

KUUCHAMAA: The Kumeyaay Sacred Mountain¹

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PASSAGE of the National Environmental Policy Act followed by passage of the American Indian Religious Freedom Act (AIRFA) provided a new opportunity for American Indians to protect sacred places outside reservation boundaries. In some cases, Indians working with anthropologists have been able to use the AIRFA to protect previously unrecorded sacred locations. In other cases, although the sacredness of a location may have already been known to anthropologists, the combined efforts of Indians and scientists were insufficient to protect the sacred location. For example, the sacredness of San Francisco Peak in Arizona to the Navajo and Hopi was well documented. Dr. Joyce Griffin worked with both tribes to present their objections to development of new ski areas by the U. S. Forest Service which they felt would destroy the sacred nature of the peak and have a major impact upon their religion. The Forest Service ignored these objections and developed the area (Joyce Griffin, personal communication 1983). Another case is the Gasquet - Orleans road to be developed by the U. S. Forest Service for access to additional logging areas in northern California. Dr. Dorothea Theodoratus worked closely with the Yurok, Karok, and Tolowa to develop the religious information needed for the objections that were presented first to the Forest Service and then

in court (Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association et al. vs. R. Max Peterson, Chief, U. S. Forest Service²).

A third case will be described more fully here. In southern California, in order to protect *Kuuchamaa*, the Kumeyaay religious leaders decided to speak out and describe the importance of the mountain and its relationship to their concepts of the most high God. Previously unrecorded religious beliefs were revealed in order to have the mountain preserved by nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. While the Kumeyaay have been successful in protecting this sacred mountain (and more recently, a second, Table Mountain) they have not been successful in protecting several historic cemeteries from archaeologists and/or developers (Shipek 1983).

Contrary to early published descriptions of Kumeyaay (or Diegueño - Kamia of southern California) religion (Kroeber 1925) the Kumeyaay do have abstract spiritual concepts of religion and of a higher creator-god. Their highly complex moralistic, philosophical, and mystical concepts describe the ideal for the relationship of humans to God, humans to humans, and humans to nature. The Kumeyaay were simply more successful in maintaining the concept of secrecy which was a major part of the religious training of all the peoples of southern California (cf. Bean 1972; Boscana 1933; White 1957, 1963; Shipek 1977). Early ethnographers should not be faulted for not discovering these data since their primary

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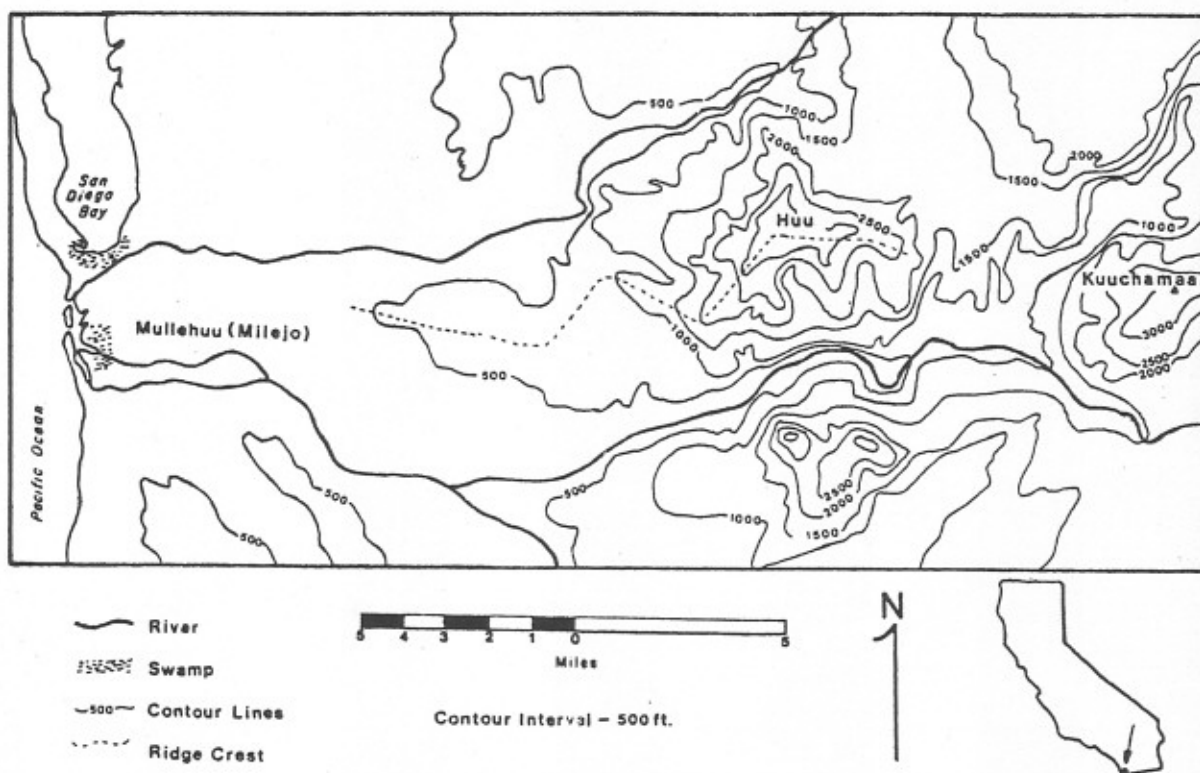


