

INTERVIEW WITH CHEEYOW, A TIPAI NATIVE AMERICAN

Discussion (recorded on 7/9/2014) with a Tipai woman named Cheeyow (meaning “to sing”) at her grandson’s home in Campo, CA, 60 miles east of San Diego. Cheeyow lives nearby as does one of her daughters, Ha-emah’s mother, and one of Cheeyow’s sisters. Her grandson, Ha-emah (meaning to “dance with water”) my friend, was present to help clarify events for us. Cheeyow is a cheerful, easy to laugh and a vibrant woman of 90 years old. Her eyes and voice are clear and alive. Her walking is a little slow, but she has no problem getting in and out of a lifted 4WD truck necessary for reservation life. We all had just eaten a great lunch at the Acorn Casino owned and managed by the Campo Tribe. It is clear that the casino is also a community social center for chatting and staying in touch with other tribal members and friends. While we were eating, several friends of Cheeyow and Ha-emah stopped by to talk. I hope readers will honor her confidentiality and privacy. While the interview is a more of a glimpse pertaining to Tipai life that directly pertaining to issues of rock art, it does give a very rare look into the character of an extraordinary woman who was present at the tragic end of historic village life and the transformation to the imposed reservation system.

Grandmother: **Cheeyow**

Grandson: **Ha-emah**

Don Liponi: **Don**

Don: Cheeyow, where were you born?

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Cheeyow: In Little Campo in 1924—it is very close to here (ed. *About a mile or two*).

Don: How many were in your family?

Cheeyow: We had 14 children in my family, but some of them died; one had pneumonia and one died of the flu.

Don: What about your other brothers and sisters?

Cheeyow: Four others died as children. I think they died of starvation because we had hardly anything to eat, just wild food like plants, maybe a wild turkey or a rabbit. That is all we had to survive on. Still, my sisters went to school, but they died, of starvation. One other died of the flu in El Cajon, the other died in Campo at home. Later, other brothers died too, one of cancer, one of old age and one of pneumonia. Another brother was in the army during WWII in Japan. He got very sick over there, but he recovered. He came back home, but he started to see things, like little men, like gremlins. He had to go to Patton State Hospital for the mentally ill. It was very cold there and he got pneumonia and died very quickly. That is all I can remember.

Don: Are any of your brothers and sisters still alive?

Cheeyow: One sister is still alive.

Don: Where does she live?

Cheeyow: Old Campo

Don: Do you get to see her much?

Cheeyow: Not so much anymore—she talks when there is nobody there—what do you call that? Like Alzheimer's. She is also going blind. She is 76 years old.

Ha-emah: My grandmother is going to be 90 in November!

Don: You are going to be 90! Wow, you are doing so good!

Cheeyow: That is what they all say! (*Laughter*)

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Cheeyow: When I fell down, when the cat tripped me, I went to physical therapy and they were asking me all kinds of questions there. They asked me, “What did you do to get so old without dying?” (*Laughing*). I said to them, “Nothing.” Then they said “Everyone dies at your age.” They said, “I bet it's because you are always so happy and singing.” (*More laughter*) Most of the time I believe I am happy.

Don: My grandfather was 91 when he died, but he was healthy up to the end.

Cheeyow: My father was 92 when he died. He was like a “captain” for the San Diego Mission Indian Federation. He advocated for the Indians with the Catholic Church and other agencies. Beforehand, he attended the Catholic schools with the priests who were his teachers. He learned English really good and also how to read and write. He was very good with numbers. He tried to take care of seven Indian reservations in their relationships with the missions. If they needed food and they were dying of starvation or needed clothing to keep from freezing—things like that. He would meet and talk with the head priests or whatever you call them (*Everyone laughs*). The church really didn't seem to be concerned with our needs. We were lucky to get second hand clothes—we didn't care. We were so cold. We would wrap ourselves with leaves or with grass. That is why you see old pictures of me naked (*Voice breaks*), we didn't have any clothes. They would call us savages because we were naked, but really, we just didn't have clothing. I would try to put grass around “my stomach” so they couldn't see me. I was a Catholic from birth and couldn't understand why they wouldn't at least feed us, especially since my father worked with them.

