



Kiliwa territory, Baja California, Mexico, 2018.

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Amidst Borders, the Cultural Territory of the Yuman¹

In this article, I will show the transcendence in time and space of a living geography located on what is today the border between Mexico and the United States. This imposed border divides the territory of the Kumiai, Paipai, Cucapá, and Kiliwa nations, which anthropologists call the “Yuman peoples.” I will be using ethnography and these groups’ memory, funeral rituals, traditional songs, and mythology.

Tracks on the land are lasting marks in the biography of any Yuman. In effect, the road each person takes leaves its traces on these landscapes of wide-open horizons and creates an individual and collective memory, since in their interrelated clans, actions are intertwined with the territory, its resources, and the ways of sharing it.

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All photos by the author.

They say, “The steps are always taken twice; in life and in death.” Thus, any mark on the desert’s layer of dust or among the rocks in the hills is inexorably visited a second time. If the first time the path is blazed in life, the second time, when you die, your very presence on the surface of the land must be erased. After death, the time of the last pilgrimage along the road taken begins, and then you pick up all the fingernails and hair left behind, plus the energy that each object has been impregnated with; the tracks are erased and your own steps are recovered.

When one trip around the sun has been made and the task has been completed, all the clans come together and the friends of the Californias travel along the highways to say good-bye, speaking the road traveled together, the experience shared, and, to ask that everything be taken, even the memory itself, the name of the dead will not be spoken again.

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The Vocation to Walk

For the Yuman, people's ephemeral sojourn in the world contrasts with the depth of their memory of the territory, very present in their mythology and traditional songs. In an interview by National Institute of Anthropology and History researchers Daniela Leyva and Alejandro González, traditional Kumiai singer Juan Carranza said that the song accompanied by a *bule* (a kind of rattle) sung during *kuri kuri* dances—the Yuman call their fiesta the *kuri kuri*—is the narration that mentions certain roads, manifesting the appropriation of a living geography.²

Their origin myths are also anchored in a specific landscape. They narrate where the Yuman come from and how far they have walked as a people. To start, they recognize themselves as having come from far-off lands, upriver along the Colorado, from the Mohave Desert in California. There, the serpent Maihaiowit exploded and knowledge of the word, how to hunt, to sing, to weave, and to fish spread. From there, they walked and scattered along the way, those of the Pai family—the Paipai, who share the common original language with the Havapai, Havasupai, and Walapai, in the area of the Grand Canyon—; then the Cucapá, who also scattered, with some remaining on the other side of the border, in California, together with the Yuma, and others on the Mexican side, in Sonora and Baja California, up to the banks of the Hardy River on the edges of the Cucapá Mountains.

The Paipai traveled far from their linguistic brothers and sisters, from the nearest clans, who stayed in Ojos Negros, in the municipality of Ensenada, to create the beautiful town of Santa Catarina. The Kiliwas settled further to the south, on the skirts of the San Pedro Mártir Mountains, on “the rib of the Earth,” as they say. The Kumiai, relatives of the “Diegueños” from San Diego County, also were separated by that border that was so new to the history of these peoples. In Mexico, the Kumiai live today in communities from Tecate to the environs of Hanson

Lagoon in the National Constitution of 1857 Park. If there's anything the Yuman people defend, it is their nomadism, their ability to move, which for thousands of years led them to travel over what is now the south of California and Arizona as well as the peninsula of Baja California and the state of Sonora.

Geography and Its Mythological Counterpart

The mythology of these peoples links the effigies of the gods with the land, since, depending on their destiny and their actions, the gods turn into the mountains, rocks, and valleys surrounding them. For example, the head of the great monster, a whale or lizard, that killed the Cucapá cultural hero is Cerro Prieto, located just outside Mexicali; the body of Meltipá, *the land person*, creator of the Kiliwa world, scattered, creating that group's cultural landscape, since the head remained in the Trinidad Valley, the body is made up of the entire slope that leads to the so-called San Felipe Valley, and the right arm is the Arroyo Viejo, close to Colorado Hill.

Among the Paipai, the tale of the hero's deed narrates the battle of a young warrior against the monster Jalkutat, who attempted to steal the spring that gave life to Santa Catarina; in the end, the young man is victorious and then the clans are born. In other words, the gods form the world, which is nothing more than their bodies; this means that the landscape is not only ancestral, but it is alive and is also touched with the divine.

