

Keeping Cahuilla Alive

Preserving this critically endangered language is vital to understanding the Agua Caliente people's identity, history, and culture.

BY JOAN PAGE MCKENNA



IT'S EARLY ON a Friday evening at the Agua Caliente Casino Resort Spa in Rancho Mirage. In an event room off the main casino floor, the air buzzes with lively conversation and laughter as a small group gathers for Cahuilla language lessons, followed by dinner. The mood is upbeat and fun. Michelle Morreo leads the class with a written and spoken tutorial on the seasons, occasionally pausing to check her pronunciation with her grandmother, master teacher

Christina Morreo, who's seated in the front row. The class encompasses all generations, and everybody participates, repeating phrases aloud as we go around the room one by one. "Mipa tawpa?" (When is summer?), we ask. "Ay tawpa" (It's summer already), we reply. Michelle has taught Cahuilla since 2000, and Christina — one of only five or so remaining fluent speakers — since 2003. They're part of an ongoing effort to save the language from becoming dormant. Once

spoken by thousands of people from the San Geronio Pass near Banning to the Salton Sea and parts of the San Jacinto and Santa Rosa mountains, the Cahuilla language and its number of speakers has dwindled to a handful within a 100-mile radius of the Coachella Valley. Both the Endangered Languages Project and the UNESCO Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger categorize Cahuilla as "critically endangered," the

last step before dormancy, meaning "the youngest speakers are grandparents and older, and they speak the language infrequently."

Revitalizing Cahuilla is essential because language is so closely interwoven with identity, explains John Preckwinkle III, Chairman of the Cultural Preservation Committee for the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. He himself is working on becoming a more proficient speaker.

"Language is the key to our culture," he says. "When you understand how the language works, you then understand the thought processes of the culture. For example, in Americanized English, things have a certain order. You say, 'John and Stephanie walked down the street,' and that's how you picture it in English. But when you start picturing it in the Cahuilla language, it's 'John, Stephanie, street, walking, direction.' It's a very literal language."

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WHO SPEAKS CAHUILLA?

The nine sovereign bands of the Cahuilla people:

- Agua Caliente
- Augustine
- Cabazon
- Cahuilla
- Los Coyotes
- Morongo
- Ramona
- Santa Rosa
- Torres-Martinez

TRACING CAHUILLA'S LINGUISTIC ROOTS

Cahuilla is a member of the Takic branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family. Within Takic, it is most closely related to Cupeño, Juaneño, and Luiseño and more distantly to Gabrielino, Kitanemuk, Serrano, and Tataviam. The other Uto-Aztecan languages of California are Tubatulabal and the Numic languages (Chemehuevi-Southern Paiute-Ute, Comanche, Kawaiisu, Mono, Northern Paiute, Panamint, and Shoshone).

