THE VOYAGE OF THE HELEAK

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The year was 1976 the United States was 200 years old, but that's another story and by another it should be told.
Ours was ancient culture,
Here long before the white man's reign,
they lived in villages by the water from where they believed all life came.
For generations they fished and hunted, they traded with neighboring tribes,
until the dawning of the day the white man arrived.
They took our men to build their temples, they told them that it was wrong,
to give praise to all living things, in dance or with song.
They taught our people their religion and how to tear at the ground,
They destroyed their villages and moved them to their towns.
So it came to pass, a culture was put to sleep but on a glorious day in 1976, the Chumash went back to sea!
We were lead be true descendents of those people from long ago.
We were able again to build a fire from were only a small spark glowed.
It started for me with the building of a boat, the Tomal it was called, for others it started long before that,
it was a coming of a new dawn.
Finding out what we were, ignited an inner pride. Quickly are numbers were growing, the time had come to step out into the light.
We learned songs and dances thought to be lost we brought back to life the brotherhood of the tomal, ridicule was our cost.
But soon those who were laughing and making fun, found that it was time they to came out into the sun.
The building of the Tomal was truly a great feet, and would have never been accomplished without the help of Wokoe Pete.
Pete was a kind and gentle man, in tune with all living things, he cares for injured animals, among men, Pete is a king.
There were also many others, who lent more, than a helping hand. They stood by us in the beginning, but we lost them at the end.
At last the Tomal was ready, she was long and sleek, and so a name was rendered, we called her the Heleak. Fully loaded she sat high in the water, so we filled her bottom with sand, she responded incredibly to the slightest of commands.
We took her to the ocean and fresh water ponds she cut beautifully through the water, a long lost child had finally come home.
On the morning of our journey we were more then ready to go, there was Cheachio, Kiwick, Kote Lota, and Slow, Sespie the turtle, Thot Ojoconato, White Bear, Tomaro, Akhewo, and Thot. We got ourselves together and loaded the Heleak on the back of our support boat.
We headed for San Miguel Island on that glorious first day, our friends and family watched us as we sailed away.

We landed on San Miguel Island before the setting sun. We made camp, built a fire, sang songs and drummed, our spirits were soaring our eyes glowed with delight, then the word was passed we’d head out at first light.

Morning came quickly everything was calm, the Heleak was placed into the water just before dawn.

Three oarsmen, and one for steering, were silhouetted by first light, the crew aboard our support boat had awakened to that sight.

We cut through the water with incredible ease, we had truly come full circle with our ancestors, yes indeed! There were seals and dolphins seemingly showing us the way, our hearts were overflowing as we watched them play, the sun was shining brightly, the water was smooth as glass, it was a perfect reunion of the present with the past.

We rounded Santa Rosa Island were we spent the night, to some we may have seemed foolish but in our hearts we knew we were right, again we gave thanks to the great spirits with drum and song, night passed quickly, before we knew it, it was dawn.

We were back in the water again before first light we were well rested everything felt right.

But then began a struggle between Santa Rosa Island and Santa Cruz the currents in the channel were crossing, it was a battle we thought we might loss.

After several hours of rowing we refused to be denied, the Heleak made it across the channel, and was headed down Santa Cruz’s Westside.

Cheering, hollering and screaming, we made it! New energy rushed though everyone, there was the sound of songs echoing off the cliffs, as we streaked beneath the sun.

And even a great white shark, came to see us, as he glided beneath our boat some found it hard to swallow because of the lump in their throat. As if he had come to greet us he moved with grace and calm. After seeming to grant us safe passage we looked and he was gone.

The landing at pirates cove was were the trip turned around for us, as if the Heleak was saying, “I’ve had enough!” there was a none believer who traveled with us, his motives he tried to hide, but it was there at pirates cove our two worlds did collided.

The Heleak was slightly damaged, it was better not to go on, we stayed on Santa Cruz Island for the setting of two suns, we drummed and sang in a beautiful valley we were chased by wild boar, some of us wished to continue our trip but the Heleak could take little more.

We loaded her up once more on the back of our support boat we spent the night off Anacapa Island and in the morning when we awoke. We sailed to Ventura harbor though it was not the same we placed the Heleak back into the water our hearts soared again.

Our people were there to greet us, we feasted and sang, we spoke of what it was like to be in tune with or ancestors again.

We had landings in Carpinteria, Summerland and finally back at home. We couldn’t help feeling good about how much our spirits had grown.

We sought no more, then we did, what we did was prove with pride, that no matter what anyone else has to say, the Chumash culture is still alive!

We live.