

Cahuilla

U*X*L Encyclopedia of Native American Tribes
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Cahuilla

Name

The name Cahuilla (pronounced *ka-WEE-ya* or *KAW-we-ah*) is from the word *kawiya*, meaning “masters” or “powerful ones.” Some sources indicate the tribe’s name may have come from the Spanish interpretation of *Kawíka*, which means “mountain-ward,” or from the Luiseño word *Kawíka-wichum*, which translates to “westward those-of,” indicating that they lived to the west.

Location

Many Cahuilla live on or near nine small reservations in inland southern California. They are located in mostly rural areas, although part of the Agua Caliente reservation is located within the city limits of Palm Springs. The reservations are situated in the area of the tribe’s traditional lands, bounded on the north by the [San Bernardino \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/san-bernardino\)](#) Mountains, on the south by Borrego Springs and the Chocolate Mountains, on the east by the Colorado Desert, and on the west by Riverside County and the Palomar Mountains. Nearly two-thirds of traditional Cahuilla territory is desert.

Population

There were about 6,000 Cahuilla at the time of contact with the Spanish. By the 1850s there were 2,500 to 3,000. Following a smallpox epidemic in the early 1860s that number dropped to 1,181 in 1865. In 1955 there were about 535; in 1970 that figure rose to 1,629. In the 1990 U.S. Census, 888 people said they were Cahuilla. The 2000 census showed 2,259 Cahuilla, and 3,435 people who had some Cahuilla blood. (See box for Cahuilla reservation populations.)

Language family

Uto-Aztecan.

Origins and group affiliations

Centuries ago three groups of Cahuilla occupied different regions: the Palm Springs, Pass, and Desert Cahuilla. Today these groups are intermingled on the reservations. The Cahuilla have a long history of cultural contact, trade, and intermarriage with their neighbors—the Serrano, the Gabrieliño, and the Luiseño. The Cahuilla are sometimes called Mission Indians, along with several tribes that lived near [San Diego \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/san-diego\)](#) when the Spanish began building Catholic missions there in the eighteenth century. Although the Cahuilla shared many customs with the Mission Indians, they had less contact with the missions than other tribes did.

The Cahuilla lived in a region of unpredictable weather extremes where heavy rains one year could be replaced by drought the next, and earthquakes and fires could suddenly strike. They acclimated to and took advantage of their environment. They were a friendly and generous people who would happily give

away excess possessions, certain that if they were ever in need, their generosity would be repaid. Today they live on reservations near their traditional homeland. They have adapted to their new circumstances, but still retain their traditional customs.

History

Archaeologists (those who study the remains of ancient civilizations) say the Cahuilla originated in the [Great Basin \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-physical-geography/great-basin\)](#) area of present-day Nevada and Colorado. The Cahuilla still sing what they call “bird songs” that tell of their creation and their move to southern California some two thousand to three thousand years ago. They settled near Lake Cahuilla, which dried up hundreds of years ago and was replaced by the [Salton Sea \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-physical-geography/salton-sea\)](#). The Cahuilla adapted to the area and found beauty in a land that many would consider harsh and barren.

Because they lived inland, the Cahuilla initially had little contact with the Spanish who took control of California in the late eighteenth century. The tribe’s first meeting with Europeans took place in 1774. Spanish explorer [Juan Bautista de Anza \(/people/history/us-history-biographies/juan-bautista-de-anza\)](#) (1736–1788) passed through Cahuilla territory looking for a land route from Mexico to the Monterey Peninsula. A Catholic mission had already been established there. The Spanish at the mission hoped Anza would find a way to bring supplies overland from Mexico rather than by the sea route, which took a long time.

Cahuilla bands guarded their territory closely, especially the vital watering holes. They objected to Spanish trespassers and fired at them with bows and arrows. Meeting similar hostility from other tribes along their land route, the Spanish gave up their search. The Cahuilla had no more contact with them for a time, but heard stories of Spanish ill-treatment of Mission Indians as well as about Spanish goods, which greatly interested them.

Important Dates

1774: Cahuilla first meet Spanish explorers.

