

Kumeyaay Oral Tradition, Cultural Identity, and Language Revitalization

Margaret Field and Jon Meza Cuero

Forms of oral tradition such as narrative and song often serve as important cultural resources that retain and reinforce cultural values and group identity (Bauman 1992; Bright 1993; Jahner 1999; Sekaquaptewa and Washburn 2004). This is particularly true of American Indian “trickster tales” which, like European Aesop’s fables, contain moral content and are typically aimed at child audiences.¹ This essay discusses an example of this genre with specific reference to the Kumeyaay community of Baja California Norte, Mexico. It also discusses how such stories are an important form of cultural property that doubly indexes group identity—once through the code that is used, and then again through the content of the narrative itself. Oral traditions such as trickster tales form an important body of knowledge that not only preserves cultural values and philosophical orientations, but also continues to imbue its listeners with these values. American Indian communities typically view their oral traditions as communal intellectual property (Hill 2002), and for this reason it is incumbent upon researchers who work with traditional texts in these oral communities to collaborate with them to ensure that collected texts are treated in a manner that is appropriate in the view of the communities from which they originate (Rice 2006; Field 2012b). Especially today, in light of the increasing availability of multimedia and the expanding capabilities for archiving oral literatures so that they might be more available than ever before in multiple formats (audio and video in addition to print), it is important for researchers to bear in mind the relationship between the recording, publication, and archiving of oral literature; community preferences regarding these aspects of research; and considerations related to language revitalization—particularly in cases where the indigenous languages themselves are becoming increasingly endangered.

The Kumeyaay Community of Baja California

Kumeyaay is the indigenous language of the San Diego area as well as the northernmost part of Baja California Norte, Mexico, extending southward from the United States-Mexico

¹ This is not to say that they are solely designed for children; rather, they serve multiple social purposes and are considered a sacred genre, especially as many of them are embedded in creation mythology. They are, however, particularly accessible to children.

border for about 50 miles. Today, Kumeyaay (specifically the Tipaay dialect of Kumeyaay) is still actively spoken by about 50 speakers who reside in Mexico, but it is very close to obsolescence north of the border. The Tipaay community extends from about 50 miles east of San Diego to the coast, encompassing 13 distinct communities, each with its own slightly different variety of spoken Tipaay. Just north of these Tipaay communities are the related 'Iipay Kumeyaay communities, which share many similar cultural values but whose dialects are very different (Field 2012a).

In all of the Kumeyaay community as well as most of Southern California, singers are important repositories of traditional oral literature, as stories are typically not only told but also embodied in song cycles (Apodaca 1999). In the San Diego area, the most well-known of these song cycles are “bird songs,” which tell the story of early migrations of Yuman people from the Colorado River area throughout southern Alta California, Baja California, and adjacent Arizona. Other Southern California song cycles include Lightning songs and Wildcat songs, among others. One of the authors of this article, Jon Meza Cuero, is currently the sole teacher of the Wildcat singing tradition and a member of the Baja Kumeyaay (Tipaay) community. Both authors have had the pleasure of collaborating together on Kumeyaay language documentation and various projects since 2005, when we started by creating a set of online Kumeyaay language lessons.² In 2007 we traveled together to each of the six Baja Kumeyaay communities to interview speakers in a pilot study on Baja Kumeyaay, to gauge how many speakers there actually were, and to determine their relative levels of fluency. This pilot study led to a larger project documenting Baja Kumeyaay dialects which we undertook together with linguist Amy Miller and anthropologist Michael Wilken-Robertson. As part of this greater documentation project we recorded several stories along with other discourse genres,³ many of which may now be found at the Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA), although Amy Miller and Margaret Field are still working on completing transcriptions.

For the purposes of this essay, Margaret Field interviewed Mr. Meza Cuero in the summer of 2012 about Wildcat singing in general, about its relationship to storytelling, and about one of his stories in particular: “Rabbit and Frog.” The interview was conducted in Spanish and then translated into English. Below Mr. Meza Cuero expounds on the diversity of singing traditions in Southern California, and the relationship between songs and stories:

Many times, the stories change, especially in different places. They change according to the way the people live in that place. If there's a rabbit, a rabbit here in Baja California, or a rabbit in Mexico City, or a rabbit in Hawaii, the rabbit changes. I don't tell stories from Mexico City, or from Hawaii; I tell stories from here—about rabbits from here. The way of telling is different, but the point is the same. It's the same rabbit, the same point of the story, but told in a different way,

² Available at <http://larc.sdsu.edu/Kumeyaay/Welcome.html>.

