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The Maritime Life of Native American Tribes: The Makah and Chumash

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Abstract. The lives of Native American tribes, particularly the Makah and Chumash, which are closely tied to marine environments, face significant challenges in maintaining their environment-based traditions amidst social changes and modern policies. This study aims to depict the lives of these two tribes and how they strive to preserve their identity and traditions in relation to environmental sustainability. The approach used in this study involves analyzing two documentary films, Neah Bay and Homecoming: Journey to Limuw (Stories from The Blue), which provide in-depth insight into the ecological and cultural traditions of the Makah and Chumash tribes. By employing an ecocritical perspectives, this study analyzes the narratives and imagery in the films to understand the representation of human-environment relationships presented within the context of indigenous cultures. The main findings indicate that both tribes continue to uphold environment-based traditions despite external pressures, emphasizing the importance of environmental preservation in their cultural life

Keywords: documentary, maritime life, indigenous tribes, ecocriticism

1 Introduction

The civilization and society of the United States were built not only by European settlers but also by Native American societies, which we now know as the Indian tribes. Native Americans developed their civilization based on the environment, influenced by various factors such as belief systems, social structures, and economic conditions. This is particularly evident in tribes that inhabit coastal or marine environments. For example, the lives of the Makah and Chumash tribes have long been intricately tied to the sea, with these tribes relying on the marine ecosystem for their survival. In the modern era, the existence of these tribes, who base their identity and culture on their environment, faces many challenges. The changing landscapes, external pressures, and environmental threats have raised concerns about how these communities will continue to uphold their cultural and ecological traditions (Reid, 2017) [1]

These challenges are further exacerbated by issues such as the degradation of natural resources, the loss of cultural practices, and the legal and political battles these communities face in maintaining their traditional ways. The Chumash and Makah tribes, for instance, have fought for years to regain control over their ancestral lands

and the resources within them. This struggle has intensified as modern legal frameworks and conservation efforts, particularly regarding marine ecosystems, have at times conflicted with their rights and cultural heritage. Additionally, the resurgence of interest in traditional practices, such as whaling, raises complex debates around cultural preservation versus environmental protection (Kelley, 2012) [2].

This study aims to explore the maritime lives of the Makah and Chumash tribes, comparing their respective environmental traditions and how these practices intersect with modern challenges. By focusing on the relationship between these communities and their coastal environments, the research seeks to uncover how both tribes manage to preserve their traditions and identity while navigating external pressures. Using documentary films such as *Neah Bay* and *Homecoming: Journey to Limuw (Stories from The Blue)* as primary sources, this study will analyze how these tribes are portrayed in the context of their environmental struggles and cultural preservation (Marks, 2001) [3]

Documentaries are not only artistic representations but also significant tools for communicating real-life issues, especially those concerning social and environmental matters. In this study, the documentaries provide a visual and narrative exploration of the cultural and ecological challenges faced by these tribes. The portrayal of their efforts to protect their ancestral traditions and environments offers insights into the broader struggles of indigenous communities worldwide. The methodology employed is ecocriticism, a literary and cultural approach that examines the representation of nature in texts and media, particularly focusing on how human interaction with the environment is depicted (Reid, 2020) [1].

The research will specifically focus on analyzing both the imagery and narratives presented in the documentaries to explore how the Makah and Chumash tribes' connection with the sea is integral to their identity and culture. It will also consider the historical context of these tribes' struggles to maintain control over their traditions amidst the encroachment of modern political, legal, and environmental frameworks. By addressing these issues, the study aims to broaden the understanding of how indigenous communities negotiate their relationship with the natural world and the societal systems that challenge them (Timbrook, 2010) [4].