1863: Smallpox epidemic strikes the Cahuilla.

1875–77: Various Cahuilla reservations are established.

1891: The Act for the Relief of Mission Indians establishes reservation boundaries.

1959: The Equalization Act finalizes land allotments.

1964: The Malki Museum is founded on the Morongo Reservation.

Contact with Spanish and settlers

In the early 1800s the Cahuilla visited some of the Spanish missions near the coast. There they learned Spanish, adopted European clothing, and learned new technologies like ironworking. In some cases they were forced to work for the missions and were harshly treated by those in charge. Throughout the early years, however, most Cahuilla managed to retain their independence while taking advantage of European goods.

In 1822 Mexico took the mission lands away from Spain. Again the Cahuilla remained fairly independent. They took seasonal jobs as skilled laborers on cattle ranches owned by Mexicans. In 1848 the [United States \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/united-states\)](/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/united-states) officially took control of California, and shortly after that the Gold Rush began. (The California Gold Rush was a mass migration of people to the state after the discovery of gold there in 1848.) These two events caused tensions between the tribe and the new settlers who trespassed on Cahuilla land and water sources.

Territorial struggles

Initially, though, the Cahuilla under Juan Antonio (c. 1783–1863) existed peacefully with the whites. Antonio even aided the U.S. Army against Ute (see entry) attacks. When a band of outlaws stole cattle and murdered people, Juan Antonio and his people tracked them down and killed all but one. After they helped control the 1851–52 Cupeño uprising, the Cahuilla expected the California and U.S. governments to ratify a treaty giving the tribe charge of their homelands. When the treaty was denied, Antonio raided settlers for several years.

During this time the tribe suffered from diseases miners and settlers brought with them when they moved into the area. Because the Cahuilla had no immunity to these diseases, many died. In 1863 a severe smallpox epidemic reduced the Cahuilla population from 6,000 to about 2,500. Meanwhile settlers took over the tribe's water sources, and Cahuilla crops suffered. The whites then pressured the U.S. government to set aside reservations for the California tribes. Starving and

weakened by diseases, the Cahuilla were forced off their lands. They had no choice but to submit to the reservation system. Even then, settlers cheated them out of land.

In the decades that followed the Cahuilla grew more resentful of federal government (/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts-28) intervention in their lives and the continuous chiseling away of their lands. The 1891 Act for the Relief of Mission Indians, which formalized the reservation system, took still more of the Cahuilla's land when it made the boundaries. Government schools and American missionaries tried to suppress the Cahuilla religion, language, and political systems. The 1887 General Allotment Act (also known as the Dawes Act) divided Cahuilla lands into individual parcels and made it impossible for them to do the kind of community farming they had done before.

Romantic Novel Arouses Interest in California Indians

Helen Hunt Jackson (1830–1885) was a poet and writer from Massachusetts who traveled to California in 1872. While there she became interested in the condition of western Native Americans (/history/united-states-and-canada/north-american-indigenous-peoples/native-americans). In 1881 she published *A Century of Dishonor*, a non-fiction work that attacked the government's Indian policy and the treatment of American Indians. Because of her work, the U.S. Congress formed a special commission to investigate and suggest reforms for Native American affairs.

The [federal government \(/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts-28\)](/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/political-science-terms-and-concepts-28) then appointed Jackson to investigate and report on the conditions of Mission Indians. Hunt traveled throughout southern California and documented her findings in a fifty-six-page account. When Congress failed to act on her suggestions of additional schools for children and more land for reservations, she decided to bring the [Native Americans \(/history/united-states-and-canada/north-american-indigenous-peoples/native-americans\)](/history/united-states-and-canada/north-american-indigenous-peoples/native-americans)' plight to the country's attention.

In 1884 she published her popular novel *Ramona*, said to be based on an actual Cahuilla woman named Ramona Lubo, whose husband had been murdered by a white settler. The novel is mainly romantic fiction, not a true account of the Native Americans in the area, but it did a great deal to arouse public sympathy for the Mission Indians.