³ During this project (funded by the National Science Foundation) we did not record any ritual language or content considered too sensitive to share with the outside world. In addition to traditional narratives and narratives about how to perform traditional activities such as basket-making and pottery, we also recorded conversations and wordlists that will be used to create a multidialectal Kumeyaay dictionary.

from where the storyteller lives. It's an indigenous tradition to be different. Each group has its tradition; you go to a different place, they have their tradition.

If you can tell the story, you can sing the song. Every story has a song, every story. For all of history every story has had a song. There are songs for fiestas. There are songs for funerals. There are songs for the middle of the night. There are songs for starting the singing. For example, when I go to a traditional gathering, we start with a song. The first song is for everyone who wants to sing, if they want. If the singer stops to drink coffee, or if somebody else wants to sing, or just to give the younger singers a chance, they can. We sing for four or five days, right? Time goes by and it's the middle of the night! When it's midnight, we sing the middle of the night songs. We sing until dawn. There are songs for fiesta, for people who want to dance, for the young ones, for everything. Sacred songs are for funerals. Then there are only four songs, no more. If you are a singer,⁴ you are going to sing just four songs, but there are many singers, one after the other, each one sings four songs. Each singing group has the right to sing their four songs, for the person who is going in the ground.

Mr. Meza Cuero's story, "Rabbit and Frog," is probably most closely related to the genre of trickster tales, which are found across all of Native North America, especially in the Western part of the United States, with the most commonly known subgenre being "coyote stories" (Bright 1993). The protagonist in the genre of trickster tales need not always be a coyote but is always a trickster who displays various kinds of culturally censured behaviors such as insincerity, gluttony, and above all egotistical narcissism. The Tipaay story of "Rabbit and Frog" does not feature a coyote, but instead a frog who displays trickster-like characteristics. The other main character is Rabbit, who is duped by the trickster and comes to regret it in the end.

When sung in song cycles, traditional stories such as this one bring together two important aspects of communicative competence: cultural knowledge in the form of social values, behavioral norms, and expectations and also traditional language. Mr. Meza Cuero is one of the few Kumeyaay culture bearers today who is able to tell his stories (in addition to singing them) in the indigenous language. Traditional stories are a key part of the process of cultural continuity. As Toelken and Scott have noted in their study of this genre, coyote stories teach children cultural expectations about appropriate behavior through the use of humor "without resort to didacticism" (1981:106). Storytelling thus becomes an important part of child socialization. The cultural knowledge learned through communicative practices such as storytelling includes cultural expectations about social roles and relationships, including, very importantly for indigenous American communities, how to treat family as opposed to strangers. Each of these communicative contexts involves slightly different social roles which may also be associated with distinct communicative strategies.⁵ The story of "Rabbit and Frog" deals with these roles in particular. Forms of knowledge such as these are invariably tacit or taken for granted, and thus less accessible to discursive consciousness (Giddens 1979). Embedded in traditional stories, they provide good examples of what Bourdieu (1977) has called the *habitus*,

⁴ Here he is referring to a lead singer of a group.

⁵ See Field 1998 for a discussion of how the pragmatics of directive-giving varies across these contexts for Navajo speakers, as well as Nevins 2010 for a discussion of these dynamics in the Apache community.

or “routine modes of perception, action, and evaluation which guide actors in social practice” (Hanks 1996:238). In this way, traditional stories and other forms of oral tradition may be viewed as interactional strategies through which cultural identity is discursively produced. Additionally, just as stories act as discourse-level vehicles for the transmission of identity, so does the linguistic variety with which the story is told. Thus, oral literature *doubly* indexes group identity (Kroskrity 2000): membership in a larger speech community is indexed through traditional storytelling, and local dialect indexes membership in a sub-community within that larger speech community.

