Yuman Ideas about the Past

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Abstract

Memory is an essential human faculty. Individuals have a practical need to remember the things they have experienced, and to think about what others tell them concerning events in the past. Cultures, too, have motives for creating and making use of collective memories, whether those memories are based on fact or on imagination. Different cultures remember the past in different ways, and they do so for different reasons. The native Yuman peoples living in northern Baja California, Alta California, Arizona, and Sonora (Figure 1) have had their own unique ways of understanding the past. Those ideas are worth considering, both for their intrinsic interest and for the insights they may provide for understanding other aspects of the Yuman cultures.

Ideas about the Past in Traditional Yuman Cultures

It would be desirable to know how the past was envisioned and how information about it was transmitted in traditional Yuman cultures as they existed prior to the intrusion of any Hispanic influences. Unfortunately, those things cannot be known directly, in the absence of any testimony recorded during that period. However, a considerable body of indirect evidence does exist in the form of ethnographic reports, recorded during the eighteenth and nineteen centuries, but, above all, during the first half of the twentieth century. It is worth emphasizing that most of this evidence was documented several generations after outside influences on Yuman cultures had begun to make themselves felt, and that it was transmitted through outsiders who wrote about it in nonnative languages (Spanish or English). Despite these limitations, if the available testimony is assessed critically, it can yield a considerable amount of credible evidence concerning earlier, traditional Yuman ideas about the past.

By about the middle of the twentieth century, outside influences had become more pervasive in shaping the Yumans’ view of their past. Such influences are seen in what is perhaps an extreme case, provided by an account from Patricio Uchoa, a Paipai man in his 60s or 70s, recorded in 1951:

The Paipai came from Europe (sic). A great chief (generál) led all the paisanos way to the north across Europe, toward the rising sun. It was very cold and there was lots of snow and ice. There were many great monsters (monstros) with lots of hair and long yellow teeth; they were twice as high as this house (one-story adobe). (Mammoths?) The generál led the people across the mar océano far to the north, then south all the way; along the way he ordered some to stay here, and others to stay there, and to each he gave a different language. We Paipai were the last to come and we have always been here in this country. All this happened a long time ago. I don’t know the name of this generál [Hohenthal 2001:326; parenthetical annotations and Spanish spellings are given as in the original].

For cultures that transmit their knowledge about the past through oral traditions, it is useful to distinguish three “periods” or phases of that past—historical, legendary, and mythic—although these categories may not have been sharply distinguished within the cultures themselves. The historical past is concerned with events that are more or less factual and that can...
be directly linked with the present. The legendary past is concerned with events that probably have little or no factual basis and are linked with the present only tenuously, or not at all. This past is likely to include more supernatural elements than the historical past, but it is still substantially naturalistic in character. The mythic past is most often concerned with the ultimate origins of the world and of traditional lifeways. It contains strong supernatural elements, and it often features animals-who-were-people as its main actors.

The Historical Past

Early twentieth-century Yumans could often recount events from the lifetimes of their parents or grandparents (see, for example, Spier 1923:309–310; Kroeber 1925:797–798; Gifford and Lowie 1928:339; Spier 1928:238–241, 251–253, 356–358, 368–369, 1933:161; Gifford 1932:185–186, 1936:324–339; Meigs 1939:46, 1971:13). It is reasonable to infer that their ancestors 150 years earlier had also possessed similar transmitted historical memories. Twentieth-century Yumans sometimes reported accounts of events relating to the mission period. However, already in the accounts of the missions and missionaries, there had begun to appear improbable elements that represent incipient legends rather than factual history (e.g., Costo and Costo 1987). A case in point is an account of “Crying Rock,” at which the Franciscan missionaries at San Diego were said to have thrown Kumeyaay children over a cliff in order to impose discipline upon the children’s parents (Robertson 1987).

