

CAHUILLA INDIANS

California Desert People

Cahuilla History and Notes

The Cahuillas are Takic-speaking peoples who reside in Southern California in what are now Riverside and San Diego counties. Many, but not all, of the Cahuilla peoples live on reservations-Cahuilla, Agua Caliente, Santa Rosa, Torres-Martinez, Cabeson, Morongo, Los Coyotes, Ramona, and Saboba. These reservations were established after many years of conflict with local and federal authorities in the 1870s. Today the Cahuillas number about twenty-four hundred people. Prior to European intrusion, however, when they occupied the better part of Riverside County and the northern portion of San Diego County, they numbered from six thousand to ten thousand people.

Within their language-speaking group, the Cahuillas were divided into about a dozen independent clans containing five hundred to twelve hundred people each. These clans controlled separate territories of several hundred square miles each and maintained their own political authority. Each clan was allied through ritual systems that provided political stability and networks for economic exchange. Each clan was dialectically different from the others.

Community beliefs were clearly stated in various song cycles (epic poems) and historical accounts that described a clan's sacred and secular history and provided guidelines for behavior. These beliefs were reinforced on a regular basis, usually annually, in clan ritual centers where the texts of the song cycles were presented in their entirety-a process requiring several days to complete. The most important parts of these gatherings were the nukil ceremonies, which honored those members of a clan who had died since the last nukil ritual had been performed.

For the Cahuillas, cosmological values and concepts were established when the world was created by Mukat. The Cahuilla creation story tells of the origin of the world, the death of god (Mukat), and the consequences of that death for humans (e.g., the need for death, social roles, and so forth). It also describes the basic concepts of supernatural power and its proper use in the contemporary world.

Initially, the Cahuillas were not affected by the Spanish mission system. On the other hand, they were very much affected by the economic systems imposed on their homelands. They engaged in wage labor for the Spanish and Mexicans and became an integral part of the labor force in Southern California. When the Americans arrived

in the 1850s, the Cahuillas signed a treaty with the U.S. government, but the agreement was not ratified. As a result the Cahuillas were left without a legal land base until the 1870s.



Remarkably, however, the arrival of the Spanish and the Americans did not obliterate the Cahuillas' own political, legal, and religious systems. The most damaging effects the Europeans had were in losses of Cahuilla land, the death of perhaps 80 percent of the Cahuilla peoples from European diseases, and the gradual loss of Cahuilla

political autonomy.

"Cahuilla Indian Portrait." California Historical Society, Photo collection.

Today, most of the descendants of the Cahuillas are residents of reservations where, until recently, the people engaged in agriculture, viticulture, cattle raising, and wage labor. Today some reservations also earn income from tourism. A new, important economic activity on several reservations (e.g., Morongo and Cabeson) is gaming. Other reservations are planning gaming facilities. Such enterprises are providing a significant new economic base for the people.

Modern-day Cahuilla reservations are administered by elected tribal councils. Some reservations are allotted to individuals, while on others the land is held in common. Issues of health, education, and welfare are matters of concern for the state of California, since California Indians were partially terminated from federal agencies in the 1950s. However, with the new income from gaming, many problems arising from a lack of funds have now been or soon will be somewhat alleviated.



The traditional language is still routinely spoken by some several dozen elders, and some traditional music and dance persist in the song-and-dance cycles referred to as the bird songs, and in the hand game locally known as peon. Classes in language, cultural history, and crafts are being held for young people on several reservations.

Singing the Birds explores the origins and significance of the traditional birdsongs of the Cahuilla and their relevance today. (photo: Agua Caliente Birdsingers performing)

A fiesta system, thought for a time to have been a lost tradition, was revived in 1964 by the Malki Museum on the Morongo Indian Reservation. This museum was the first Indian museum established on a California Indian reservation. Now several reservations (e.g., Agua Caliente, Cabeson, and Pala) have established museums and sponsor fiestas each year. The latter offer important opportunities for intertribal interactions. The music and dance traditions of many tribes are featured, and artists have venues for displaying their works. In addition, these events provide Indian organizations with the chance to publicize their programs.

Cahuillas have been active in political protests for many years. At first (1840-91) they confederated into quasi-military groups under the leadership of generals-men such as Juan Antonio, Cabeson, and Antonio Garra-not only to defend themselves from the encroachments of Europeans but also to demand various political and economic

rights. After reservations were established (c. 1891), these confederations disappeared, but within several decades the Cahuillas had formed their own protest organizations or joined others, such as the Mission Indian Federation. These protest organizations arose in response to oppressive practices by Indian Service personnel, and they became significant vehicles for political protests against the federal government's policies regarding the management of Indian affairs. These organizations were pivotal in the redressing of economic, political, and legal grievances from 1919 until the early 1960s.

Today a strong sense of history prevails among the Cahuillas. Several reservations have developed museums and cultural centers (e.g., the Malki Museum on the Morongo Indian Reservation, the Agua Caliente Cultural Center on the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation, and the Cupeno Cultural Center on the Pala Indian Reservation) and have established cultural and educational programs for young people, elders, and visitors. Educational achievement is a high priority, and the Cahuillas are rapidly progressing in this regard. Cahuillas have been and are actively engaged in teaching and publishing works about their traditional culture and history.

CAHUILLA MAIDEN

Three Cahuilla sisters fearful of the hot bubbling spring, saw a baby in the water. This Cahuilla Maiden tried to save the baby, but she perished in a whirlwind down with the water of the spring. Her two frightened sisters ran to their father, the Medicine Man. He witched the spring with mosquitoes and they carried his power to the spirits of the water below. The next morning the body of the girl came up, but she was dead. Then our people/ancestors gathered, prayed, and offered nourishment. With that, they gained strength to no longer fear the spring, but respected its spiritual healing.

The Agua Caliente Cultural Museum commissioned celebrated artist, Doug Hyde to create a bronze statue of a Cahuilla Maiden in conjunction with the renovations of the Spa. A member of the Cahuilla Tribe was used as the model for the "Cahuilla Maiden", which is located at the entry of the Spa on the corner of Tahquitz Canyon Way and Indian Canyon Drive.



CREDITS:

Lowell John Bean, *Mukat's People: The Cahuilla Indians of Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972);

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<http://www.aguacaliente.org/maiden.htm>

"Cahuilla Indian Portrait." California Historical Society, Photo collection.

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