For many indigenous communities, the dialect in which a story is told is just as valuable to the community as the content of the story, and both require the careful attention of the researcher. This is especially true in indigenous communities where local dialects are important emblems of cultural and group identity. For example, in the Tipaay-speaking Kumeyaay community of Mexico, there are distinct local dialects across six communities, all located within a 50-mile radius of each other (Field 2012a). Intense lexical variation is found in many indigenous Californian and Mexican speech communities (Friedrich 1971; Golla 2000; Field 2012a), as well as in many other indigenous communities around the world (Sutton 1978), and is closely connected to group identity.

Language ideologies in indigenous communities may also reflect beliefs concerning the relationship between local varieties and community identity, but they are not necessarily homogeneous across related speech communities. For example, members of Kumeyaay communities in the United States frequently express the belief that their dialects are each different enough to be considered distinct languages. This attitude exemplifies a typical “localist” language ideology,⁶ which is linked to a discourse of “local control” (Hill 2002:123) often seen in the indigenous speech communities of the southwestern United States. Kumeyaay tribes on the United States side of the border are often hesitant to share language materials even with each other, let alone academics or non-Kumeyaay people. In contrast, on the Mexican side of the border, community language ideologies are typically more variationist (Kroskrity 2002; Kroskrity and Field 2009); everyone acknowledges dialect variation yet insists that all dialects are mutually intelligible and therefore one language shared by all. This difference in language ideologies between United States and Mexican communities is no doubt largely due to differences in their histories of contact with two different dominant cultures as well as other considerations too lengthy to include here (however, see Field 2012a). More to the point of the current essay, this difference in language ideologies will no doubt have profound repercussions for the development of future materials for language revitalization purposes and will also provide very different considerations for researchers working on these related dialects on each side of the international border.

Although geographically connected communities may share very similar, if not identical, versions of traditional stories, storytellers from specific communities inject their own community’s idiom into them, marking them as symbols of local community identity and making them not only very different from each other but also clearly indexical of the local community that surrounds a particular storyteller. These facts lead to two important language-related

⁶ See Field 2012a for a lengthier discussion of language ideologies in Kumeyaay communities.

considerations for researchers of oral literature: 1) the effects this research may have on language revitalization efforts and 2) the imperative to work collaboratively with the community and prioritize their wishes concerning access to and future uses of any collected texts. These points are expanded upon below.

First, when archiving and publishing language materials from communities without a tradition of literacy, it is important to be aware that making any materials public may affect language revitalization efforts in that community. If there is no standard dialect or orthography, published research may potentially affect what might be a delicate political balance between factions of the speech community, or it may have an impact on language maintenance. For example, if materials from only one dialect are published to a greater extent than another, this may result in *de facto* promotion of that one dialect to the status of “standard” and may privilege that variety over others for use in future language revitalization efforts (Muhlhausler 1996; Hale 2001; Eisenlohr 2004; Hill 2002).

Second, even though the goals of research on oral literatures and endangered languages may be to preserve them for posterity, indigenous communities may not all be in accord with this common academic goal, or even with the assumption that all knowledge should be shared (Hill 2002). Intellectual property concerns are always an important consideration for American Indian communities. Even though a recorded story may already be published, the language or dialect in which it is told may not be, and the language itself may be considered intellectual property by the speech community. In the United States and Canada it is standard operating procedure when working with indigenous languages to request consent from tribal governments (in addition to individual speakers and storytellers) before beginning fieldwork. As Battiste and Henderson recommend (cited in Rice 2006:133):

Ethical research systems and practices should enable indigenous nations, people, and communities to exercise control over information related to their knowledge and heritage and to themselves. . . . To act otherwise is to repeat that familiar pattern of decisions being made for Indigenous people by those who presume to know what is best for them.