Resisting assimilation

In 1919 Jonathan Tippet organized the Mission Indian Federation. Julio Norte, from the Morongo Reservation, was grand president of the first conference. Seventy-five leaders from Southern California tribes met to prevent white encroachment on their land and water supplies. They also wanted their children taught on the reservation rather than being sent away to boarding schools. The group lobbied for Native American rights for many years.

During the early 1900s the Cahuilla resisted interference in their affairs. In 1934 they regained some independence when the [Indian Reorganization Act \(/history/united-states-and-canada/north-american-indigenous-peoples/indian-reorganization-act\)](/history/united-states-and-canada/north-american-indigenous-peoples/indian-reorganization-act) (IRA) passed; the act ended the allotment system and

encouraged the formation of tribal governments. These new model governments, however, were supervised by the U.S. government. When a federal program cut off funding and supervision of the reservations in the 1950s, the Cahuilla became more involved in setting up their own health, education, and welfare programs. In the 1960s, they received funding that allowed them to manage their own affairs. They still remain politically active and continue to work for their rights.

Religion

The unpredictable weather of their homeland convinced the Cahuilla that the world was governed by an changeable creative force. In their traditions, that force made the first two human beings, Makat and Tamaioit, huge and powerful beings who then made everything else. But with the exception of the shaman (pronounced *SHAH-mun* or *SHAY-mun*), the creatures who came after these first two did not have the same powers.

The shaman controlled rain, created food, and conducted ceremonies, where they performed amazing feats like eating hot coals. They told stories of creation in songs and dances; special rattles made from gourds supplied the music. Shaman passed their knowledge and powers on to successors who were chosen because they exhibited certain special qualities when young.

The Cahuilla believed in a life after death. The dead were reborn and lived a life much like the one they had left behind, but in the new life only good things happened.

Although their early experiences with Spanish Catholic missionaries were not pleasant, after the Cahuilla moved to reservations, missionaries renewed their efforts. In time many Cahuilla converted to Catholicism and others to Protestantism. Today the Cahuilla still maintain elements of their traditional beliefs and practices.

Origin of the Birds

Two important figures in Cahuilla oral stories are Mukat and his brother Tamaioit, the two powerful first beings, from whom all other creatures originated. The following story, "Origin of the Birds," was told by a man named Alexandro of Morongo to anthropologist Lucile Hooper in 1918 (anthropologists study human cultures). Hooper claimed that Alexandro gave her a short version of the tale because it would have taken "all night to name the birds."

When Mukat died, the people who were still living at the big house did not know where to go or what to do. They went east, west, north, south, above, and below. They could not decide which direction they were intended to take. They finally reached the edge of the water and here they saw Sovalivil (pelican). He told them how to find Tamaioit. When they found him, he asked why they came to him. "I am different from all of you," he said, "so I cannot help you, I fear. There is one thing I might suggest, however. I created the willow tree, which I forgot to bring with me; get the branches of that and brush yourselves with it and perhaps you will then know what to do." So they all returned and brushed themselves with the willow, then started out once more.

A few, who became tired, stopped, and turned themselves into rocks and trees. The others reached the top of Mount San Jacinto and here they slept that night. At dawn, Isel (a bird with a yellow breast that is often seen around swamps), awoke them and made them look around. A bird which is larger than a buzzard told them not to look, that there was nothing to see. Nevertheless, they all looked around and saw many beautiful green fields. They decided to go to these. On the way, one by one, they stopped. These that stopped became birds. When the others returned that way, they named the birds.

Hooper, Lucile. "The Cahuilla Indians." [University of California \(/social-sciences-and-law/education/colleges-us/university-california\)](#) *Publications in Archaeology and Ethnology* 16 (April 10, 1920).

Language

The Cahuilla language belongs to the Takic branch of the Uto-Aztecan stock (sometimes called Southern Californian Shoshonean) and is very close to Cupeño.

Cahuilla Words

Only a small number of Cahuilla speak their traditional language anymore.

However, many still use some Cahuilla words, such as the many Cahuilla terms for relatives—for example, *qaʔ* for “father’s father,” and *qwaʔ* for “mother’s father.”

