Toypurina, born in 1760, was a member of the Kizh community. The name of the Kizh (pronounced “Keech”) comes from the word for their dome-shaped houses. For thousands of years, the Kizh people lived comfortably in these domed houses in their homelands. Part of that land is now called Los Angeles County, California. But Kizh territory extended even beyond those bounds, to parts of Orange, Riverside, and San Bernardino Counties as well. It also included four offshore islands, now called Santa Catalina Island, Santa Barbara Island, San Clemente Island, and San Nicolas Island.

Each Kizh village was made up of about fifty to five hundred people. The mild climate and lush landscape provided plenty of food, water, and shelter. Each village was self-governed and not part of a collective group.
**A Misunderstanding**

During an interview in 1903, ethnographer C. Hart Merriam misunderstood a Kizh woman whose village name was Toviscangna. In his writings, he incorrectly used her village name to refer to all the tribes in the area as Tongva. However, Kizh is the correct tribal name of today’s descendants. Toypurina was Kizh.

Kizh people believed their land to be a sacred place. They understood that all things were connected and that the land, water, sky, plants, and animals cared for the people. In return, it was their job to care for and protect the animals and the environment.

The mountain woodlands were dense with towering oaks, pines, and black walnut trees. Nuts, especially the acorn, were a main source of food. They were gathered by the women and children. Raw acorns tasted bitter because they contained substances called tannins. To get rid of these tannins, the Kizh first ground the hulled acorns into a fine flour. Then they soaked the ground acorns in hot water. After that, the ground acorn meal could be used to make either bread or a kind of porridge.

Berries grew along the banks of the waterways and the edges of the forests. Hillsides were covered in prickly pear cactus, sagebrush, and buckwheat. These nutritious plants were used as both food and medicine.

*ethnographer:* someone who records information about human cultures
Kizh land was home to animals large and small. Ground squirrels, rabbits, and foxes were abundant. In the mountains, there were bears, bighorn sheep, mule deer, and large cats. Owls, woodpeckers, turkey vultures, hawks, and golden eagles sailed over forests and mountaintops. Kizh men were expert hunters, and they knew the best times of year to hunt and the best places to fish. They killed only enough game to feed their families and no more. They understood how to care for the land and the water. In return, they were given back more than enough food to survive.

In the grasslands, the men also hunted deer and smaller game, such as rabbits, foxes, and coyotes. They flushed quail, bringing them down with arrows, while keeping an eye out for snakes hiding under rocks in the tall grass. The cool spaces beneath the rocks gave rattlesnakes shelter from the hot sun.
The grasslands provided for much of the Kizh people’s needs, including housing. Here they found the materials to build the dome-shaped houses that gave the Kizh people their name. They built their houses with the long branches of the willow tree and thatched them with tule (pronounced “too-lee”), a freshwater marsh grass. Tule grass is native to the Kizh homelands. It grows in abundance in marshes along freshwater lakes and rivers. Indigenous people up and down the West Coast had long used and traded this long-fibered green plant.
Women harvested chia and other grass seeds. They gathered wild vegetation, such as bulbs and tender plant roots. In late summer, after the seed crops had been gathered, the Kizh burned their fields to stop the growth of competing plants. This kind of land management allowed important food and medicinal plants to thrive. It helped underground bulbs get the sunlight they needed to sprout early when the rainy season began. The new growth attracted deer and other herbivores, which fed on the sprouts, thus increasing the number of animals available for hunting. Using generational wisdom to manage their land, the Kizh could increase the amount of food they produced each year.

At harvest time, women and older girls carried specially designed baskets made of tule grass. They carried two baskets, one in hand and the other over the shoulder. The women worked quickly, using a stick to knock the seeds off the plants and into their baskets. As they worked, the older women shared stories with the younger women and the children. Children were very important to the Kizh people. Their parents spoiled them with love and devotion—and so did the rest of the village. Sharing stories meant that knowledge of Kizh traditions was passed on and would not be lost. Some of these children became storytellers themselves. In this way, many of the traditional stories have survived.
In the winter months, the Kizh headed to villages in the mountains northeast of the lower grasslands. Just as the Kizh maintained the meadowlands, they also cared for the mountain forests with planned burns. Controlled burning of the forest floor cleared out small trees, dense brush, and undergrowth, as well as the buildup of pine needles, dead leaves, sticks, and fallen trees. Burning this material added nutrients to the soil and encouraged new growth of diverse plants. It also controlled the spread of insects such as wood ticks—a benefit to both wildlife and people. While the undergrowth burned, quail flew from the tall grass and rabbits ran out of the brush. Skilled hunters brought home a bounty of small game.