Fig. 1. Tecate Peak (*Kuuchamaa*), Otay Mountain (*Huu*), and Milejo Meadow (*Mullehuu*).

purpose was to visit widely in order to salvage information throughout California in an extensive survey rather than to do intensive work with any particular group. Years of work, the development of trust relationships with Kumeyaay elders, the development of sufficient knowledge to know what to ask, and finally, the proper occasion, were all necessary to learn about the religious beliefs reported here.

Through intensive land use and ethnobotanical studies for the Mission Indian Land Claims Case, I had long been aware that Tecate Peak (about 26 miles from the coast on the southern California - Baja California border [Fig. 1]) was sacred *Kuuchamaa*³, and that even the herbal specialists and surviving curers would not climb the mountain's slope. I had learned that only those who had been properly initiated as shamans were

supposed to go onto the mountain. No one still living had been initiated, but in their youth, most had known individuals who had been initiated and had been on the mountain to participate in ceremonies. All indicated that it was forbidden to speak of the mountain or the beliefs associated with it except on the proper occasions. Death would follow improper discussion of the mountain, of the name of God, or the Spirit of the mountain. Death would also follow improper use of the mountain, or entrance upon the upper slopes and the peak. Indian elders had also commented about how upset they were to look up and see the fire lookout and later the TV relay equipment up there.

Modern access to the mountain has always been extremely limited because the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) had fenced the steep slopes of the mountain due to the high

fire hazard of the heavy, dense chaparral. Through a locked gate, only a very steep, narrow, fire-truck trail with sharp switchbacks leads to the top where a fire-lookout station was formerly located. Recently, an unmanned TV-relay station was placed on the north half of the peak.

In 1979, while consulting with an environmental-impact firm, one of the religious elders and I simply identified Tecate Peak as sacred and requested that a power-transmission line pass below rather than over the mountain. This brought the sacred nature of the peak to the attention of the BLM. In the fall of 1981, a local church asked the BLM for use of the mountain side as a recreation camp. At that time, BLM officials asked for verification of the sacredness of the peak in order to nominate the mountain as a national historic site and to protect it from further abuse. They wanted to take the elders to the mountain to discuss it and interview them.

The elders debated the propriety of going on the mountain (since they were uninitiated) or of speaking about their religious beliefs concerning the mountain. They concluded that protection of the mountain was paramount and that they must go and tell their beliefs in spite of the injunction to maintain them in secrecy. With BLM officials, two trips to the peak were made by the existing religious elders. Each time, they prayed before entering the mountain. Then, when on the top, they prayed to *Kuuchamaa* to understand that they had come onto the mountain and were speaking about their religion in order to protect the mountain. They had come in deep reverence, not to violate their beliefs, nor to violate the mountain, nor for personal advantage, but to protect the sacred mountain for the sake of the Kumeyaay and all peoples. During the interview, they repeatedly informed the non-Kumeyaay present that too many people on the mountain for non-religious purposes would destroy the sac-

red place. They also stated that taking a plant or rock from the mountain would cause the death of the person taking it. Putting something on or near the peak was also forbidden.

According to the Kumeyaay, the Creator God Spirit, *Maayhaay*, put the mountain there as the most sacred place. The mountain was named *Kuuchamaa* by God and designated as the central location for acquiring power for good, for healing and peace. While other sacred mountains also exist in Kumeyaay territory, such as Mt. Signal (Eagle Mountain), Jacumba Peak, Mt. Woodson, and Viejas Mountain, they were used for other specific types of power. *Kuuchamaa* was the central place, more sacred and more powerful than any other.

