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Sacred Sites

Susan Suntree

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SACRED SITES

The Secret History of Southern California

SUSAN SUNTREE

Foreword by Gary Snyder
Introduction by Lowell John Bean
Photographs by Juergen Nogai
For the Ancestors 
and 
for my children, 
Sean and Califia
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Foreword  GARY SNYDER

A work of great spirit accomplished with patience and vision, Susan Suntree’s epic poem is a lovely weaving of science and myth. It is a work that sings. Like all good stories it reads like the storyteller is right there, speaking to the reader, shaping the universe one song at a time.

Suntree’s book is about impermanence. From the very beginning, the landscape known as Southern California has reshaped itself dramatically and often. Learning how a place comes into being acquaints us with forces of life that are large and intimately interconnected. For the indigenous people, the creation and transformation of the world is an account of the First People. In this way of looking at it, the land is alive and working out its own story.

Conditions are always changing. Something always upsets the balance. Suntree recounts a pivotal moment in one of the creation myths when Frog Woman and her cronies curse the great leader Wiyot, bringing death into the world. The First People respond by sitting together and talking things over until they find ways to accommodate changed conditions and rebalance the world. The common good is at stake. Everybody participates: trees, animals, weather, and eventually the human beings. So this is a book about maintaining balance. We can only do this by carefully listening to our non-human neighbors and relatives.

But people resist letting the world in. We tend to think of the natural, the sacred, the wild as happening outside our neighborhoods and far away. Suntree brings us home. Every day in Los Angeles, tectonic plates, weather blown in from thousands of miles away, and the work of Raven and Coyote are always at play. Don’t miss it!

Suntree’s many years of writing, performing, and activism inform her work. So it is in part her cumulative wisdom and insight that makes this book so strong. Here we have a model for a much larger project: indigenous and Western poets and scientists swapping stories, singing their best songs around the same fire, working hard to keep the world in balance. This is going to take every song we’ve got.
The unique format of this extraordinary book inspired me to write its introduction. Here the reader will find scientific information presented in a way that is designed to be congruent with the Native style of oral narration and gives both perspectives in a highly readable form. Susan Suntree offers a remarkable initiation to traditional southern California philosophy. In doing so she provides an opportunity for readers not familiar with the region’s cultures and geography to better understand the power of the interrelationship they have in shaping human societies.

Suntree’s extensive review of ethnographic and archaeological research has allowed her to present myths and songs of the region’s native people that previously have been available primarily to scholars. Her careful review of Constance Goddard DuBois’s papers is particularly rewarding. In myths and especially in songs (in the case of Southern California) are found the philosophical foundations of a culture. As DuBois knew, without them we can’t really understand either individual behavior or social organization.

If a culture’s myths seem cryptic or abbreviated, it is because they contain codes of meaning and refer to a base of knowledge and experience not available to outsiders. For example, Western scientific explanations make sense to members of Western societies because they express commonly held assumptions. Thus, using my own expertise in and knowledge about Southern California’s Native American cultures, I would like to offer a regional and ethnographic context for the data of this book. It is my hope that doing so will assist in understanding Suntree’s work and also stimulate broad interest in the region’s extraordinary cultural history.

The native people of Southern California developed one of the world’s most complex cultures among groups who practiced hunting and gathering or had a proto-agricultural base. There was great cultural diversity because of the region’s ecological features—sea coast, tidelands, rivers, mountains, foothills, lakes, and valleys. Within each of these are specific environmental niches that provided advantages and disadvantages to the people who occupied them. Additionally, the region supports two linguistic-historic traditions: the Hokan and the Takic branch of the Uto-Azetcan family of languages. This rich mixture supported a long and stable cultural history.

Settlement

The territory occupied by Southern California Indians—the Cahullia, Serrano, Luiseño, Juaneño, Tongva, Kitanimuk, Chemehuevi, Chumash—was divided unevenly into distinct geopolitical areas, each area claimed in perpetuity by a group, a lineage, or a clan. (The Kumayaay, in the San Diego area, are not described in this book.) Hundreds of communities, varying in population of fewer than one hundred to one
thousand or more, were settled year round in areas that took maximum advantage of basic resources such as water (springs, streams, standing water, and the ocean) and subsistence materials. When hostile neighbors presented problems, settlements were often located in places not easily seen from a distance. Many settlements were naturally protected by virtue of being placed in narrow areas at the heads of canyons, which could be guarded fairly easily against sudden attack.

Communities were more or less permanent, with some changes in residence occurring when an individual died or was ill or when the size of a couple’s family increased and necessitated more or new houses. From these communities a portion of the people would leave seasonally to collect food and other materials that were necessary for a comfortable living and, for social or ritual occasions, to visit the communities of neighboring groups.