Don: How about your mother?

Cheeyow: She was OK. She came from San Diego; her mother's husband came from there also, his name was Ramirez. My mother had five brothers and they were all Ramirez's. They lived in several places in Mexico

before San Diego. You got treated better in Mexico, especially if you could speak Spanish and could pass for being a Mexican. Then she met my father on the reservation. My father was a Laguna Indian (ed: *From the historical Laguna Reservation*)—his name was also Laguna, like Laguna Mountains (*laughs*). So I got named after one of my ancestors. He was a good man and he always worked hard to provide for us, but it was nearly impossible. There was so much corruption and lying. We had no rights at all and certainly no political friends to help us.

Don: What did you do after you went to school in Jacumba?

Cheeyow: We moved back to Little Campo, but we moved for another reason. My father was a “captain” of several reservations and he made too many enemies—some didn’t like him. Some called him a Mexican, some called him a Chinaman and all kinds of names and they kicked him out of that reservation (i.e., *Jacumba*). It was mostly petty jealousy because he was trying so hard to help his people. So we came back here and this woman told him that she would call a meeting and say that he was her nephew. She would say to the others, “That is my nephew you are talking badly about.” She did this to help him. Her name was Rina. She gave him some land and said this ground is yours and your family’s and she gave it to him. So he developed it.

Don: So this woman helped your father out by kind of adopting him?

Ha-emah: Yes. Her father worked all over. He was at Barona, then he worked on the dam at El Capitan; he started the Mission Indian Federation to help with Indian rights and treaties from the 1920s through the 1960s. Then one of the groups sold out, sold their land rights, and it ended the whole fight for Indian rights by the Mission Indian Federation through the treaties they had signed. I know my mother got a \$900 check and that was it, the end of all that progress. A single check that could not buy a piece of land or food for a family for very long.

Cheeyow: So my father then taught the clan how to play baseball. Nobody knew how to play baseball, but they really liked it and they started playing. Some different clan didn’t like it and they called him names like the Devil. All of this despite the fact that Jim Thorpe was probably the most famous Indian at that time. (ed: *He was also a baseball player and an Olympic Gold Medalist.*)

Don: They were jealous?

Cheeyow: Yes! (*Laughs*)

Cheeyow: They would say “the Devil’s in you, we don’t want you as our captain” (tribal leader). They believed in the Devil so much that they started imagining one. The Indians didn’t have any formal religion. The Europeans brought that—Columbus—he was the Devil. Anyway, that’s what happened.

Cheeyow: All of us started working young. Working for the family. The man who ran the school came over and wanted to put my father in jail for not sending his children to school. “It’s against the law,” he said. You

have to go to school until you are 16 or 18. So we had to go to court and the attorney said we had to go home and go to school. If you do not go to school we are going to put you all in jail, including my brothers and sisters. That's what they used to do is put the parents in jail and put the children in foster homes to make them go to school. While the Indians and the Europeans were enemies anyway, the taking away of children made things really bad.

Cheeyow: So I baby-sat a lot for my older sister so that she could work. She worked at the Navy Hospital and then she worked at Rohr Aircraft. She had to work to make a living.

Don: When did you start a family?

Cheeyow: When my sister's children were a little older, I was able to get a better job at Rohr making parts for the military. I also started a family at about 22 years old. I have four children. I had to go back to the reservation in order to have them, but then the people from foster care showed up and took them as facilities were so limited on the reservation. We barely could take care of ourselves, let alone our children. Foster care knew this and so they took our children away and they were raised by white families. At that time the reservation had no schools or medical care and no hope. I had to think that it was better for the children, but I did not see them for many years. Only a mother could understand how cruel this was. We were regarded as not being human.