The Kumeyaay creation belief states that when God created the world and humans, the mountain was created as a special place for the home of the spirit of *Kuuchamaa*. The coming of *Kuuchamaa*, as a man, was foretold in the creation legend. When he came as a man, he lived on the south side of the mountain peak. As a man he was a shaman, *kuseyaay*, having more power, leading and teaching all others. When living, he regularly called all the shamans, both the Kumeyaay *kuseyaay* and those from all the tribes around, the Kuhway (Luiseño and Juaneño), the Cahuilla, Cupeño, Quechan, Cocopa, Piai, and the Kiliwa. *Kuuchamaa* taught them all and lectured to them to stop fighting, that they should all live at peace with each other and help each other. He lectured them about all types of proper behavior, and instructed them to cooperate and help each other. He then sent them back to teach their own people. He taught them rituals, that is, singing and dancing which they were to use to train and teach the people peaceful behavior, cooperation, and the helping of one another. But the people did not obey and all the shamans had to be called to the mountain again and again.

Kuuchamaa taught the people many things through teaching the shamans on the mountain. He taught them to do a special dance there on the mountain. It was called *hollkwii*. The elders said that the *horloi* (Waterman 1910: 296) was a different dance used on different occasions. The shamans are supposed to have danced so much up there one time that they wore a circular rut in the rock on the mountain top.

According to the elders, "One time some shamans of other tribes were jealous of *Kuuchamaa*'s power and the power of the mountain so they tried to destroy the mountain." According to the legend, all the *kuseyaay* held a contest, much like the power contest of Elijah and the prophets of Baal in the Bible (II Kings). The elders said, "Some, the Kuhway [Luiseño] shamans, sent their power over the mountain and tried to destroy it. They were only able to damage one side of the mountain, leaving a split on the side which is still visible. Then the Kumeyaay shamans sent their power over the Kuhway land and destroyed some of their sacred places, to show everyone that *Kuuchamaa* was the most powerful. Other shaman contests were held on the mountain—each shaman trying to demonstrate his power for the others."

Kuuchamaa, himself, was involved in another episode the elders described, "Another time, some shamans from elsewhere brought toloache [*Datura*] to demonstrate the power acquired in this manner. Some tried it; *Kuuchamaa* observed. Some of those who tried it began dying. Then *Kuuchamaa* said this is the wrong way. If we do this, many young men will die. To use this plant, one must fast for five days, consume no food and no water for five days. Some did not believe this and still tried it without fasting. Some fasted but drank water. Many died. Among the Kumeyaay, *Kuuchamaa* forbade the use of *Datura*, called it that crazy weed, *samay e'nurr*. He

said that is a false way. Power must be given in one's dreams, not through the use of that weed."

Thus, contrary to the belief expressed in the early literature (Kroeber 1925: 742; Waterman 1910) the *Datura* cult, *Chinigchinich* (Boscana 1933), was not diffusing to the Kumeyaay under the nose of the missionaries, but had come earlier and had been rejected by their religious leader. The elders stated that, in spite of *Kuuchamaa*'s warning, in the more recent past, some persons who sought power and were unable to dream properly had begun using *Datura* to acquire a vision.

The mountain was always used by Kumeyaay shamans for acquiring healing power even before the man, *Kuuchamaa*, lived. It continued to be used after his death. In each generation, only the most powerful and best shaman stayed there and was responsible for regularly calling all shamans to the mountain. In some mystical way the spirit of God and of *Kuuchamaa* remains inside the mountain calling to individuals with special innate abilities for healing and for good. According to the elders, "Only good power, that is power to help people, could be acquired here. Spiritual songs, healing rituals, and special healing herbal knowledge was taught in dreams on the mountain. All such knowledge came in song, fasting, and dreams given by *Kuuchamaa*."

The elders said also that sometimes people who wanted power for evil or selfish purposes came here hoping to acquire strong power. "But to come here with selfish or evil purposes would rebound on that person and make him sick or if he were bad enough, kill him." According to the elders, "Not just anyone could come to the mountain. Because the mountain had been given to the Kumeyaay, only Kumeyaay people could use it in the search to obtain good power. However, a dream had to be given a Kumeyaay before he/she could come to the mountain. If one is given the dream to come, the dream must be

obeyed. The heart must be pure and one must want to help other people, not oneself. One must want power to help other people; the mountain is not for power *over* people."