A little farther back in time, significant past events were not simply distorted but had begun to fade entirely from historical memory. A particularly telling case is provided by prehistoric Lake Cahuilla (Laylander 1997; Schaefer and Laylander 2007). The lake was created when the Colorado River shifted its lower course away from a route leading directly south to
the Gulf of California and instead poured its waters into the Mexicali, Imperial, and Coachella Valleys to the northwest (Figure 2). The full flow of the river would have taken about 20 years to fill the lake to its maximum level of 12 m above sea level. At that point, while about half of the river’s volume would have been lost through evaporation from the lake’s surface, the remaining half would have once again flowed south into the lower delta and the gulf. When the river subsequently shifted its course back again, away from Lake Cahuilla, a minimum of about 60 years would have been required to completely desiccate the lake. The presently available archaeological and geological evidence indicates that during the last thousand years there were at least three cycles of lake formation and recession, as well as some earlier lake cycles. The most recent cycle occurred in the AD 1600s, at a period when several Spanish expeditions had already explored the lower Colorado River and its delta but had not yet entered the Lake Cahuilla basin itself.

The events associated with the lake’s cycles would have had major impacts on many of the Yuman groups (Laylander 2006a). For two decades, while the lake was filling, the lower Colorado River delta in northeastern Baja California would have been left dry, and its numerous Yuman occupants would probably have had to abandon the delta. When the full lake had stabilized at 12 m asl, its shores would have been a rich source of fresh water, riparian plants, fish, shellfish, and aquatic birds, and the basin was potentially a magnet for year-round occupation, or at least extended seasonal visits, by Yumans who had been living either in the Peninsular Range to the west or on the Colorado River to the east. When the lake receded, a highly productive region was gradually transformed back into a harsh desert.

Despite the importance of these events, the ethno- graphic record 250–300 years later contained only faint traces of Kumeyaay memories concerning the lake, and apparently no memories of Lake Cahuilla were
recorded for the other Yuman groups (Orcutt 1903:42; Gifford, 1931:79; Laylander 2004). The vagueness of historical knowledge about Lake Cahuilla is all the more striking because there were practical incentives for remembering it. The lake had formed and then gone away repeatedly; there would have been every reason for Yumans living after AD 1700 to suppose that Lake Cahuilla would likely come again in the future. Memory of the Yumans’ past experiences in exploiting the opportunities that were offered by the lake and in dealing with the severe challenges provoked by its rises and falls could have been helpful in adjusting to similar future events. Yet these advantages of factual historical memory were not sufficient to overcome a drift toward historical oblivion—“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana 1905:284).

Farther back in time, there were other significant events that are visible in the archaeological record but that seem to have been entirely lost from Yuman traditional memory. These events included three important technological innovations and a change in a significant cultural practice. One technological event was the adoption of the bow and arrow, which largely replaced the earlier atlatl and dart as the projectile system of choice for hunting and warfare. Another was the adoption of pottery-making, which did not entirely supplant basketry but did significantly supplement it in the manufacture of containers for cooking, carrying, and storing, as well as serving other uses such as tobacco pipes. A third important innovation among some of the Yumans, specifically those who lived along the Colorado and Gila Rivers and in the Colorado River delta, was the cultivation of agricultural crops. The non-technological innovation was the adoption of cremation as the culturally preferred means for disposing of the dead, in place of inhumation burial. The precise timing of these innovations is not yet well established archaeologically, but they may all have dated from around AD 500–1200. It is not surprising that the specific circumstances associated with the adoption of these innovations were not remembered. However, it is more telling that Yuman legends and myths projected the presence of the innovated practices back to earliest times. For instance, various versions of creation myths recorded among the Kiliwa, Paipai, Kumeyaay, Cocopa, Quechan, Mohave, Maricopa, Yavapai, Walapai, and Havasupai contain references to the presence of the bow and arrow, ceramic vessels, agricultural crops, and cremation at the time of the world’s beginning (Meigs 1939; Laylander 2001, 2005a). This indicates that no cultural memory had been preserved that things had once, centuries earlier, been done quite differently.

Another set of events that significantly affected the Yuman peoples were ethnic migrations. Linguistic and historic evidence suggests that these episodes occurred throughout periods ranging from several thousand years ago to less than a century before the time of the ethnographic reports. The most recent displacements were documented by outside observers, while earlier movements can be inferred from the relative degrees of linguistic differentiation within the Yuman language family (Mixco 2006; Laylander 2010). Displacements that had occurred during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries particularly affected the Yumans living in the Colorado River delta and on the middle Gila River, including the Kahwan and Halyikwamai in Baja California and the Halchidhoma, Kaveltcadom, and Maricopa in California and Arizona. These events were remembered during the early twentieth century, although sometimes only fairly vaguely (Kroeber 1920, 1925:799–801; Forde 1931:104–105; Gifford 1931:17–18; Spier 1933:11–17).