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Cheeyow: I wasn't married in front of a priest or a Bible. I didn't have that. I was poor, too, so I had to work, babysitting, barmaid, in a drug store, I picked up bowling pins and balls and the good job at Rohr. I still was interested in school, so I went to evening school at San Diego High and I was a pretty good student. I wanted to get my diploma. I would have finished that too, but my mother got sick. We could not afford a nurse and there was no one around to help a sick person, so I did. I brought her water and food and acted as her nurse.

Cheeyow: My big sister taunted me, "What do you want to go to school for, you will never do anything. Your education will do you no good. Go help your family." I should have listened to myself, but I didn't, I listened to someone else.

Don: So then what happened after that?

Cheeyow: I took care of my mother and the little children, but I couldn't do it all, so foster care took them away. My son was in a good one and he did great. Some of the foster homes were full of criminals and the kids would be taken away and put into special homes after their mother and father died. I was pretty lucky that my children were raised in good homes. I know it might sound cruel, but they were probably better off being raised away from the reservation where they had opportunities. My one daughter lives nearby, the one I had when I was 22.

Don: Cheeyow, there are not many people who could make it through all the adversity that you did and come out with a positive attitude about life and not be angry or bitter. It seems like you have overcome a lot of that. How do you do it?

Cheeyow: I feel like I am blessed, despite everything, like I am special in the way that God takes care of me. I feel like I am treated like an angel. There were many times I could have said no and been selfish or stingy or things like that. I told myself that I will do the things that God, this invisible voice, is telling me to do. Also, I like music and my family is very musical. Everyone plays an instrument and I have that spirit in me as well. Dancing is very important spiritually—each person must find their own dance. I didn't waste my life, I got enjoyment out of it, and I try to tell other people to do the same as me.

Don: What about the old ways, what we call medicine men or shaman or, in Tipai language, the *Kusiyayay*? If we go back 50 or 100 years ago, there was a different spirituality in the Kumeyaay. How do you relate to that?

Cheeyow: They do not have much influence any more as they have not been around for 100 years. I was born a little bit too late, as when I was born, my Mother was already a Catholic, we already had Jesus Christ as our Savior. We would call it the "Big or Great Spirit" in Indian. Even the oldest person I spoke with said there was the "Great Spirit" that made the thunder roar, made the animals and made the people. The people would sing and make music to pay him back. Hymns I guess you would call it. The ceramics and the baskets, we also put a spirit in them as they came from the earth and they took a long time to make. There were no books to teach you how to make them. A mother would show her daughter and it would go on for so many generations that no one could remember where the teachings came from.

Don: How long would it take to make this woven plate (*about 12" across for shelling nuts*)? A day?

Cheeyow: Oh no! A much longer time! There were many steps and very fine weaving. They were very important because we put food in them and that came from the Great Spirit. No machine could make the baskets, only the people. The baskets were the one thing we could always trade for food. Many people wanted to buy our baskets—as many as we could make. Also, the same was true for *ollas* and other pottery. These artistic pieces kept us alive when we would have starved.

Don: Well, Cheeyow, thank you for sharing with me today. You have had a remarkable life and I have learned so much from listening to you today. Thank you for helping me to understand the Tipai way of life here in San Diego County, as it was just one generation before me. Very few people I know could have even survived under your circumstances, I think you are an amazing woman.

Cheeyow: You are very welcome.

INTERVIEW WITH HA-EMAH, A TIPAI NATIVE AMERICAN

Discussion (recorded 7/11/2014) with Campo Tipai member, “Ha-emah,” at his home near Campo, CA about 60 miles east of San Diego. “Ha-emah,” means “to dance with water;” an appropriate name for this avid surfer who is in his 40s. Ha-emah is particularly analytical in his thinking, but quickly in touch with the spiritual order of nature and the interrelationships of all things, both living and inanimate. Clearly, from his spiritual viewpoint or world-view, many things are not merely what they appear to be. Many people talk about such things, but what sets him apart is that he actually uses these principles in his daily living and actions. Before European contact, this viewpoint of animism was widespread among the Tipai. Since this spiritual way led the Tipai to a successful and plentiful way of life for many millennia, I believe it deserves more than a passing consideration. It’s obvious that his reality is in the old way, but the “modern societal” precepts are useful in day-to-day living.

