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Cahuilla

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Language and Environment

Cahuilla (*kə'wēyu*) is the name given to a group of south-central California Indians. The term is of uncertain origin but may be from their own word *káwiya* 'master, boss' (Kroeber 1925:693; Hansjakob Seiler, personal communication 1974). Their language belongs to the Cupan subgroup of the Takic family of the Uto-Aztecan stock; among the four Cupan languages, Cahuilla is more similar to Cupeño than it is to Luiseño (Bright and Hill 1967; Bright 1975).*

The Cahuilla area was topographically complex: mountain ranges interspersed by passes, canyons, valleys, and desert, with elevations from 11,000 feet in the San Bernardino Mountains to 273 feet below sea level at the Salton Sink. The Cahuilla occupied most of the area, from the summit of the San Bernardino Mountains in the north to Borrego Springs and the Chocolate Mountains in the south, a portion of the Colorado Desert west of Orocopia Mountain to the east, and the San Jacinto Plain near Riverside and the eastern slopes of Palomar Mountain to the west (fig. 1).

Valleys, passes, and foothills blended into the mountain ranges with the lower desert areas. Alluvial fans led into canyons averaging 4 to 16 miles in length and several miles in width; these in turn led into mountain valleys flanked by high scarps. Consequently, separate and distinct environmental zones were formed, each with its characteristic life-zones (table 1): Lower Sonoran, Upper Sonoran, Transition, and Canadian-Hudsonian (Hall and Grinnell 1919; Grinnell and Swarth 1913).

Seasonal extremes of temperature, precipitation, and wind patterns caused dramatic differences in the relative abundance of flora and fauna from place to place and time to time. Dry winds affected food potential and increased the incendiary potential of the plant cover, while high velocity winds accompanied by sandstorms were common (Ryan 1968).

* Modern linguists have used several equivalent phonemic orthographies for Cahuilla. Those described by Bright (1965a) and in more detail by Seiler (1957) are readily converted to Handbook standards by the following substitutions (Bright's symbol is given first, then Seiler's, and finally the Handbook equivalent): *qw*, *k**, *k**; *xw*, *x**, *x**; *ly*, *l*, *l*; *ñ*, *ñ*, *n*. Bright and Seiler show vowel length with a double letter, while a raised dot is used here. Italicized Cahuilla words in the Handbook are written in this orthography, after respellings provided by Hansjakob Seiler.

During some years abundant water was available, while in other years serious drought conditions prevailed, inhibiting plant growth and causing decreases in the faunal population. Permanent springs and tinajas were common; lakes appeared occasionally; and rivers, streams, springs, sloughs, and marshy areas were subject to considerable variation in water potential throughout the year. Periodic desert lakes extended to 60 miles in length and were formed by melting snows, torrential rains, and overflows from the Colorado River. When the water table was low deep, walk-in wells were dug in the sand (A.S. Evans 1889; Ryan 1968; Shepard 1965; Lawton and Bean 1968; Nordland 1968; Bean 1972).

Territory

The Cahuilla area, located near the geographic center of southern California, was bisected by a major trade route, the Cocopa-Maricopa Trail, and was at the periphery of two others, the ones labeled Santa Fe and Yuman. Natural boundaries such as the Colorado Desert separated the Cahuilla from the Mohave, Halchidoma, Ipai and Tipai; the mountains, hills, and plains separated them from the Luiseño, Serrano, and Gabrielino.

These peoples interacted regularly by intermarriage, trade, ritual, and war. The Cahuilla shared a common tradition with the Gabrielino and other nearby Takic speakers, such as the Serrano and Luiseño. Of these, the Gabrielino and Serrano were most intensively involved with the Cahuilla (Bean 1972:69; Kroeber 1925: 578-580).

Villages

Villages were usually situated in canyons or on alluvial fans near adequate sources of water and food materials, where a degree of natural defense was afforded from strong prevailing winds.

The area immediately surrounding the village was owned in common by the lineage, while other lands were divided into tracts owned by clans, families, and individuals. Networks of trails used for hunting, trading, and social visiting interconnected villages. Numerous sacred sites marked off by petroglyphs and pictographs were associated with each lineage village.

Movement out of permanent villages was for specific purposes such as hunting, gathering, trade, ritual, or