Large game such as mule deer, bears, and bighorn sheep were hunted for food. Their hides provided warm clothing and blankets for the winter. Hides were also hung on the walls to insulate homes against the cold weather.

The Pacific Ocean lay to the southwest, only a few days’ walk from the grasslands. There was plenty of kelp, seaweed, and other sea plants available for gathering. Waterfowl and mussels were abundant. The Kizh hunted seals, otters, and sea lions from large canoes. Fish like garibaldi and sheephead were a source of food from the ocean. Whales and dolphins filled the waters around the four islands.

**insulate**: prevent heat loss
One hundred miles of seacoast allowed people in the coastal villages to travel great distances in their large wood-plank canoes, called ti’ats. They were seaworthy and unique to the Kizh and one other area tribe. Constructed of long wooden planks, these canoes were made watertight by sealing them with a natural tar substance mixed with spongy pith from the inside of tule grass reeds. A ti’at could hold up to thirty passengers and was fast and reliable.

The Kizh were master traders. The ti’ats gave islanders the ability to travel back and forth from the islands to the coast. This made communication and trade possible between the mainland and the islands. Different islands offered different resources for trading. Steatite (soapstone) was plentiful on Catalina Island.
Its strength made it good for carving into cooking vessels, ceremonial pipes, and figurines. Abalone and olivella shells were carved into beads. These beads, along with sea lion and sea otter pelts, were used to trade for goods the islanders needed from the mainland.

Kizh living on the islands traded for deer meat and other large game from the mainland. They also traded for the tule grass they needed to build their homes, weave baskets and mats, and make clothing such as grass skirts.

The Kizh people worked using the seasons as their guide. They gathered nuts and seeds when these were plentiful. The weather was mild, and they could hunt year-round. However, the best hunting came after the animals had grown fat from grazing all summer and eating plenty of nuts and berries. The Kizh understood the rhythms of the natural world and planned their work accordingly.

Each Kizh village was ruled by its own chief, or tumiar. The main duty of a chief was to keep their people united while never forgetting the ideology of the people. The village chief kept the peace, resolved differences among the people, and watched over their health and safety.

Village hierarchy was based on blood lineage. Chiefs came from the more successful families of artisans,
hunters, or traders. Often the next in line would be a son or brother. If there were none, tribal elders could appoint a sister or eldest daughter after the chief’s death.

Even greater than the power of the village chief was the power held by the village shaman. This role was important because shamans talked with the Great Spirit. Only a shaman could punish another shaman for any wrongdoings.

**Spiritual People**

*The Kizh were a spiritual people. Their origin story says that in the beginning, there was chaos. Out of the chaos and the many chiefs, there was one great chief, Chingishnish. He traveled to all the Kizh villages and neighboring villages, teaching the people about the spiritual laws passed down from the Creator. He died and ascended into Kizh heaven.*

Kizh mourning ceremonies lasted for eight days. They included several rituals meant to guide the deceased person on their spiritual path. One ritual involved cutting down a pine tree, stripping away its branches, and covering it with paintings. Special baskets were woven for mourning ceremonies. These ceremonies usually involved cremation and included offerings of personal items such as bows, arrows, beads, seeds, and animal skins.

*shaman:* priest or priestess  
*mourning:* grieving  
*cremation:* act of burning a dead body
Another ritual held was the mourning anniversary ritual. This ritual served to remember those who had died during a particular year, especially when there were multiple deaths in a family or clan. Food and gifts were prepared to take to the ceremony. The images of those who had passed were painted on grass matting. These ceremonies were organized by the chiefs of different villages and often involved more than one community. The rituals lasted several days, during which the dead were remembered with stories, singing, and dancing.

Life for the Kizh and the other Indigenous tribes of California was disrupted and eventually destroyed. In 1769, Spanish missionaries arrived and began building a series of missions. They were there to convert the Indigenous people to Christianity—and to make the Kizh, and all others they encountered, subjects of Spain.