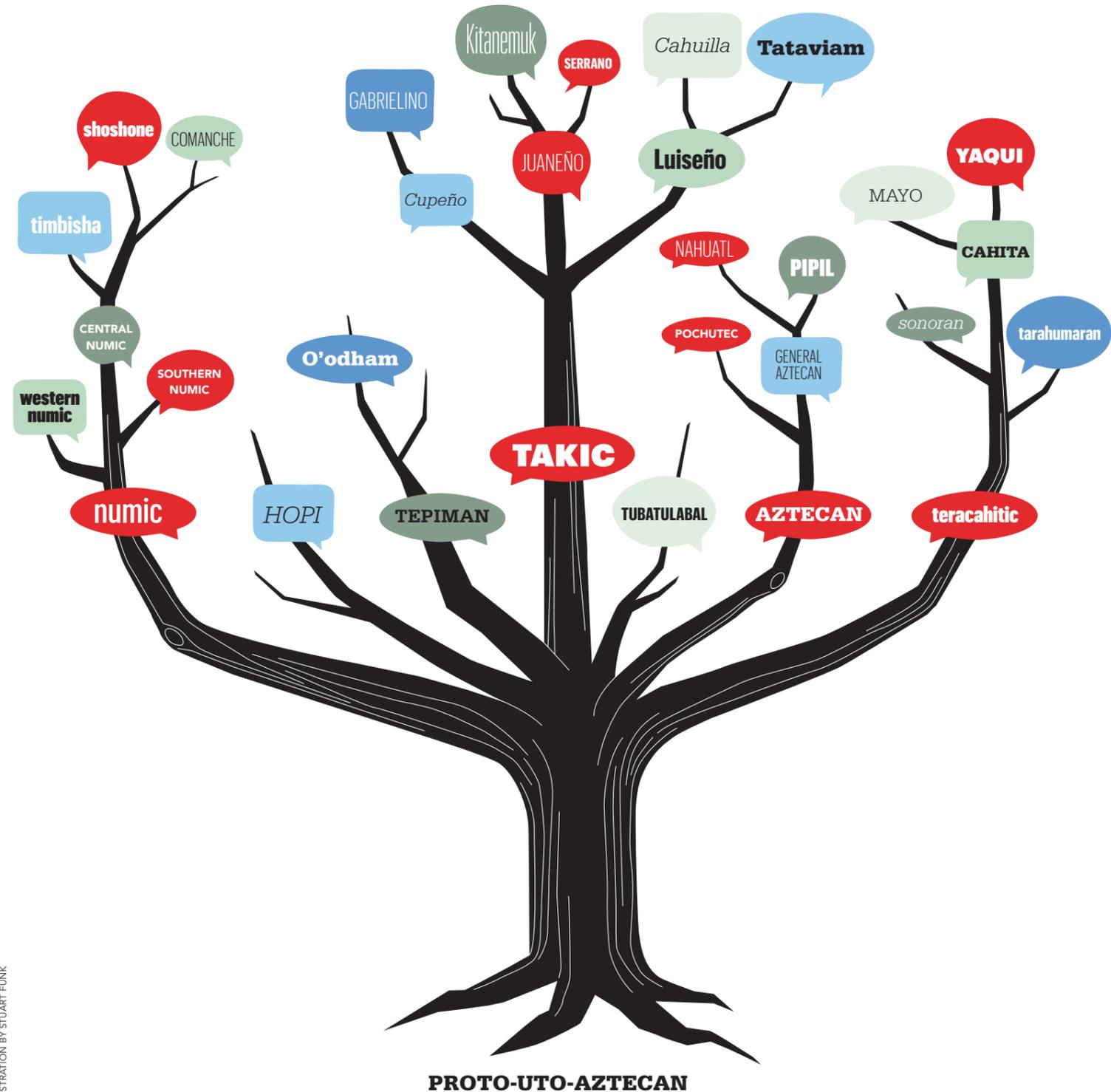


ILLUSTRATION BY STUART FUNK

Cahuilla Language Flashcards

**Bighorn
Sheep**



pa`at



AGUA CALIENTE
BAND OF CAHUILLA INDIANS

Cat's Claw

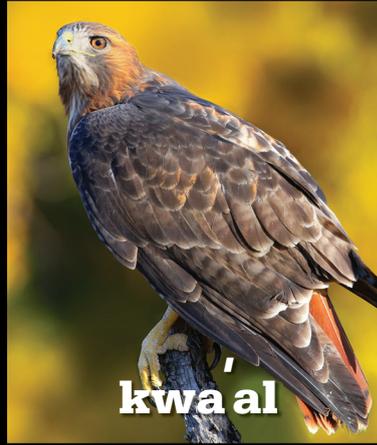


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AGUA CALIENTE
BAND OF CAHUILLA INDIANS

**Red-Tailed
Hawk**

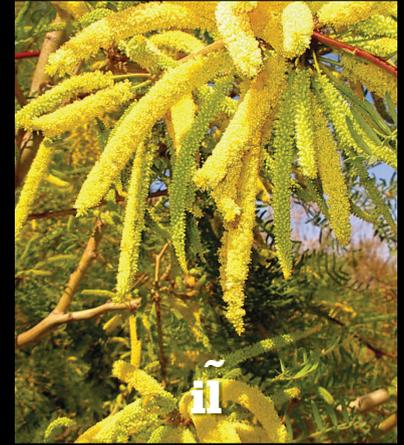


kwa'al



AGUA CALIENTE
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**Honey
Mesquite**