2 Methods

This study employs two main approaches: library research and contextual approach. The library research approach is used to gather, review, and analyze relevant literature related to the topic of the study, particularly concerning the lives of the Makah and Chumash tribes in relation to their environmental traditions. Library research allows

the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of various theories, concepts, and previous research related to ecocriticism and the human-environment relationship within indigenous cultural contexts (Yadav & Sinha, 2024) [5]

The contextual approach, on the other hand, is used to analyze the relationship between the narratives presented in the documentaries and the specific social, cultural, and environmental context of the studied tribes. The contextual approach provides a better understanding of how the themes of environmental sustainability and cultural preservation are represented in the documentaries (Lousley, 2020) [6]

The primary source of data for this research consists of the narratives and imagery found in two documentary films, *Neah Bay* and *Homecoming: Journey to Limuw (Stories from The Blue*). These films are considered primary data because they directly reflect the daily lives of the Makah and Chumash tribes, as well as their views on environment-based traditions and ecological preservation. In this context, the documentaries are viewed not only as artistic representations but also as social documents containing critical messages about ecology and cultural identity (Priyoto et al., 2024) [7]

The data analysis technique used is content analysis, which involves a detailed reading of the narrative and visual elements of the films, focusing on how they portray environment-based traditions and the struggles of the Makah and Chumash tribes to preserve their identity in the face of modern challenges.

3 Result and Discussion

3.1. The Makah Tribe, Washington State

The Makah Tribe, one of the Indigenous peoples of the American continent, has inhabited the coastal regions for thousands of years. As a result, they have developed a tradition and cultural identity that is deeply intertwined with the sea, which they have incorporated into their daily lives. As illustrated in the documentary Neah Bay, Washington, USA, several key traditions of the Makah people continue to be preserved and passed down to younger generations, while also being introduced to the broader public. Among the most prominent practices is:

a. Whale Hunting or “Whaling”

Whaling has been a significant part of Makah cultural tradition for more than 3,500 years, dating back to an era when hunting and gathering were fundamental to human subsistence. Due to their residence along the coast, the Makah have historically relied

more heavily on marine animals than terrestrial ones, particularly migratory whales en route to Alaska. Whale hunting has enabled the Makah to meet a variety of basic needs. These include the consumption of whale meat, extraction of whale oil, utilization of bones and skin for tools and clothing, and other essential resources derived from the animal. The practice is not only viewed as a means of sustenance but also as a culturally symbolic act embedded with spiritual and communal values, reflecting the tribe's intimate relationship with the ocean ecosystem.

This cultural continuity, as depicted in the film, demonstrates the tribe's resilience in sustaining their ancestral ways despite external pressures. Today, the Makah's attempts to revive and maintain whaling traditions have generated considerable public discourse, particularly as they negotiate their Indigenous rights within the frameworks of modern environmental regulations and animal protection laws. Nevertheless, for the Makah people, whaling is not merely about survival or tradition—it is an assertion of sovereignty and cultural integrity in a modern world that often marginalizes Indigenous ecological knowledge and practices.

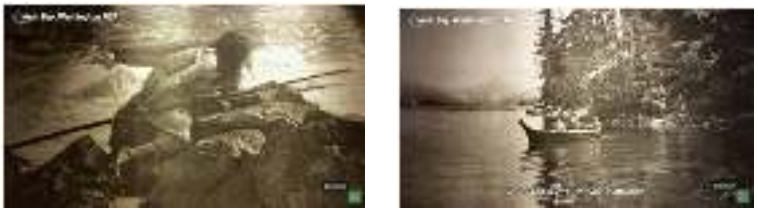

Fig. 1-2 Old Photo of Makah Hunter

Before and after conducting whale hunts, the Makah Tribe must undergo elaborate spiritual preparations, including rituals, fasting, and religious ceremonies. These practices are deeply rooted in the tribe's cultural beliefs regarding the origin of their whaling tradition. According to Makah oral history, it is believed that the Creator once sent the Thunderbird—a mythical Raven-like figure—to aid their people during a time of disaster and famine.

The Thunderbird, in this sacred narrative, captured and delivered a whale to the starving Makah villagers as an act of divine intervention and compassion. This event was interpreted not only as a moment of salvation but also as a spiritual covenant between the tribe and the sea. The whale became more than a source of nourishment; it symbolized sacred reciprocity between nature and the people.

In response to this gift, the Makah made a spiritual commitment to seek sustenance through whale hunting while honoring the spirit of the whale and the Thunderbird. This marked the beginning of what became a ritualized tradition, one that continues to

this day. Each hunt is not merely a physical endeavor but a sacred act that must be preceded by purification, prayer, and ceremonial readiness to ensure spiritual harmony and respect for the natural world. Through this process, the Makah reinforce their ancestral bond to marine life and affirm their ecological and spiritual worldview, where survival and reverence for nature coexist within a holistic cultural framework.

