HE CLOSES HIS EYES for a couple of seconds to focus, then begins to shake the gourd rattle. He sings in a voice that is clear but not very loud. Preston J. Arrowweed is taking you on a journey that begins with the first song in a series that contains between one and two hundred songs, a series that takes you through the night to the dawn.

Text by Richard Heller

Photos by Daniel Golding
He has made a commitment to the songs and the stories they tell. He sings them at celebrations and at funerals; they are the songs and stories of the Lightning Songs and the Pipa series (the people's songs). The songs are about the landscape and the animals that live on it. Because of this Arrow-weed has made a commitment to environmentalism as well.

Wearing his trademark western hat and a pony-tail, Preston Arrow-weed, 68, is an elder and a traditionalist of the Quechan and Kamia (Imperial Valley Kumeyaay) tribes of the lower Colorado River and the Imperial Valley. He explains that singing these songs is like being a preacher, you have to adhere to what they are about.

The gourd pulses back and forth while he lays out the rhythm for his singing, then he swirls it around as his singing rises in pitch to a section of the song called "the challenge." It is a call to stand up and dance.

"I'm not a singer, I ended up in it," he explained later, referring to the duty of the songs. He shoulders a responsibility that has deepened as he has gotten older and there are fewer and fewer people alive who know the languages and the stories of the songs.

The responsibilities of the songs have required a lifetime of activism on issues such as Native American sacred sites and land rights. He has advocated for the sacred site at Indian Pass, where a Canadian mining company wanted to open a goldmine, and protested at Ward Valley, where nuclear waste was to be buried near an aquifer that feeds into the Colorado River.

Arrow-weed resides on the Fort Yuma Reservation in Imperial County, where he grew up. As a young adult he was in the Marines and lived in other parts of California, during which time he worked as an extra and a bit player in various films. Through this work he developed an interest in drama and writing plays dramatizing themes from the songs and the history of his people.

After singing vigorously for a few minutes, he ends a section of the series by shaking the rattle four times as he marks the cadences of the song. "Hmm, hmm, hmm, hmm," he sings. He has just finished four songs, which are part of the all-night journey.

Arrow-weed explains that although he may sing one or the other of his song cycles at
celebrations, he also sings them at funerals. They are sacred songs. Either series may go all night, for six or eight hours, until dawn, requiring an incredible feat of memory. He states with admiration that his teachers could sing for days.

One of the song series, the Lightning Songs, is sung in Quechan and Kamia. The Pipa Songs are sung in Kamia. The Pipa Songs used to be sung with a rattle made of a water turtle shell. Now singers use rattles made from tin cans, which have a loud, bright sound. The Lightning Songs and the Pipa Songs are the remnants of perhaps thirty or more different series that were known in the lower Colorado River region homelands of the Yuman speakers of the Hokan language family.

The song series that has come to predominate in much of southern California is the Bird Songs. In most areas, Bird singers have proliferated at the expense of other traditional cycles. In order to encourage the survival of these lesser-known song series, Arrow-weed and his wife, Helena Quin-tana, received a grant from the Christiansen Fund for his Ahmut Pipa Foundation in order to hold a gathering of singers from southern California, the lower Colorado River, and Baja California.

Singers of the Wildcat Songs, the Il’sha Songs, the Pipa Songs, and the Lightning Songs, as well as Bird singers, attended a two-day colloquium in the desert wilderness near Yuma in the winter of 2008. Mojave, Cocopa, Kumeyaay, and Quechan elders and singers showed up to share the lore and meaning of their songs with each other. Another gathering occurred in November 2009.

Arrow-weed emphasizes that to understand the songs you have to understand the stories of the tribes. The lyrics tend to be shorthand descriptions of the action that is taking place in tribal myths. He translates one of the Pipa Songs: “It is the land, it is named, now you know it.”

One of the Lightning Songs tells of the birth of lightning near Mount San Jacinto: “In the darkness, there is lightning.”