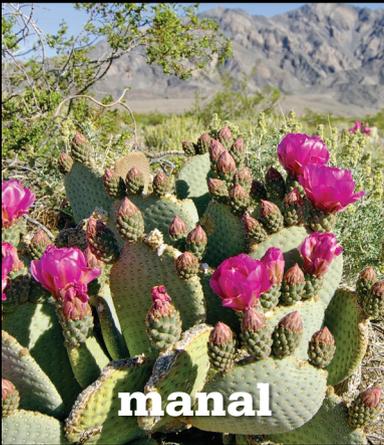


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AGUA CALIENTE
BAND OF CAHUILLA INDIANS

**Beavertail
Cactus**

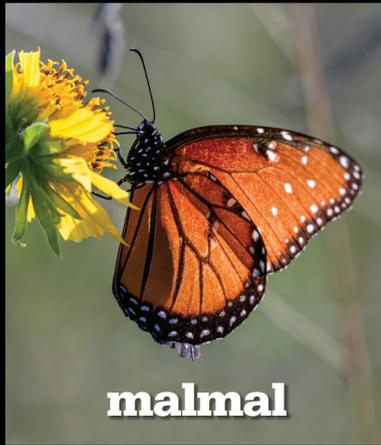


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AGUA CALIENTE
BAND OF CAHUILLA INDIANS

Butterfly



malmal



AGUA CALIENTE
BAND OF CAHUILLA INDIANS

**Teddy Bear
Cholla**

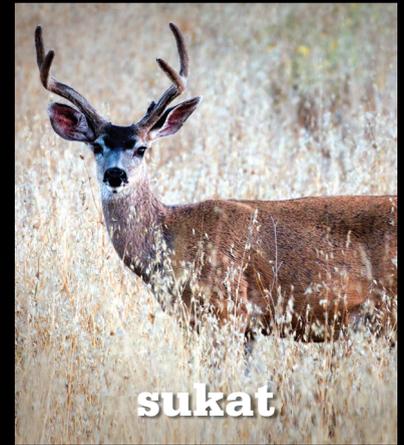


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Deer



sukat



AGUA CALIENTE
BAND OF CAHUILLA INDIANS

Hummingbird

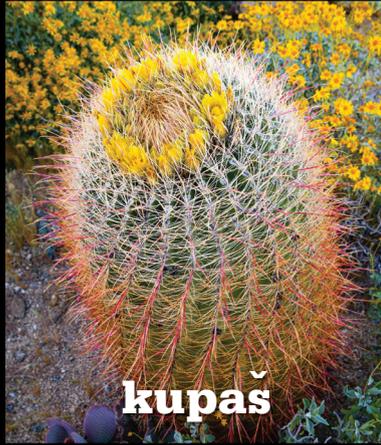


tucĩl



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**California Red
Barrel Cactus**



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AGUA CALIENTE
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Coyote