The elders stated that *Kuuchamaa* was given four helpers by God, *Maayhaay*. They were to watch over all and aid him in teaching and maintaining peace and helpful behavior. They reported to him when anyone had done evil. The helpers were to remain on earth after *Kuuchamaa*'s death in order to watch over all and to report to his spirit. Three of his helpers were the eagle, the red-tailed hawk, and the raven who flew over all and constantly watched all below them on earth in the daytime. The fourth helper was the owl who flew and watched over all at night. While we were with the elders on the mountain top, we saw eagles flying around us. A special flower, sacred to *Kuuchamaa*, was also seen on the upper mountain slopes⁴.

At his death, which he had foretold, *Kuuchamaa* was cremated on the top of the mountain and his ashes interred in a hidden place according to the instructions he had given. He had also been asked if his followers could be cremated on the mountain top in a like fashion and he assented to this if they desired to do so. Thereafter, powerful Kumeyaay shamans were often cremated on the mountain top. The elders said that if the *kuseyaay* (shaman) had been so powerful that his power was feared, his ashes were scattered into the winds in order to dissipate the power.

One of the elders had an uncle who was a powerful healing shaman who had had a special stone that depicted *Kuuchamaa*. On a small stone, drawn in red, black, and white, was the figure of the mountain with a man's face on top. This stone was buried when the shaman died.

The elders told us that down on the southwest slope of the mountain is a spring that drips over a rock, which the Kumeyaay called "God's Tears." If the right dream came

to a shaman, he took a patient up there to lay under that spring for a healing. Many were healed up there. If the patient was too ill to walk, his family and friends made a drag with poles to carry him. This spring was the only place on the mountain to which uninitiated people (i.e., non-shamanistic) could go, and then only if the dream told them, or told their shaman to go there.

During the visit to the mountain with the BLM personnel, the elders were asked why this particular mountain was sacred to *Maayhaay*, God, and was the home of his "prophet" *Kuuchamaa*. It was pointed out to them that other nearby peaks were actually higher. The elders responded that though they had asked, they had never been told the reason why this mountain was the most sacred. Later, off the mountain, I remembered that Spanish records had named a meadow to the west, near the coast as *Mullehuu* (Milejo), or "meadow at the base of the nostrils." In the past, west of the meadow was a narrow, long north-south bay with a sand bar on the west or seaward side, known as the "mouth." Rising steeply east of the meadow is a narrow, high mountain ridge, Otay Mountain, running eastward and dropping off steeply on each side to a river (Fig. 1). This mountain was called "the nose," *Huu* in Kumeyaay. I realized that the sacred mountain, *Kuuchamaa*, is the next mountain inland and that it is more or less at right angles to the "nose" with a deep valley on each side just west of its major heights, and that the spring called the "Tears of God" is on the southwest side leading down into the valley on that side. Imagining oneself high above this area looking down, one can conceptualize a face represented by these mountains with Tecate Peak, or *Kuuchamaa*, as the forehead, containing the brain, and, to the Kumeyaay, the place of power as well as knowledge. Thus God had created this special location as the home for his spirit. When asking the elders about this relationship

of *Mullehuu* and *Huu*, the nose, to *Kuuchamaa*, they replied, "We did not have to tell you. IT came to you so you have the right to know."

As a result of the various discussions with and the questions asked by both the BLM and by archaeologists working on various environmental projects in recent years, the elders then asked me to publish the whole story in order that the literature should correctly describe their religion and religious beliefs. They did not like to be dismissed as "primitive and lacking higher mystical and abstract concepts." They all admitted, however, that they were giving only the barest outlines of their religion because none of them had been initiated as a shaman. They were all individuals who, in the past, would have been trained for the positions of either *kuseyaay* (shaman), *kwaaypaa* (captain), or *kuchat kwatay* (big leader). Thus each knew some of the aspects of the religion and they worked together, first for the purpose of saving *Kuuchamaa* as the most sacred Kumeyaay place, and second to correct the description of their religion in the anthropological literature.

