanding. The paper uses embodied cognition to propose that ritual reenactment is instrumental in establishing rich embodied knowledge that constitutes the core of revitalized Chumash tradition. Furthermore, I argue that embodied knowledge about indigenous tradition encoded during ritual reenactments establishes permeating Chumash worldviews through the basic principle of association in everyday cognition.

Dansk resume af afhandlingen

Denne afhandling undersøger, hvordan religion har bidraget til den kulturelle revitalisering hos chumashindianerne i det sydlige Californien. Med afsæt i 15 måneders kvalitativt feltarbejde med omfattende interviews og observationsdata identificeres de mest udbredte motiver og temaer i den revitaliserede chumashreligion. Afhandlingen består af fem artikler, som hver især analyserer forskellige aspekter af samtidig chumashreligion. De fem artikler opsummeres i en overordnet introduktionsartikel, som desuden diskuterer gennemgående teoretiske problemstillinger, præsenterer projektets forskningsstrategi, og gennemgår den anvendte metode og det indsamlede data. Overordnet set kan chumashernes religiøse revitalisering beskrives som et løst institutionaliseret netværk baseret på nyfortolkning af den indfødte tradition, der danner rammen om en religiøs praksis, hvor individer med vidt forskellige religiøse verdenssyn har mulighed for at fortolke centrale religiøse symboler på en måde, som giver mening i deres liv. Gennem den rituelle reenactment af materiel og mundtlig kultur fra før koloniseringen udforsker og omfortolker chumasherne den indfødte tradition, så den er relevant i en nutidig, californisk kontekst.

Nutidig chumashreligion er formet af et dramatisk historisk forløb siden den første kontakt med europæere. Koloniseringen medførte, at den oprindelige tradition i løbet af to århundreder gradvist forsvandt kun for at blive genoplivet, da borgerrettighedsbevægelserne og den modkulturelle strømning i 1960'erne slog igennem. Afhandlingens første artikel *Postmodern critiques still challenge the study of religion* diskuterer, hvordan postkolonial kritik og den postmoderne kritik af den etablerede videnskab udgør en metodisk og videnskabsteoretisk udfordring for forskere, der ønsker at studere chumashkultur empirisk. Artiklen argumenterer for en etnohermeneutisk tilgang, fordi denne placerer både forsker og interviewperson solidt i hver deres sociologiske og kulturelle kontekst. Ved at gøre forskningens dobbelte kontekst til en integreret del af forskningsstrategien, tager etnohermeneutikken den postmoderne kritik til efterretning uden at bryde med religionsvidenskabens centrale princip om en kritisk analytisk tilgang.

Den anden artikel *Chumash conversions: The historical dynamics of religious change in Native California* udgør den religionshistoriske kontekstualisering i afhandlingen. Artiklen redegør for, hvordan Spanierne påbegyndte koloniseringen af chumashområdet i 1772 med etableringen af et katolsk missionssystem. Indianernes adgang til den nye politiske og kulturelle orden gik

igennem missionerne. I takt med at kolonisamfundet blev stadig stærkere, brød det oprindelige samfund sammen på grund af indførte sygdomme og omfattende social destabilisering. Artiklen viser, hvordan katolicismen gradvist fortrængte indfødte traditioner og blev den altoverskyggende religion blandt missionsindianerne, lige indtil revitaliseringen brød igennem og vendte udviklingen. Selvom den indfødte tradition ikke var blevet praktiseret systematisk i flere generationer, blev indiansk religiøs praksis alligevel omdrejningspunktet i revitaliseringsbevægelsen lige fra begyndelsen. Artiklen viser, hvordan chumasherne sammensatte stumperne af den indfødte tradition med religiøse traditioner fra andre nordamerikanske folk og fra panindiansk spiritualitet, samtidig med at de trak på religiøse strømninger som var udbredte i New Age-miljøer, fx astrologi, numerologi og holistiske krops- og helbredsforståelser. Artiklen anvender teori fra den socialvidenskabelige forskning i religiøs omvendelse til at analysere de historiske dynamikker i religionshistorien.