The disparate parts of a community’s landscape were connected by a complicated and well-defined trail system that made movement from area to area relatively easy. These carefully maintained trails also connected the communities to gathering, hunting, and religious sites. It was essential for everyone to know not only the differences between the trails but also all the unique identifying trail markers, in order to avoid trespassing onto land belonging to other families or privately owned land, such as shamans’ power sites. Nevertheless, people from different groups often exchanged assets from their overabundance. In areas somewhat erratically useful, or in the case of game that might travel across tribal territories, neighboring groups sometimes shared access to them, such as when hunting pronghorn or gathering piñon nuts.

Throughout the territories, numerous named places could be used for various purposes because of the presence of water, food, or natural shelter. Each place was given a name, and its precise location was well memorized. Others locales were considered private and thus restricted to specific individuals because of ritual or sacred connotations. Such areas—frequently marked by petroglyphs, pictographs, and rock piles—were known to be private or dangerous because of the presence of powerful beings. Shamans and other ritual leaders frequently had sites of this kind, such as rock art sites and caves, for their own exclusive use, where they carried on esoteric activities or cached sacred materials such as the ceremonial bundle. Other places of special interest in a community included cremation areas. It is especially interesting to note that of the hundreds of place names known, many are named after a particular resource: a plant gathered there, a rock located there, a hill mentioned in oral history accounts, a place of origin, and the like.

The Community

The arrangement of buildings within a community was determined by ecological factors: water and food sources, shelter, and a desire for privacy. Communities often developed near springs or along streams—with the buildings generally extending along both banks—and coastal strands and estuaries. People took care to build their homes where they would not be washed away in floods, blown down by the wind, or overheated by the sun. In addition to house structures, caves and rock shelters were sometimes used for living quarters or storage, with brush shelters added in front to make the area more commodious.

Hot springs, found across Southern California as a result of the tectonic activity there, were almost invariably the focal points of the communities where they existed. In winter the hot springs environs were comparatively warm and comfortable and the waters were a pleasant way
to get warm, to bathe, or to wash clothes. For those with aching bones and muscles, the springs were especially soothing, and for any sick person they were considered to have curative powers. Hot springs were places of power, both sacred and sentient, just as ordinary springs were. Southern California peoples have many recollections of unusual phenomena involving springs. Francisco Patencio wrote that people were at one time afraid of Sec he, the hot spring around which the present-day city of Palm Springs has grown up.

Various spiritual and magical personages lived in springs and could take on different forms, such as “water babies” and snakes. These and shamans could travel via a spring’s extensive underground channels in order to move rapidly from one place to another. The spiritual beings associated with water existed from the beginning of creation and were personages from whom power and knowledge could be derived for healing, divination, and other magico-power activities. For these reasons the ceremonial house, quite literally the heart of any community, was placed close to the spring.

The residences of priestly extended families surrounded these central areas, in effect owning them or being responsible for the proper care of the sacred center and the religious regalia of the group. Other community members would be scattered in a somewhat isolated manner to locales west, north, and south of the central area, depending on what spots were best with respect to the sun and wind, access to useful vegetation, defense, and the location of other water resources. It was generally assumed that extended families would live together as a unit. A father and mother, their children and grandchildren, and the father’s father would live together, although larger groups did sometimes cluster. Extended families would live at some distance from other extended families. Occasionally individuals, for one reason or another, would live alone and at some distance from others.

**Social Organization**

Southern California Indians self-identified as belonging to a group who spoke the same language and recognized a commonly shared cultural heritage. There is no indication that these language groups ever combined for any activities as a single unit prior to European contact, although some confederation did take place shortly after contact when they united to attack or defend themselves from outsiders.

Most language groups were divided into two groups, or moieties: the *tuktum* (Wildcats) and the *‘istam* (Coyotes); the Luiseño and the Chumash were exceptions. Each person was a member of the moiety of his or her father, and although the moiety had no territorial boundaries, it was a very real social instrument that established ethnic identity, regulated marriages, and guided ritual reciprocity. Exogamous marriage rules at the moiety level were strict, and were maintained until recent times by some families, although they had been broken down considerably in some groups by the time W. D. Strong visited Southern California in 1924–1925. These kin groups referred to one another using names that implied family relationship and obligation and recognized common descent. The moieties served an economic and ceremonial function at most religious affairs. Intermoiety cooperation was necessary because certain components of ritual activity were owned by each moiety and these had to be integrated to complete the performance. No doubt rules that mandated this group interaction and distribution of resources were created. The requirements of marriage and ritual, along with moiety reciprocity, brought groups together at different places on a frequent basis throughout the year and
also set a framework for alliances that required social and economic interaction over a long period of time.

The moiety concept was established in the beginning, when the components of the universe were each classified into one of two mutually exclusive groupings: Wildcat and Coyote, beings associated with the Creators who dichotomized the cosmological realm. The consequences of this separation were immediately related to ecological-subsistence needs. Within the territories of either moiety, significantly different ecological patterns made for varying deficiencies of needed resources at any given time, and thus the system required an exchange of goods and some sharing of goods and services.