In the myths narrating the clans' journeys and explaining the origins of the songs, a cultural region also appears covering both countries, separated by today's national boundaries. A common source-language, funeral customs, music, kinship, and shared material lives express not only historic exchange but the construction of an identity down through the centuries. These crisscrossing elements were detected from the beginning of the twentieth century, for example, in Yuman art, particularly music. This means we can speak of stylistic integration in the production of the Mohave, the Yuma, and the Diegueños as constituent parts of this cultural region. Among the common traits are the simplicity of tonal development, the composition of long series of songs, and their close connection to the myths. They also share the use of the *jonal* or *bule* as the only accompaniment, the strict separa-



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tion between festival songs, interpreted at yearly collection celebrations, and funeral pieces.

Funeral rites also have elements in common both in the area now located in the United States and in the south of the Baja California peninsula. It is true that the first peoples, except the Cochimi, were exterminated during the Spanish colonial period, but precisely eighteenth-century sources and those from the beginning of the last century mention those common traits, such as, for example, those observed in the Kiliwa funeral rite (*ñiwey*).

Among these people, the *ñiwey* began a minimum of one year after the death, but it could be postponed until the fifth year, when the clans would have gathered enough acorns, pine nuts, and hunted animals to distribute among the participants. They hid the artifacts that would take on life for the ceremony in caves, letting them “age.” On the day of the ceremony, the clans came together and established a dialogue between the living and the dead. Some artifacts (layers of hair and feather headdresses) were put on the warriors’ heads, while they held others in their hands (boards used as masks and feather wands). Dressed like this, they would dance out of the caves toward the ceremonial center built of branches for the occasion. There, the healer, smoking coyote tobacco and playing the *bule*, would “take over” the voice of the dead, negotiate about old quarrels, find lost items, and arrange mat-

ters pending among the clans present. Later, he would sing and the participants would dance until the dead were sent to their permanent resting place, ending the ceremony.

Toward the North, among the Diegueños from San Diego and Riverside Counties, and among the Yuma, we find the same ritual, but instead of placing the artifacts on the warriors’ bodies, they built wooden “dolls.” On the dolls they placed the clothing and the life-giving hair, painted the faces to make the clan identity clear, and put the feathers on their heads and in their hands, tools for the mystical journey, thus making, just like among the Kiliwa, bodies that represent their dead.

Different sources describe this paraphernalia and some of the objectives of the rituals recorded among the Pericura and the Waycura. Thus, we can be relatively certain that the Yuman death traditions have extended not only over the territory, but over time.

Belonging Defined by Water

Two more traits show us the importance of territory and its symbolism. Because these peoples do not build large ceremonial centers nor are they precisely sedentary, their relationship with the land seems to be very different from that developed by agricultural peoples and the great Mesoamerican empires. However, in ancient times, each Yuman clan was associated with a body of water, as a fixed territorial center that gave the clan its name. This belonging in turn generated hunting and gathering rights over a certain area around that body of water throughout the year.

Relations among the Yuman groups were based on the connection between one clan’s hunting and gathering places and those of another, and the visits to the different camps were linked to intermarriage and political alliances among clans. Points for gathering acorns and pine nuts, for example, acted as meeting places. This was the moment for festivities, music, and singing, a time for *kuri kuri*.

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Another shared aspect was the towns of ancestors. While the Yuman worked ritually to turn the presence of the dead into a journey into another world, the inevitable accumulation of dead relatives ends up marking forever the place where a camp or a seasonal hunting hamlet was located, following the memories and the trace left by the living on the objects, houses, and, generally speaking, on the land. Over time, this accumulation of presences made certain sites sacred. And, even though the funeral rites attempted to make the presence disappear, the landscape is inevitably shared with settlements of dead relatives. This means that they continue to be present, which means that the rituals like the ñiwey can be understood as perpetually failed attempts at erasure and are constantly redone. Both living and dead Yuman make up,

together, the social and material fabric that, despite imposed borders, identifies part of our geography. **MM**

Further Reading

González Villarruel, Alejandro, and Natalia Gabayet, "¿Qué hace al kiliwa un koléew? La historia etnográfica subvertida en la esquina norte del país," *Desacatos* vol. 49, (September-December 2015).

——— "Los dos muertos de Demetrio Pulido. El ritual funerario kumiay," *Nueva Antropología* vol. xxix, no. 84, (January-June 2016), pp. 33-54.

——— "Cantantes yumanos: mitos, sueños y tradición," *Frontera Norte. Revista internacional de fronteras, territorios y regiones* vol. 31 (2019).

Notes

1 The information gathered for this article is part of a research project coordinated by Dr. Alejandro González Villarruel, "Antropología inminente, lengua y cultura yumana," CNAN-Centro INAH Baja California, 2012-2015.

2 Interview by Alejandro González and Daniela Leyva, October 9, 2015.

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