

The question of Baja California's prehistoric isolation: evidence from traditional narratives

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Abstract

A key issue for interpreting the prehistory of Baja California concerns the degree to which the region was isolated from the remainder of North America or received only delayed influences from it. In the past, evidence bearing on this question has been adduced from studies of physical anthropology, aboriginal technology, linguistic relationships, and various social and religious practices. Despite the fact that myths and other traditional narratives are only sporadically and imperfectly documented for most of the peninsula, they provide an additional index of outside links, particularly with respect to relatively shallow time depths. The evidence of the narratives suggests that northern Baja California as far south as San Vicente was closely integrated into a cultural region encompassing most of southern Alta California and western Arizona. The myths of central and southern Baja California were more distinctive, but they also showed evidence of the operation of relatively active processes of cultural diffusion and interaction with the north.

Introduction

Many of the distinctive cultural characteristics of prehistoric Baja California seem to be tied to the peninsula's unique geography. But was the key factor Baja California's natural environment, and the constraints and opportunities presented by its resources -- in other words, its physical geography? Or was the key factor the peninsula's relative isolation from prehistoric events elsewhere in North America -- its context within cultural geography? To evaluate the second factor, it is important to try to determine whether the region (or some part of it) was truly a separate cultural world unto itself, cut off to a substantial extent from developments in the remainder of North America.

A significant degree of isolation has figured in several influential interpretations of Baja California's prehistory. One example was Paul Kirchhoff's (1942) discussion of the region as a *callejón sin salida*. Another was William C. Massey's (1961, 1966) model of successively older cultural "strata" outcropping from north to south within the peninsula. In the 1980s, more flexible models were suggested by Miguel León-Portilla (1983), who saw successive cultural waves passing varying distances down the peninsula, and Mark Kowta (1984), who highlighted possible sources of cultural influence from the east.

Different types of evidence have been invoked in discussing the issue of isolation. Physical anthropology provided one of the earliest arguments for the isolation of the Cape Region, based on distinctive human skeletal features in the Las Palmas burials. Cranial indices

and dental traits were used to argue that the populations of the extreme south had retained genetic links to one or another of a variety of exotic regions, rather than assimilating with their historic neighbors to the north (e.g., Pompa y Padilla 1977; Rivet 1909; Romano Pacheco 1977; ten Kate 1979). More recently, physical anthropologists have been skeptical about the validity of such attributes as genetic markers of distinct populations, rather than as reflecting nutrition and individual development (cf. Laylander 1987; Tyson 1977).

Linguistic evidence points toward a different conclusion. Common membership in the Yuman and Cochimí sister-families linked all of central and northern Baja California with southern Alta California and western Arizona during the last few millennia of prehistory (Laylander 1997; Massey 1949; Mixco 1978). If Guaycura was also a Hokan language, as has been suggested (Gursky 1966), similar connections extended farther south and farther back in time. Evidence concerning the Pericú language is too meager to say anything one way or the other.

Some late technological innovations, notably agriculture and the use of ceramic vessels, were restricted to the northern part of the peninsula, and this has been interpreted as a sign of the relative isolation of the center and south (Massey 1961). Any substantial practice of prehistoric agriculture within Baja California does seem to have been limited to the Colorado River delta in the northeast (Laylander 1995). However, the failure of agriculture to spread farther than it did, either south into Baja California or northwest into Alta California, probably should not be attributed to a constriction in the flow of technological information. In the case of Baja California, it more likely reflects the adaptive possibilities and imperatives of a region characterized by sparse rainfall and meager surface water. The manufacture and use of ceramic vessels was similarly limited to northern Baja California, although in this case it has recently been suggested that the local brownware tradition might have originated within that region, rather than having diffused into it from the east or north (Griset 1996:273-274). Ceramic technology also failed to spread northwest through most of Alta California, where no factor of cultural isolation can be blamed. Most likely, ceramic vessels were simply not an attractive alternative to other sorts of containers and cooking vessels for most of the hunter-gatherers of the peninsula, perhaps in part because of the high mobility of those groups and the scarcity of fuelwood for firing the pots.