**The Ceremonial Bundle**

Each independent group had a ceremonial bundle initially created by the first religious leader in its history. The reeds from which the wrappings were made were acquired at the ocean in the early time of creation by Coyote, who served as the first ceremonial leader. Thus the sacredness of the bundle and its contents was rooted in tradition. This was the most important set of objects in Indian life among the Southern California peoples.

The ceremonial bundle was a reed mat that was four or five feet in width and fifteen to twenty feet in length; it enclosed ceremonial objects such as feather ropes, shell beads used in ceremonial exchange, bone whistles, curved sticks, tobacco, and other ritual items. Within the bundle a supernatural power suggestive of the Creator that communicated with the religious leader existed; the religious leader regularly addressed this power using an esoteric language and regularly fed it native tobacco.

The ceremonial bundle and its equivalents served as a symbolic representation of each group. The bundle validated life: religious, political, social, and economic. As a sacred object the bundle connected the people with the "beginning," the time when all the good things of life came, when food was created, when ceremonial and political structures were given to the people, and when they first occupied their territories and received the songs they sang.

The adjudicative and administrative roles of the religious and political leaders were supported by the ceremonial bundle and other ritual objects since they could call upon the bundle's power as a sanctioning device to punish illegal behavior. The bundle was integral to the economy as well. Its power was used when the community performed its annual rites of increase, and its possession reaffirmed the right of the people to live in the land whose resources they exploited. It was used to control positions of hereditary leaders and those who had achieved high status and recognition by their use of supernatural power.

**The Leaders**

The community leader, sometimes called the captain or chief by English speakers, managed the people in many ways. He was responsible for the correct maintenance of ritual and the care and maintenance of the ceremonial bundle and the ceremonial house. The ritual activity kept the environment in proper balance.

The community leader served as economic manager, determining where and when people would go to gather foods or hunt game. He knew, having been advised by those who knew, where the food-gathering places were located and would instruct people when to gather. He also had the privilege of first gathering if he so chose. The food he gathered would be eaten at the ceremonial house.

The leader administered first-fruit rites prior to the gathering of acorns, mesquite, and other staples, and he collected goods
that he either stored for future ceremonial use, exchanged with other groups, or used for emergency rations. He was responsible for remembering group boundaries and individual ownership rights so that when conflict arose between individual families or within lineages or clans, he could adjudicate them.

Significant political roles were also ascribed to the leader’s assistant, to the singers, and to the shamans. When there was an important political decision to be made, they met with the leader. When an important man in the community was to be censured, or a legal dispute arose that had repercussions beyond an individual or family level, these men were called upon for their opinions and support. They also acted to punish offenders on behalf of the lineages.

**The Leader’s Assistant**

The leader’s assistant provided ceremonial, administrative, and adjudicating support. He was an integral part of all rites, ceremonies, and functions (birth, puberty, first-fruit, death, and others), and no other person could assume his specifically defined duties or roles of his office (which tended to be based on hereditary). The assistant participated fully in the economic phases of community life by organizing and leading certain community hunting and gathering activities (usually ceremonially instigated), and by gathering and distributing the food throughout the community as needed.

He was a man who inspired respect and fear among the people and was obeyed without question. His power was justified by tradition, as it was Coyote who served as the first assistant at the first funeral ceremonies for Mukat (Cahuilla) or Wiyot (Luiseño, Juaneño, Gabrielino).

**Religious Dancers and Singers**

The person who knew sacred music and dances and who led their performance played a role in each of these groups. Dancing, which was integral to most ritual performances among Takic- and Hokan-speaking peoples, portrayed dramatic persons and events in the groups’ histories and cosmologies. Dance performances were complex events that ranged from the swift, elegantly performed eagle dance (simulating an eagle’s flight) to ponderously careful and dramatically significant war dances to emotionally meaningful dances associated with burying images of the dead. Dances and dancing required choreographic talent, stamina, and a sense of mimicry, rhythm, timing, and imagination.

**Shamans**

Shamans formed an elite group, acting together with the tribal leader and the leader’s assistant to express opinions, make decisions, and provide offerings to the Sacred Bundle, especially in times of disaster and epidemic. Shamans often met in the sweathouse, using it as a sort of “clubhouse.” The tribal leaders were usually shamans and therefore controlled the political structure by weaving it into a tightly interacting group who increased its power over the communities. Thus, an association of shamans cut across clan and lineage boundaries to form an association of power-oriented persons. On occasion shamans demonstrated control of power by public fire-eating and sword-swallowing demonstrations.

Possession of supernatural power was necessary for becoming a member of the powerful and somewhat secret society of shamans. This power was acquired by one of several means: an individual could be born with it, it could be passed from another shaman, or it could be received from a spirit being.