In Mexico, however, most indigenous communities do not currently have autonomous tribal entities that can be petitioned by researchers. Given this situation, when beginning our research in 2007, we (the authors) approached elders in each of the six communities where a variant of Kumeyaay is spoken.⁷ We told them we were interested in documenting the dialects of Kumeyaay within each community and creating a multidialectal Spanish-Kumeyaay dictionary as well as pedagogical materials for language revitalization purposes. We asked them if they would be interested in working with us to document the language, archive audio and video examples of discourse, and collaborate on language revitalization materials. Being keenly aware

⁷ One of these communities, Santa Catarina, is home to two Yuman languages, Pai Pai and Ko’alh. Although Ko’alh has been classified as Kumeyaay in the past, it is not entirely mutually intelligible with Kumeyaay today.

of the endangered status of the language, and of the fact that almost no language teaching materials exist,⁸ every person we interviewed was enthusiastic about all of these suggestions.

Ideally, initial contact with the indigenous community should include: 1) discussion of how any resulting materials may be used to promote or enhance linguistic and cultural maintenance and/or revitalization efforts, and 2) plans for publication and archivization, including the content of consent forms specifying exactly what, if any, limitations the community might prefer in terms of future access to recorded materials. We chose to archive our recordings at the University of Texas' Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (AILLA), which is a bilingual website accessible to both English and Spanish speakers.⁹ We explained to community members that the recordings we made of wordlists, stories, and traditional activities would be archived for posterity and available to anyone interested in learning about Kumeyaay via the Internet.¹⁰ We also chose AILLA as the location to archive our documentation efforts because of the compatibility of their mission statement with the goals of our project: 1) preservation of indigenous language materials from Latin America, 2) accessibility of these materials (in terms of making sure that non-proprietary formats are used in recording, consent forms are obtained, and intellectual property rights are respected), and 3) community support for the indigenous speech communities of Latin America in terms of making sure these materials are also available for these communities to use for language revitalization purposes.

Great care should be taken in recording and archiving oral traditions for posterity. The website E-MELD (Electronic Metastructure for Endangered Languages Documentation¹¹) is one of the best places to find information on how to do this. The main goal of this site is to educate researchers on how to archive their audio and video data in non-proprietary formats so that it will be universally accessible and remain that way indefinitely. This site also offers useful information on recommended models of recording equipment and methodologies for archiving recordings and associated metadata. If the indigenous language requires special characters not found on an English keyboard, it is especially important to employ a non-proprietary Unicode font so that transcribed texts will still be legible in the future.

Keeping all of these caveats in mind, as part of our project to document dialect diversity in Baja Kumeyaay communities, we, aided by linguist Amy Miller, recorded and transcribed the following story. It was originally recorded in 2007 in both Kumeyaay and Spanish, translated from Spanish into English, and the Kumeyaay was roughly transcribed by Jon Meza Cuero and Margaret Field. This first effort was then significantly improved by Amy Miller a year later. The translation and transcription of the opening presented here is Amy Miller's. The entire

⁸ The Mexican government has created one or two pamphlet-sized picture dictionaries for Kumeyaay. We are currently collaborating with the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) to share the pedagogical materials we create with community schools.

⁹ Available at <http://www.ailla.utexas.org>.

¹⁰ AILLA's registration process requires each user to agree to the Terms and Conditions for the fair use of archive resources. This precludes their use for radio and/or television, for which some of our contributors specifically denied permission.

¹¹ Available at <http://emeld.org/school/>.

transcription may be found in David Kozak's *Inside Dazzling Mountains: Southwest Native Verbal Arts* (2013:111-23).

“Rabbit and Frog”: A Kumeyaay Trickster Tale

The Tipaay trickster tale of Rabbit and Frog begins with a formulaic opening:

<i>Ke'nápa nyuuchs</i> ¹²	It's an old story.
<i>Nyuuch yúsa.</i>	It's old.
<i>Nyuu,</i>	It's old,
<i>nyuu yus 'i mat.</i>	it's old, I say.
<i>Ke'nápa nyuuch nyáasa:</i>	It's an old story I am telling you.

This formulaic opening is a good example of what Richard Bauman has described as “an act of authentication akin to the . . . antique dealer's authentication of an object by tracing its provenience” (1992:137). In doing so, the storyteller is explaining that this story has been passed down to him from the ancestors.

The genre is made clear in the next few lines of the tale, which indicate that the setting is a mythic time period found across most of Native America, and especially in California creation stories, in which animals figure largely as creators:

Long ago, people were here, they were in this place. They were not people, they were animals. They were animals, but they were like people. They spoke the People's language. They came, and they went, they went all over the world, and they spoke the one People's language [Tipaay].