Arrow-weed explains that you have to know the tribal language as well as the mythology to really know what the song is narrating: “When I was young there were elders who knew what I was singing. Now it’s different.” Many singers in southern California do not know the language or the mythology; they sing the songs syllabically with only vague understanding the narrative of the story. At the gathering of singers, one of the participants explained that you can learn the songs and still not know what they are about. Another participant from the San Diego area explained that the songs are like fence posts—you go from one to the next as you sing.

In the summer of 2009, Arrow-weed taught a class called “Hokan Culture Through Songs” at Kumeyaay College on the Sycuan Reservation in San Diego County. He presented the stories that the Lightning Songs and Pipa Songs tell. Both deal with Creator, Kumat. He explains, “I want to
give enough to represent the songs in the future.” With the songs, as with much of the religious lore of southern California peoples, much is still secret because it is considered sacred.

Arrow-weed and Quechan film maker Dan Golding have collaborated on two documentary films through Golding’s Hokan Media Productions. One, Honoring Kumat, shows the struggle to preserve the sacred site at Indian Pass. The other, Journey From Spirit Mountain, tells part of the Lightning Song story.

The Indian Pass site has ancient trails and petroglyphs as well as “sleeping circles” cleared in the desert pavement. They were to be destroyed by a large open-pit goldmine operated by Glamis Gold of Canada. At first, the tribe wasn’t going to comment because they thought it was impossible to stop the mine. However, Arrow-weed and another tribal member, Lorey Cachora, spoke out.

Arrow-weed spoke, sang, and testified at public hearings that ultimately drew involvement from the Sierra Club. The proceedings went as far as a case with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Part of the case was based on international law, Article 12 of the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Canadian company wanted to use NAFTA to dismantle U.S. environmental law.

Arrow-weed sought to preserve the sacred site by bringing forth the lore of his tribe, including the Lightning Songs. He was one of the few tribal members to doggedly pursue the issue. Eventually Quechan tribal lawyer Courtney Coyle presented the case before the NAFTA Tribunal, and the gold mine project was stopped.

Arrow-weed is the last singer of the Lightning Songs. He feels a pressure to transmit the gift he carries to future generations. Although he is a traditionalist, he uses the means of modern society to do this.

As shown in Journey From Spirit Mountain, the Lightning Songs tell of four figures who travel across the landscape naming the places they visit. One of the figures is a young boy who could do many things. A manifestation of Creator, his name is translated as Wonder Boy. Accompanying Wonder Boy is Coyote, the first man (who was made by Creator) and the man who originally dreamed the songs.

Along the Colorado River people who had great charisma or ability were thought to have gained it from their dreams. Song series were also thought to have come to singers in their dreams. The Lightning Songs were dreamed in 1894 or 1896 by either Charles Wilson or his cousin and are preserved in an original manuscript created by anthropologist and linguist Abraham Halpern in the 1940s. There are seven melodies to the series and “If you don’t have the right one the words won’t fit,” Preston explains. As a little boy he used to go to the meetinghouse on the reservation, where he heard the songs sung.
As Arrow-weed explains in the film, the four characters in the Lightning Songs begin their journey and at an early juncture cross the Colorado River. There they see a number of things, including geese and mudhens, and in the river there is a cottonwood house post. It is the house post of the world. At this point Wonder Boy becomes frightened because he has a dream that sharp-beaked water birds are stabbing him.

The four pilgrims continue on to visit Mount San Jacinto, Sa-Ku-Pai (Cloud Barrier). It is there that the song about the birth of lightning occurs. Wonder Boy also dances in the snow. They then proceed across the landscape to Jacumba in the San Diego high desert, and then to the Pacific Ocean near Enseñada to a place where the water shoots up, a place called La Bufadora, or the blowhole.

They hear the calling of the sea coyotes, which Arrow-weed explains are what we now call sea lions or seals. They also see water throwers (whales). From there they travel north to near San Juan Capistrano, then head east back to the Colorado River near Yuma.

The Pipa Songs begin at Mount Avikwame (Spirit Mountain) near Laughlin, Nevada. Avikwame is the place where Creator had his house and where the Native peoples of the land were created and came down from to populate the landscape.

