

## **UC Merced**

### **Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology**

#### **Title**

Memorial to Mrs. Rosalie Pinto Robertson

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1952672f>

#### **Journal**

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 6(1)

#### **ISSN**

0191-3557

#### **Author**

Shipek, Florence C

#### **Publication Date**

1984-07-01

Peer reviewed

# Memorial to Mrs. Rosalie Pinto Robertson



MRS. ROSALIE PINTO ROBERTSON, aged 65, Kumeyaay tribal leader and singer, died on January 16, 1984, of complications following treatment for cancer. She was both a traditionalist and a forward-looking leader seeking improved modern living conditions, health care, education, and jobs for the Kumeyaay people, while maintaining their traditions, religious beliefs and practices. For thirty years she worked with anthropologists and linguists interpreting the southern California Kumeyaay (Diegueño-Kamia) culture and language. She invited students to the reservation for fiestas and ceremonies and spoke to

anthropology and linguistic classes both at San Diego State University and the University of California at San Diego. Over the years she provided information to local museums, state parks (Cuyamaca, Anza Borrego, Torrey Pines), and to the California Department of Transportation.

As she became aware of the misconceptions in the earlier literature on the Kumeyaay (calling them Diegueño, Kamia, Ipai and Tipai), she desired that correct information be published and recently convinced other elders to give permission for the publication of much religious and specialist knowledge, previously withheld as secret. To protect sacred places, and to preserve the traditional knowledge and religion, she realized that it must be recorded, interpreted and published correctly. She spent much time explaining and interpreting Kumeyaay culture and beliefs to the non-Indian world.

The earlier generation of anthropologists had interviewed her immediate ancestors, who were performing their duties as *Kuchut kwa-taay* (tribal chief), *Kwaaypaay* (captain or band chief), and ritual leaders, acting as intermediaries protecting them from the external world. Among her immediate relatives interviewed were her great grandfather Paayon (Pion) interviewed by Davis (1919) and Lee (1931); her great-uncle Jim McCarty Hilmep, by Gifford (1918) and Spier (1923); and her grandfather Jose Hilmep (Jose Largo), by Gifford (1918) and Spier (1923). Through the past leadership intermarriage traditions, she had relatives among the leadership of all the surrounding tribes and had

been raised speaking Cocopa and Quechan as well as Kumeyaay, and learned English at school.

Paayon, last tribal chief, or *Kuchut kwa-taay* and Jose Hilmep, *Kwaaypaay* had trained Rosalie and her brothers in the religious and cultural traditions of the Kumeyaay, as well as in the duties and responsibilities of leadership to protect and care for the people and to protect the reservation land and sacred places wherever possible. In the absence of her brothers during their World War II service in the armed forces, she was handed the duty of leadership by her grandfather at his death. She continued, as had her grandfather and the other traditional tribal leaders in southern California, to participate in the Mission Indian Federation opposing policies of the Bureau of Indian Affairs which the traditional leaders felt would damage their people.

I first met Mrs. Robertson in 1954, after Public Law 280 was enacted and the Bureau of Indian Affairs had ceased providing services overnight, when the Agency was reduced to three officials in Riverside for all 33 southern California reservations. She sought sources of information to learn the necessary procedures for dealing with state and county agencies that were now supposed to provide services. In working with her, I became aware of the existing tribal level leadership structures that functioned intertribally throughout southern California, supporting each other politically in dealings with the government, and passing on new information obtained for the use of all. When the information about Kumeyaay (Diegueño-Kamia) land use was needed for the Mission Indian Claims case (Docket 80 before the Indian Claims Commission) she introduced me to numerous elderly Kumeyaay plant, farming, and curing specialists, among whom was Delfina Cuero (Shipek 1968). She provided information and introduced older Kumeyaay able to provide information leading to federal recognition for the

Jamul Band.

In recent years she provided information to the Bureau of Land Management and to several Environmental Impact Assessment firms in order to protect sacred places and cemeteries from secular desecration. When discussion and negotiation failed she brought lawsuits to recover the remains of ancestors illegally excavated from cemeteries used until 1900. Altogether, much of the recent ethnographic and linguistic information being published about the Kumeyaay has come either from Mrs. Robertson directly or indirectly through her services in translating information from older tribal members who recognized her traditional leadership and agreed to be interviewed through her intercession.

For years, worried about declining participation and interest in traditional religious ceremonies and beliefs, she had actively encouraged younger Kumeyaay to train and participate in the religious ceremonial singing and leadership. Her encouragement has led to an increased participation and maintenance of the traditional Kumeyaay religious ceremonies and beliefs.

Part of the responsible leadership tradition she inherited was that of providing aid to the sick, needy, elderly, and helpless. Anyone who called or came to her door for help received it unstintingly. She was also asked for and provided aid to the Kumeyaay and Paipai reservations in northern Baja California. Among her other services, she was the primary mover in bringing the existence of the plight of the Paipai and Kumeyaay Indians of northern Baja California to the attention of the Mexican government and acquiring for the reservations the services of that country's equivalent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Those of us who worked with Rosalie Pinto Robertson were privileged to know a woman who would arise from the sick bed to help another person and who saw neither

tribe, race, creed, nor national boundary if a call came for help. She worked consistently to improve understanding and justice for all peoples.

FLORENCE C. SHIPEK  
University of Wisconsin - Parkside  
Kenosha, WI 53191

### REFERENCES

- Davis, Edward  
1919 Diegueño Ceremony of the Death Images. Contributions V(2). New York: Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation.
- Gifford, Edward W.  
1918 Clans and Moieties in Southern California. Berkeley: University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 14(2): 155-219.
- Lee, Melicent H.  
1931 The Indians and I. San Diego: Thomas Givens Dawson.
- Shipek, Florence C.  
1968 The Autobiography of Delfina Cuero, as told to Florence C. Shipek. Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop.
- Spier, Leslie  
1923 Southern Diegueño Customs. Berkeley: University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 20(16): 297-310.