A key example in arguing that the peninsula experienced a prehistoric technological lag has been the apparently late arrival of bow and arrow technology in the Cape Region. Massey (1961) suggested that the bow and arrow only replaced the atlatl and dart in the course of the seventeenth century, a full millennium after the new technology had been adopted near Baja California's northern entrance (Yohe 1992). However, a reconsideration of the evidence suggests that the bow and arrow were already established throughout the peninsula prior to the seventeenth century, possibly centuries earlier, and that larger projectiles continued to be used along with the bow and arrow throughout the early historic period in many portions of both Californias (Laylander 2007).

A variety of distinctive social and religious practices are documented for aboriginal Baja California. For example, shamans wore capes made from human hair and used ceremonial *tablas* throughout much of the peninsula. Unusual food practices included the second harvest of pitahaya seeds and the sharing of meat in the *maroma*. Archaeologically, the Great Mural rock art of the central peninsula and special burial practices in the Cape Region stand out. These and other traits marked Baja California as a true cultural region, not assimilated to its neighbors, but they do not necessarily indicate that it was substantially isolated. Similar levels of distinctiveness

were present in many of the regions of western North America where it is not doubted that active interaction existed with adjacent regions.

Traditional Narratives

Myths and other traditional narratives have a potential to shed some additional light on the issue of prehistoric isolation. Because they are complex, somewhat conservative in their content, and typically not closely integrated with specific environmental circumstances or adaptive strategies, the narratives, like the elements of language, can serve effectively as potential markers for common cultural inheritance or diffusion.

A key issue concerns the time depths represented by the sharing of narrative elements. Genetic affiliations between languages generally speak to relationships on the order to 1,000-5,000 years in the past. On the other hand, narrative elements in aboriginal North America, despite their sometimes-sacred character, seem to have been continually and relatively rapidly modified, diffused, or abandoned. Several lines of evidence from southern Alta California support this view, including (a) oral accounts' limited preservation of information about independently known late prehistoric events, particularly the rise and fall of Lake Cahuilla in the seventeenth century; (b) the incorporation into origins myths of references to late prehistoric and post-contact cultural elements, such as the bow and arrow, pottery, New and Old World agricultural crops, Old World domesticated animals, and Old World races; and (c) the ways in which similarities and differences in narrative elements freely crosscut lines of linguistic affiliation above the level of single language communities (Laylander 2001, 2004). This evidence suggests that individual narrative themes and motifs were likely to be no more than a few centuries old within the oral literature of any given culture. Their value as diagnostics for the presence or absence of deeper cultural relationships, going back a millennium or more, is therefore minimal, but for late prehistory they serve well as markers for patterns of interaction.

Quechan, Cocopa, Kumeyaay, Tipai, and Paipai Narratives

In the north, the political boundaries separating Baja California from its neighbors, Alta California, Arizona, and Sonora, are clearly arbitrary divisions from the perspective of prehistory. At contact, four ethnolinguistic groups straddled the modern border (Figure 1). The Kumeyaay and Quechan were predominantly Alta California and Arizona groups, while the Tipai and Cocopa lived primarily in Baja California. A fifth group, the Paipai, were entirely Baja Californians. Traditional narratives are generally well documented for the Kumeyaay, Quechan, and Cocopa (e.g., Crawford 1983; Curtis 1907-1930; DuBois 1904, 1905, 1906, 1908; Forde 1931; Gifford 1918, 1931; Harrington 1908; Hinton and Watahomigie 1984; Kelly 1977; Spier 1923; Waterman 1910). The available evidence concerning Tipai narratives is much less extensive (Hinton and Watahomigie 1984; Meigs 1971). Information on Paipai narratives is scantier than that for most of the Yuman groups, although it is more substantial than the information for the Tipai (Bendímez Patterson 1989; Gifford and Lowie 1928; Hinton and Watahomigie 1984; Meigs 1977; Wilken Robertson 1993).