Earlier ethnic movements, including ones that had occurred as recently as the seventeenth century (Spier 1933:14), do not seem to have been remembered historically, but instead to have been relegated to the mythic past and the period of the creation. Franciscan missionaries at San Diego in 1814 reported that the neophytes there stated that their ancestors had come from the north (Geiger 1976:93). While this might be a migration legend, it seems more likely that it refers
to the mythic period and the original dispersal of mankind from the scene of creation at Spirit Mountain (Wikami, Avikwamai, etc.), usually considered to have been situated in southern Nevada. Other ethnographic accounts are explicit in linking the historic distributions of ethnic groups to migrations during the mythic period (e.g., DuBois 1907:130; Curtis 1907–1930(2):77; Harrington 1908:345–346; Gifford 1918:171, 1931:12, 78–79; Spier 1923:331, 1933:352; Kroeber 1935:246–247, 1972:12).

A particularly striking case is provided by the Pai branch of the Yuman linguistic family (Laylander 2015). The Paipai of northern Baja California and the Upland Yumans (Yavapai, Walapai, and Havasupai) of northwestern Arizona, which are now widely separated and have few specific cultural resemblances to each other, are nonetheless very closely related linguistically—so close that some scholars have suggested that Paipai and Upland Yuman are mutually intelligible dialects of a single language, although other scholars have not accepted this view (Mixco 2006:31–32; Laylander 2015:117). In either case, a very recent separation, measured in a few centuries, is indicated. Yet this fairly dramatic geographical schism (which may have been linked to a cycle of Lake Cahuilla) seems to have left only vague traces in Yuman historical memories. A Paipai, José Dominguez Castro, reported that “the people [meaning the Paipai] came from Apache land [probably meaning the land of the Yavapai, who have often been termed ‘Apaches’ or ‘Mohave-Apaches’] before the coming of the Spaniards” (Meigs 1977:19). A Yavapai story tells of the resentment over a taboo against cousin marriage that caused the Paipai to emigrate from Spirit Mountain, the locus of the creation myths. This account has been interpreted as a memory of the Paipai-Upland Yuman split, although that interpretation is questionable (Laylander 2015; Mixco 2006; Winter 1967; Kendall 1983).

Evidence from other regions of the world suggests that the depth and detail of historical memory varies greatly between different orally based cultures (Vansina 1985; for native California, cf. Laylander 2006b). In some cultures, history has morphed into legend in as little as a century, while in others, detailed genealogies, apparently containing a substantial amount of factual content, have extended as far back as a millennium. Why was the Yumans’ historical memory relatively short? Several explanations may be suggested. One is the relatively weak hierarchical and property arrangements in traditional Yuman societies. Oral histories most often serve as legalistic charters. They show the origins and continuity, and therefore the legitimacy of dynasties; they establish the basis of property ownership rights; and they provide binding legal precedents concerning behavior. Yuman leadership positions were not powerful, and they were often not hereditary. Land ownership was not strongly developed, and such ownership rights as existed were recognized within small communities, without the need of formalized sanction in historical narratives. Legal institutions were informal. Another factor that limited Yuman historical awareness was a system of strong taboos relating to death, requiring the destruction of personal possessions and avoidance of mentioning deceased persons’ names (Laylander 2005b:171–176). A third consideration is that the verbal content of oral performances was not made highly conservative through such structuring elements as rhyme, regular meter, alliteration, and the repetition of stock phrases. Rock art—the paintings, petroglyphs, and earth figures that are common in many parts of traditional Yuman territory—may have provided some mnemonic aids, but unlike written texts, their content was not specific enough to have imposed any serious constraints on the continuing reinterpretation of ideas about the past within the Native cultures.

