

Native perspectives on archaeological sites of Cuyamaca Rancho State Park

*Michael Wilken-Robertson
Instituto de Culturas Nativas de Baja California*

Introduction

The Kumeyaay (or Kumiai as spelled in Spanish) region extends from Escondido in California to south of Santo Tomás in Baja California, predating the establishment of the United States and Mexico by hundreds or thousands of years. These highly mobile native hunters, gatherers and fishers have long traveled throughout the region, maintaining contacts through intermarriage, trade and gatherings, both social and ceremonial. In spite of the relatively recent international border that has bisected their original territory, Kumeyaay people have managed to maintain cultural ties, especially for purposes of cultural preservation. The Kumeyaay of Baja California are often invited to teach Kumeyaay of California traditional arts such as the making of baskets, pottery, bows and arrows, cordage, plant foods and medicines, as well as language skills. This dynamic two-way process also finds California Kumeyaay reintroducing songs and traditional games such as peon to their southern relatives.

This process can enrich our knowledge and appreciation of native relationships to the land by providing perspectives that have rarely been included in academic treatises or public planning studies. Archaeologist Sue Wade of the California State Parks Colorado Desert District is in charge of several important archaeological sites on public land in San Diego's Cuyamaca Mountains. "Archaeological information has been gathered from Cuyamaca Rancho State Park for over a century," she explains. "However, little effort has been made to contact the descendents of the people who lived at or have information about the sites in the park so that their interpretations can be incorporated into our understanding of the park's prehistory."

In order to begin including indigenous perceptions of significant cultural sites in the park area, Ms. Wade and anthropologist Michael Wilken, director of research for the Native Cultures Institute of Baja California, arranged to bring three Baja California Kumeyaay elders and a Kumeyaay videographer to Cuyamaca Rancho State Park for three days. During this time, the three elders, videographer, and anthropologist/translator visited various cultural resource sites, recording the elders' interpretations of Kumeyaay ethnobotany, land use, and past lifeways in Cuyamaca Rancho State Park.

Field interviews

The field activities were carried out over three days, from Thursday, May 16 through Saturday, May 18, 2002. During that time, audio and video tapes in Kumeyaay and Spanish (spoken by the Kumeyaay) and in English (translated by the anthropologist) were made to document the site visits. The Kumeyaay participants were Teodora Cuero Aldama, traditional authority of La Huerta community, Baja California; Benita Meza, cultural authority of Juntas de Nejí, Baja California; Norma Meza, daughter of Benita Meza (and translator for her mother who



Figure 1. Kumeyaay cultural consultants Norma Meza (standing), Teodora Cuero (seated, left), Benita Meza (seated, right).

speaks only Kumeyaay); and Javier Ceseña, videographer from San Antonio Necua (Figure 1). Also participating were Sue Wade, Michael Wilken and a number of different park employees and volunteers. Kumeyaay Carmen Lucas, a direct descendent of some of the original inhabitants of the area, was invited to participate but was not able to join the group.

Although the three elders all live in Baja California, they all have Kumeyaay relatives in California and were well aware of their ancestors' occasional visits to the area. Doña Benita, whose community is geographically the closest of the Baja California Kumeyaay communities to the park, remembered that her ancestors had been there:

Norma (translating for Benita): They told her that when they came here, there were reservations and they would stay for a few days and then return to Nejí. All her uncles and aunts would come and spend time here: the Calles, the Matas and the Cueros ... the would all come to get things or when the pine nuts were scarce [at home] they would come here.

The first day's interviews took place at and near the Stonewall Village archaeological site. Important insights into the use of different types of mortars were provided by the informants, including a vivid description of how native people might have used the site and its specific grinding stones (Figure 2). Possible meanings of the Kumeyaay name of the site were discussed. Special prayers and blessings for the site were offered.

The second day's activities focused on Arrowmaker's Ridge, another important archaeological site with a significant number of grinding stone features, cupules, lithic and ceramic remains, and landscape features (Figure 3). Although the hike to the site was rather arduous for the elders, they were able to provide important information regarding the cultural



Figure 2. Benita (left) and Teodora (right) reflect on mortars at Stonewall Village site.



