

UC Merced

The Journal of California Anthropology

Title

The Origin of the Name "Cahuilla"

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2361f395>

Journal

The Journal of California Anthropology, 4(1)

Author

Bright, William

Publication Date

1977-07-01

Peer reviewed

The Origin of the Name "Cahuilla"

WILLIAM BRIGHT

The term "Cahuilla" is now well known as the name of a tribe and language of southern California, belonging to the Southern Californian Shoshonean (or Takic) branch of the Uto-Aztecan family, and as a place name designating an Indian Reservation, a valley, and a mountain in Riverside County (Gudde 1969:46). Several alternative spellings have been in use at various times, such as Coahuila and Coahuilla—apparently by confusion with the name of the Mexican state of Coahuila (Kroeber 1925:693). The name of the Coachella Valley may represent a garbled mixture of this same term with the word Conchilla (Spanish, meaning "small shell"), which had earlier been applied to that valley (Gudde 1969:68).

It seems clear that the term "Cahuilla" was used first to refer to the Indian tribe, and later as a geographical name. Furthermore, several early writers also used the form "Cahuillo," implying a Spanish usage with masculine *-o* vs. feminine *-a* (cf. Whipple 1850:17). But if we seek the origin of the word "Cahuilla," we encounter still further confusions in the published sources. Thus Barrows (1900:21) proposed a relationship with Kaweah—the name of an Indian tribe, speaking a Yokuts dialect, in the southern San Joaquin Valley. However, there is no known historic or linguistic connection between the two tribes, and the similarity in names is apparently a mere coincidence (Kroeber 1925:693).

Another suggestion, apparently first published by Hugo Reid in 1852 (cf. Heizer 1968:9), is that the name "Cahuilla" reflects the Cahuilla word for "master." This word, as pronounced by Katherine Saubel, is in fact *qáwiy'a*, literally "his master or boss"; compare *neqáwiy'a* 'my boss'. These are

evidently forms of a stem *-qawiya*, which occurs only in possessed forms. However, it is hard to understand why there should be a shift in accent from the initial syllable, as it appears in the native word, to the second syllable, which is accented in the Spanish or English pronunciation. Furthermore, the meaning relationship to the tribal name is difficult to explain—who were supposed to be the masters of whom?

Finally, it has been noted that the term "Cahuillo" was once applied to Indians living near Ensenada, Baja California, in Mexico. A vocabulary of their language was published by Nicolás León (1903:273-6) under the impression that it was to be linked with the Cahuilla language of California; however Kroeber showed that the material actually represented a dialect of Diegueño, a Yuman language, and commented:

It is . . . apparent that the term Cahuillo . . . which has ordinarily and properly been used of the Shoshonean Indians who inhabit the region between the San Jacinto and San Bernardino ranges in southern California . . . , has somehow also come to be a designation, how commonly is not known, of the northernmost Yuman Indians of Lower California [1905:571].

Kroeber here seems to suggest that the term was transferred from the Southern Californian tribe to the group in Mexico. However, evidence has now come to light, in the unpublished papers of the late J.P. Harrington, that the term may in fact have referred to Indians in Mexico, and only later have been transferred to the Southern Californian Cahuilla.

The evidence to which I refer exists in MS box no. 6061 (original box no. 349) of the Harrington papers now preserved in the National Anthropological Archives of the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington D.C.—and specifically in a folder containing several fragmentary drafts of an article under the title "Solution of the origin of the tribal

name Cahuilla." The folder contains correspondence dated as late as 1958, and the handwriting used by Harrington suggests that he was working on these materials in his later years.

Among the data assembled by Harrington are several points which have, as far as I know, not been noted by Californianists, as follows:

(1) The term "Cahuilla," as applied to the Southern Californian tribe, is attested at least as far back as 1824, in the spelling Cagüilla, by the California State Papers in the Bancroft Library, at Berkeley (cf. Gudde 1969:46); the form "Cuchuil" which Gudde cites from 1782 is found in archives from Monterey County, and it is not clear that its reference is to the Southern Californian tribe.

(2) The name for the tribe was given by Harrington's Cahuilla consultants as *kawí:ya?*—"a term said by the Indian tradition to have been taken from Spanish."

(3) According to long-time residents of Southern California, the term "Cahuilla" had been used in local Spanish with several meanings. For instance, "Any Southern California Shoshonean coming to live in the Santa Barbara area [where a different family of languages, namely Chumash, was spoken] was spoken of as a Cahuilla." Furthermore, "Juan Bernal, earlier County Surveyor of Los Angeles County, said that he had heard the expression *No vale ni un Cahuilla* 'It is not worth five cents' [lit., 'It's not even worth a Cahuilla.]" Finally, "Black hornets used to be called Cahuillas."

