

Ethnography: dreamed, remembered and contemporary landscapes

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Here I will review the existing ethnographic literature related to ethnobotany to provide a context for understanding the current state of research in the Kumeyaay region. I will explore the journey of ethnobotanical knowledge from ancient times to the present through oral tradition, through ethnographic descriptions of Kumeyaay relationships to plants and the land, and through contemporary views of Kumeyaay community landscapes.

Sources

Ethnographic accounts of the northern peninsula's Yuman groups produced since the early twentieth century contain valuable cultural information that sheds light on both prehistoric and historical indigenous lifeways, including documentation of native plant collection, processing, and consumption, and the cultural and historical contexts in which these activities were conducted (Laylander 1987; Wilken-Robertson and Laylander 2006). Since the beginning of the discipline, anthropologists have recognized the urgency of documenting the interactions between native peoples and their environments, especially given the dramatic decline in indigenous populations and cultures, which they assumed (often erroneously) to be on the verge of disappearance (Laylander 1987; Lightfoot and Parrish 2009). In Baja California, U.S. researchers carried out early efforts to describe "vanishing" indigenous lifeways, including observations of human-plant interactions, as part of wider efforts to establish cultural histories of California and the Southwest (Drucker 1937, 1941).

In this study, I focus on the Baja California section of the Kumeyaay region. However, I also consider work done in the U.S. that is relevant to the ethnobotany of Baja California and its cultural contexts. Kumeyaay cultural authorities such as Delfina Cuero (Shipek 1991) have demonstrated strong continuities between Kumeyaay culture north and south of the U.S.-Mexican border, and biologists (Minnich and Franco 1998) have likewise demonstrated the transboundary continuum of botanical resources and the physical environment.

Ethnographic context of ethnobotanical knowledge

After almost two and a half centuries of cultural exchange between indigenous and nonnative peoples in the region, and a century of ethnographic descriptions of indigenous interactions with plants and the environment, how can the ethnobotanical knowledge of contemporary Kumeyaay consultants be presented in a way that recognizes its long journey from prehistory to the twenty-first century? In this section, I synthesize relevant information from ethnographic documentation to contextualize current indigenous ethnobotanical knowledge and practice. I will consider three phases of Kumeyaay time and space, based on ethnographic materials and my own fieldwork. In the first, I consider a time when the Kumeyaay world was formed and occupied all space. In the second, I explore the remembered territory and lifeways of

the Kumeyaay as Kumeyaay ethnographic consultants have described them. In the final section, I examine the contemporary landscapes of today's Kumeyaay communities, including those of the consultants whose knowledge has enriched this study.

The dreamed landscape: Kumeyaay origins

In most early accounts of Kumeyaay origin mythologies (DuBois 1901; Gifford 1918; Waterman 1910), the relationship between humans and the land begins in a dreamlike sea, a primeval amniotic fluid from which two brothers emerge to create the world. They create the sun, the moon, and humans out of clay, and their sibling rivalries lead to many of the problems that exist in the world today. Kumeyaay consultant Aurora Meza Calles of Nejí tells a version of the myth learned from her grandmother:

On this day we are going to tell the story of the twin boys who came up from the bottom of the sea to make the world. The twins were at the bottom of the ocean when they thought,

“Let's create the world. Let's make people up there,” they were thinking.

“How are we going to get up there?” asked the older one.

“Swimming,” said the younger one.

“How will we get there?”

“Swimming,” they both were thinking.

“Let's get going!” So then the older one leaped up. He went up first, swimming with his eyes closed. He came to the edge of the water and then sat down. The younger one was still underneath, and then he asked, “How did you get up there, brother?”

“Looking around, with my eyes wide open, I came up through the water.”

“How is it up there?”

“It's really cold.”

“Oh!” said the one underwater. The younger brother came up with his eyes open and the seawater burned his eyes.

“Oh brother, why didn't you tell me the truth? Now I am blind.” He now had his eyes closed, they were hurting.

“It's not my fault you're blind. I came up and nothing happened to me. So now I'm going to make the earth.” He was supposedly going to make the world, but he had no idea how to do it. Then he said, “My brother, it's not easy making people.”

“What is the world like?” asked the blind one.

“Well the sky is stuck to the earth,” said the older one.

“Ahhh,” said the blind one.

“Now I'm going to make the world.”

He lay down on his back, and with his two feet and his hands he pushed the sky up, and there it stayed. He kicked it until it stayed up there.

“I'm very cold, brother. Make me a sun so that it will warm things up.”

So the older brother quickly formed a tortilla of clay and threw it toward the east. But it would slip off and fall down, and when he tried again it just kept falling.