Fig.3 Preparation before whaling in 1999

Fig.4 Ritual and celebration after whaling

This narrative has not only been passed down orally through generations but is also substantiated by archaeological evidence in the form of petroglyphs carved onto a seaside rock. These ancient carvings depict whales and the Thunderbird, along with several masked human faces believed to represent ancestral members of the Makah Tribe from thousands of years ago. These visual relics serve as historical testimony to the tribe's longstanding spiritual and cultural connection with the marine world and the mythical being that once delivered salvation.

To this day, the whale and the Thunderbird remain powerful cultural symbols for the Makah people. Their images are prominently displayed throughout the Makah Indian Reservation in Washington, USA—engraved into totems, murals, and public art—as enduring emblems of identity and heritage. These symbols are more than ornamental; they convey the deep cosmological narratives that frame the Makah worldview, linking survival, spirituality, and sovereignty.

The tribe explicitly identifies itself as a "Whaling Nation," a declaration that underscores both its ancestral rights and its commitment to preserving traditional ecological knowledge. For the Makah, whaling is not only a cultural practice but also a defining component of their collective identity—one that is actively maintained through ritual, oral history, and sacred iconography rooted in place and time.

Fig.5 and Fig.6 Makah's Tribal Emblem

Due to the alarming decline in whale populations, the Makah Tribe voluntarily signed an agreement in 1926 to cease whaling—despite it being a vital cultural tradition—in order to support the survival of whale species that were approaching extinction. This decision reflected the tribe's ecological ethics and respect for marine life, even though the primary cause of whale population decline was not Indigenous subsistence practices, but rather industrial-scale commercial whaling that had severely damaged marine ecosystems.

Recognizing the cultural importance of whaling to the Makah people, the United States government reopened the opportunity for the tribe to resume limited whaling in 1997, as part of an initiative to preserve Indigenous traditions and cultural autonomy. This policy shift acknowledged the tribe's treaty rights and the unique role that traditional practices play in sustaining cultural identity.

On May 18, 1999, the Makah successfully carried out their first and only legal whale hunt of the modern era, capturing a Gray Whale. This event marked the last official whale hunt conducted by the tribe to date. It remains a powerful moment in Makah history—both as a revival of ancestral tradition and as a symbol of the delicate balance between cultural survival and ecological responsibility


Fig. 7 and Fig.8 Makah's ceremony of whaling and hunted gray whale

b. The Use of Canoes and Harpoons

In carrying out whale hunting, the Makah Tribe utilizes small paddle-powered canoes and traditional harpoons as their primary tools. Each canoe typically accommodates a crew of seven to eight individuals. The formation includes one person positioned at the front responsible for striking the whale with the harpoon, five to six rowers situated in the middle who propel the vessel forward, and one navigator seated at the rear to steer the canoe.

Whale hunts are typically conducted during high tide to ensure optimal maneuverability and access to migratory whale routes. Once the harpoon successfully pierces the whale, the animal is guided toward the shoreline and tethered to a large rock known as Whaling Rock. This rock serves as both an anchor point and ceremonial site. As the tide recedes, a designated butchering team proceeds to slaughter and segment the whale for distribution and use within the community.

This process reflects not only the tribe's physical coordination and maritime knowledge but also their continued adherence to ancestral methods of subsistence. The roles aboard the canoe are strictly defined and based on traditional systems of expertise and responsibility, ensuring both the effectiveness of the hunt and the preservation of cultural practices passed down through generations.

Fig. 9 Whaling in a canoe

For thousands of years, Makah canoes have traditionally been crafted from cedar wood, a material readily available in their surrounding environment and highly valued for its durability and buoyancy. The use of cedar not only reflects practicality but also carries cultural significance, as the tree is regarded with spiritual respect by the Makah. In the 1999 whale hunt, however, the materials used for hunting tools were partially modernized: the harpoon shaft and blade were made of metal, while the grip was crafted from wood and bound together with strong cord, combining traditional techniques with contemporary materials to meet safety and regulatory standards.

c. Traditions of Music, Dance, Prayer, and Ritual

Beyond whale hunting, the Makah people maintain a rich array of ceremonial and artistic traditions that have been passed down through generations. These include sacred songs and chanting, ceremonial dances, prayers, and ritual observances tied to important cultural events. Such practices are especially prominent during the preparatory and celebratory phases of whale hunting, as well as during weddings, funerals, and other communal rites of passage.