The Legendary Past

The boundaries that separate the legendary past from both the historical past and the mythic past are not always sharp. Legends are usually not closely linked
chronologically with the present. They contain more supernatural elements than historical accounts, but their events are less supernatural than those related in myths. Like historical accounts, legends usually do not serve primarily to explain the origins of the present world and its lifeways. Some legends may perhaps have had an original foundation in factual events, but like myths, they are at least primarily the products of folk art rather than folk memory. In the early twentieth-century ethnographic record, narratives that can be classified as legends were particularly numerous among the River Yumans.

A Yuman legend that lies close to the historical end of the legendary continuum stretching between myth and history is a long Mohave account of clan migrations and battles (Kroeber 1951). This account makes little use of supernatural elements, and it has a tenuous link to the present in that it serves to account for the origins of Mohave clans. According to the ethnographer,

The story is … factually sober. As regards its content and form, it might well be history. At the same time, there is nothing to show that any of the events told of did happen, or that any of the numerous personages named ever existed. The type of events is largely drawn from Mohave pre-Caucasian actual tribal experience, but I doubt whether any of the specific incidents were really handed down by tradition. In short, the story is pseudohistory. It is a product of imagination, not of recollection.… The successful attainment of an appearance of historicity to a fantasy creation within an unlettered tribe, especially one wholly lacking mnemonic devices, is significant as a cultural event because of its unexpectedness and near-uniqueness [Kroeber 1951:72].

One example—among many—of a legend that is situated closer to the opposite end of the history-legend-myth continuum is the Flute Lure narrative, which was told in related versions by the Kumeyaay, Ipai, Mohave, Halchidhoma, and Havasupai, as well as some of the non-Yuman groups in the general region (Laylander 2001:99–116). The action in this story is strongly shaped by supernatural events. On the other hand, almost all of the characters are human, although subordinate characters who are animals-as-people do occur. In some versions, the story’s events are linked chronologically with the creation of the world, but they play no significant role in explaining the experienced world or its lifeways.

What was the function of the legendary past within traditional Yuman cultures? No doubt, legends were told in part to provide entertainment. Beyond that, they conveyed to their listeners, particularly the younger ones, important information about human nature and about the world, including details of its natural and human geography. In reality, the sources of this information lay essentially in the present or in the very recent past rather than in any remote past, but its presentation within accounts of a legendary past probably reinforced its authoritativeness.

A comment by Edward S. Curtis about the Mohave is perhaps indirectly instructive:

The names of the dead are never uttered. If a Mohave dies before his child has learned to speak, that child will never know what name its father bore. In this may be seen a potent reason for the weakness of this people in hunting and fighting. The custom of the Sioux, for example, of singing their babes to sleep with songs recounting the mighty deeds of great ancestors and of encouraging the boys to emulate their exploits, furnished notable incentives for attaining prowess in war and the chase [Curtis 1907–1930(2):53].

Curtis undoubtedly overstated the importance of a genealogical connection and of a more or less factual
basis for narratives to be able to serve as models for behavior. The many extended Mohave narratives that are set in the legendary or mythical past provided equally suitable models for the young men to emulate (Kroeber 1948, 1951, 1972).

The Mythic Past

Yuman myths describe a past that antedated the present organization of the world. Supernatural events abounded in the mythic past, and the central actors often blended the characteristics of humans with those of animals, or even with those of plants or inanimate objects. A continuum extended from the myths that served to describe important events at the beginning of the world to the amusing stories about Coyote and other animals/people. The latter evidently served primarily to entertain their hearers and may not have been believed to be factual by the narrators or the hearers, but they occasionally also contained etiological or explanatory elements (“pourquoi stories,” “just-so stories”). From a modern perspective, the mythic past was clearly a product of imagination rather than memory, although it may have been accepted as factual within the traditional cultures.

An important issue concerns the stability of the mythic past within traditional Yuman oral cultures. Because of mythic narratives’ “sacred” character, some scholars have assumed that such oral texts are likely to have been extremely conservative. This belief has probably arisen from an analogy with the conservative character of written religious scriptures within other cultures. The widespread sharing of many mythic motifs among different New World cultures has also seemed to give some support to this supposition of extreme conservatism regarding the mythic past (e.g., Thompson 1929:xxii; Bierhorst 1985:7–10). However, examined more closely, the geographical and cultural patterns in the sharing of mythic motifs, which freely crossed lines of linguistic heritage but were strongly influenced by the ethnohistoric propinquity of the groups involved, does not seem to support a hypothesis of the millennia-long stability of myths. Rather, it suggests that most or all of their content was comparatively recent and had resulted from ongoing processes of invention and diffusion. Within any given culture, there was a considerable amount of openness to innovation in the ways in which the mythic past was envisioned (Laylander 2005a).