“Oh, little brother, it keeps falling down, I don't know what's wrong with

it.”

“Give it to me,” said the younger one. “Bring it over here.”

So he brought him some clay and the blind one started forming it. He made a little ball, and then he made it into a round tortilla. He pulled out one of his whiskers, stuck it in the middle and then threw it toward the east. It stayed up in the sky.

“Did the sun come out?” asked the younger brother.

“It’s there now, but it’s still cold.” (It was the moon.)

“Then something is missing. Give me more clay.” He started forming it. He made a tortilla, then pulled out several of his own whiskers and put them around the edge of the tortilla, and threw it toward the east. He threw it, and the sun came out. When it came out, it started warming everything up.

“Oh older brother, you should make people because the world is too empty.”

He started forming clay to make people, but he just made a long round piece without any figure. Then the blind one asked,

“What are they like? Did you give them a mouth and nose and eyes?”

“No,” said the older one. “It’s very windy; the wind would just get in their eyes, that’s why I didn’t make them.”

“Oh, brother, bring me some earth and I will make them.” Then the blind one made them, he gave them form. He made them with feet, hands, head, nose, eyes, and mouth. From his own whiskers, he made their hair. He lifted them up, breathed into their nose, and put them back down. And that’s how he gave life to the clay figures [Mesa 2011].

A century earlier, Jim McCarty of Campo, California, told a similar version in which plants are provided for people to use: “Wild plums (akai) and chemise brush (epi) were here at Campo for the people to eat and burn” (Gifford 1918:172). Like myths from many parts of the world, these Kumeyaay prose narratives illustrate the construction of culture (Brunvand 1978) and anchor the people, their behavior, and their relationship with the environment in both the natural world and the one created by the “thinking” of the brothers (Waterman 1910). After this original creation, “the plants and animals used to be people” (Waterman 1910:336) until later culture heroes gave them their names, distinctive markings, and present appearances. The activities of plants during this mythological time explain the development of their current distribution in distinct ideational landscapes of the Kumeyaay (i.e., landscapes that encompass and embody symbolic, natural, and economic features) as the story “The Journey of the Sacred Trees” as told by Kumeyaay Ofelia Muñoz illustrates:

Many years ago, the pine, the pinyon and the oak tree came up this way from the cliffs of the Rumorosa. They were walking toward the coast. After much walking, the pinyon became tired and stayed in the highest part of the mountains; but the pine and the oak kept going. When they were almost about to arrive at the village of La Huerta, where the Kumeyaay Indians still live, the pine became tired and stayed there; for this reason we know that place as the Dancing Pine. From that time on, the Cucapá would do their final singing practice before their arrival at La Huerta, where year after year they would always go for the annual fiesta held on October fourth. Finally, the oak continued its journey, for it intended to continue on to all of the Kumeyaay tribes to give them the acorns they use to prepare their

food, and so it was that it made its way to all of the communities of the coast. And so it is that today, all of the Kumeyaay communities have oaks with which to make acorn mush [Muñoz 2001:22].

The story distinguishes between four major environmental regions of importance to the Kumeyaay. The Rumorosa region along the eastern escarpment of the Sierra Juárez is an area of desert transition that links Baja California with the Colorado River desert lowlands. Along the base of the Rumorosa, palm oases have long supported life in the arid region (Franco 2009). The high sierra pinyon groves, generally to the east of the tall pine forests, provide an important food resource in late summer, where Kumeyaay, Cucapá, Paipai, and other groups often gathered (Hicks 1963). The foothills, such as the area where La Huerta is located, support chaparral and riparian springs such as Jtá (now La Huerta) where bands of the Jat'am lineage stayed during seasonal treks to and from the mountains, desert, and coast (Wilken 2008). The actual "dancing" pine trees are an isolated grove growing in foothill chaparral along the old trail that leads from La Huerta up to the mountains along which the Kumeyaay used to travel up to the pinyon harvest (Teodora Cuero, personal communication). The "communities of the coast," although they are no longer geographically located on the coastline, do occur in association with coastal live oak woodlands (Wilken-Robertson 2004a) and continue to be linked to the coast through Kumeyaay oral tradition.