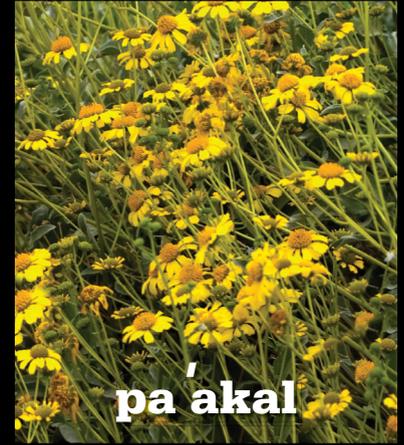


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Brittlebush

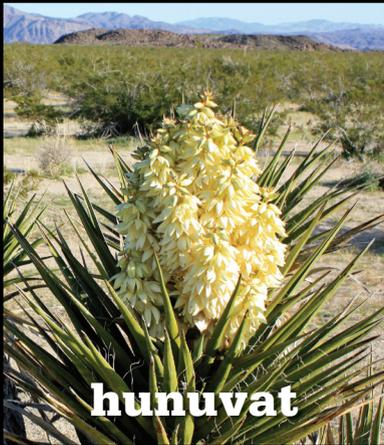


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Mojave Yucca



hunuvat



AGUA CALIENTE
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Quail

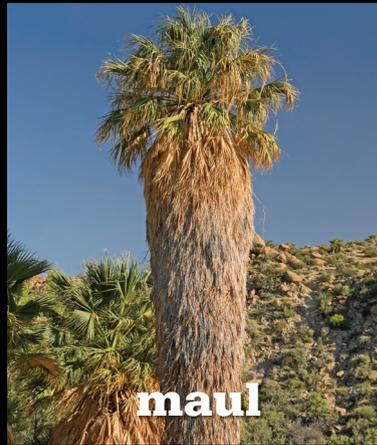


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**Washingtonia
Filifera**

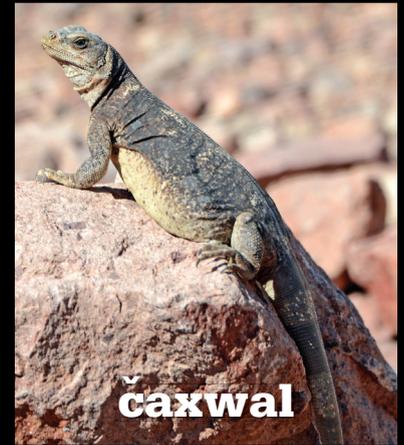


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AGUA CALIENTE
BAND OF CAHUILLA INDIANS

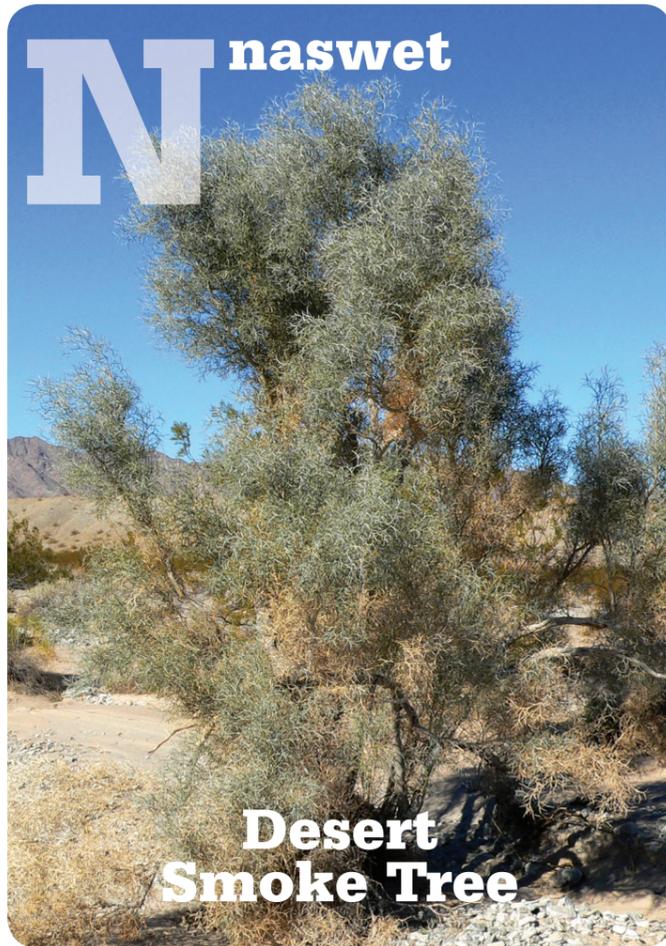
Chuckwalla



caxwal



AGUA CALIENTE
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N naswet

Desert Smoke Tree

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The decline in the number of speakers began in the early to mid-1900s, Preckwinkle notes, when Tribal elders decided not to teach Cahuilla as a first language because of persecution, racism, and assimilation.

In the late 1800s, many tribes were forced to send their children to boarding schools, and there was enormous pressure to learn English, adds Raymond Huaute, a Cahuilla scholar and language specialist completing his Ph.D. in linguistics at the University of California, San Diego. It was during this time when the

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If you ask a Cahuilla person how old the language is, our elders would say it's from the beginning.

