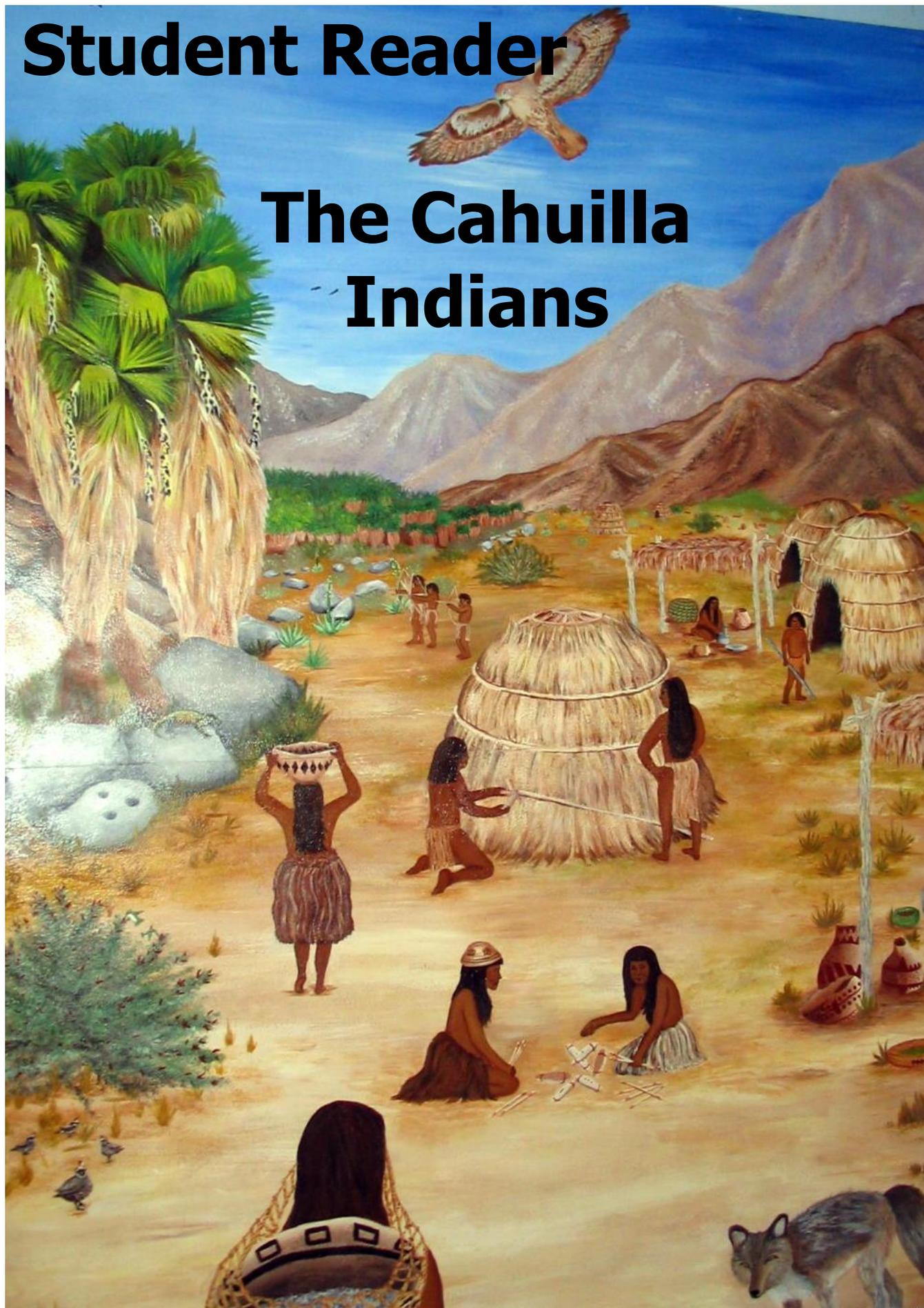


Student Reader

The Cahuilla Indians



Acknowledgements

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Note: In this *Student Reader: The Culture of the Cahuilla Indians*, the past tense is used to place the Cahuilla culture in historical perspective. However, many of the activities presented are still a part of the culture today.

