

ETHNOHISTORIC AND ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT FOR THE NORTH BAJA PIPELINE

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This brief paper reviews the published ethnohistoric and ethnographic literature of the area traversed by the North Baja Pipeline. This area is on the west side of the Colorado River south of the community of Blythe, Riverside County, California. The Blythe area, or Palo Verde Valley, was in the traditional territory of the Matxalycadom or Halchidhoma from about A.D. 1700 to 1829. Prior to 1700, some other Yuman tribe probably occupied the area, but their identity is unknown. Between 1827 and 1829, the Halchidhoma pulled out of the Palo Verde Valley area under military pressure from the Quechan and Mohave. The Palo Verde Valley then became Quechan territory and is considered so today. This review focuses on the traditional lifeways of the Halchidhoma and Quechan as they relate to the archaeology of the region.

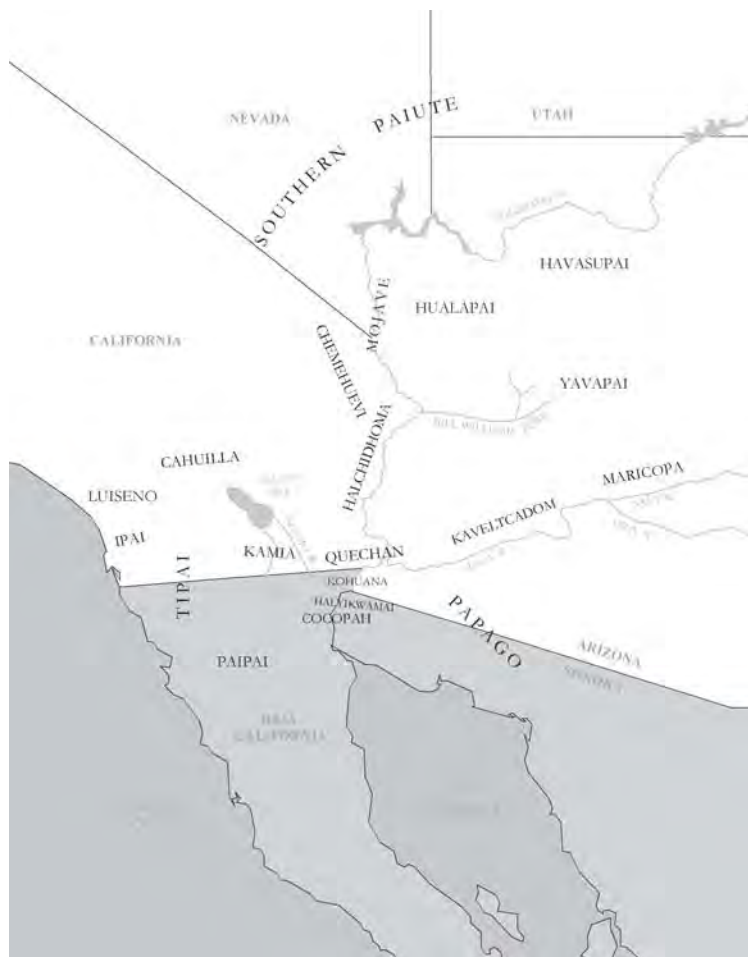
The area around Blythe, at the northern end of the North Baja Pipeline project, was home to the Matxalycadom or Halchidhoma from about 1700 to 1829 (Figure 1). In 1829, under military pressure from the Quechan and Mohave, the Halchidhoma migrated away from the Colorado River and eventually settled with the Maricopa along the Gila River in the vicinity of Phoenix. After 1829 or so, the entire study area, that is, the Colorado River from Ehrenberg/Blythe south to the Mexican border, was considered Quechan territory. It is not known who lived in this area before the Spanish invasion, but they were probably Yuman speakers and may have been Quechan (Forbes 1965).

At the time of contact, the lower Colorado River people had a relatively large population (Bee 1983:97; Forbes 1965:343) and a stable economy based on fishing, gathering, and horticulture (Figure 2). Throughout winter and spring, they lived in large, seasonal settlements or rancherías located on terraces above the floodplain (Figure 3). These winter settlements were moved from time to time, and establishing their precise locations is problematic (Bee 1982:40-44, 1983:87; Forde 1931:101). When the floodwaters of spring receded, the people left their winter villages on the river terraces and moved down onto the floodplain (Figure 4). They dispersed into camps of extended families and lived near their .8-1.2 ha horticultural plots.