Artistic expression is also deeply embedded in Makah culture. This is evident in the form of ceremonial paintings, traditional musical instruments, intricately carved masks, and culturally symbolic regalia. The ceremonial masks often represent the four seasons, each distinguished by unique facial features and symbolic attributes. Traditional cloaks and garments, woven with cultural motifs, are reserved for highly significant ceremonies—such as the Whaling Moratorium Ceremony held in 1926, marking the tribe’s voluntary cessation of whaling in response to declining whale populations.

Together, these elements underscore the Makah's commitment to preserving their intangible cultural heritage. They serve not only as expressions of identity and spirituality but also as dynamic tools of cultural transmission that reinforce the values, beliefs, and historical continuity of the Makah Nation.

Fig. 11 Four Seasons Masks

Fig. 12 Makah's Ceremonial Robe

3.2. The Chumash Tribe, California

Like many other Indigenous tribes of the American continent who reside along coastal regions, the daily life and cultural traditions of the Chumash people are deeply intertwined with the sea and maritime heritage. In the documentary *Homecoming: Journey to Limuw*, which serves as a primary reference for this study, the Chumash are portrayed as actively working to preserve and revitalize their maritime traditions that have persisted for thousands of years. Several cultural elements are highlighted in the film, including:

1. Use of Ocean Canoes or Tomol

Tomol is the traditional ocean-going canoe of the Chumash people, believed to have existed for millennia. These canoes were historically used for a variety of daily activities and ceremonial purposes, enabling the Chumash to navigate the waters along the California coast and the Channel Islands. A *tomol* is typically constructed from redwood logs that have drifted ashore. These logs, ranging in length from 8 to 30 feet, are cut and shaped, then bound together using natural fiber cord made from plants such as milkweed. The seams are sealed and reinforced with *yop*—a traditional adhesive made from a mixture of pine pitch and natural asphalt.

Once assembled, the surface of the canoe is polished with sharkskin to achieve a smooth finish and decorated using natural pigments derived from shells and clay. The *tomol* is recognized as one of the oldest sea vessels in North America, a testament to the Chumash's advanced craftsmanship and deep understanding of marine navigation.

For the Chumash, the *tomol* is more than a mode of transportation—it is considered the "House of the Sea," a sacred vessel that embodies cultural resilience and spiritual connection to the ocean. In ancient times, it was used to facilitate communication and trade among Chumash communities spread across the islands and mainland, as well as for oceanic hunting expeditions, including the pursuit of challenging prey such as swordfish.

In the present day, the *tomol* is no longer used for everyday maritime activities but remains central to the tribe's ceremonial life. It is prominently featured in annual crossings to the Channel Islands, which are viewed not only as cultural reenactments but also as spiritual journeys that reconnect participants with their ancestors and ancestral waters. These ceremonial voyages serve as living expressions of Indigenous

maritime heritage and are vital in sustaining Chumash identity in the face of modern challenges.

Fig.12 Modern *tomol* in action

Fig.13 *Tomol*'s paddle

The paddle used in conjunction with the *tomol* also carries profound cultural and spiritual significance. While it functions as a tool for propulsion and steering, it is equally regarded as an extension of prayer to the ancestors and the divine. Each stroke of the paddle is believed to carry intentions, blessings, and hopes for the safety and well-being of one's beloved family members. In this way, paddling becomes a sacred act that weaves together physical effort and spiritual purpose.

Moreover, *tomol* paddles often serve as identifiers of family lineage. Each paddle is uniquely decorated with specific patterns, carvings, and motifs that reflect the identity and heritage of the family to whom it belongs. These visual markers distinguish individual paddlers and affirm the continuity of ancestral knowledge through artistic expression. Within this context, the paddle is not only a functional tool, but also a cultural artifact that preserves memory and reinforces communal identity.

