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Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology

Title

Kumeyaay Ethnobotany:
Shared Heritage of the Californias

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9h49q5m9>

Journal

Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology, 39(1)

ISSN

0191-3557

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Publication Date

2019

Peer reviewed

REVIEWS

Kumeyaay Ethnobotany: Shared Heritage of the Californias

Michael Wilken-Robertson
San Diego: Sunbelt Publications, Inc., 2018,
312 pages, ISBN: 9781941384305, \$29.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Kristin M. Hoppa

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1901 Spinnaker Dr., Ventura, CA 93001

An excellent addition to the bookshelves of anthropologists, botanists, and anyone with an interest in Baja California, this book contains a wealth of cultural information and an accessible guide to native plants. Beautiful photographs throughout the book feature the landscape, native plants, processing techniques, and the Kumeyaay themselves.

The first and second chapters set the stage for understanding Kumeyaay-plant interactions through a review of the available archaeological and ethnohistoric information, respectively. While evidence for late Pleistocene occupation is scarce, there are extensive shell middens and milling implements dating to the middle Holocene (beginning 8,000 years ago) and sites with pottery and smaller projectile points dating to the late prehistoric period (beginning 1,300 years ago), although it is not clear whether these populations are related. Ethnohistoric documents include descriptions from European explorers (beginning with Cabrillo in 1542), Franciscan and Dominican missionaries (who first arrived in 1769), and various nineteenth century writers. Kumeyaay territory was divided by the U.S./Mexico border in 1848, and further so by mining claims (gold was discovered in the 1870s) and private ranches. Today, approximately 600 descendants of Kumeyaay and Ko'ahl speakers live in indigenous communities managed through federal land grants, as well as in non-federally recognized communities. The author worked with consultants from a range of communities that provided varying perspectives and knowledge of different ecosystems.

In chapters three and four, Wilken-Robertson shifts from outsider to insider knowledge. In contrast to the cultural chronology used by archaeologists, chapter

three discusses the ethnographic literature in terms of three phases of Kumeyaay time and space: the “dreamed landscape” of mythical origins, the “remembered plantscape” of traditional ecological knowledge, and the “contemporary Kumeyaay landscapes” within distinct communities. The author does a wonderful job of weaving together these chronologies to highlight cultural continuity and persistent traditions within the changing landscapes. The fourth chapter of the book focuses on Kumeyaay language, noting that there are only about 60 fluent speakers of Kumeyaay in Baja California, all of whom are over 20, and the majority (71%) of whom are over 60 years of age. These dynamics and the threat of language loss highlight the importance of preserving the information contained in this book.

Chapter five delves into the field methods underlying the ethnographic research. Wilken-Robertson starts with an overview of some of the ethnobotanical work relevant to the Baja region and discusses his first-hand collection of data from sixteen Kumeyaay consultants, all of whom were plant specialists and fluent speakers of the Kumeyaay or related Ko'ahl languages.

Chapter six contains ethnobotanical information on 47 plants representing “a range of different plant types (e.g., trees, shrubs, cacti, and perennials) from distinct ecosystems that play an important role in Kumeyaay culture and provide examples of various plant uses for food, medicine, tools, construction, and ritual-ceremonial purposes” (p. 77). There are detailed descriptions of the plants, their economic uses, how they are processed, and other historical or modern anecdotes. There are also stunning photographs of the gathering and processing of plants, as well as resulting fibers, food dishes, etc. I was particularly impressed with the photos illustrating the many steps of acorn processing, along with a discussion of how and why acorn is still an important part of contemporary subsistence, even in communities where most food is purchased.

The remaining chapters offer thoughts on interpreting, preserving, and applying ethnobotanical knowledge. Chapter seven, “Reflections,” links the ethnobotanical knowledge recorded and presented here through time and space. Wilken-Robertson reflects on the linguistic

ties and common practices among neighboring tribes, as well as the links between prehistoric and contemporary practices. This chapter also reflects on how the loss of land is connected to a loss of knowledge, noting that most consultants knew only about the plants in their immediate vicinity. Chapter eight discusses the relationship between ethnobotanical knowledge and sustainability, highlighting the fact that the Kumeyaay and their predecessors have long been managing natural resources through prohibitions involving harvesting and controlled burning. A discussion of modern challenges includes resource harvesting permits and “the difficulties of organizing communities that have been marginalized for so long” (p. 236). The final chapter offers some insight into the

future and how ethnobotanical knowledge can be used to support and empower native communities. The author discusses his involvement with the Tecate Community Museum, which includes an interactive ethnobotanical garden, as well as ongoing efforts to share knowledge through educational workshops and traditional arts.

Overall, this is a wonderful book that will be of interest to a wide range of people. The photographs paint a vivid picture for even the casual reader, while the narrative provides a compelling story of enduring traditions in the Baja region, and the ethnobotanical information is an excellent reference for researchers. Plants are listed in the index by both their common and scientific names, making this book accessible to a diverse audience.



Forging Communities in Colonial Alta California

Kathleen L. Hull and John G. Douglass, eds.
Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018,
292 pp., \$60.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Kristina Crawford

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Communities are forged through the interactions of people across time and in space and place. With the rise of the internet, it has become apparent that it is not proximity but continual or repeated interactions that builds communities. But what is a community? Interaction can operate at different scales and with different foci. It can involve regional or local interactions along kinship, language, religion, economic, and other axes. Meaningful expressions of community can include spaces, places, rituals, and daily life. The practices and contexts of community can be seen in materials and spatial organizations that can be recovered with archaeological techniques and archival investigations. However, the scale of community is ill-defined in most hunter-gatherer-forager studies.

Forging Communities in Colonial Alta California is an edited volume based upon an organized symposium

at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in 2015. The symposium was designed to explore community formation, reformation, and continuity among Native Californians during times of dramatic change. The present volume is focused predominately on Native Californian communities confronted by the mission system, but it includes studies of other community interactions at Fort Ross and the pueblo of San Diego. Archival materials are highlighted throughout as being important for understanding community interaction, and the archaeological record is often used as a secondary or supporting line of evidence.

Without the archival materials to set up expectations, the archaeological evidence would in many cases be insufficient support for arguments regarding community interaction. The best example of this is Chapter 4, in which Bernard and Robinson provide historical accounts of the interconnectedness of interior peoples and coastal peoples linked by marriage and other social ties, as well as accounts of neophytes fleeing missions for the interior and being absorbed into villages there. These accounts set up a context for understanding archaeological sites in the inland area that acted as a refuge for people fleeing the coast and missions. The most compelling evidence for this involved a locally available chert that