His own family raised him, but off the reservation. He-emah attended high school in San Diego. After serving his country in the military armed forces, he returned to the reservation and has made a living by providing Cultural Resource Management evaluations and protection for several government agencies. He is the sole Native American curator for the Imperial County Museum. We talked on his back patio, looking south into the blue mountains of Baja California. A breeze was blowing through the mountain pass below and the rustling of the cottonwood tree he planted could be heard nearby.

Grandson of Cheeyow: **Ha-emah**
Don Liponi: **Don**

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(Ongoing cassette tape)...

Don: So we both used to play tennis at that park over by the water tank on Ohio Street in North Park (ed. *In San Diego*).

Ha-emah: I used to have a partner in town I played with four times a week, but it’s difficult as everyone is so busy. I try to get down to the beach whenever I can; it always has been and always will be part of my life. As I see it, sometimes I’m able to go there more and sometimes less, depending on various factors. Sometimes it’s just looking and smelling the ocean, but most times I prefer it to be surfing in the water. Sometimes I have even just walked on the beach to pick up shells. In this day and age everyone is working out in one form or another, but there is no workout like surfing. By that I mean you have a connection to those out there with you, especially on big surf days, you have a connection to life and death because it can come to you if you aren’t careful.

Don: True, we lose several people every year.

Don: The ocean is a great segue into rock art!

Don: What do you feel today when you look at these old villages, these old paintings or, when we were at that site today that we are calling a medicine wheel? These sites look like they have sat there hundreds or maybe even a thousand years and no one has touched them. Maybe no one has seen them in hundreds of years? While we can probably never know specifically what the artist was trying to convey, we can sometimes see that a pictograph could have spiritual and/or problem solving intentions. Is that what we want—to have that spiritual connection that was apparently attained by the artist? Is that what we are looking for when we see painting on a rock?

Ha-emah: Well, many people have made their living off of formulating really complex answers and thinking about these things, but it could be something simple. A voice saying to you—“Where are you? What are you doing? Are you breathing this great, clean air and overlooking the past shoreline of Lake Cahuilla? Are you living in thanks?” (ed. *Which we can see from near his home*)

Ha-emah: Cheeyow’s (*Ha-emah’s grandmother*) great grandfather remembers climbing out of Banner Grade and looking down on the last stand of Lake Cahuilla in what must have been the late 1700s–early 1800s. The Spanish also recorded these accounts. Technically, it’s historical, but it is within the memory of family members that are still alive. It just gets passed down from grandfather to grandson, father to son or mother to daughter...so on and so on.

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Ha-emah: Ironically, I will walk over to one of the wind machines nearby and look down on the Salton Sea or Lake Cahuilla and feel the breeze which is very strong there. The breeze or the wind, if I am still, takes me right into image of a bird and flying down to the lake. Yet, I have no formal shaman experience and have never painted a pictograph, but here we are, evolving into a well-known shamanistic rock art experience.

Ha-emah: Then I see at other times, either these large ravens or people have sighted condors coming off the cliffside thermals of the Laguna’s (*mountains*), riding them down into the desert floor. Then when we go down to the Yuha Flats, say Pinto Canyon, we see a petroglyph of what looks like to me, a “Condor Man.” So the bottom line is that it is not about the object so much as it is about thinking like a condor or a raven or maybe better, how does a raven or a condor feel when they have this warm breeze under them flying down to the desert floor? Can I transform myself to be within this spiritual experience? In the older times such an experience may have been—that this is a sign to leave the mountains and go to the lake or the river and plant crops. The shadows and sunlight crossed the images and gave us other information about when it was time to do certain activities. I often wonder, if I were a formally trained Kumeyaay “scientist” (i.e., *archaeologist*) would I have put the art panels in the same places as the shaman if I wanted to create a successful annual calendar? My simple answer would be no—it’s not a science—it comes from a spiritual place. I want to be clear, we are only people, and many of us are now Christians. The shaman, or whatever you want to call them, were trying to attain a spiritual connection or communion in order to guide themselves, or the group that depended on them, achieving real spiritual guidance.