Cultural values are also evidenced in the last line of this orientation (Labov and Waletzky 1967), which indexes the variationist language ideology most commonly espoused by the Mexican Kumeyaay community; that is, that despite the existence of multiple dialects, Tipaay constitutes one language.¹³

The following is an abbreviated¹⁴ English translation of the story (see Meza Cuero et al. 2013 for the complete version in both English and Kumeyaay):

¹² This work is based on material supported by the National Science Foundation under Grant no. BCS-0753853.

¹³ There is also a northern cluster of dialects known as 'Iipay. Whether 'Iipay and Tipaay were entirely mutually intelligible is not well understood and cannot be attested to today as there are no longer enough fluent speakers of 'Iipay.

¹⁴ The full version of this story is 336 lines (intonation units) long and requires 16 pages of space. Since this essay is not focusing on the style of the text itself (apart from the formulaic introduction and very beginning) but rather on its basic content and overall significance in terms of cultural values, we have shortened it here to 43 lines. Intonation is reflected in punctuation, following Du Bois et al. 1992.

There was a Rabbit. He had a house.
 Rabbit was in his house, and was warm.
 Frog passed by the house.
 Frog peeked inside.
 Rabbit was sitting inside. He was eating.
 Frog passed by and went away.
 A few days later, Frog came passing by.
 “Hi! How are you?” he said as he arrived.
 “I’m fine, and you?” (said Rabbit).
 “I’m fine. Gee, it’s very cold outside!” (said Frog).
 “It’s cold? It’s nice and warm in here.” (said Rabbit).
 “I’m really cold.” (said Frog), rubbing his hands together. “Gee, it’s really cold.”
 “Oh?” (said Rabbit). “Walk around and you’ll be alright.”
 “You are from outside and you must stay outside. God made you so that you would live outside. I do not, I
 am a rabbit, and I must stay in my house.”
 “Alright, see you soon.” said Frog. “I’m going now.”
 And he went hopping away—hop! hop! hop!
 In two or three days, he came back.
 “Hello Brother!” he said. “How are you?”
 “I’m fine. How are you?” (asked Rabbit).
 “Oh, I’m really cold.” (said Frog).

This exchange happens three times, but the third time, Rabbit changes his mind, lets him in, and goes out to find some food for both of them to eat:

Rabbit went out looking for food.
 He came back much later.
 “What’s up?” (Rabbit) said.
 “Nothing, I’m fine here.” (said Frog).
 (Rabbit) gave him food, and (Frog) just sat there eating.
 “Oh, the food is really good!” (said Frog).
 One day went by. Two days went by.
 (Rabbit) went out again looking for food.
 When it was late he came back.
 Frog was just sitting in there, big and puffed up.
 “Hello Brother! How are you? Are you sick or something?” (asked Rabbit).
 “No, I’m fine” (Frog said).
 “Why are you so big?” (asked Rabbit).
 “Why am I big? Everyday you bring me food!
 I’m just going to sit here getting fat!” (said Frog).
 Three days later, Frog was at his biggest.
 “Your belly is really very big!” (said Rabbit).
 “Oh? So what if it is very big?” (said Frog).

“If I am to fit in the house, you have to leave!” (said Rabbit).
 “No, no, it’s my house!” (said Frog).
 “It’s really, really, really good, my belly is very big.” (said Frog).
 “Okay then, you stay here, and I’ll go away.” (said Rabbit).
 He did it very reluctantly.
 Frog stayed in the house.
 He stayed, and Rabbit went away, looking for another house.
 That’ll be the end of it, this thing that I’ve been telling.