Figure 3. Teodora and Benita reflect on how Kumeyaay people might have lived at the Arrowmaker's Ridge site.



Figure 4. Teodora demonstrates use of cupule for cracking open acorns.

and natural resources of the site, particularly the abundant cupule formations that they believed had been made and used for cracking open acorns and removing the outer shell (Figure 4).

Teodora: Look, you take a big fat acorn, and you hold it like this, you see? Then you go like this: crack, crack, crack! But it was a whole bunch of people, don't you be thinking it was just one. And some would be cleaning it [cracking it open], and so that it wouldn't slip they would make these holes. How rich! And look there's more over here, how rich! Even the children, with a little grinding stone they already had ready ... would use the slicks on the sides of the rock. And that's how they would do it ... but there would be lots of people sitting there. Since the people lived here many years, that's why there are so many of them.

Now you never would have imagined what this was for, but we Indians have more of an idea. We're Indians, how couldn't we know what they used to do? I'll bet you never would have guessed, right?

We used to do the same thing. And not just acorns, but also the islaya seed. You could put two or three islaya kernels in the bigger slicks to crush and break them open. Only the manos [ginding stones] aren't here because they would hide them.

The question of seasonal occupation of the site and mobility of Kumeyaay people was



Figure 5. Benita discusses traditional use of elderberry flowers.

discussed. Teodora mentioned that people probably lived there when it was “hot” (rather than in winter) and then might have gone down to the coast for the winter, taking some of their native foods, like acorns, with them to supplement their seafood diet.

Teodora: The Indians who lived here when it was hot, they might have done all this here: peeling and preparing the acorns, they could take it with them to some other place where they had a mortar to grind it. Even though there weren't any oaks there, they might take the acorns from here, because they would walk a lot.

Norma: Many kilometers to get their food.

Teodora: They would take their food, they would take their coals to make fire in a clay pot they had especially for that purpose. Because they would burn greasewood [*Adenostoma fasciculatum*], *vara prieta* as we call it, a firewood I really like because it makes nice coals. And these coals they would carry in a little clay pot so that they could light a fire right away. It was a special little pot with holes in it so that the coals could breathe so they wouldn't go out, and handles.

They tell me that long ago in my village of La Huerta, they would prepare acorns and then in winter they would take them to the coasts of Ensenada, there was nothing there so they would take it with them to make their mush there and eat it with mussels, with abalone, fish and other seafoods. And there they would pass the winter until it was time to go back up to the mountains.

Many of the different plant species found in the site and environs were discussed, in particular the elderberry (*Sambucus mexicanus*) (Figure 5), hollyleaf cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*), flattop buckwheat (*Eriogonum fasciculatum*) and *pamita* (Figure 6), a member of the radish



Figure 6. Teodora examines *pamita* seed.

family, as yet unidentified.

Teodora: We call the elderberry *kepesh*. The flower is good for a fever and the leaves help reduce swelling, you just put a lot of the leaves on the swollen area. The fruit can be eaten when it's ripe; there are two kinds, the black and the white, like little grapes. Then it can be cooked and made into a mush, adding a little sugar because it's sour.

Benita: The flower is used to cut a fever, especially for children who have a high fever.

Teodora: There are two types of flattop buckwheat: there's one with a green leaf and then this other one. The buckwheat flower, especially of the green leaf type, has a cluster of white flowers that can be picked and stored for medicine. It's very good for a stomach ache and also for heart problems. I know it's very effective because I have taken it, especially after I work too hard, my heart starts pounding hard. Then I boil up the flower cluster with some cinnamon and drink it and it calms me down, it settles it down very well. The root is also very good for children when they have problems with their chest (wheezing), this root takes care of it.

Norma: [Benita] used the root for diarrhea; they boiled it to make a tea.

Teodora: You just put in one, two or three of these little flower clusters.