The Southern California Creation Myth consists of an assemblage of motifs that were shared among most of the Yuman groups, including the Paipai, Kumeyaay, Ipai, Cocopa, Quechan, Halchidhoma, Mohave, Maricopa, Yavapai, Walapai, and Havasupai (Laylander 2001:156–161, 170–171; Waterman 1909). Notably excluded from this group were the Kiliwa, who had a distinctly different creation myth (Meigs 1939:64–82). (For a more recent version of the Kiliwa creation myth, see Ochoa Zazueta 1978; however, for a critique of Ochoa Zazueta’s methods and the content of his version, see Mixco 1983:282–284. The Dominican missionary Luis Sales in 1790 also reported a somewhat divergent creation myth from northwestern Baja California; see Sales 1956:35–37). The Kiliwa language is also the most divergent member of the Yuman linguistic family. These facts might seem to suggest that the creation myth of the other Yumans (who are linguistically termed the Core Yuman group) dates from a period subsequent to the separation of Kiliwa from Core Yuman but prior to the fission of Core Yuman into its three separate branches of Pai (including the Paipai, Yavapai, Walapai, and Havasupai), Delta-California Yuman (Kumeyaay, Ipai, and Cocopa), and River Yuman (Quechan, Halchidhoma, Mohave, and Maricopa), perhaps sometime between 1000 BC and AD 500 (Laylander 2010:147–150). However, the Southern California Creation Myth is also shared by linguistically unrelated Uto-Aztecan groups to the north of the Yumans, including the Luiseño, Cupeño, Cahuilla, and Serrano. The geographical distributions of variations in the creation myth motifs among the Yuman versions correspond to patterns of
historic-period geographical propinquity rather than to patterns of shared linguistic descent. Consequently, diffusion and innovation rather than conservatism seem clearly to be the main operating principles.

An unusual feature of the way in which the mythic past was understood among the River Yumans was a belief that individuals directly accessed that past in their dreams, through a sort of backward time-travel. A narrated account of the creation was not understood as having been passed down from elders, but rather as having been personally experienced by the narrator, often in prenatal dreams (Harrington 1908:326; Kroeber 1925:784, 1947:1–2; Forde 1931:204). (Note that some accounts of River Yuman dreaming report travels to Spirit Mountain and encounters with supernatural beings, but without necessarily implying that the dreamer had traveled back in time; see, for instance, Forde 1931:188–189, 191, 201–203). Other individuals might help to “correct” the individual’s memory of his dreams, thus giving a certain amount of impetus to cultural consistency in the narrative. Nonetheless, this method of knowing the past opened up considerable opportunities for individuals to introduce innovations in their ideas, either consciously or unconsciously.

What were the functions of the mythic past within traditional Yuman cultures? As in the case of legends, one of the functions of myths was undoubtedly to provide entertainment. Another important function was to offer explanations for aspects of the experienced world that could not be satisfactorily explained in terms of rational analysis or personal experience. Still another function, although apparently one that was not strongly expressed in Yuman myths, was to inculcate social norms for proper behavior. Yuman myths and folktales reported the disastrous consequences of unwise actions, but they did not suggest anything like Western cultures’ fundamental dualism between good and evil in individual personalities or in behavior. Yuman myths did not present evident moral lessons in the way that many traditional Western myths have done.

Ideas about the Past in the Contemporary Yuman Communities of Baja California

We now turn to ideas about the past within the contemporary Yuman communities of Baja California. In some of the interviews that Bendímez has conducted, in addition to general information about personal histories and cultural practices, she has tried to ask specific questions pertinent to Yuman ideas about the past. Among these are the following: From whom did you learn the history of your community? Do you remember mention of creation myths? Do you believe, as some Yumans have, that it is possible to know the past by visiting it in dreams? Have you heard accounts of things that happened in your community during the period immediately before the Spanish and Mexicans arrived? Are young people interested in learning about the past from you and from others?