Planting was done in the mud as the river receded. Major crops included maize, squash, and pumpkin. In 1701, Padre Eusebio Kino

introduced wheat and watermelon to the Quechan and these became popular cultigens. However, wild plants, especially mesquite, contributed more to the diet than horticulture (Castetter and Bell 1951). After the fall harvest season, the Quechan would reconvene in

Figure 1: Traditional tribal territories early 19th century.



villages on terraces above the river to avoid seasonal flooding (Bee 1983:88; Forde 1931:101).

The cultural landscape of the lower Colorado area is greatly influenced by the cosmology of the Pan-Yuman tribes. The Yumans believe in a plural reality: one is the “normal” material existence that everyone understands, and the other is the spiritual-mystical existence. This spiritual level of reality is accessed by means of dreams (Bee 1982:49-50; Forbes 1965:63; Forde 1931:201-204; Kroeber 1925:754; Stewart 1983:65).

Dreams figure prominently in legend and song and were the major source of knowledge and power (Bee 1982:49-50; Forbes 1965:63; Forde 1931:201-202; Kroeber 1925:754). The best and most significant dreams come unsolicited, during sleep at night, but intentional dreaming in pursuit of knowledge and insight is also occasionally done. This is somewhat analogous to meditation or prayer among other religious traditions, but no direct supplications to deities are made (Forde 1931:180-181, 202). Vision questing for supernatural power, such as pursued among the plains tribes, was not done (Forde 1931:202).

Among the Pan-Yuman peoples, dreams are tied closely to the cultural landscape. Personal dreams parallel Yuman religious myth and legend in the sense that most are about journeys of spiritual discovery, often along actual, physical trails leading to mountains of religious significance where important spirits reside.

Figure 2: Mohave water carrier (Source: American Memory Collection, Library of Congress, Edward S. Curtis's *The North American Indian*, 1908).



Figure 3: Mohave winter house (Source: Ben Wittick, 1890s).





Figure 4: Cocopa summer house, jacal, and ramada with drying pumpkins strips (Source: Edward H. Davis, 1923).

On these sacred peaks, one may be able to confer with spirit beings to learn from them and gain wisdom. Various origin events took place on these mountains, and these events can be re-witnessed in dreams. For these reasons, mountains and the trail systems linking them hold vital spiritual significance to the traditional Pan-Yuman peoples.

The *keruk* ceremony was the most important and deeply religious of all Pan-Yuman ceremonials. It is a reenactment of the death of the creator god Kukumat and the procession carrying his body back to Avikwaame (Newberry Peak or Spirit Mountain) located some 16 km north of Laughlin, Nevada, in Mohave territory.

The *keruk* was held typically in the fall to mourn the death of an important person or persons, but it was not necessarily held every year. The *keruk* was also the occasion for relatives and friends from considerable distance to get together.

Pilot Knob (Avikwalal; no gloss) with its associated site of Avikwinur (inscribed rock), located some 18 km west of the present-day town of Yuma, was the starting place for the traditional *keruk* ceremonial pilgrimage. The pilgrimage ended at Avikwaame some 360 km north of Yuma. The *Keruk* Trail and other trails linking various sacred mountains with each other and with various village areas were utilized for actual religious pilgrimages associated with the *keruk* ceremony, and they were also utilized for dream travel. These spiritually charged trails often have various trail

features evidently designed to help travelers deal with spiritual issues. These features include spirit breaks, which consist of cobbles aligned across or parallel to the trail; spirit deflectors, which are short dead-end trails; parallel trails, which are used to avoid the use of old, haunted trails; and trail cairns or shrines, which are piles of pebbles and pottery sherds accumulated as each passing traveler contributed one piece for good luck.

Spiritually significant trail segments sometimes have geoglyphs associated with them. The larger geoglyph sites are thought to be places where *keruk* observances once took place (Altschul and Ezzo 1994:52-53; Forbes 1965:67; Johnson 1985:37).