An electronic version of this reader is available online at http://pdc.csusb.edu/Porter_Room.htm

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Cover photograph by Jeanette Janik

The mural on the cover, "The Cahuilla: Life and Land," is courtesy of the Palm Springs Library. It was designed and painted during the summer of 2005 by Lauren Parnell, Isreal Montesdeoca, Blake Richards and Sara Hahn under the direction of O'Jay Venegas.

Location of the Cahuilla

The Cahuilla villages were located from the low deserts to the high mountains. Their territory also included a series of valleys and mountain passes. The elevation ranged from 273 feet below sea level at the Salton Sink to the peaks of the San Jacinto Mountains and the San Geronio Mountains. The Cahuilla territory covered about 2,400 square miles.

California Indians had a tendency to stake out their tribal territory so as to cover several life zones. Life zones include various combinations of elevation, rainfall, climate, and certain plants and animals. By being able to freely hunt or gather in more than one life zone, the Indians could secure a much greater variety of plant and animal foods.

Life Zones of the Cahuilla Indians

The Cahuilla had distinct vertical life zones within their territory. Plant and animal resources came from different life zones. By being able to freely hunt or gather in more than one life zone, the Indians could secure a much greater variety of plant and animal foods.

Life Zones	Plant Resources	Animal Resources
Lower Sonoran Zone lies in the desert below the juniper-pinyon belt. Contains about 60% of total Cahuilla land.	Arrowweed, barrel cactus, cactus, California fan palm, cat's claw, creosote bush, desert ironwood, desert willow, mesquite, milkweed, Mojave yucca, octotillo, cholla, palo verde, saltbush, sand verbena, screwbean	More edible varieties than any other zone, including badger, chipmunk, cottontail, seven species of mice, mule deer, raccoon, three species of rats, three species of kangaroo rats, three species of squirrel, gray squirrel
Upper Sonoran Zone lies approximately one to two thousand feet to the five thousand foot level. Contains 30% of the total Cahuilla land.	60% of the plants used for food occurred in this zone, including oak and pinyon trees, cacti, agave, mesquite, nolina, octotillo	Abundant fauna including mule deer, antelope, mountain sheep, numerous rabbits and other rodents
Transition Zone lies at the five to seven thousand foot elevations. Contains 7% of the total Cahuilla land. Cold, snowy winters with 20-30" precipitation per year.	15 % of the plants used for food occurred in this zone, including oak, elderberry, service berry, wild cherry. Plant life also includes coniferous forests with oak groves, and cottonwoods growing along streams. South slopes have chaparral vegetation.	Deer, gray squirrel, ground squirrel, chipmunk, deer mouse, pinyon mouse, pack rat. (Bears and mountain lions were not eaten but they were dangerous to the hunter and were competitors for the same food resources.)
Canadian-Hudsonian Zone is at the highest elevations. Contains about 5% of Cahuilla land. Heaviest precipitation, lowest temperatures.	Very little food resources	Mountain sheep, mule deer, rabbits, rodents, lizards and snakes

Appearance

The Cahuilla were physically strong, of medium height, and stocky build. Both the men and women had long black hair parted in the middle. Only the women wore bangs. Both sexes tattooed their foreheads with vertical or horizontal lines. The women also tattooed their chins to designate clan relationships. Tattoos were made by pricking the skin with a cactus thorn or a needle made from the yucca plant. Charcoal from a yucca cabbage, or juice from certain leaves, was rubbed into the open skin prick to make a blue-black tattoo.

Food-Plants

The Cahuilla Indians used their environment to provide food, clothing, and shelter. Living in the Southern California desert, pass, and mountain areas, they had many natural resources. The oak tree produced the most food for the Cahuilla. Acorns were usually gathered during a 2 to 3 week period in October and November. Men, women, and children would all help gather acorns. After gathering the wild acorns, the women used mortars and pestles to grind the acorns into flour. The tannin in the acorns had to be washed many times before they could be eaten.

The mesquite produced edible blossoms in June and seed pods in July and August. The Cahuilla also ate cactus, agave, yucca, screwbean, fruits, berries, tubers, roots, and seed-producing plants such as sunflowers, chia, ocotillo, wild squash, and juniper.

Hunting for Food-Animals

The Cahuilla ate a variety of large game such as deer and small game such as rabbits, mice, chipmunks, squirrels and raccoons. Generally, hunting and skinning were done by men and cooking was done by the women.