The Quechan, Cocopa, Kumeyaay, Tipai, and Paipai creation myths show clearly that all of those groups belonged to a common cultural universe also including the northern Yuman-speaking Ipai, Maricopa, Mohave, and Upland Yumans, as well as the Utoaztecan Takic-speaking Luiseño, Cupeño, Cahuilla, and Serrano (Laylander 2001). Shared elements in the

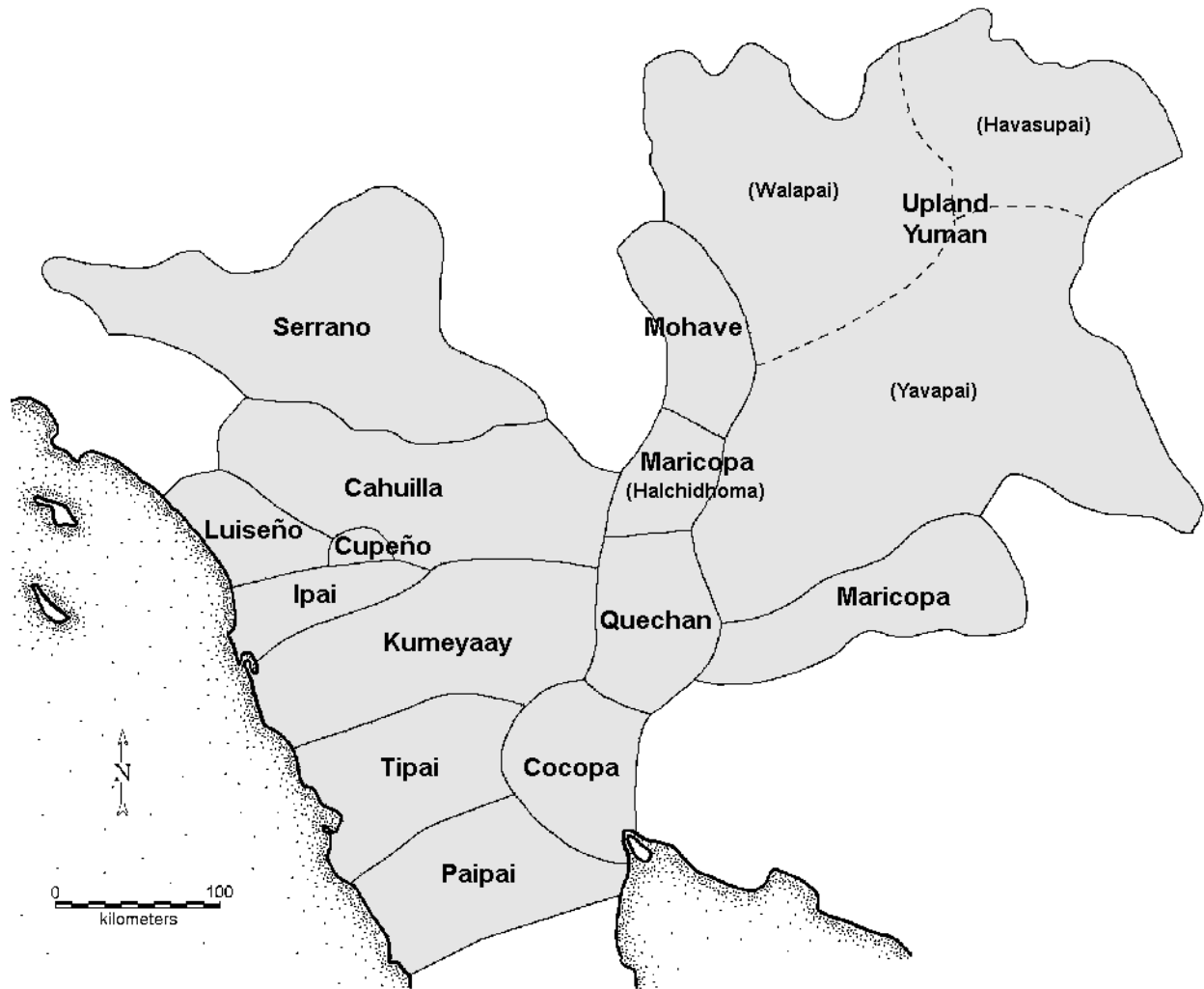


Figure 1. Southern California mythic region.

creation myths of most Yuman and Tadic speakers define what may be termed the Southern California Creation Myth (Table 1; cf. Kroeber 1925; Waterman 1909). Less substantial sharing in traditional narratives linked the Yuman and Tadic groups with neighboring Numic peoples to the north, Athapaskans to the east, and Pimans to the southeast.