Ha-emah: Like we were talking about the breeze. Now we can all feel that, but how do you come to know that it means it’s time to relocate, it’s time for rain or for a storm or it’s time to harvest or plant? Even today,

scientists cannot always hit the mark with such questions, yet it was best for all involved if the shaman could perform reliably through spiritual communication.

Don: How do you do that?

Ha-emah: (*Thinking*)...I have been taught that it's about everything you don't have and everything you do have. It's about what you need to get rid of in order to get to what you don't have. Vehicles, computers, cell phones, television, and gadgets. Simplify! Again, it's like the ocean for me, in its pure form. We always talk about surfing, so let's go back to surfing. For me, say I look at stand-up paddle boarding and I see something is missing—it's just me, maybe, but what I would miss would be that baptism from the ocean when you begin and when you end your dance with the wave. Dancing is so important to the Tipai that we are getting into multiple metaphors!

Ha-emah: When you look at the wave, the movement, the colors, the sound, the glitter of light and smell, then I can attain a moment of simplicity or vision. Even though it all happens faster than I can think about it, the experience lingers, sometimes for many years; the ocean is in my dreams even when I haven't been there in a long time. I could easily say that the ocean is my "spirit helper." What is important is that each person find their own spirit helper that can assist them into a spiritual place. To me, this is where wisdom and pure ideas come from.

Don: I can really relate—a few moments like these (i.e., *within a wave*) are part of me and have changed me forever.

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Ha-emah: So imagine that you can attain this world of simplicity or spirituality, and you have practiced it and have become proficient at entering a spiritual place, how different you would be. Since it's been a part of me since I was a little boy, it's a good way for me to enter that place. I made a vow that I would make it into the ocean at least once a week during the summer and so far, I am doing it. It has really helped me put my problems and solutions in a different light. It's more like being in harmony with God's world and less about pursuing the hollowness of many man-made pursuits.

Don: It sounds like an overreaction or hysteria, but I do not see how we can escape the severe consequences from our loss of love, passion and concern for nature. We are so out of touch—wilderness, in its many forms, to Western, modern civilization seems to be a type of adversary or at least something to conquer and get rid of. Why spend hours on acorns, when you can create a massive carbon footprint with a fast food burger or someplace like it in a few minutes? Many of us feel badly about this, but we cannot break our addiction to technology and easy living.

I guess what we are talking about is that we committed general and cultural genocide on Native Americans, specifically the Tipai, and the balance they achieved with their environment. This sustained them in California for well beyond 10,000 years, closer to 15,000 years and the "modern, technological, Euro-American culture," destroyed it about 300 years without even considering that people like the Tipai were more in tune

with a spiritual path. We were the ones worshiping the Pagan God of advancing materialism. We came here from Europe, among other reasons, to seek religious and political freedom, but the slaughter of millions of native people had nothing to do with Christianity, Judiasm, Jesus, or God.

Another probably unsolvable problem is that there are just too many people, well beyond what the earth can sustain and stay in balance. Even though environmentalism is mainstream now, is it significant enough for restoration of the land to take place? From what we have seen, it seems doubtful. The earth has changed in the past and it is now changing again. It doesn't need man's permission, but this time we are primarily responsible. Even in the worst of all circumstances, the earth will continue and new species will begin to evolve as others disappear. Unfortunately, too many people believe this cannot happen. I guess denial and arrogance have set man up to believe it cannot happen to him—the king of all species (ed. For a further discussion of these ideas, please see *In the Shadow of the Sabertooth* by Doug Peacock, Couterpunch Press, Petrolia, California 2013).