The Kumeyaay, Paipai, and Cocopa individuals who have contributed to this picture include Benito Peralta, María Emes Boronda, Juan García Aldama, Pascuala Saenz, Pulina Vega Poblano, Celia Silva Espinoza, Aurelia Ojeda, Josefina Ochurte, and Norma Mesa. It is not possible to present their full narratives, but we have extracted from them a few generalizations that may be of interest for the subject being discussed here. The narratives touch on several of the topics related to the periods or phases of the past, that is, the historical, legendary, and mythic, that were referred to in the first part of this article.

Most of what the Yuman narrators recounted was concerned with their own lives and personal experiences, including those from childhoods in the early twentieth century. These accounts told of cultural practices that were passed down and have continued to be followed. However, they often also reflected an awareness of some past lifeways—in such things as patterns of mobility and settlement, the uses of natural resources, personal dress, and material culture—that are no longer current but instead belong strictly to the
past. The attitudes that have been expressed toward this vanished past are ambiguous: some are nostalgic, while others are more critical.

Such is the case of Juan García Aldama (Figure 3), Cocopa from El Mayor.

There were no Mexicans here, there wasn’t a school, nothing, just Cucapá. I remember that in 1908 Mexicans arrived here…. We used ko.paps [boats or canoe] that were made from tule. They were very big, and a lot of people could go on them. We went [to the mouth of the Colorado River] for the Cucapá grain ñipá.

When I was a kid … we ate a lot of food. Seeds of palo fierro, biznaga, tule…. We played a lot … atás [like marbles] klu uy [a race], sualj [a game that women played with sticks, they painted a line in order to play that game] [Bendímez 1985].

Maria Emes Boronda (Figure 4) from Cañon de los Encino-San Antonio Necua remembered how she learned to sing and dance:

I learned to sing with my uncles, because they sang. My uncle, Emiliano Carrizales, had another brother, but half-brother, his name was Francisco Aldama … [he] sang a lot when he was young, he went to Cuajum [El Cajon, California] and other parts…. It was there where my uncle learned to sing… Then he came and sang here. I learned all of those songs when I was a child. Since he danced I danced too. The songs I sing, they sang it [Bendímez 2008:59].

Some of the elders remember portions of the creation myth, while others have not heard it. For example, Benito Peralta (Figure 5), a Paipai from Santa Cataria, when speaking of the origin of his ancestors, told Mauricio Mixco:

Figure 3. Juan García Aldama.

Figure 4. Maria Emes Boronda.
They crossed to this land, at the mouth of the Colorado River.… There God started to sing, placing the races in their homes.… He named the races Southerners, Northerners … the Crow race “Juach”, the “red skin” the “Jamsulch”, the Kiliwas, the “Crude Mouths.” … To each of them he said “this will be your hill, this will be your water” [Mixco 1977:216–217].

Stories about the Spanish mission period of the early nineteenth century have also been passed along to some individuals. The time depth of remembered community history has remained fairly shallow. For example, Benito Peralta, cited above, reported: “I can’t say how many years we have lived here. Perhaps for many years, because I’ve seen some very old men of this community, and they also told me that they saw old people, very old, who told them about their lives” (Bendímez 1989:19). As for the mission period, Benito explained that his grandmother, Petrocinia Cañedo, commented the following about Mission Santa Catarina, founded by the Dominicans in 1797 and destroyed in 1840:

[The Indians] left here, maybe they knew something, that they were going to be attacked, I believe [and] they fled almost when the sun was setting. I believe, they went out of here straight to the mountains, to those hills that can be seen there in front [towards the north]. [They are called] Wicualj. They were climbing and half way … it was already dark, I mean [a relative] told this to her…When they were half way, they looked back … and saw a blaze, the people burned the mission [Bendímez 1989:23].

Traditional Yuman cultures had strong taboos against mentioning the names of deceased persons, but this taboo seems to have largely faded away during the twentieth century. Named relatives and other noteworthy individuals were mentioned freely in the contemporary narrators’ accounts. This must be making knowledge of past experiences and events more vivid, albeit still on a fairly short time scale. Norma Mesa commented that before, “when someone died … they forgot their name. You should not mention, it was a lack of respect, that is why they had kwesa puch [deceased] and ñewatt [one who went away]; they were like nicknames for the dead.”