The relationships of the Paipai within this southern California mythic region are particularly revealing. Linguistic evidence indicates that the Paipai and the Upland Yumans of western Arizona (the Yavapai, Walapai, and Havasupai) formed a single language community (termed Pai Yuman) in the relatively recent past -- perhaps less than 1,000 years ago. It is a debatable point whether the geographical separation of the Pai groups occurred by the Paipai moving south into Baja California, or by the Upland Yumans moving north out of it. Testimony from the modern Paipai and Upland Yumans generally seems to support a north-to-south movement (e.g., Meigs 1977:19; Mixco 1977:206; Wilken Robertson 1993:142; Winter 1967:375), whereas linguistic evidence seems to favor the opposite course (Joël 1998; Laylander 1997:70-73). In whichever direction the spread of the Pai Yumans occurred, presumably the migrant group carried along with them their traditional narratives as well as their language.

Can evidence of this migration be seen in the preserved records of Paipai and Upland

Table 1. Southern California creation myth elements in versions from ethnolinguistic groups represented in Baja California.

Creation Myth Themes	Kumeyaay	Tipai	Paipai	Cocopa	Quechan
mysterious, abstract creations					
mother earth / father sky	X				X
prior worlds are destroyed					X
creators emerge through sea	X	X	X	X	X
quarrel between creators	X	X	X	X	X
malformed creations	X			X	X
one creator goes under ground	X	X	X	X	X
rattlesnake's revenge				X	
people shoot each other		X		X	
frog bewitches creator	X			X	X
creator's prolonged illness	X			X	X
coyote steals piece of corpse	X			X	X
giant serpent is killed	X			X	X

The Southern California Creation Myth themes are discussed in Laylander 2001. Sources for the myth versions include Crawford 1983; E. Curtis 1907-1930; N. Curtis 1909; DuBois 1905, 1908; Forde 1931; Gifford 1918, 1931; Gifford and Lowie 1928; Harrington 1908; Hedges 1970; Kelly 1977; Meigs 1971, 1977; Spier 1923; and Waterman 1910.

Yuman myths? It does not appear so, which says something about the rapidity with which one people or the other adapted to its new cultural context. Both the Paipai and the Upland Yuman myths share features with the myths of the other peoples in the general southern California region, but there do not seem to be patterns that are specific to both the Paipai and the Upland Yuman myths but not shared with their neighbors. As would be expected, Paipai narratives have some specialized features in common with the narratives of their Kiliwa, Tipai, or Cocopa neighbors, and Upland Yuman narratives have some features in common with those of their River Yuman, Numic, Athapaskan, or Piman neighbors. If the Paipai had moved relatively recently from western Arizona, it might also be expected that Paipai narratives would have similarities with western Arizona narratives not shared with the Tipai, Cocopa, or Kiliwa. On the other hand, if the Upland Yumans moved out from northern Baja California, they might have brought with them recognizable elements from Kiliwa, Tipai, or Cocopa myths. Neither of these predictions seems to be fulfilled. The Pai Yuman case supports the conclusion that narratives were relatively fluid and that conservation of narrative elements within a given culture occurred on a time scale measured in a few centuries rather than through longer periods.

Kiliwa, Cochimí, Monqui, Guaycura, and Pericú Narratives

Kiliwa traditional narratives are somewhat better documented than those of the Paipai (Meigs 1939; Mixco 1983; Ochoa Zazueta 1978). However, for the remainder of central and southern Baja California, the ethnographic record concerning myths is both more meager and less reliable (Figure 2). The Cochimí, Monqui, Guaycura, and Pericú cultures had passed away before scientific ethnographers could study them, and information has been preserved only