Food- Other Animals

Birds were a very important part of their diet. They ate quail, ducks, geese, and some seasonal birds. They would not eat the eagle or the raven because these two were used in Cahuilla rituals. Reptiles, including rattlesnakes and lizards, were a source of food. They also ate insects such as ants and grasshoppers, cricket pupae, cicadas, and moth larvae. They caught fish with arrows, nets, and stone enclosures called fish traps.

Shelter

Houses in the desert region were generally dome-shaped or rectangular. The Cahuilla called their dome houses a kish, pronounced like the word quiche. Some were as large as 15 or 20 feet across. The house was made from bending willow branches covered with palm fronds, tule or whatever plant material was available. Each house had a front opening and a hearth in the center of the floor. A hole was left open at the top of the roof for the smoke to escape. Tule mats covered the doorway and the dirt floor. Other types of shelter in a Cahuilla village included ceremonial houses, sweathouses, and granaries for storing seeds and food.

Clothing

Due to the warm climate, the Cahuilla Indians wore very little clothing during most of the year. During the warmer months, they wore a two-piece apron made from woven tule, fan palm leaves or deerskin. During cold weather, they wore capes made from rabbit fur or deerskin which also doubled as blankets. Most of the time they went barefoot, but if the ground was rough they wore sandals woven from yucca, agave, or palm fronds. The women also wore basket caps. The Cahuilla would adorn themselves with flowers and tattoos.

Tools

The Cahuilla used things in their natural environment to create helpful tools and utensils. The bow and arrow and the throwing stick were used for killing game. Bows were made of willow, mesquite, or stalks from palm fronds. Arrows were made of cane, sagebrush, and arrowweed. Arrows had stone or wooden points of different sizes. The arrow tips were dipped in poison made from venom of black widows spiders or rattlesnakes. They also used nets, fire, and clubs to hunt their food. Nets were made and owned by men. They placed the nets along game trails to catch small animals or birds.

More Tools

Mortars were made from rock and were used with a pestle to grind acorns into flour. Bones were used for making tools and tanning hides. Stones were made into pounding tools. Rocks were sometimes thrown at game. Flints were used as arrowpoints and small drills. Pottery containers were used for boiling dried and fresh seeds, fruits, blossoms, and meats. Tortoise shells were used for making household utensils and rattles.

Tools Made from Plants

Plants were used in many creative ways. The stiff, strong center of the fan palm was used for making utensils such as spoons. Digging sticks were made from hard woods. Flexible woods were used for making bows, cradles, and baskets. Plant fiber was used for making carrying nets, nets for hunting game, articles of clothing, mats for the floor, and traps. It was also used for thread and twine for sewing hides and for weaving rabbit-skin blankets. The spine of the agave leaf was used as a needle for sewing.

Baskets

Some foods were cooked in baskets. Hot rocks were put into a basket to make the liquid boil. Baskets were used for many other purposes such as carrying baskets, storage baskets, flat baskets for serving food, leaching baskets to prepare acorn meal, cages for birds or insects, and cradles to carry a child. Foods were dried and stored in large basket granaries.

System of Government

The Cahuilla were divided into two groups or moieties: the Wildcat and Coyote. Members of the wildcats were expected to marry into the coyote society and visa versa. Cahuilla land was further divided into areas called *sib* areas. The leader of the sib was called the *net*. The job of the *net* was usually passed down from father to the oldest son. The *net* was in charge of ceremonies and he ruled over a council of leaders. The *net* would decide when and where people would go to gather food and hunt game. When two people had a dispute or a problem, the *net* would hear both sides and would then make a decision on how to solve the dispute. The net met with the nets from the other villages. They would settle disputes over land use, marriages, and warfare.

The Economy

Each person in the village had his or her share of work. The women cooked, provided acorn meal, and made baskets. The men hunted, traded, and made rope and string from long grasses. The children gathered yucca plants, acorns, and other plants necessary to their diets. All of the food was divided and shared evenly. Trade was very important to the Indian way of life. The villages traded with each other. The coastal Indians would trade dried fish, sea otter skins, and shell beads with the Cahuilla villages. In return, the Cahuilla would trade animal skins, acorns, salt, and obsidian. Pottery and agricultural products were traded with the tribes to the east.