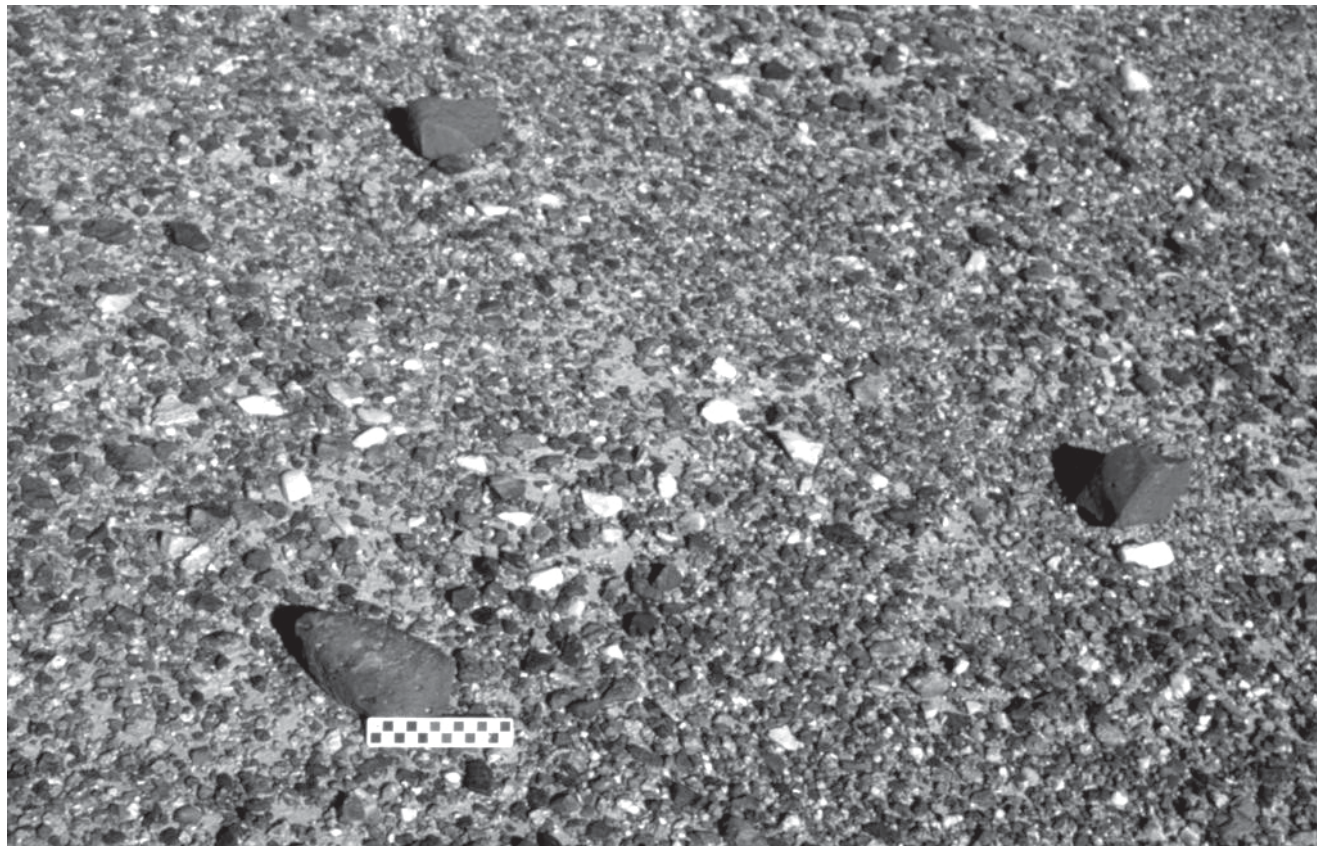
Features one might find at a major *keruk* site include anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and abstract geoglyphs; dance circles; winding, amorphous dance paths; amorphous, tamped staging areas; and cleared circles or sleeping circles (Figure 5). Minor ceremonial sites may lack many of these elements. Likewise, while a ceremonial function and spiritual significance is typically ascribed to anthropomorphic, zoomorphic, and abstract geoglyphs, some smaller, isolated ones may have been associated with ceremonies other than the *keruk*, such as initiation rites or harvest ceremonies (Altschul and Ezzo 1994:63).

Often one finds white quartz shatter associated with geoglyphs along spiritually significant trails (Figure 6). The milky quartz was shattered as part of a personal purification ritual as one approached a spiritually powerful place. Other archaeological manifestations of



Figure 5: Sleeping circle.

Figure 6: Quartz shatter.



Pan-Yuman spiritual life are power circles, also known as prayer circles, and shaman's hearths.

Power circles are small cleared circles in which a person seeking direct communication with the spirits might sit and dream or meditate (Altschul and Ezzo 1994:55; Johnson 1985:37). Shaman's hearths are small rock rings. They are thought to have a similar function, that is, as a place for meditation or dreaming, but the person sat outside a shaman's hearth. Some shaman's hearths have a stone in the center, which archaeologists sometimes call a focus stone. Shaman's hearths and power circles are sometimes found in clusters, which Quechan consultants suggest may reflect a place where a spiritual teacher instructed students.

From this very brief review, one can readily see how an understanding of Pan-Yuman spirituality is crucial for interpreting the Patayan archaeological record and understanding the cultural landscape of the North Baja Pipeline study area.

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