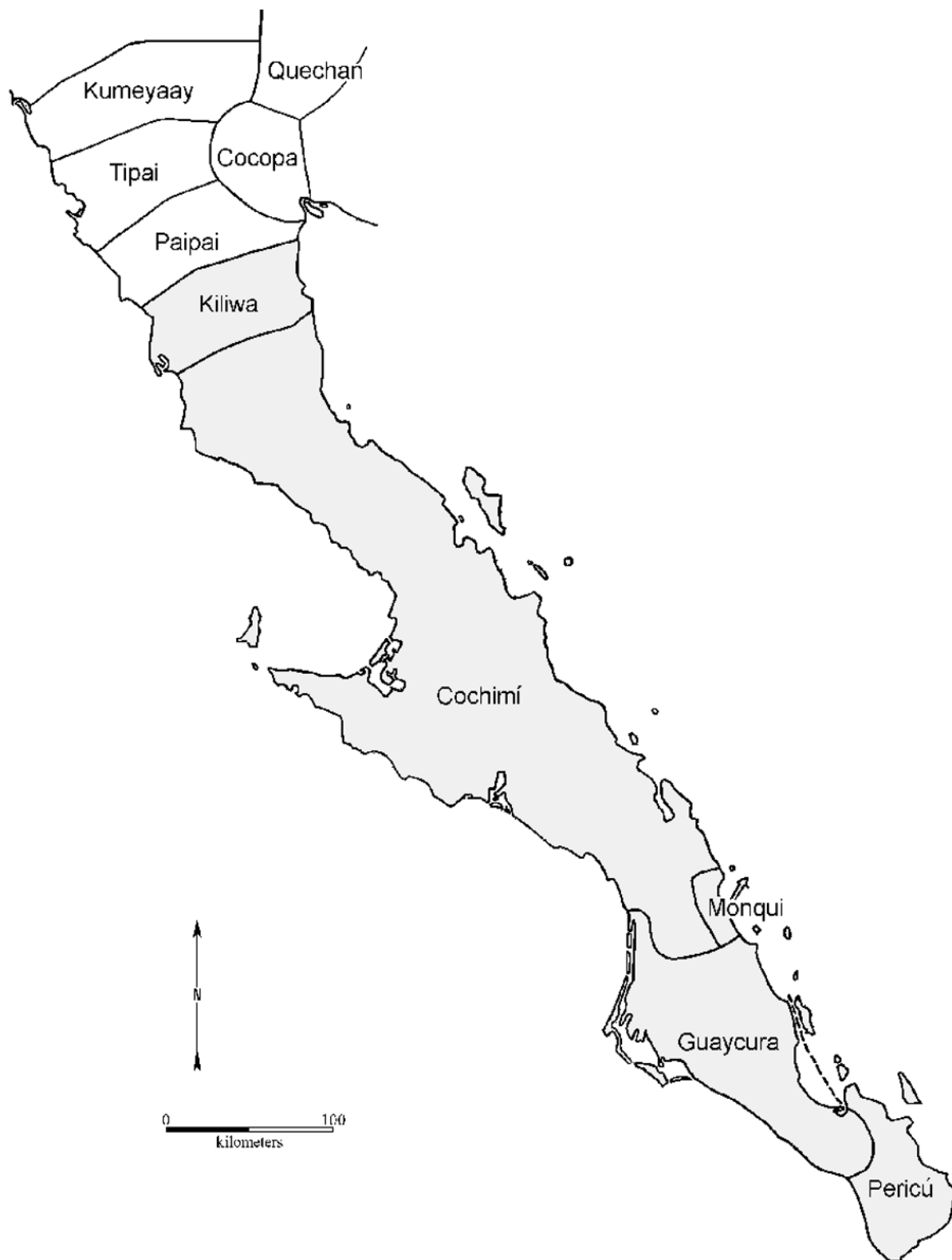


Figure 2. Kiliwa, Cochimí, Monqui, Guaycura, and Pericú territories.

through the accounts of early travelers and, above all, in the reports of the eighteenth-century Jesuit, Franciscan, and Dominican missionaries. Excellent as were the missionary ethnographies in many respects, they were particularly problematic in dealing with the subject of native religious beliefs. The problems arose from the missionaries' ideological hostility toward native religions, which often blocked their access to information on this subject, or resulted in summary, derogatory dismissals of it. Another complication was a predisposition on the part of some commentators to discover traces of an ancient Judeo-Christian heritage among the peninsular peoples (Laylander 2000:44). There are substantial, if brief, sketches of the creation myths of the Pericú (Venegas 1979(4):524-525) and the northern Cochimí (Sales 1960:40-42). Additionally, some shorter references to myths or religious ideas were recorded for the Monqui (Venegas 1979(4):527-528) and the southern Cochimí (Aschmann 1966:65-66; Venegas 1979(4):529-530), but there is almost nothing for the Guaycura (cf. Baegert 1772, 1982).