(4) The Mexican use of the term, as referring to Indians of Baja California, is documented by an entry in Santamaría's dictionary of American Spanish (1942, I:266). I quote Harrington's translation into English: "CAHUIL(L)AS . . . Name which has been given in Lower California . . . to the Cochimí or Laimón Indians brought to civilization and who live in villages in the regions of the north of the peninsula; they are also called *Caúllas*."

(5) Santamaría's information is, in turn,

taken from an earlier Mexican source (Diguet 1912:12-13). I again quote Harrington's translation:

When Lower California was discovered, the region was occupied by three tribes of Indians . . . designated by the names Cochimís, Guaycuras, and Pericúes . . . The Cochimís . . . occupied the northern part of the peninsula from the 26th degree to the mouth of the Colorado . . . The Cochimís or Laimones . . . were divided into the Cochimís proper and the Cochimís of the north. This difference which the missionaries had established was not based on ethnic characters, but served rather to distinguish the evangelized Indians from those which, living more to the north, had not yet abandoned their savage state. Of the Cochimís there do not remain today any except those of the north. Some have accepted civilization . . . and are designated in the region by the name Cahuillas or Caúllas

(6) One more reference to the use of the term in Baja California, as identified by Harrington, is that of North's article on "The Native Tribes of Lower California" (1908:239): "On the timber-clad heights of San Pedro Mártir lived the Kiliwas—or as they have been styled by the Mexican military authorities, the Cahuillas." We may note that Kiliwa is a Yuman language, still spoken in the 1970's by a few survivors in Baja California.

From these data, Harrington puts together an argument which seems to me persuasive. The name Cahuillo or Cahuilla probably came originally from Cochimí, a language of Baja California for which only the scantest data remain to us. It was adopted by the Spanish to mean "a non-missionized Indian." In this sense, it was being applied, in the early years of this century, to speakers of Yuman languages—Diegueño, Kiliwa, and perhaps others—in the northern part of Baja California. In the meantime, the term had also been carried to southern California, where it was applied to

the non-missionized tribe which we now know as the Cahuilla. Under the mission system, the extensions of meaning to "something of little value," or alternatively to something as dangerous as black hornets, would be natural. Finally, in terms of this argument, the derivation of Cahuilla from *qáwiy'a* 'master' is probably to be taken as a folk-etymology.

In attempts to discover the origins of words, we can never go back beyond a certain point. In the present case, since it is unlikely that we will ever have full data on the Cochimí language, we may never know what the original Cochimí meaning of the word "Cahuilla" may have been. But I believe we may accept the data assembled by Harrington as showing that—unlike other tribal names such as Serrano or Luiseño—the term "Cahuilla" did have an Indian origin, and that it was used by Spanish speakers in Baja California to mean "a non-missionized Indian." In that sense, it was apparently applied to the Southern California tribe that we call the Cahuilla today.

University of California, Los Angeles

REFERENCES

- Barrows, David P.
1900 The Ethno-botany of the Coahuilla Indians of Southern California. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. (Reprinted 1967, Malki Museum Press, Banning.)
- Diguet, Léon
1912 Territorio de la Baja California: Reseña Geográfica y Estadística. Paris & México: Librería de la Vda. de Ch. Bouret.
- Gudde, Erwin G.
1969 California Place Names (rev. ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Heizer, Robert F.
1968 The Indians of Los Angeles County: Hugo Reid's Letters of 1852. Los Angeles: Southwest Museum Papers 21.
- Kroeber, A.L.
1905 Supposed Shoshoneans in Lower California. *American Anthropologist* 7: 570-572.
1925 Handbook of the Indians of California. Washington: Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 78.
- León, Nicolás
1903 Los Comanches y el dialecto cahuillo de la Baja California. *Anales del Museo Nacional de México*, la época 7:263-278.
- North, Arthur W.
1908 The Native Tribes of Lower California. *American Anthropologist* 10:236-250.
- Santamaría, Francisco J.
1942 Diccionario General de Americanismos (3 vols.). México: Robredo.
- Whipple, A.W.
1850 Extract from a Journal of an Expedition from San Diego, California, to the Rio Colorado. Washington: Report of the Secretary of War, pp. 2-28.



A Chumash Pottery Jar

ROBERT H. CRABTREE
CLAUDE N. WARREN

This note describes a pottery jar associated with a burial in a proto-historic Chumash cemetery (CA-SBa-60) and places it in a regional and historical context.

Aboriginal Southern California represents an important cultural frontier, providing considerable information for cultural historical studies, in their broadest meaning, which we take to include cultural processes. That part of southern California consisting of the Mojave and Colorado deserts and the coastal strip south of the San Luis Rey River was a region in which native cultures were in part influenced by the Meso-American frontier cultures of