Some communities offer Cahuilla language classes. Thanks to Cahuilla speakers like Katherine Siva Saubel (1920–) a respected elder and active political leader, books of Cahuilla grammar, stories, and vocabulary have been published. In *lʼisniyatam*, her Cahuilla word book, Saubel stresses the importance of naming to the Cahuilla. She offers examples like *pal* (water), *sewet* (snake), and *huyal* (arrow), with many variations. In written Cahuilla, most letters are pronounced like English letters, with a few exceptions: a *ʔ* sounds like a gulp; and an *x* is like a scratchy *h*.

Government

Traditionally the Cahuilla lived in about a dozen independent villages, each with its own name, territory, and a male ancestor common to everyone in the village.

Trails connected villages with other villages and to other tribes. Each village had a headman called a *net*, who settled minor disputes, chose hunting-gathering areas, and represented the group at meetings. The position of *net* passed from father to son.

The *net* was assisted by a *paxaaʔ*, who made sure people behaved properly. He oversaw rituals and ceremonies, led hunting parties, and communicated the decisions made by the headman (who made them after consulting the shaman).

Traditional Cahuilla leadership was largely male-oriented, but today women are active in Cahuilla politics. Each reservation is governed by an elected business committee or tribal council. These councils are selected by the adults of the tribe, who often compose a general council. Special committees deal with economic development and other community concerns.

Cahuilla Population: 2000 Census

In 2000, U.S. Census takers counted the following numbers of people living on nine Cahuilla reservations. Not all of those on the reservations, especially the Agua Caliente and Torres Martinez (their tribal enrollments were 415 and 532, respectively, in 2001), are Cahuilla.

Cahuilla Population: 2000 Census

Group	Population in 2000
Agua Caliente	21,538
Augustine	8
Cabazon	806
Cahuilla Reservation	154
Los Coyotes	286
Morongo	954
Ramona Band	7
<u>Santa Rosa (/places/latin-america-and-caribbean/south-american-political-geography/santa-rosa)</u>	65
Torres Martinez	4,146

“2000 Census of Population and Housing. Matrix 7: American Indian and Alaskan Native summary file.” Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Data User Services Division, American FactFinder, 2004.

Economy

The traditional Cahuilla economy was based on a complex system of hunting and gathering, which required a complete knowledge of the local plants and animals (there were hundreds of plant varieties). The people traded plants with other tribes for gourd rattles and baskets.

The Spanish introduced cattle to the region in the 1800s. The cattle ate many local plants, and this reduced food for game animals as well as people. Unable to hunt and gather as before, some Cahuilla went to work on farms and ranches owned by the Spanish and other whites.

After the move to the reservations in the late 1800s, Cahuilla women earned money by making and selling woven baskets. This art is not as widely practiced today. Most reservations in the early twenty-first century run their own money-making enterprises for the benefit of the tribe: bingo, camping facilities, and casinos, for instance. Tourism and recreation, agriculture and livestock, manufacturing, service and retail businesses, real estate development, mining, and tribal government provide additional employment opportunities for many Cahuilla. Others choose professional jobs both on and off the reservation.

Daily life

Families

Cahuilla children are born into the clan (group of related families) of their fathers. According to writers Lowell Bean and Lisa Bourgeault: “[A] typical Cahuilla community consisted of elderly men who were brothers, their wives, and their

sons and nephews, together with their wives and children.” All of these related people worked and played together.

Education

Children learned their adult roles by observation and through play. Boys played games that taught coordination and made their muscles strong (like footraces and kickball), so they could become quick, skilled hunters. Girls developed hand-eye coordination so they could weave baskets and pick up small seeds.

Children learned their history and religion from stories handed down from generation to generation. Elders were highly respected for their knowledge of tribal history; they advised younger people on what to do during natural disasters. Older members of the tribe also taught youngsters values and skills. Some of the values that the Cahuilla believed in were sharing, doing things slowly and in an orderly way, thinking about the consequences of one’s actions, being honest and dependable, and using knowledge carefully. All children learned that if they received a gift, they must give something in return. If they did not, they were publicly ridiculed.