Remembered plant-scapes: ethnographic studies of Kumeyaay hunting, gathering, and fishing economy

The ancestors of the Kumeyaay made a living as gatherers, hunters, and fishers in the diverse habitats of the region (Hicks 1963; Hohenthal 2001). Although they were aware of agriculture and sometimes traded with the Cucapá and other groups of the Colorado River desert for agricultural items, the Kumeyaay chose to make a living through interaction with the flora and fauna of their territory (Laylander 1987). Small, mobile bands seasonally exploited resources in a variety of habitats, moving from coast to mountains to desert, as different plant resources became available (Hicks 1963; Owen and Michelsen 1994; Shipek 1987). It is not clear if permanent village sites also existed; Owen and Michelsen suggest that bands revolved around a "home base" (Owen and Michelsen 1994). Members of bands belonged to lineages known as *shimulh* in Kumeyaay; these named descent groups were patrilineal, autonomous, and associated with specific territories and resources (Laylander 1987). Five to 10 families including affinals often composed extended family bands; exogamous marriage rules ensured that members of other *shimulh* formed part of the group, providing access to other territories and resources (Shipek 1987). Certain resource areas such as the pinyon groves and the coast may have had wider tribal access; when resources were abundant, several bands might coalesce in these areas (Laylander 1987; Shipek 1991).

Movement throughout the differing ecosystems varied from year to year, depending on the climate and other factors, but generally the Kumeyaay seem to have occupied highland zones during the warmer part of the year and lowland (coastal or desert) zones in the cooler seasons (Hohenthal 2001). Kumeyaay elder Teodora Cuero recalled the migratory pattern that her ancestors from La Huerta followed in the past:

They say that back in the early times there was plenty of manzanita, barrel cactus, chia, pamita seeds, pine nuts, acorns, sweet acorns; all these things produced a lot and that's what people would gather to have food all year long. Certain times they

would go down to the coast, to Eréndira, to the coast of Ensenada, and further on, wherever they could go along the shore to gather mussels and abalones which they would also pack up to carry later for food. They would go down there in winter because it wasn't so cold and once the winter was over, in springtime they would come up this way [La Huerta] since they knew that there would be greens and all kinds of things to eat. From here they would head up to the mountains during the hot time of year to pick pine nuts, acorns, pamita seed, chia and all those things. Once the pine nuts ran out, they would come back here and then back they go to the coast [Wilken-Robertson 2004b:51].

Specific routes for moving through these different habitats depended on both the physical and the social geography of the region; cultural consultants often noted specific routes taken by their ancestors (Hohenthal 2001). Extended family bands had inherited use rights for certain areas and plant, animal, hydrological, mineral, and symbolic resources, or could gain access through affinal relationships with other lineages (Michelsen 1977; Shipek 1987; Spier 1923). Some Kumeyaay were based on the desert side of the mountains and followed an annual round that took them from the desert in the winter up into higher elevations as resources became available, probably focusing more on agave and other plants of the Colorado River desert, and less on coastal live oak acorns (Hohenthal 2001; Spier 1923).

Syntheses of seasonal availability of plant resources in the Kumeyaay and Ko'alh regions may be useful in reconstructing overall patterns of movement through the various habitats of the Kumeyaay region (Hicks 1963; Owen and Michelsen 1994). However, more interdisciplinary research is needed to determine the possibilities of the environment to sustain foraging activities in the region. Generally, the most important resources available to the Kumeyaay in the course of a year would include annual greens in the coastal regions in late winter-early spring (supplemented by fish, shellfish, and acorns left from fall harvest); desert agave and chaparral yucca in foothill areas in late spring; sage and chia seeds, barrel cactus buds, and manzanita in summer, with prickly pears and Mojave yucca fruits ripening after midsummer; by late summer, pinyon and sweet acorns in the Sierra Juárez; in early fall wild cherries; and by late fall-early winter, the harvest of the all-important bitter acorns of the live oak, which the Kumeyaay stored for use throughout winter-early spring (Hicks 1963; Hohenthal 2001; Owen and Michelsen 1994).

These uses of resources have been noted by twentieth-century ethnographers (Hicks 1963; Owen and Michelsen 1994). However, researchers have also pointed out numerous diachronic processes that need to be considered when attempting to reconstruct aboriginal patterns of movement (Timbrook et al. 1993). The abundance and availability of native plant harvests varied from year to year due to climatic cycles and fluctuations throughout the Holocene (West et al. 2007). Beginning in the late eighteenth century, some resources such as native grasses, originally important in the diet of Native Californians, became extinct due to anthropogenic processes such as the introduction of livestock and exotic plant species into the ecosystems of Kumeyaay territory (Shipek 1986, 1993; Timbrook et al. 1993). As the Spanish colonists sought to establish a sedentary, agricultural, and ranching economy in the Californias, they prohibited indigenous traditional management activities such as prescribed burning, and access to many traditional gathering areas became increasingly limited; these changes in human-plant interactions affected the populations of both (Anderson 2005). Data recorded by ethnographers reflect the adjustments native peoples had incorporated into their lifeways as a result of Spanish and Mexican colonization (Timbrook et al. 1993). These factors need to be

considered when interpreting ethnographic documentation of human interaction with plant resources.

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