Norma: You drink it once a day.

Teodora: It's not bitter or anything, it's a very good tea. There are many things to eat here: first the acorns, manzanita, *islaya* [holly leaf cherry], I can see one of those plants from here. Perhaps these tall pines also provide some kind of seeds. They might have also hunted some kinds of animals like deer, rabbits, hares; there are many animals to eat such as squirrels, badgers, raccoons, and if there's water that's even better.

Norma: We call the squirrel *jamash* in Kumiai. It can be roasted on the coals, it's delicious.

Teodora: Until it's golden brown.

Norma: Yes, you have to skin it first because it's a bit tough. The woodrat you don't have to skin; the big ones, they just put them on the coals with skin and all.

Teodora: This [*pamita*] was also eaten; it could be toasted in a clay pot and since it's so tiny it just had to be heated up, then ground and made into a drink. It would turn out quite thick like a mush and could also be used for a swollen stomach, what the doctors call infection.

Benita: They say that pine pitch was used for pain in the chest, to get out the "air," they would smear the pitch onto a leaf and then stick it on to get rid of the pain, also on the back or wherever there was "air."

Teodora: It's very useful, we still use pinyon pitch. Once I was getting pneumonia, so my mother prepared the pitch in a piece of denim, but she also ground up some *chuchupate* herb and mixed it into the pitch. Then she took this and stuck it on my chest and another on my back. It feels like it's pulling you, in your back and your chest, when you warm it up and put it on it feels like it's pulling. Well it cut the pneumonia and then they could take me to a doctor. It's very useful, that pinyon pitch.

When that pine pitch is on branches, you can take a little one, boil it and drink the tea; it's really good for a cold.

In the past when there were good rains, these beautiful green leaves of moss would sprout up, this is what was used to make a remedy for a woman who can't have children. They would make it into a tea, and I believe it works because I knew an old woman, really old, and there was a couple that had been together many years and they didn't have any children. So they asked her what kind of remedy she might give them; so she would cook this stuff up and take it to them by the gallon. She never let them see what it was, but the lady was drinking it for about a month and then she was able to have kids, two sons. Later she had two daughters, that woman had four in all.

The elders were asked to provide any insight they might have about how people might have lived at the Arrowmaker's Ridge site.

Teodora: I would like to tell you some things about this place, but there are some things that I can't tell you, so I'll just tell you the things that I can. The way I see it, what I think is that there were a lot of people living here. That's why there are so many mortars where they worked, where they would make their foods from their seeds. For many, many years they lived here. Who knows what they did

when someone died, that's hard to know. We don't see graves, nothing. Maybe they cremated them, they say that the people in the past were burned when they died.

They surely chose this place, because that's how we Indians are. We have a place that we belong to, we get old there, we die, and the younger generations continue there; I think that's what happened here. But it's hard to say more because there's no one left. I think people must have lived here for a long, long time, thousands of years!

Well it makes me very sad and very happy to have come to see this, thanks to you ... it make me glad to see the works of my Indian ancestors. And it makes me wonder, what could these poor ones have been like? Nowadays we have our work, we know how to make a living and yet we still suffer. How did they manage? There were only Indians, they had to really make an effort to eat, to be able to sleep, to dress themselves, or maybe not, they just used leaves or tree bark to clothe themselves. And they just ate seeds and water. If they got sick, they surely knew which herbs they could use to heal themselves. Surely they had much knowledge, more than we, because they knew how to make these clay pots and many other things, and we know none of this. Some of us Indians may know something, but very little. Well there you go, as for me, that's what I see, that's what I'm thinking. All of this is history, a great history that they have left recorded here so that some day we might be seeing it. Did they ever imagine this? Maybe they did, no one knows.

Benita's response to the site reflected a constant theme for the three ladies at each of the sites visited: the perception that the sites are attended by the spirits of the generations of Kumeyaay who had lived in the area (Figure 7).

Benita: Many people lived here and their spirits are still here. That's why the trees don't grow much [in this clearing], because there are still many spirits.