From the late 1800s until the 1830s the U.S. government sent students to boarding schools to assimilate them (make them more like whites). Children could not speak their language or follow their tribe’s customs, so many of them did not learn tribal traditions. In modern times Cahuilla children attend public schools, colleges, and trade schools. Some reservations also sponsor classes in Native language and culture.

Buildings

Cahuilla homes varied widely depending on location. Some families put brush shelters over the fronts of caves; some built cone-shaped homes of cedar bark. The Cahuilla also used Y-shaped supports and thatched roofs and walls, sometimes plastering the walls. Many of these homes were dome-shaped, but some were rectangular. A *kish* was a windowless structure that had walls made from a plant called arrowwood and a slanted roof made from palm fronds. People slept inside on the earth floor and kept a fire in a circle of rocks.

At the center of the village was the largest building, the ceremonial house; the *net* lived in it or nearby. The house usually included a small area where a bundle of sacred items was kept, and a large area for religious dances. Outside was a smaller dance area, and a place for preparing food for ceremonies was attached to the house. Nearby were granaries—large nest-like baskets used for storing food—and a communal sweathouse, where men went for social and ritual sweatbaths and to discuss important matters.

Cahuilla families often clustered their homes together. Unlike some tribes who had winter and summer villages, the Cahuilla had permanent villages. They built near water and food sources, often in or around canyons for protection from harsh winds. They marked the boundaries of their hunting-gathering territory with designs carved into rocks. Cahuilla homes today tend to be spread out on plots of land large enough for farming or cattle ranching.

Food

The Cahuilla diet was well-rounded and nutritious. They used a combination of hunting, harvesting, and growing. Food was gathered from four different environments: the low and high deserts, the mountains, and the area in between.

Tasks were divided by gender and age—the men hunted, the women harvested plants and seeds, and children and older people cooked.

The Cahuilla knew the ripening times of hundreds of plant varieties. They even pruned and watered crops they had not planted, like pine nuts, cactus, and mesquite (pronounced *meh-SKEET*) beans. Pine nuts were roasted on coals in shallow trays or baskets; cactus was boiled or eaten fresh; and mesquite beans were dried and pounded into a fine meal.

Acorns were a staple of the Cahuilla diet. They were ground into flour and then covered with boiling water to remove the poisonous tannic acid. The Cahuilla planted corn, beans, melons, and squash. They baked yucca, agave, and tule potatoes in stone lined pits. To store food and keep it fresh, they sealed it with pine pitch. When food was scarce, they often raided birds' or rats' food stores.

Women roasted or boiled meat or cut it into strips and sundried it. They cracked bones to get the marrow out or ground them into powder to mix with other foods. They drank animal blood fresh or stored it in containers made of leather or animal gut.

The Cahuilla today incorporate many traditional foods into their lives. For instance, a twentieth-century Cahuilla breakfast might consist of coffee, eggs, refried beans, and *sawish*, a flat bread like a tortilla. The Cahuilla still enjoy acorns and cactus buds, and they continue to eat deer and quail. Mountain sheep and antelope can no longer be hunted, but once they were highly valued for their delicious meat.

Mesquite Cornbread

Made by grinding up the seeds and pods of the mesquite (pronounced *meh-SKEET*) tree, mesquite meal can be used in baking as a flour or it can be used as a spice. Here it is combined with cornmeal to give the bread a unique flavor.

- 3/4 cup Cornmeal
- 3/4 cup Flour
- 1/2 cup Mesquite Meal
- 2 t [Baking powder \(/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/baking-powder\)](/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/baking-powder)
- 1/2 t Baking Soda
- 1/2 t Salt
- 1 cup Buttermilk or yogurt
- 1 Egg
- 3 T [Maple syrup \(/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/maple-syrup\)](/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/maple-syrup) or honey
- 3T Oil

Optional ingredients:

- 1 cup fresh or frozen corn
- 3T minced onion
- 3/4 cup grated jack cheese
- 1T chipotle flakes
- 3/4 cup chia seed

1. Preheat oven to 350° F.
2. Combine dry ingredients in medium bowl.
3. Combine wet ingredients and stir into dry ingredients just until combined.
4. Spread into greased 8 x 8 pan or muffin tins.
5. Bake 20-25 minutes.