2. Annual Crossing to *Limuw* (Santa Cruz Island)

The Annual Crossing to *Limuw* is a sacred and deeply meaningful event for the Chumash people. This ceremonial voyage commemorates the historical legacy of Chumash ancestors who once inhabited the Channel Islands and serves as a living act of cultural preservation and revitalization. The event symbolizes the community's resilience in the face of historical disruptions—particularly those caused by colonialism and the forced religious assimilation imposed by Spanish missionaries.

The journey spans approximately 23 miles from the mainland to the island of *Limuw* (Santa Cruz Island) and is undertaken using modern *tomol* canoes, carefully constructed in accordance with traditional methods. These vessels are paddled by trained members of the Chumash community who come from various regions to

participate in the crossing. The voyage is not merely a reenactment but a sacred pilgrimage—an act of cultural resurgence that reaffirms Indigenous connection to ancestral lands, waters, and identities.

Each stroke taken toward Limuw is both a tribute to the ancestors and a declaration of cultural continuity, transforming the ocean crossing into a ceremonial space where historical memory, spiritual devotion, and community solidarity converge.

Fig.14. Preparations before Chumash crossing

Picture 15. Chumash Crossing in a Tomol

In the documentary, prior to embarking on the crossing to Limuw, the paddlers and canoe captains undergo both physical and spiritual preparations. These include fasting, prayer, and ritual sea purification as acts of cleansing and readiness. The journey begins before sunrise, when both sky and sea remain cloaked in darkness—a setting considered sacred and deeply symbolic by the Chumash people. According to their beliefs, traveling through darkness enhances the spiritual gravity of the voyage, framing the crossing as a sacred passage rather than a mere physical endeavor.

As daylight begins to emerge mid-journey, the paddling teams conduct a coordinated rotation, replacing fatigued rowers with fresh ones who possess the stamina required to complete the voyage smoothly and on time. This changeover is executed with precision and reflects the communal effort and discipline involved in sustaining both the physical and spiritual aspects of the crossing.

Upon arrival at Limuw, specifically at the village of Swaxil, the paddlers and their support teams are welcomed with an emotionally charged reception. Families embrace the returning voyagers with cries of joy, traditional songs, and ceremonial dances performed by awaiting members of the Chumash community. The shoreline becomes a sacred gathering place filled with prayers and celebration, honoring not only the success of the voyage but also the cultural spirit it represents.

This moment of arrival is rich with spiritual and cultural significance. It serves as a powerful reminder of traditions that were once disrupted or lost due to colonization and forced assimilation. The ceremony at Swaxil rekindles a sense of identity,

belonging, and continuity—reaffirming the community's commitment to reclaiming and honoring the ancestral ways that continue to shape their lives.


Picture 16-17. Welcoming Home Tomol's Paddlers

3. *Kakunupmawa*: Religious Ceremony and Mythology

The documentary briefly recounts a Chumash spiritual myth centered on a benevolent deity known as *Kakunupmawa*. Regarded as a divine being imbued with compassion and wisdom, *Kakunupmawa* holds a central place in Chumash cosmology, serving as both a protector and creator. According to oral tradition passed down through generations, there was a time when the Chumash ancestors were forced to leave Limuw Island due to an unspecified event. In response, *Kakunupmawa* created a radiant bridge made of a rainbow to allow them to cross safely from the island to the mainland.

However, the deity instructed them not to look down while crossing the bridge. Some individuals disobeyed this divine warning, became fearful, and fell into the sea. To prevent their drowning, *Kakunupmawa* transformed them into dolphins—a sacred gesture that bestowed spiritual significance upon these animals. To this day, dolphins are regarded as spiritual relatives of the Chumash people, embodying the interconnectedness between humans, animals, and the ocean.

This myth encapsulates the Chumash belief in a compassionate, omnipotent force and conveys profound lessons about trust, humility, and unity with nature. More than a tale of origins, it serves as a foundational narrative that guides the Chumash worldview—affirming that the ocean is not merely a physical realm but a living, spiritual entity. The expression "the ocean is life, and life is the ocean" is not metaphorical but theological in Chumash thought.

In remembrance of their ancestors and in reverence for *Kakunupmawa,* the Chumash community conducts ritual ceremonies that include prayers, songs, and moments of reflection. These sacred observances typically take place shortly before the Annual

Crossing to Limuw, reinforcing the spiritual dimension of the voyage and ensuring that the act of paddling is undertaken with cultural mindfulness and ancestral guidance.