The Kiliwa, northern Cochimí, and Pericú creation myths cannot be considered cognate with the Southern California Creation Myth, nor with each other. Kiliwa is the only Yuman language to lack a version of the creation myth that is cognate with the regional account. Linguistically, Kiliwa is a separate branch of the Yuman family, and the separation of Kiliwa from "Core Yuman" (ancestral to the Delta-Californian branch, including Tipai, Kumeyaay, Ipai, and Cocopa; the River branch, including Quechan, Maricopa, and Mohave; and the Pai branch, including Paipai and Upland Yuman) may represent the earliest splitting of the Yuman family, dating to perhaps around 2,500 years ago (cf. Laylander 1997:61-66). However, the evidence indicates that the Southern California Creation Myth, or most elements of it, were much more recent than the breakup of Core Yuman, which began perhaps 2,000 years ago. The myth was evidently not retained by most Yuman groups from proto-Core Yuman times, but was spread by diffusion both within the Yuman family and between Yumans and Utoaztecs. That the myth failed to be adopted by the Kiliwa suggests at least a limited degree of cultural separatism between the portion of the peninsula around San Quintín and San Felipe and the areas farther north.

If the Southern California Creation Myth as a whole did not diffuse into central and southern Baja California, several specific motifs were shared by the Kiliwa, northern Cochimí, or Pericú with the groups to their north. Table 2 summarizes some of the common elements. Before such similarities can be accepted as evidence for open channels of cultural diffusion extending the length of the Baja California peninsula and beyond it, three alternative explanations need to be considered:

(1) Could the similarities be merely coincidental, independent developments, perhaps representing shared psychological responses to universal human issues? Considering the general corpus of North American creation myths (cf. Rooth 1984; Thompson 1929), this explanation is implausible. The resemblances between Takic, Yuman, Cochimí, and Pericú beliefs were stronger than those that would be found in arbitrary comparisons drawn from the continent as a whole.

(2) Could the similarities represent survivals from an ancient common heritage? If Pericú was a Hokan language (which is uncertain, but possible), the speakers of Pericú, Cochimí, and the Yuman languages all shared a common linguistic ancestry. However, such links would necessarily have dated back several thousand years at a minimum, and all available evidence suggests that traditional narrative content did not remain stable over time spans of that order. Confirming that the similarities are not residues from a common Hokan heritage, they are not shared with the mythologies of other non-Yuman but Hokan groups in Alta California. Ancient

Table 2. Correspondences between Pericú, Northern Cochimí, Kiliwa, and southern California creation myths.

Creation myth element	Pericú ¹	Northern Cochimí ²	Kiliwa ³	Southern California region ⁴
creator / culture hero's name ⁵		X	X	Co, Ip, Ku, Ma, Mo, Pa, Ti, Up
creator has female mate and offspring	X			Ip, Lu, Ku, Ma, Mo, Pi, Qu
creator has male colleague / antagonist	X	X		Ca, Co, Cu, Ip, Ku, Lu, Ma, Pa, Qu, Se, Ti, Up
antagonist / evil creations are shut up underground, but cause ills in world	X			Ca, Co, Cu, Ku, Ma, Pa, Pi, Qu, Se, Ti
creator makes culture hero, who carries on his work	X	X		Ca, Ku, Lu, Ma, Mo, Qu
culture hero's spit becomes oceans		X	X	--
four sacred mountains are created in four directions			X	Pa
colors are associated with directions ⁶			X	Co, Ip, Ku, Ma, Mo
first people conspire to kill creator / culture hero	X	X		Ca, Co, Cu, Ip, Ku, Lu, Ma, Mo, Pa, Pi, Qu, Se, Up
creator / culture hero's prolonged illness before dying			X	Ca, Co, Cu, Ip, Ku, Lu, Ma, Mo, Qu, Up
creator / culture hero is cremated			X	Ca, Co, Cu, Ip, Ku, Lu, Ma, Mo, Pi, Qu, Se, Up
first people originally lived on a sacred mountain			X	Co, Ip, Ku, Ma, Mo, Qu, Up

¹ Account apparently from San José del Cabo, recorded by Nicolás Tamaral in the early 1730s (Venegas 1979(4):524).