Makes 12 muffins.

“The Cahuilla.” *The Living Desert Education Department*. (accessed on August 27, 2007).

Clothing and adornment

Centuries ago the Cahuilla wore clothing made of the natural materials of their environment. They pounded mesquite bark into a soft material for women’s skirts and babies’ diapers. They also used mesquite bark for sandals, and made blankets out of strips of rabbit fur. Men wore deerskin or sheepskin breechcloths (garments with front and back flaps that hung from the waist). Body paint was used for ceremonies, and facial tattooing was common.

After meeting the Spanish in the late eighteenth century many Cahuilla began combining European-style clothing—like pants, shirts, skirts, and jackets—with traditional clothing.

Healing practices

The Cahuilla believed that when the spirits were displeased, they made people sick. Shamans were then called upon. They healed by sucking directly on the affected part of the patient’s body to remove the ailment, or by blowing, spitting on, stroking, or rubbing the affected area. Sometimes herbs were used, or a pit was dug and warmed with hot rocks, then the sick person would lie down in it. Those who lived near present-day Palm Springs used the hot springs there for healing. The Cahuilla have always been very concerned with cleanliness and place great importance on regular bathing and proper cleaning of cooking tools.

Shaman were men, but older women with a knowledge of herbs could help with certain conditions like childbirth or broken bones. Ruby Modesto (1913–1980), a twentieth-century healer or *pul*, described her life and work in her book *Not for Innocent Ears*. She noted that while many puls used power in a good way, some puls used their power for evil deeds like poisoning people. Modesto cured people with “soul damage;” people who had seizures, for example, were thought to have soul damage.

While shaman handled spiritual health and dealt with supernatural powers, doctors handled physical illness. Most doctors were women who had learned their trade from shaman or diviners (those who could foretell the future). Doctors needed an extensive knowledge of plants and herbs. Most were older because it took a while for the community to trust them enough to consult them.

Arts

Crafts

Once they had mastered survival in the desert, the Cahuilla had time to devote to crafts. While men made heavy baskets for practical purposes such as gathering plants and seeds, women made beautiful coiled baskets from grasses and rushes of different colors. The baskets were decorated with designs of rattlesnakes, turtles, stars, and eagles. Gift-giving was a part of every Cahuilla ceremony, and often the gifts were baskets or gift items presented in baskets.

Cahuilla pottery was thin, breakable redware. To form it, women patted it with wooden paddles against a rounded stone. Then they carved designs into it or painted it. They made ollas (large clay pots) to store seeds and grains.

Music

The Cahuilla recorded their [oral history \(/literature-and-arts/language-linguistics-and-literary-terms/literature-general/oral-history\)](#) in song. They enjoyed music of all kinds, and it accompanied games, dancing, shaman's work, hunting, and food gathering. Songs were accompanied by a variety of instruments including pan-pipes, gourd or turtle shell rattles, sticks, dried cocoons, seashells, whistles, and flutes made of bone or wood.

Customs

Society

The tribe was divided into two groups based on their male ancestors—Wildcats and Coyotes. These were divided into three to ten clans who spoke different dialects (varieties of the language). They all worked together in times of war as well as when gathering food and performing rituals. Each of these groups owned a village, but clan territory could be used by everyone.

Ceremonies and festivals

The Cahuilla placed a special emphasis on death. When a close relative died, the person's home and belongings were burned so the spirit was set free and could enjoy the possessions in the next world. The Cahuilla's most important ritual was an annual ceremony mourning the dead. The tradition continues today with a [Memorial Day \(/sports-and-everyday-life/days-and-holidays/days-months-holidays-and-festivals/memorial-day\)](#) fiesta, celebrating Cahuilla culture and honoring Cahuilla men who died in service during [World War II \(/history/modern-europe/wars-and-battles/world-war-ii\)](#) (1939–45; a war in which [Great Britain](#)

[\(/places/britain-ireland-france-and-low-countries/british-and-irish-political-geography/great-britain\)](#), France, the [United States \(/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/united-states\)](#), and their allies defeated Germany, Italy, and Japan).