Research in missionary records revealed that the Dominican, Father Luis Sales (Rudkin 1956), had written a short description of southern Kumeyaay religion which provides an early source for some of the religious information in the elders' statements. Sales was stationed at the missions of Rosario, San Vicente, and San Miguel between 1772 and 1790. All were within the Yuman language area and the last two were in southern Kumeyaay territory. While his reports do not always distinguish between mission populations and give only the barest outlines, his description of the religion indicates that, except for the *Datura* initiation ceremony, the southern Kumeyaay had concepts and ceremonies similar to those of the *Wiyot-Chinigichinich* religion of the Luiseño, which

Father Geronimo Boscana described some 30 years later. According to Sales, the "great captain" *Menichipa* [dialect of Vinacot]⁵ created the earth, sky and all, and then created another like himself named *Togomag*, and then a man and a woman who had a son named *Emai Cuano*. *Emai* [may be a dialectical variant of *Maayhaay*.] was adopted as a son by *Menichipa* and given all power and authority. In his creation, *Menichipa* had left everything imperfect, and *Emai* perfected all, "making sweet seed that were bitter, bringing fire to warm humans, and putting water in the sea, rivers, and lakes, and creating rain." He commanded dances and feasts to be celebrated, including funeral ceremonies. Sales wrote that among the local peoples were "Quamas" or "Cusiyaes" (*kuseyaay*) which Sales translated derogatorily as sorcerers, commenting that these people had no need of priests (Kehoe 1981; Shipek 1981) since they had neither sacrifices nor idols. Sales goes on to explain that these *kuseyaay* are healers and speakers who told the stories and legends of their ancestors, and also maintained knowledge of the most efficacious herbs. They also managed ceremonies for all purposes.

Ethnographic evidence has shown that many Kumeyaay *kuseyaay*, like San Luiseño *pul* (shaman), were specialists in managing some aspect of the environment—some in knowledge of various food plants, animals, fish and shellfish, and some in controlling the weather. Weather control shamans had ceremonies to make rain, stop rain, control the dew, and control the wind. Most of the larger bands also had "Sun watchers" who were responsible for watching for the solstices and equinoxes in order to tell the people when to hold certain ceremonies, when to plant and harvest, and when to do other food management ceremonies in relation to the position of the sun.

During the time on the mountain top, BLM personnel, having heard from some

source that there was a connection with a flood myth, questioned the elders intensively about any flood myths or legends connected with *Kuuchamaa* and they replied that in their youth, the only flood myths they had heard referred to Imperial Valley which in the past was time and again flooded by the Colorado River. The elders were also asked about the use of the mountain for boys' initiation ceremonies and they replied that it was not used for that purpose, that it was only for the purpose of initiating shamans and for shamanistic ceremonies. They said that boys were initiated in their own villages, as were the girls.

Upon leaving the mountain, when we stopped to open the BLM gate, one elder pointed to a large irregularly weathered granite boulder on the slope below us, asking if the others saw what she did. In awe, all agreed that the granite boulder presented the outline of the Madonna and Child facing up toward the peak. They stated that this confirmed the sacredness of the mountain even in their more recently acquired Catholicism. They pointed out that God did not send prophets just to Israel, but to all people to teach them how to behave, that He had placed the Madonna there to prove to other people that *Kuuchamaa* was as much his prophet to the Kumeyaay as were those in the Bible, and that God wanted this mountain to be kept sacred.

SUMMARY

While over the years I have been able to reconstruct a few portions of the Kumeyaay religious beliefs, the occasion for discussing my fragmentary reconstruction had not occurred. To discuss these matters under ordinary circumstances would be to cause someone's death. Thus, passage of the National Environmental Policy Act and the Native American Religious Freedom Act, which provided the opportunity to protect the sacred mountain, *Kuuchamaa*, presented the oppor-

tunity to develop a more complete and correct understanding of the moralistic and mystical philosophy of the Kumeyaay religion. Further, the Kumeyaay elders, having become aware of the published descriptions of their society and their religion and desiring that more correct information be presented, have asked that this material be published.

NOTES

1. Portions of this research were funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research and the University of Wisconsin - Parkside Committee on Research and Creative Activity.

2. Northwest Indian Cemetery Protective Association, a non-profit corporation; et al., Plaintiffs, vs. R. Max Peterson, in his official capacity as Chief, United States Forest Service; et al.; Defendants. No. C-82-4049 SAW in the United States District Court for the Northern District of California.

3. The orthography used here is that of Couro and Hutchinson (1973) developed for Northern Kumeyaay bands. However, the speakers in this case were all Southern Kumeyaay, using southern dialects—that of the Campo / Cuyapaipa / New River bands and their pronunciation is followed here.

4. Due to the rarity of this flower it was requested that public identification be withheld.

5. In discussing the Sales work, his rendering of Kumeyaay words is used.

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