
Heart of Fire is a model of California Indian ethnography of our times. Its form reflects Indian sensibilities and protocol, its narration is Indian and multi-vocal; its theme is resurgence and survival. The book opens with grateful acknowledgements to well over a hundred persons and organizations; proceeds from the book go to a reservation scholarship fund administered by Malki Museum. Deborah Dozier originally conceived of the project as a catalogue to accompany a travelling museum exhibit, "Cahuilla Voices: We Are Still Here." In July 1991, Dozier taped conversations among five Cahuillas: Katherine Saubel, Alvino Siva, Dolores Alvarez, Anthony Andreas, and JoMay Modesto. (Biographical sketches of these accomplished persons with accompanying photographs, can be found on pages 15 to 17.) The "heart" of the book is the verbatim transcriptions of these conversations. These have been lightly edited and organized into topical chapters: "Identity," "Family," "The Land," "Food and Medicine," "Bird Songs," "Rock Art," "Basketry," and "Pottery," concluding fittingly with a chapter "We Are Still Here." The Indian voices are foregrounded; Dozier's role is modestly muted. The book is handsomely illustrated with excellent maps and many good-quality historic photographs. These and their accompanying textual explanations add a rich dimension to the book.

In the brief introduction, Dozier artfully juxtaposes the Cahuilla's natural desert environment of southern California—a land of extremes—to the modern-day scarring of the land by freeways, landfills, and mini-malls. The Prologue is a version of the Cahuilla's creation
story as translated and told by Katherine Saubel. In this cosmology, the Creator Mukat ultimately has to be destroyed because he becomes a menace. The Introduction and Prologue both underscore the Cahuilla’s understanding of life as unpredictable, thus fostering adaptability and realism in Cahuilla culture. The conversations which follow embroider this theme with tangible examples of Cahuilla character traits today: pride, strength, humor, and acceptance of things as they are. Though the earlier culture of the Cahuilla is not viewed romantically, at times there are expressions of loss, tinged with remorse and anger—particularly by siblings Alvino Siva and Katherine Saubel, who were reared in a more traditional context—for what change has brought to the Cahuilla people. Birdsong Siva, for example, emphasizes that in the past “Everything had to be done right if you were going to do it.” (26).

The conversational, multi-vocal format provides many insights, for example, in the chapter on Identity; where there is wide disagreement among the participants as to what makes a person a “Cahuilla.” In other portions of the book, however, the information presented in this manner is disjointed. Issues about which the reader might wish to know more are only fleetingly mentioned. In the chapter on Land, for example, the conversations touch upon the ethics of land management, loss of water rights, and changing historic land utilization patterns by the Cahuilla. Beanfields and honey-making gave way to sand and gravel businesses and landfill operations. (Katherine Saubel makes a passionate objection to the last mentioned item.) There is a want of historical contextualization and systematic, in-depth analysis. Heart of Fire, offering fresh and candid contemporary viewpoints, can best be appreciated as supplement. The reader may perhaps wish to first read some of the excellent work on the Cahuilla by anthropologist Lowell Bean, who coincidentally consulted and collaborated on many projects with Saubel.

There are a few minor failings. First, as the book consists largely of transcribed conversations, instead of using initials alone to differentiate speakers, it would have been more helpful to the reader to provide full names. Secondly, Dozier only sparingly added footnotes for clarification or elaboration; she could have been somewhat more aggressive in this regard. Thirdly, the text under the photo of the “Mission Indian Federation, 1930” (p. 146) is misleading as the federation drew almost exclusively on a southern California membership (not central California); meetings were held at the Tibbet home in Riverside from 1919 until Tibbet’s death in 1930.

The book is a valuable contribution, and Heydey and Dozier are to be commended. Not only does it add to the store of Cahuilla ethnography and history, it is handsomely designed with wide margins, attractive maps, and interesting historical and contemporary photographs. The book is unpretentious, but the coherence of its design and overarching theme of survival bring its many elements into a subtle and pleasing harmony.

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