The Cahuilla practice other rituals like the eagle ceremony. For this they form a large circle outside the ceremonial house. In the middle of the circle the dancer, wearing an eagle feather headdress and skirt, imitates the movements of an eagle while hitting two sticks together to direct the people in singing. The ceremonial house remains an important center for culture and community, even to those Cahuilla who live and work away from the reservation.

Games

The Cahuilla enjoyed playing games, and moieties (units or parts of the tribe) often challenged each other. In most games endurance was important, and betting was common. Men competed in foot races and in shooting arrows and played guessing games. Women also ran races and played guessing games. They tried to outdo each other in juggling, spinning tops, balancing objects, and playing cat's cradle. Music was part of many of these activities.

Marriage

Knowing who their ancestors were was very important because the Cahuilla would not marry anyone even remotely related to them. A boy's parents chose a bride from another clan, being careful to choose someone who would be an asset

to their tightly-knit, hard-working community. The boy's father then offered the girl's father a gift. If he accepted the gift, his daughter simply moved into the home of the boy's family without further ceremony.

It was difficult for a married couple to divorce because marriage ties connected clan members. If a woman could not have children or was lazy or nonproductive, a man could divorce her. If a spouse died, the surviving wife usually married her husband's brother; a man took his wife's sister.

Current tribal issues

In 2006 a forest fire destroyed 1,200 acres on the Morongo Reservation. Lives were lost, and homes were burned. Many people assisted the tribe, because the Morongo had often helped neighboring communities during forest fires; recovery, however, will take a long time. In 2007 the [Environmental Protection Agency \(/social-sciences-and-law/political-science-and-government/us-government/environmental-protection\)](#) fined operators of an illegal dump on the Torres Martinez Reservation in California \$46 million. According to statistics there are at least 26 illegal dumps on the reservation, and they pose major environmental, health, and safety risks.

The Cahuilla work hard to preserve their culture. A major part of this effort can be seen at the Malki Museum on the Morongo Reservation. Cahuilla scholars and storytellers have done a great deal to educate others about Cahuilla culture and history. The museum also revived the fiesta system, once thought to be a lost tradition. While the Malki Museum was the first Native American museum ever established on a California reservation, today several other Cahuilla reservations have opened museums of their own, where they sponsor annual fiestas.

The Cahuilla remain active in political issues like land and water conservation.

Like so many American Indian tribes, they must continually fight the reduction of their lands by outside developers, oil companies, and highway builders.

Notable People

Ruby Modesto (1913–1980) grew up speaking Cahuilla, and because she did not learn English or attend school until after she was ten, she learned a great deal about her traditional culture. Modesto became a medicine woman in her forties. In her book *Not for Innocent Ears* she described how she became responsible for healing people possessed by demons.

Katherine Siva Saubel (1920–), known for her efforts to preserve the Cahuilla language, was inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame in 1998, a first for a Native American woman. Another major focus of Saubel's work was Cahuilla ethnobotany, the study of using plants. In 1972 Saubel and anthropologist [John Lowell](#) (</people/history/us-history-biographies/john-lowell>) Bean published *Temalpakh: Cahuilla Indian Knowledge and Uses of Plants*.

Cahuilla political leader Juan Antonio (c. 1783–1863) fought in the 1840s and 1850s to protect Cahuilla lands from Mexican and American settlers. Other noted Cahuilla include Rupert Costo, a late-twentieth century publisher and editor who founded such magazines as *Indian Historian* and *Wassaja* ; singer Joe Lomas; and educator, author, and activist Edward Castillo (1947–).

Bean, Lowell John, and Lisa Bourgeault. *The Cahuilla*. [New York](/places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york) (</places/united-states-and-canada/us-political-geography/new-york>): Chelsea House Publishers, 1989.

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Edward D. Castillo (Cahuilla-Luiseño), Native American Studies Program, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California

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