Sung shortly after the initial songs in the Pipa Cycle are what Arrow-weed calls battle songs. It has always been the case that the people have had to fight to keep their land. In this section there is a song about a dead warrior. The death of Creator, which is the first death and the first funeral, is also referred to.

Kumat was killed by a spell that his daughter, Frog, put on him. As he lay dying, the animals all gathered around him to protect him from Coyote, who wanted to steal his heart. Some say Coyote wanted Creator’s power. Because of this Coyote is sent out to get fire from the sun and while he is away the female Blue Fly creates a spark that Lizard takes and uses to light the four corners of the funeral pyre. All of the animals are standing around, not knowing how to express the grief that they feel. An insect that is found in the trees and makes a buzzing sound, teaching them how to cry.

When Coyote returns, he sees the animals gathered around and notices that the shortest ones are the squirrel and the ground squirrel. He jumps over them and grabs the heart and runs off with it, chased by the other animals.

The places on the landscape where this happened are in the desert country near Yuma. A red crater at Cottonwood Peak is the place of the death and the cremation of Creator. A place Arrow-weed translates as “Greasy Mountain” is the spot where Coyote took the heart after being chased by the other animals.

During his class at Kumeyaay College, Arrow-weed narrates the story and sings the songs. During a break his cell phone rings. Tired, he picks up and says, “Hello?” Slowly he begins to smile. He announces that the NAFTA tribunal has come to a decision on the Indian Pass gold mine. The
sacred site will be spared, at least for now. It is the first and only time such a ruling has been made in favor of a Native American sacred site.

Thoughtful, Arrow-weed explains, “Knowledge is the best way to survive in this world. Knowledge of the tribal ways is important.”

He then picks up his gourd rattle and prepares to sing another song.

Richard Heller is an anthropologist consulting for the Ahmut Pipa Foundation. He holds a masters degree from San Diego State University.

The Ahmut Pipa Foundation

In 1996, Preston J. Arrow-weed and four other people formed the Ahmut Pipa Foundation. Ahmut Pipa means “the people’s land.” It is a nonprofit, tax-free foundation established with a mission to educate the Quechan community, the tribes of California, and the general public on Native American ethnohistory, culture, and art. It hopes to do so by using the voices of the people themselves.

A result of Preston’s vision, the foundation uses a mixture of traditional and contemporary teaching styles. In addition to increasing the preservation of tribal cultures, it also hopes to create a stronger awareness of the environment’s role in traditional Quechan lifeways.

The foundation has been involved in a number of projects, including sponsoring Preston’s grandson, Louis Jefferson, on the Longest Walk from Parker, Arizona, to Washington, D.C. The walk advocated for the continued protection of Quechan sacred sites. In addition, local expatriate Maya leaders expressed sorrow over the lack of appropriate space to perform their rituals. Preston’s parcel of land on the Fort Yuma Indian Reservation was offered for that use. In March of 2006, the Ahmut Pipa Foundation, the Maya leaders, and the Sierra Club held a weekend gathering to share stories and discuss environmental threats in Latin America.

The foundation also hosted the American Indian Film Institute and Hokan Media Productions as they brought together thirty youths under the guidance of up-and-coming Native filmmakers. They taught the young people how to create their own films, which were screened in front of a capacity audience at Yuma’s Main Street Cinemas.

The foundation also partnered with Dan Golding’s Hokan Media Productions to produce two DVDs, Journey from Spirit Mountain and Honoring Kumat. The foundation also supported the presentation of Preston’s play Cottonwood Fluff in the Dark at San Francisco’s Fort Mason Center in 1999. Support is also being provided to Preston’s latest play, with a working title of Horse Hair and Frog, which demonstrates how interference with Quechan tribal leadership by the U.S Army in the 1800s has affected governance of the Quechan to this day.

The major ongoing project is the Gathering of Hokan Singers and Speakers, which was held in 2008 and 2009. It was videotaped for a documentary by Hokan Media Productions. A manuscript about the event is being prepared for publication by anthropologists Richard Heller and Edward O. Henry.

Contributions to the foundation can be made online through www.guidestar.org or by mail to P.O. Box 160, Bard, CA 92222.

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