In at least some cases, Yuman ideas about the past continue to be passed forward from one generation to the next. An example comes from an account by Aurelia Ojeda (Figure 6), a member of the Kumeyaay community of San José de la Zorra:

I feel very happy because one [daughter] wants to keep everything [that Aurelia’s grandmother] taught me and everything she did not manage to teach me when I got married, because she wants to leave it to the girl. Then she says grab me, bring your notebook, and write what I say. It’s very important to me that a legacy of the community from here of the Kumeyaay people is recorded, because it has … a lot of history, a lot of song wisdom, because of songs, stories … how they lived when she was little … the first teachers who came here, how they [the Kumeyaay] reacted,
the first priest who came here, how they reacted; how far they went, the distance they had to walk to collect, to eat. All that’s known to her.

In part, contemporary Yuman attitudes toward and interest in the past are linked to the communities’ modern political and economic goals. According to Maria Emes:

Before, they didn’t like the Indians … (They called) drunk Indians! … dirty Indians, stinky Indians. That was the way they treated us, ah! The Mexicans that knew about us. And now they remembered. The government got the idea that we need a cultural center … for the rescue of I don’t know (what, they asked us) who knows how to sing, who knows to teach kumiai and weave baskets? … They talked to me, at the school in a meeting, because nobody wanted to sing, they talked with me, because we started to sing there and to dance the Indian way, and all of my people scolded us. They were ashamed because we were doing that. I wasn’t ashamed of my race, I never forget the things of my ancestors, they taught me a lot [Bendímez 2008:81].

According to Aurelia Ojeda:

We are fighting for recognition of our ancestral territory. Why? Because before, it was a Kumeyaay Nation, a very beautiful Kumeyaay nation. Then, little by little, it went away, not destroyed, but people from outside were arriving and there were the settlements here of whites in the communities of the nation. So we are fighting for recognition of the ancestral territory. There are many, many traces of our ancestors, as there are metates, locations for reed collection, ranchos, cemeteries, caves, so many traces that they left us.

Summary: Traditional and Contemporary Yuman Pasts

To sum up, traditional and contemporary Yuman cultures have dealt with the past in their own particular ways. Substantial importance has been attached to factual information that was transmitted from the past, as distinct from factual information about the past. Basic to Yuman survival was a hard-won corpus of knowledge concerning local botany, zoology, geology,
geography, and technology. This had been gradually built up in the past but was essentially understood and valued as being about the present. Similarly, the normative ideas that structured traditional Yuman settlement patterns, social organization, and ceremonialism were inherited from earlier generations to a considerable extent, but they were used to describe and to prescribe practices in the present. The individuals living in contemporary Yuman communities also have memories of the past—primarily of relatively recent pasts. Many of those ideas are factual, while some may be imaginary, but they continue to serve the cultural needs of the communities.

The traditional Yumans probably received some factual information about the most recent past, such as accounts of notable personalities of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, recent interethnics conflicts, and perhaps intracommunity events such as episodes of witchcraft. But concerning more distant pasts, such as the eras of Lake Cahuilla, of technological innovations, and of migrations of the branches of the Yuman family, factual information tended to fade fairly rapidly and to be forgotten. Lying behind the recent past was an essentially unchanging legendary past of indeterminate duration, stretching back until finally the creation period was approached. In contrast to the accounts that have been preserved in some other cultures, there were apparently no factual memories of extended dynasties, of the great deeds of heroic or malignant individuals, of longstanding ethnic enmities or shifting patterns of alliance, of technological innovations, or of changing lifeways. Instead, the Yumans constructed an imaginative past, framed as legends and myths, in part to entertain and to instruct but also to provide psychologically reassuring explanations for realities that could not be more directly explained by simple observation or direct experience. The legendary and mythic pasts of the Yuman cultures evolved under the influence of interactions with neighboring societies or through the creative contributions of individual narrators. Yet archaeology, linguistics, comparative ethnology, physical anthropology, and paleoenvironmental studies reveal to us that behind the ethnographic present lay a forgotten factual past that had also been far from static.

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