

# Seven brothers and their burden

A folk tale of the Gabrielino Indians (as retold by Anna Stamatou)

A very long time ago, when the world was already ancient but not quite fully made, Great Spirit looked upon it as it spun, all blue and shiny against the midnight sky. A boundless ocean covered it from pole to pole and the moon pulled at the waters so that they were in constant motion. By night, Great Spirit watched the dance of the waves as they glimmered in the starlight; by day she took delight in every creature that journeyed across the deep or darted between rocks on the sea bed or leapt into the air just for the sheer joy of it and, as she considered it all, she thought:

*“These waters need somewhere to go and something to hold and shape them. I shall make land.”*

And so it was that one moonlit night, as she gazed out over the heaving sea, Great Spirit saw one of the giant turtles, most ancient of its kind, rising to the surface to take a breath. The dome of its shell seemed to her like a vast, glistening island so, as the enormous beast held its heavy head above the water and slowly blinked a glassy eye, she called to it:

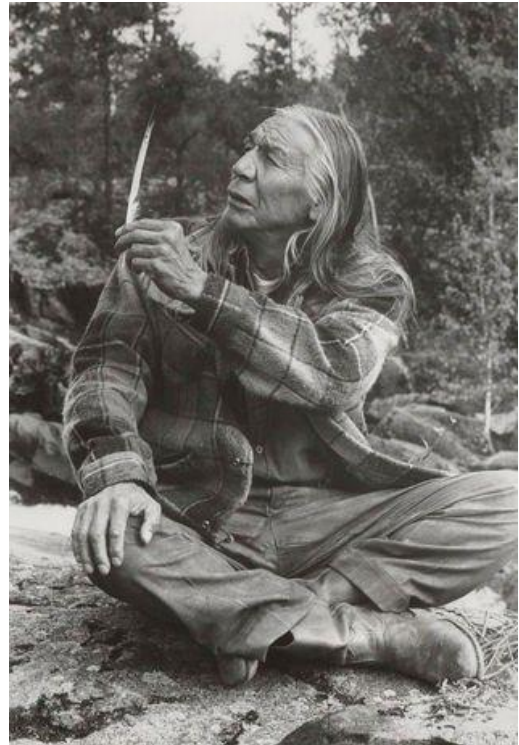
*“O venerable creature, child of my first making, hear my voice now, for I have need of you. Go. Seek out your six brothers as they wander the seas, and when you have found them, bring them to me.”*

At this, the giant beast sank beneath the inky waters once more and was gone. Through seven sunrises and seven moonrises he swam, in search of his brothers; never feeding; never resting but journeying endlessly on until finally he had found and gathered them all. Then, Great Spirit spoke again:



*“Turtles, there is a task that must be done and you are the creatures that shall have the honour of carrying it out. Form yourselves into a line, head to tail, north to south, and do not move, for you are to carry upon your backs for all time the land on which people shall dwell.”*

And saying this, Great Spirit reached into the sky and took up earth and rushes and laid them around the turtles' backs. Parting the beasts gently, she made places for lakes to lie and rivers to run, and that is how our land of



California came into being. The dome of each shell became a mountain and forests crept up to cover the lower slopes. When everything was ready, we, the First People, came to live on the land.

Now, most of the time the giant turtles are still and quiet – doing as they were told – and life on the land is balanced and harmonious but, just occasionally, the seven brothers lose patience with each other and begin to quarrel – as all brothers sometimes do. Forgetting Great Spirit’s instructions, they wrestle and bite. Then the earth heaves and splits and deep cracks appear in it. Even the roots of a tree as mighty as our old sycamore lose their grip, and the people fear for their lives until the turtle brothers settle their dispute, remember themselves, and are still again. And then, tranquillity returns to the land.



#### Note

The Tongva were one of the First Peoples of Southern California and lived along the coast and the islands to the west in what is now Los Angeles and Orange County. Following colonisation by the Spanish, they and other nearby indigenous tribes became known as “Gabrielinos” as the settlement of San Gabriel Arcangel came to dominate the area and used the indigenous population as a source of cheap (effectively slave) labour, gradually suppressing the traditional ways and identities.

An ancient sycamore tree, later known as “El Aliso”, was a significant local landmark from the late 15th century until it was finally felled in 1895.

#### About the images

1. Unidentified Native American storyteller
2. Treasure basket (underside) circa 1840, woven by Pomo people of Western California
3. Cave painting made by Chumash people of Western California (San Emigdio Mountains, Los Padres National Forest).
4. Paddling a traditional plank canoe or “tomol”, present day Chumash people make a sea crossing off Santa Cruz Island, California. The Gabrielinos shared this method of boat building with their Chumash neighbours but used a different name for the boat. They knew it as a “te’aat”.