² Account from El Rosario area, recorded by Luis Sales (1960:40-42), probably in the 1770s.

³ Account in Meigs 1939 and Mixco 1983. The Kiliwa creation myth was also presented in Ochoa Zazueta 1978, but concerning that version see the comments in Mixco 1983:282-284.

⁴ Sources for more than 50 versions of the Southern California Creation Myth are discussed in Laylander 2001.

Ca = Cahuilla, Co = Cocopa, Cu = Cupeño, Ip = Ipai, Ku = Kumeyaay, Lu = Luiseño, Ma = Maricopa, Mo = Mohave, Pa = Paipai, Pi = Piman, Qu = Quechan, Se = Serrano, Ti = Tipai, Up = Upland Yuman.

⁵ Names include *Menichipa* (Northern Cochimí); *Metipa* (Kiliwa); *Sipa* (Cocopa); *Tuchaipa* or *Chakopá* (Ipai); *Maiyoba* and *Tcaipakomat* (Kumeyaay), *Cipas*, *Thoshipa*, or *Isacipas* (Maricopa); *Matochipá* (Mohave); *Mitipa*, *Metipa*, or *Matipa* (Paipai); *Mayipá* and *K'chúsepá* (Tipai); and *Túdjupa* (Upland Yuman).

⁶ This motif was usually reported separately from the creation myths.

survival can probably be ruled out as an explanation.

(3) Could the similarities have arisen from common responses to the imposition of a Christian cosmology by the missionaries? Several of the Yuman-Cochimí-Pericú similarities call to mind Christian themes, particularly the antagonism between God and Satan and the incarnation and death of Christ. Bendímez and Navejas (1992:68-69) wondered whether 60 years of Jesuit missionization (1697-1757) before the publication of Venegas' account of the Pericú myth would have been sufficient to induce such a degree of alteration in the Pericú worldview. In actuality, less than 15 years (1720-1734) had elapsed between the foundation of the first permanent mission in Pericú territory and the recording of the creation myth at San José del Cabo by Nicolás Tamaral, although it is true that the Cape Region had been subjected sporadically to less intensive European influences over a much longer period. The northern

Cochimí creation myth was written down in 1790 by Luis Sales, but was probably collected sometime in the 1770s, less than a decade after the start of the local mission at El Rosario. Both the Pericú and the Cochimí accounts therefore date from very early in the process of mission acculturation, when Christian influences were likely to have been relatively superficial. The well-documented Southern California Creation Myth, despite its similar Christian analogies, seems convincingly to have been independent of any major Christian influence on its content, and the same was probably true for the recorded cosmologies of the Pericú and northern Cochimí. The missionaries undoubtedly gave emphasis to Christian analogies in the myths, but they evidently did not invent them.

The myths indicate that Kiliwa, Cochimí, and Pericú territories were not effectively isolated from the cultures to the north, even though they were not completely assimilated to them. In the late prehistoric era, time lags in the transmission of at least this type of cultural information through the length of Baja California apparently did not exceed a few centuries at most.

Conclusions

Native American myths and other traditional narratives were subject to ongoing and relatively rapid diffusion and modification. The evidence from such narratives indicates that late prehistoric northern Baja California was part of a cultural region that closely linked it with southern Alta California, western Arizona, and northwestern Sonora. Farther south, the sketchy data on traditional narratives warrant tentative recognition of the peninsula below San Vicente as a distinct region, or perhaps several distinct regions. The sharing of some motifs down the length of the peninsula suggests that an active system of cultural exchange existed. Although such ties were not close enough to unite central and southern Baja California with northern Baja California and southern Alta California, the people of the peninsula did not live in an isolated cultural world. Their traditions were probably less divergent from those of the Core Yuman and Takic speakers than were the traditions of other adjacent peoples farther north in Alta California, such as the Chumash, Yokuts, and most Numic groups. The cultural distinctiveness of prehistoric Baja California seems to be attributable more to the challenges of its natural environment and the creative originality of its inhabitants than to any factor of cultural isolation.

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