As is usually the case in trickster tales, there is no overt evaluation (Labov 1967) by the storyteller (Beck and Walters 1977; Toelken and Scott 1981); rather, the listener must infer the moral for themselves. But it is easy to discern the moral of this story: after inviting Frog into his home, industrious Rabbit loses it to the ungrateful and selfish Frog. What did Rabbit do to deserve this fate? He acted against his initial better judgement (concerning frogs belonging outside) and embraced Frog, a relative stranger, as a kinsman and brother. Following traditional Kumeyaay protocol, Rabbit feeds Frog, but Frog just sits there getting fatter and fatter until there is no room for Rabbit in his own home. One can infer from this tale that in the traditional Kumeyaay view it is important both to be selective in deciding whom to offer hospitality, and also to be suspicious of strangers who are quick to claim a kinship relation. When interviewed on the subject, Mr. Meza Cuero was happy to explain:

The frog wanted to control the rabbit, so the rabbit would believe in him, and he could do what he wanted with him. The frog knew that the rabbit was a good person, a very good person. So the frog made the decision to kick him out of his house. He thought “Aaa, nice and warm, I’m going to kick you out of your house,” that’s what. The frog was never cold because they live outside all the time. He put on a very innocent face, the frog. This is why he called him “brother.” The frog was thinking bad things, that’s why he was rubbing his hands together: “I already know how I’m going to get that rabbit out of his house.” The rabbit made a mistake by being such a good person. If you are a very good person, you are going to make mistakes. People are going to take advantage of you. That’s the way it is.

The possibility that this kind of suspicious attitude toward strangers might be a traditional Kumeyaay interactional stance is supported by the following observation made over half a century ago by the anthropologist Roger Owen, who spent a great deal of time in Baja Kumeyaay communities working on his dissertation (1962:24):

Sib¹⁵ membership, or merely genealogical connection in the absence of legitimate sib identity, serves to organize the great bulk of social interaction: one tends to interact with other members of one’s sib or with other close relatives. With the rest of the world, Indian and non-Indian alike, some social distance if not hostility is maintained. In dealings with non-relatives and non-Indians, adult individuals tend to be diffident and suspicious; even with some relatives hostilities of a low

¹⁵ The Kumeyaay word for the anthropological term “sib” is *shimulh*, or extended family group.

order of intensity may be maintained. With one's sib-mates, however, amicable relationships usually prevail.

Lowell Bean makes a similar observation concerning California Indian cultures in general being suspicious of strangers in his discussion of power in *Native California* (1975:27):

If security, predictability, and sociability are associated with one's home base, everything beyond is associated with danger. The forest and other places not inhabited by man are unsafe because they are defined as uncontrolled . . . thus, travel away from one's home base increases the chances of encountering danger. The danger of uncontrolled power is believed to increase in a series of concentric circles the farther one moves away from one's immediate social universe. For this reason, the presence of strangers in a community may represent a source of danger and must be viewed with suspicion.



Fig. 1: Juan Meza Cuero as Frog. Photo by Margaret Field.



Fig. 2: Rabbit and Frog: a traditional Kumeyaay story.

[http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/27ii/field#myGallery-picture\(2\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/27ii/field#myGallery-picture(2))

Like any good trickster, Frog displays several negative behavioral characteristics, including laziness, insincerity, and greed (Bright 1993). As Toelken and Scott (1981) point out, children learn cultural values from trickster tales by learning how *not* to behave—in this case, from the actions of both the trickster and Rabbit. Stories such as this one are classic examples of traditional indigenous pedagogy. When we first recorded this story, we were unsure exactly how we could incorporate it into language revitalization efforts, as our main goal at that point was the creation of a multidialectal dictionary of the Kumeyaay spoken in Baja California, which we are still working on. It was Mr. Meza Cuero's idea to turn it into a puppet performance, which we then filmed. We will distribute the video along with the transcript (in the form of a seven-act play, in Spanish and Kumeyaay) to schools and homes in the Baja California Kumeyaay community on DVD, as few homes or even institutions have reliable access to the Internet. Through such distribution we hope to present the Kumeyaay language in a context that appeals specifically to children, the target audience of our language revitalization efforts. We will also illustrate a use for Kumeyaay literacy while in addition carefully annotating the speaker's home community and pointing out that other dialects and their spellings may differ. We end this essay with an observation from Mr. Meza Cuero regarding the important role children play in the

process of cultural continuity:

I like to plant my songs in “soft ground,” so that they can bloom and grow, you know what I mean? So that we will have songs for a hundred years. I teach songs to little kids, and they are like soft earth, they grow. When the kids grow up, they sing my songs.

San Diego State University

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