Teodora: It's true, there are many spirits here. That's why this land here that they chose, I think it's sacred.... This is a very beautiful place, very sacred, I'm going to give great thanks to the spirits who come near us. We have come to see where they were, where they were born, where they worked in these rocks, so I'm going to give thanks to them. Because they're listening to us, they're watching us, only we can't see them.

Now I would like to take these herbs that I've brought and cast smoke on this rock where so many people worked; children, elders, women ... that I have seen with my own eyes.

From a natural observation area, the local geography was visually surveyed and possible meanings of Kumeyaay place names were discussed.

Teodora: Of course this is useful [that I also explain these things in Kumiai], because when I retire from this world, in another 10 years, people will say, "the late Teodora Cuero was here, talking about herbs and lots of other things"; that's what they'll say, of course.

The elders were impressed by the numerous bedrock mortars at the site and noted the placement and distribution of the depressions. Norma remembered an area in her native Nejí



Figure 7. Blessings in the Kumeyaay language were offered by Teodora at the site.

where there are similar groupings of mortars and provided an important insight into the social functions of the grinding areas based on the experience of her own childhood (Figure 8):

Norma: They would sit next to each other (facing each other) and they could even hook their feet together and work like that ... there they would be the two of them together, one seated like this and the other facing her, working together with the same rhythm. And over here there would be another sitting, over there the same, or they could sit in a row or all right next to each other so that they could carry on a conversation.

On the third day, the group visited the Cuyamaca Village site and discussed various features of the site, including interpretation of historically documented Kumeyaay place names, traditional uses of quartz crystal and comparisons of Kumeyaay oral tradition. Norma found some pieces of dark stone and brought them to the group's attention.

Norma: This rock is called *wyí pó* in Kumiai, it was used to make mortars and metates.

Teodora: And this rock was not from around here, they brought it from far away, maybe from the ocean, because this rock doesn't break too easily. That's why they would use this to make pottery, to cut things, or for example to skin a deer or a rabbit, to remove the skin, because in the past they didn't have [metal] knives or anything. We have a name for this rock.

Norma: *Wí jkwá.*

Teodora: We would call it *wí jushá.*



Figure 8. Norma Meza demonstrates traditional posture and technique for grinding acorns.

Norma: Oh! The one they used for the tips of the arrows or on the end of a long stick to spear a deer or a rabbit, they also used it to kill people.

Teodora: That's right.

Norma: It was like a bullet, very sharp. It could also be used like a file to smooth a wooden stick.

Throughout the three-day visit, the elders attempted to interpret the meanings of local Kumeyaay place names. This turned out to be especially difficult due to the unpredictable methods used over 150 years for transcribing Kumeyaay phonemes to written versions for the English speaker. Nonetheless, insights were provided on a variety of place names, including the name Cuyamaca:

Norma: [We] all agree that the most correct version would be “what the water (or the cloud) left behind -- *kwí amáka*.”

Teodora: Whatever they saw, whatever they heard, those were the names that they left. If someone goes and falls, then they call it *tipei knesh* [fallen Indian], or if you go and sit down to rest then they will call that place *tipei piu knak* [Indian sits], that's what the Indians based their names on. It was whatever they saw, not something that they thought up.

Norma: Or something they heard, like the crow: *kaak*, the crows cry “kaak”, so then we Indians call them *kaak*.

Conclusions

Clearly, the insights provided by the Kumeyaay elders add a rich and lively perspective to our understanding of archaeological sites within the larger context of native lifeways. In order to ensure the permanence of this important legacy for future generations, further studies of this type should be carried out in both Mexico and the U.S. while the current generation of elders is still able to participate. We deeply appreciate the support of all who made this unique collaboration possible: California State Parks, Colorado Desert District; Cuyamaca Rancho State Park; the Southwest Center for Environmental Research and Policy; the Native Cultures Institute of Baja California (CUNA) and of course the elders and the many volunteers who participated.