Raymond Huaute,
Cahuilla language scholar

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intergenerational transfer of the Cahuilla language began to decline, he says. Moreover, many males who spoke Cahuilla in the home left for the military between the early to mid-1900s, further eroding the language base.

Cahuilla falls within the Uto-Aztecan language family, Huaute explains, and has existed since time immemorial. It's difficult to pinpoint a timeline or its age. "Our oral traditions tell us it's an ancient language that far exceeds the estimations of linguistics and anthropology as disciplines," he says.

"If you ask a Cahuilla person how old the language is, our elders would say

it's from the beginning. Our creation story tells us exactly how we received our language: When the people were first created, there was a large group of people, all speaking different languages," Huaute continues. "The Cahuilla people came together because they heard others speaking the same language, and that was the beginning of their journey."

Cahuilla's contemporary language includes three distinct dialects: Desert, Mountain, and (San Gorgonio) Pass, all having minor grammatical differences.

For example, in Desert Cahuilla, autumn (literally, "to make cool") is *yuchiviwen*,



T tukwet

Mountain Lion



P pa'at

Bighorn Sheep

while Mountain Cahuilla pronounces it *yuchiwivah*, with the v and w transposed.

"The Pass and Desert dialects are more similar in their verb morphology," Huaute explains. "Mountain makes more subtle changes. In Desert, there are more individual words grouped together, whereas in Mountain, it's one long word."

Factors like geographic movement and subsequent marriages with other tribes, including the Luiseño and Cupeño, contributed to linguistic changes among the Cahuilla, he says. Within the Cupan language subgroup, he adds, "Serrano is the least

mutually intelligible with Cahuilla, followed by Luiseño. Cupeño is the closest to Cahuilla, and I would say they're more mutually understandable."

Spanish also contributed borrowed words, such as the one for "table." "We didn't know that *la mesa* was two words, so for us, it's just one word, *lamesa*. And with our loan words, whichever vowel is stressed in the Spanish word becomes a long vowel in Cahuilla," Huaute says.

Both Preckwinkle and Huaute emphasize the need to involve younger generations in the effort to reinvigorate Cahuilla. "There's

only a handful of speakers left; people are not picking it up and trying to learn it," Preckwinkle says. "It's hard to maintain it, and if you don't use it, you lose it."

The cultural and historical significance of saving the language cannot be overstated. "When we hear recordings from 100 years ago, if we don't understand the language or the syntax, we're not going to learn the lessons these elders left behind. That's what got me into the language — wanting to sing our songs, which we sing to this day," says Preckwinkle, who is also the great-grandson of ceremonial singer John Joseph Patencio.

Several of the Cahuilla bands currently offer various language programs. For example, the Torres-Martinez band includes a language department, where Christina and Michelle Morreo work. The Morongo band offers classes, and lessons are available on various other Cahuilla reservations. Palomar College and California State University, San Bernardino feature Cahuilla curriculum, as well as a recently established university-level course at the University of California, Riverside. To help draw younger learners, Preckwinkle is hoping to develop a Cahuilla smartphone app.

For his part, Huaute has launched a language revitalization group with fellow Cahuilla community members called Páayish Néken, which means "coming of the dawn."

"We have been working with some of the Cahuilla communities to supplement the college classes they're offering by using different teaching methods, similar to

the strategies that the Māori and the Hawaiians are using. It's more immersion based," he says.

"For instance, we had a Cahuilla language immersion camp for families a couple of years ago in Anza. We brought Christina [Morreo] up there. Families spoke only the Cahuilla language for most of the weekend, and a lot of people liked the idea. Our mission is to help the families that want to speak Cahuilla in their home by giving them strategies and materials to do so." 🍌

For more information about Páayish Néken visit paayishneken.weebly.com.

CAHUILLA DICTIONARY



HANSJAKOB SEILER
and
KOJIRO HIOKI

CAHUILLA WORD SAMPLER

me yah whae = hello

ah cha ma = thank you

tammit = sun

menil = moon

The Cahuilla dictionary is available through the Malki Museum and Riverside County libraries.