Den tredje artikel *Chumash ethnicity: Theoretical incoherence forges indigenous ethnization* undersøger de strategier, chumasherne anvender til at etablere deres etnicitet. Da den kulturelle revitaliseringsbevægelse brød igennem, sluttede et større antal efterkommere af assimilerede missionsindianere sig til det historisk kontinuerlige samfund i kampen for at blive anerkendt som etnisk minoritet. I løbet af et par årtier blev revitaliseringsbevægelsen imidlertid udfordret, da genealogiske analyser viste, at nogle af de religiøse ledere ikke nedstammede fra den lokale oprindelige befolkning. Dette medførte omfattende debatter om, hvordan 'autentisk' chumashetnicitet bør defineres både blandt chumasherne og blandt de forskere, som arbejder i området. Artiklen diskuterer, hvordan denne højspændte situation er en metodisk udfordring for enhver forsker, som har ambitioner om at inddrage en bred repræsentation af chumasher. På samme tid udgør den usædvanlige variation af genealogiske og kulturelle variable en oplagt mulighed for at studere etnicitetsdannelse systematisk. Artiklen bruger dels interviewmateriale og dels akademiske debatter publiceret i antropologiske tidsskrifter som data til at vise, hvordan etnicitetsdannelse blandt chumasherne opnås gennem vidt forskellige konfigurationer af kultur og genealogi.

Den fjerde artikel *White sage, bears, and territory: Contemporary indigenous religion among the Chumash in a Pagan perspective* er en systematisk analyse af de centrale motiver og temaer i revitaliseret chumashreligion sådan som den praktiseres i dag. Da revitaliseringen begyndte, tilhørte missionsindianerne almindelige katolske menigheder i deres Californiske lokalsamfund. Selvom katolicismen stadig er vigtig blandt chumasherne, ser den ud til at blive stadig

mindre relevant i særdeleshed blandt de yngre generationer, som i højere grad vægter indfødt tradition i opdragelsen af deres børn. Artiklen beskriver, hvordan revitaliseret indfødt tradition danner rammen om en religiøs praksis, der muliggør vidt forskellige fortolkninger af de centrale religiøse motiver som eksempelvis territorie, forfædre, dyreånder, og skaberforestillinger. På den måde bliver det muligt for det enkelte individ at sammensætte et religiøst verdensbillede, som er meningsfuldt i forhold til deres eget liv inden for en traditionel kulturel ramme. Artiklen inddrager hedenskab i samtiden som et komparativt perspektiv til at argumentere for, at revitaliseret chumashtradition gennem religiøs praksis rodfæstes i territoriets naturlige omgivelser og forankres i den prækoloniale kultur.

Den femte artikel *The ritual reenactment of Chumash worldviews: Embodied cognition and cultural continuity* anvender kognitionsteori som ramme for at undersøge ritualets rolle i kulturel revitalisering. Under mit feltarbejde observerede jeg, hvordan aspekter af materiel og mundtlig kultur fra før koloniseringen blev reenactet under ritualer som led i revitaliseringen af den indfødte tradition. På forskellige måder forklarede interviewpersonerne, hvordan de ved at reenacte prækolonial kultur får indblik i en oplevelsesdimension af forfædrenes liv. Begrebet reenactment er ikke kun nyttigt til at beskrive de konkrete rituelle handlinger; fra et neurovidenskabeligt perspektiv anses den kognitive reenactment af tidligere oplevelser som den grundlæggende mekanisme i menneskets måde at forstå verden. Artiklen anvender denne teoretiske ramme til at argumentere for, at rituel reenactment er afgørende i chumash revitalisering, fordi den udvider den sparsomme historiske viden ved at kropsliggøre den gennem konkrete oplevelser. I denne forståelse spiller ritualen en afgørende rolle, fordi det bliver muligt at genfortolke indfødt tradition på en måde, så den bliver relevant, samtidig med at fastholder en kulturelt kontinuitet til den prækoloniale kultur. Artiklen diskuterer desuden, hvordan oplevelser under et ritual medvirker til etableringen af en distinkt chumashverdensanskuelse, der strækker sig langt ud over selve ritualen og ind i chumashernes hverdag.