

GABRIELINO (TONGVA)



The **Gabrielino, or Tongva**, Territory was in southwest California in present-day Los Angeles County.

The South Coast Region of California is known for its sandy beaches, scrub brush, chaparral, grassy valleys, woodlands, and forests. The Gabrielinos lived in this area **in present-day Los Angeles and Orange Counties, south of the Chumash territory**. They also occupied the southern channel islands including Santa Catalina. The Fernandeano people lived north of the Gabrielinos, but historians include them under the Gabrielino Tribe.

Historians named the people of this region after the San Gabriel Mission. Nowadays, some Gabrielinos prefer to call themselves the Tongva, or “earth.”

THE LEADER

Normally, each small village had its own leader. However, when several small villages were grouped near a big one, one powerful chief became the leader. The chief was in charge of keeping religious

objects, settling disputes, and collecting taxes.

CLOTHING

Like most California Indians, Tongva men and children did not wear much clothing during mild weather. The men might have worn an animal skin around the hips. The women wore skirts made of thin strips of bark, tule grasses, or leather. During colder seasons, women and men wore capes made of animal hides or fur. Usually, the Tongva went barefoot. However, if they lived in the mountains, they wore sandals made from yucca plant fibers. Lastly, in order to appear more beautiful, they sported tattoos of blue-black lines on their foreheads and chins. The women oftentimes wore flowers in their hair.

HOUSES

The Tongva built dome-shaped houses. Some measured 59 feet in diameter and sheltered three to four families. The frames were made from willow tree branches planted into the ground in a circle. The tops of these poles were then bent toward the center creating a domed ceiling. Tule rushes and other stiff grasses were layered and tied to the frame. The homes had at least one door and sometimes a window.

The Tongva sweathouse was also a dome-shaped structure, and it was covered with tule reeds and packed dirt. Men went inside to sweat away illnesses and to talk.

FOOD

Typical of life by the ocean, seafood like kelp, shark, shellfish, and clams was abundant. The Tongva caught fish in nets or on lines with hooks of bone or shell. Seals and sea lions were hunted using spears or harpoons. On land, the Tongva also hunted with boomerangs, or *makanas*, and bows and arrows. This work provided squirrel, rabbit, and deer meat. Women gathered acorns, cattails, and chia plants to be ground up and made into cakes. Acorns were pounded in stone or wooden mortars (or metates) then boiled in a water-proof basket or in a stone bowl. Other foods included seeds, nuts, fruits and berries, and honey.

JOBS

There were many jobs to be done in a Tongva village. One was basket weaving with a variety of tule rushes and other grasses. Baskets were used for many purposes such as serving food and storing supplies. Some were even used as cooking pots. By layering a basket with asphalt, a sticky tar found on the beach, the weaver could make watertight containers for holding liquids.

Building canoes was another specialized job. The craftsman tied wooden planks together and layered them with tar to prevent leaks. This occupation was very important, because reliable boats were

needed for fishing on the ocean and for conducting trade.

TRADE

The Tongva of Santa Catalina Island managed a steatite (or soapstone) quarry, an open pit in which chunks of the relatively soft rock could be removed. The rock was brought across the channel for finishing. This commodity was very valuable. The steatite was needed to carve bowls, beads, fishhooks, shovels, and smoking pipes. The Tongva did not use pottery, preferring the steatite bowls which did not crack in the fire or their baskets. The Tongva traded steatite with other tribes in the region. The Tongva also traded seeds, fish, furs, and animal skins. Sometimes they used money made from discs of clam shells.

RELIGION

The Tongva believed in a religion named after their creator: Chingichnish. Artists designed sand portraits representing the universe in front of alters dedicated to the creator. Both women and men could be shamans, and they were the religious leaders and healers of the tribe. It was believed that they had special powers to heal the sick and to change their shape from human to animal.