4. Songs, Dances, Prayers, and Traditional Musical Instruments

The spiritual traditions and cultural identity of the Chumash people are inseparable from music, dance, and sacred prayers (chanting). These elements serve as essential expressions of spirituality and ancestral reverence. As depicted in the documentary, sacred songs are performed during key ceremonial moments—such as the launch of the *tomol* into the ocean, throughout the paddling journey across the sea, and during the welcoming ritual upon arrival in *Limuw.*

These songs are not merely artistic or entertaining; they function as a sacred medium for communication with ancestral spirits and protective guardians believed to watch over the voyage. Through chanting, participants channel intentions, prayers, and gratitude, strengthening the metaphysical connection between the physical act of paddling and the spiritual dimension of the journey.

Music, in this cultural context, acts as a vessel for intergenerational memory, uniting the living with those who came before. Dances often accompany these chants, featuring movements that mirror natural elements such as waves, winds, and marine animals. Together, these performances manifest the Chumash understanding of harmony between humans and nature.

Traditional musical instruments—such as clapper sticks, rattles, and flutes—are crafted from local materials and are often passed down within families. These instruments are not only valued for their sounds but also for their symbolic meanings and spiritual resonance. Their use during rituals and ceremonies further affirms the Chumash belief that every element—sound, gesture, and object—carries sacred intent and contributes to the living continuum of their cultural heritage.

Fig.18 “Sumawis” song during crossing

Fig. 19. Traditional music

Similarly, Chumash dances are far more than mere entertainment. One of the dances featured in the documentary is the Grass Dance, a simple yet meaningful performance that accompanies rhythms and songs during festive and ceremonial gatherings. The dance consists of dynamic body movements that mimic the gentle swaying of grass in the wind, performed in harmony with the tone and cadence of traditional music. It serves as both a cultural expression and a spiritual offering, linking movement with the natural forces that surround Chumash life.

Prayer also plays an inseparable role in both religious and cultural celebrations. In the context of the Annual Crossing to *Limuw*, prayer is conducted at multiple stages: before launching the *tomol*, during the ocean voyage, and upon arrival at the island. For the Chumash, prayers are not addressed solely to ancestral spirits but also to the sea, the wind, and all living beings in their environment. These prayers affirm the tribe's holistic worldview, which acknowledges all elements of nature as spiritually interconnected. On the mainland, family members and community supporters also engage in collective prayer, often through nighttime vigils and the guarding of sacred fires—acts that offer spiritual strength and solidarity to those undertaking the journey across the water.

The Chumash people also possess a range of traditional musical instruments used to accompany songs and dances during ceremonies and sacred rites. One of the most iconic and widely used instruments is the clapper stick, known in their language as *wansak*. Made from elderberry wood and split partially along its length, the instrument produces a percussive, rhythmic sound that maintains the tempo of traditional songs and supports the flow of ceremonial dances.

Additionally, the Chumash use flutes crafted from deer or bird bones, producing soft, sacred melodies during healing rituals and spiritual ceremonies. Another essential instrument is the rattle, often made from turtle shells filled with small objects that create a distinctive jingling sound. The rattle is believed to call upon ancestral spirits and offer spiritual protection, making it a staple in key rituals and dances. These three instruments—*wansak*, bone flute, and turtle-shell rattle—are not merely musical tools, but sacred conduits that enhance the spiritual resonance of Chumash ceremonies, bridging the human, natural, and spiritual realms through sound.

4 Conclusion

This study has illustrated the maritime lives of the Makah and Chumash tribes in relation to their environment-based traditions, as depicted in the two documentaries *Neah Bay* and *Homecoming: Journey to Limuw (Stories from The Blue)*. The main findings show that both tribes maintain a deep connection with the sea, which is

central to their identity and cultural practices. Despite facing modern challenges such as legal and environmental pressures, both tribes continue to preserve their ecological traditions. The Makah, for example, have been engaged in efforts to revive whale hunting, while the Chumash focus on maintaining their sustainable fishing and resource management practices. These efforts underscore the tribes' resilience in the face of external forces that seek to undermine their cultural and ecological practices.

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