

# Frequently Asked Questions About Acjachemen Life Before Spanish Contact

(Mission San Juan Capistrano's Native American Nation)

## What were the Native people called in Orange County?

The Native Americans of the Orange County region call themselves the Acjachemen (A-ha-che-men) Nation. The Acjachemen Nation have lived prosperously for more than 10,000 years on the coastlands of Orange County. They were among the 275,000 people that inhabited California before Spanish contact. Their nation's territory, at one time consisted of many villages, and spanned from Long Beach to Oceanside, as far east as Lake Elsinore, and westward to Catalina and San Clemente Islands.



## What kind of shelter or home did they live in?

Each family in the village would construct a home called a kiicha, a dome shaped structure made of willow and tule. On the center floor area, a fire could be built and the smoke would exit the hole in the center of the roof. A family could sit or sleep around the fire on woven mats and used animal skins for blankets. Animal skins could also be attached to the entry and underneath the smoke hole in bad weather and for privacy.



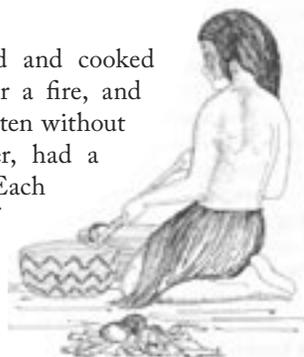
## What did the Acjachemen people eat?

Depending on the location of the village, the time of year, and the amount of rain for the season, food sources would change. On average, the Acjachemen who lived inland had a different diet than the people who lived near the ocean. See the chart below.

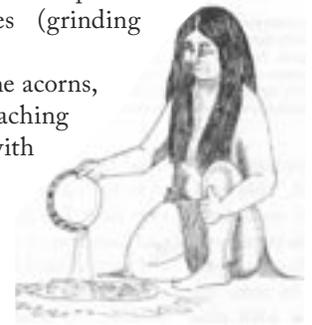
FOOD	COASTAL	INLAND
Acorns	15-25 %	25-45%
Seeds	20-40 %	20-40 %
Greens	5-10 %	10-12 %
Roots/Bulbs	10-15 %	10-13 %
Game	5-10 %	15-20 %
Fish/Shellfish	20-35 %	0-5 %

## How did they cook their food?

Each type of food was prepared and cooked differently. Meat was roasted over a fire, and greens and some seeds could be eaten without any preparation. Acorns, however, had a lengthy process of preparation. Each fall the women and children of the tribe would gather acorns from the oak groves. The steps of preparation are the following.



1. The Acorns were shelled, and then pounded with mortars and pestles (grinding stones).
2. Due to the tannic acid of the acorns, the acid was removed by leaching (or straining the meal with water).
3. The acorn meal was placed in coiled cooking baskets. The women heated igneous rocks and placed them inside the basket using looped sticks.



## What jobs did the men do?

Men did the hunting and the fishing. They hunted with bow and arrows, snares, and throwing sticks. They hunted game animals including deer, fox, rabbits, raccoons, squirrels, mice, lizards, snakes and other common wildlife found in California. The Pacific Ocean also provided a great variety of shellfish, eel, and trout.

Men built tule boats for fishing. They did this by tying large bundles of tules (type of cattail grass found along rivers and creeks) together with strong vines. A man could kneel or stand in the tule boat and pole himself across calm waters.



Men would also be in charge of tanning animal hides. They tanned hides by removing animal hair and soaking the hide in a solution of deer brains and oak gall. They would stretch, pull and knead the hides until soft to make clothing and blankets.

Men would also hold honorable positions in the community as Doctor and Shaman. Usually one man from the community held the position of Doctor. The man usually acquired the right to be a doctor by inheriting the position and buying the special tools or "medicine bundle" that contained necessary articles such as tiny obsidian points for cutting, dried herbs and roots, small mortars and pestles for grinding, baskets for storage, charm stones, feathers, tobacco and prayer sticks. He chanted and danced, used

roots, herbs and native plants to make potions and cures for sick people. He collected and carried these herbs in pouches or baskets. He tried to cure illnesses like eye infections, stomach pains, coughs and toothaches.

Shamans or Medicine Men were also held a high position in the community. It was believed the Shaman had supernatural powers and acquired these powers from dreams and spirits that entered his body. The Shaman's powers would chase bad spirits from a sick person. He diagnosed what he believed the sickness to be and sometimes sucked the affected part of the patient's body to remove the poison. They would also clean wounds with urine. The people of the tribe gave the Shaman money or gifts if the Shaman healed the person. When the Shaman died his powers died and it could not be passed onto another person.

### What jobs did the women do?



Women were important to the survival of the community. Women's tasks included basket weaving, food gathering, food preparation, and cooking. The Acjachemen women were the first ecologists of Orange County. They made use of everything on the land that had nutritional or functional value. Plants were not only good for food, but they recognized its value for basket weaving, and shelter building and much more.

Women of the community held great responsibility timing the harvest of plants to reap the maximum benefits. Not only were they responsible for the harvest, they were also responsible for the storage of all the food. Can you imagine the immense responsibility of storing food? Granary contents had to be carefully dried and inspected for insect exit holes or molds before being placed within the granary. One rotting seed could contaminate an entire granary, which could mean loss of needed food in the winter. Women truly were instrumental in ensuring the survival of the Acjachemen people.

### How did Native American women weave baskets?

The Acjachemen people of Southern California used several materials for basket weaving. These materials included grasses like Deer Grass as the base or foundation of the basket, and juncus rush and sumac reeds used for weaving the basket coils together.

The Acjachemen people used both twined and coiled weaving techniques. It is for their beautiful coiled baskets -- trays, bowls of all sizes, treasure baskets and hats -- that the Acjachemen are most renowned. The coiled baskets have a spiraling foundation of three slender rods of juncus rush, wrapped and sewn together with split strands of the same material.

Native Americans would sometimes dye the weaving materials black by soaking them in elderberry juice, burying them in mud or soaking them with acorns.



#### Twined Basket

Mostly used for holding acorns when they were pounded, or backpack baskets.



#### Coiled Basket

Mostly used for cooking. So tightly woven that they could hold water without leaking

### What religion did the Acjachemen people practice?

It is important to understand that the Native peoples of California may have had different forms of spirituality but they all unified in their belief and respect for the natural world around them. Native Californians were united in one ethic: one must interact respectfully with nature and coexist with all life-forms. Culture, religion, and life were interconnected.

The Acjachemen people were a deeply spiritual people who celebrated their religion in sacred ceremonies of dance and song. Father Geronimo Boscana, who was the resident priest at Mission San Juan Capistrano from 1814-1826 gives the best written account of the customs and religion of the Acjachemen people during the mission days. His writings called "Chinigchinich" gives an account of the creation story, mythology and practices of the Acjachemen people.



To read Father Boscana's account please see the Juaneno Acjachemen Nation's website <http://www.juaneno.com/default.tpl?PageID=169&cart=12041540883665513&ParentID=45>



### What kind of clothing did they wear?

Clothing for women consisted of a back and front apron of plant fiber for a type of grass skirt. Often women wore fiber sandals and caps on occasion. The cap consisted of twined juncus. Men wore nothing. In the colder season both men and women wore long capes or robes made of woven rabbit fur, deer skins, or sea otter furs.