Ha-emah: It's an uphill battle. At this point, probably an unwinnable battle for our civilization, but individuals can make a choice to have spiritual simplicity in their own lives. Right now, people can make that decision to be with and live in the Great Spirit. Death cannot take that away. Few are going to sell all their possessions and follow the path, said Jesus, but we can work in that direction. If science is the God, then there are certain things we can come to know about the past that rise to the level of ideas...

Don: Theories?

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Ha-emah: Yes, theories, probably not entirely factual, I think we need to remember that these people were deriving their “natural spirituality” through intense interaction with nature. They had practical matters to solve, just like we do today, where is the water, where is the food, but they used spiritual paths in combination with a million subtle signals from the world they lived in that we have lost and don't even regard as significant anymore.

Don: So do you think rock art portrays these interactions?

Ha-emah: I am sure it has to. If you had an ecstatic experience that led you to a healing or helpful idea, or truth as they believed, then you would want to share it in the only means you had available. I hate to keep coming back to THE Southern California metaphor, but if you caught the wave of your life or of the summer or even of a great surf session, wouldn't you want to talk about it? Take photographs or videos, grab the iPhone maybe? Of course you would. None of these things can duplicate the experience itself, but other people can certainly find a message in there to relate to, especially with a vivid commentary.

Ha-emah: From another direction, common problems, even minor ones like power outages, bring people together. Everyone wants an answer, but who has an answer? Many times it is not man or science that have the answer. If you put a weatherman in the wilderness, could he find water? If you put a Tipay into the wilderness, he would probably find water where there appeared to be none. Not everything is achievable through scientific training.

Don: It's like we don't realize it, and think we don't believe in them, but we want spiritual answers that we cannot find with so many secular resources. Can mankind ever improve it's spiritual reliance as a whole? I want to start singing John Lennon's "*Imagine!*"

Ha-emah: We have to break our comfort zone—get out of our element. My father and his brothers helped me practice slowing down so I could start to notice more important things around me. I think spiritual communication begins in stillness.

Ha-emah: The desert matches the sanctity of the ocean, for our purposes they are timeless and eternal and never changing in their essence. We may end up destroying them in the near future. They may recover or they may change, but ultimately man will be greatly affected. Our separation from nature and its simple spiritual path has brought about near apocalyptic changes so far. Do you think science is going to save us? Technology is not the cause of our problems—it's how we handle it. While the Tipai have been taken off the hook for the moment, at this exact time, how many separate genocides are taking place? These acts do not originate in the spiritual path that the simple Tipai shaman followed.

Don: Whatever it is that we are supposed to learn from your ancestors, say in terms of rock art and other artistic impressions—will they come from science? Like how many concentric circles will be found in this stretch of land? Maybe the earlier archaeologists as Malcolm Rogers and Julian Hayden, who were able to observe the remnants of Tipai prehistory in as virginal state as was possible, were able to connect “pre-scientifically” or spiritually to these places. A scientific interpretation did not yet exist—there were no facts initially.

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Ha-emah: Not to be too over-dramatic, but it is entirely possible or even probable, that these expressions on the rock were felt to be messages from spiritually involved beings that were trying to guide the people. Given the limitations of the tools, substrate, pigment and expressive ability of the artist, the messages did attain a style so that the ideals could be somewhat universal and understood within the region.

Don: Yet so much more individualistic than a tool like a Clovis point. So beyond practical and so much more intimate view of these past peoples. Their lessons were simple as most spiritual ideals are. Euro-American man, in his arrogance, confused this with “primitive.” In fact, although most advanced societies have technology, it is so often misused because man has wandered so far off the spiritual path.

Ha-emah: Let's go down to the ocean and find ourselves!