



KUMEYAAY ETHNOBOTANY: SHARED HERITAGE OF THE CALIFORNIAS

Michael Wilken-Robertson

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READING *Kumeyaay Ethnobotany: Shared Heritage of the Californias* by Michael Wilken-Robertson is like eating fresh, warm jalapeño cornbread slathered with sweet butter and amber honey. I read this book in small bites to savor and contemplate its contrasting flavors.

With origins dating back twelve thousand years, the Kumeyaay (Tipai-Ipai) are the Native people of southernmost California and Baja California.

Wilken-Robertson explains, “In order to provide background that contextualizes human-plant interactions of the Kumeyaay region, this book begins with a review of archaeological, historical, ethnographic, and linguistic literature” (xxvii). He also addresses “applied ethnobotany,” which “uses the knowledge, methods, and theory developed through the discipline to benefit local peoples and encourage conservation of the resources studied” (242).

His command of the Modern Language Association’s standards is as thorough as his immersion in the Kumeyaay culture. Chapters 1 through 5 give detailed accounts of Kumeyaay evolution that could serve as a class syllabus. Wilken-Robertson is an applied cultural anthropologist and teaches at California State University, San Marcos.

This book is not a how-to for medicinal applications or a guide to ingesting potentially fatal wild plants. Instead, consider it for “using and helping to conserve local native plant populations in their landscaping” (front matter).

Delineated maps show the extent of the Kumeyaay homelands and become doors propped open to a bygone nation. The “Kumeyaay territory...originally extended from the Pacific Ocean on the western edge of the continent, across the peninsular range to the Colorado Desert” (xxx), proving their historic reach.

Juxtaposed alongside the maps, photographs offer a window into a hopeful future with Kumeyaay elders using coast agave (*me’ellh*) to teach youth: “along with its great value as source of food, agave also provided fiber that could be extracted to make cordage, sandals, bowstrings, belts, and other items that were indispensable for mobile hunter-gathers” (99). The urgency of preserving all relatable knowledge underscores its passionate message. The future, as always, belongs to the children.

Forty-seven Kumeyaay heritage plants are beautifully presented in Chapter 6 with Latin, English, Spanish, and Kumeyaay variant names. All are either medicinal, ceremonial or functional. Recognizable plants include the prickly ear (*jpaa jentil*) (“both pads and fruit are edible,” 159); Mexican blue palm (*muy kuaw*) (“its date-like fruits were highly prized,” 117); manzanita (*jusilh*) (“used as a refreshing drink and medicine,” 109); and white sage (*lhtaay*) (“widely used as medicine as well as for ceremonial purposes,” 50).

Chapter 9, “Putting the Knowledge to Work,” focuses on bringing back financial autonomy. Wilken-Robertson’s long-standing relationships with the Kumeyaay have resulted in the Tecate Community Museum, which aims to “instill respect for the territory—sacred sites, environment, cultures, and customs” (243) and “encourage sustainable economic development and other community-based initiatives” (241).

This book is an enriching read that left me with a renewed craving for spirit in nature. Tecate Community Museum is on my backyard bucket list. Cornbread and my dog-eared *Kumeyaay Ethnobotany* are packed for guidance in speaking with all my relations.