The economic activities of these men were critical to a successful life for the community. They were able to “create” food.
When there was a scarcity of food or when there was a prediction of scarcity, they brought forth a miniature food-producing tree such as an oak from their hands during a public performance, thereby magically ensuring that the season’s acorn crop would be plentiful. This act has been described by Cahuilla elder Victoria Las Wierick:

When the “witch man” made acorn trees in his palm, he got hot coals in his hands and he held it there and it came like a weed growing in the ground. It grew that high [about two inches] — this would make food come when there was no food. There are none of them that way anymore.3

The treatment of some diseases was another responsibility of the shamans. These included not only the medical problems that occurred naturally — such as wounds, snakebites, and accidents — but also those caused by an attack from another shaman, supernatural punishment for the infraction of rituals and taboos, soul loss, and malevolence of spirits prior to a death ceremony. The shaman was also responsible for ensuring that an individual thought to be dead was not simply in a trancelike state. Shamans cured diseases by sucking diseased objects from the patient’s body or blowing to send away evil, as well as using various medically useful herbs and minerals, exercise, and procedures such as setting fractured bones. These acts were accompanied by songs and natural methods, including the use of herbs and massage.

The shaman was also a diviner who understood signs given by birds, animals, and celestial bodies. He could predict such things as impending illness or certain death. He knew, for instance, that a soul was lost when he saw a falling star, and could proceed to discover whose soul it was and return it to the person before one of several soul-catching beings found it. He also could see impending disaster — flood, drought, famine, or epidemic — which required gathering together the people and taking action to offset malevolent spirits. By utilizing the combined powers of the shamans and the ceremonial bundle, disasters were sometimes averted.

THE CURER

In sharp contrast to these other personages there was also a curer who utilized no supernatural power. A curer was often a woman who learned her medical lore from other curers. There were no formal installations in this role, as a person usually learned gradually through experience and through time became known and trusted in the community for his or her skill. Most curers were middle-aged or older, and they possessed great knowledge concerning medical herbs, the specifics for various conditions such as childbirth, and ailments such as wounds, broken bones, or intestinal discomfort.

The curer role was economically advantageous. The practitioner was customarily paid for his or her services in food, baskets, or other goods. If the curer did not know how to cure a disease, he or she called upon the services of the shaman. There are accounts, however, of a shaman assigning a curer to carry out his medical instructions for a patient who might require the service for many days. It is reported that curers were sometimes suspected of using magical power “to achieve personal ends.”

The people of Southern California were stable and settled for many thousands of years before European contact. Political stability was supported in large part because of the complex system of economic exchanges that crossed sociopolitical and cultural boundaries. Sophisticated technologies for exploiting the region’s variety of food sources also contributed to the re-
gion’s stability. These advantages were enhanced by the social institutions of marriage and ritual whose requisite exchanges interlocked peoples living in different environments and resulted in a regular flow of goods from one group to another. The combination of a fortunate environment, generations of adaptation, and the invention of ecologically adaptive social structures allowed the native people to thrive for millennia.

NOTES

1. While indications suggestive of moiety structure among the Luiseños were observed by William Duncan Strong, he could find no evidence of a functioning moiety system in place. Strong, Aboriginal Society in Southern California, 288. The record of Chumash social structure, which was apparently similar to that of the more northerly groups such as the Pomo, is too scant to define as “moiety structured.”

2. In the respective creation accounts, the Cahuilla Mukat and Temayawut, who are brother creators, are roughly equivalent to the Serrano creator brothers, Pakritat and Kukit. But the Luiseño Táukumit and Tamáayawut are respectively male and female creators, the parents of Wiyot. Strong has discussed similarities and differences between Cahuilla, Cupeño, and Luiseño creation stories. Aboriginal Society in Southern California, 325.

3. Personal communication.
Author’s Note

Book One, “Western Science,” is presented chronologically and dates are meant to be seen as bookends between which many events unfold. Mythic time is another matter. It can be imagined as a pool where all time is present at once.

The texts of both “Western Science” and Book Two, “Myths and Songs,” are presented as lines to encourage readers to hear them as though they are listening to a storyteller or singer. In Southern California, when the ancient creation myths were performed (as they still are among people who practice the original ways), they were often interspersed with personal songs, which lent an individual and emotional tone to the cosmological themes of the creation stories. In “Myths and Songs” these personal songs are set off visually from the main text.

My versions of the myths and songs in Book Two are based primarily on the records of ethnographers who usually worked with tribal translators. Many of these documents were recorded as prose or word-for-word transliterations. Since the recitation of myths and songs was always a component of rituals and ceremonies, I have attempted to express their qualities of oral performance and poetry. Though repetition of lines and words is a common feature of the performance of myths and songs, I have omitted much of the repetition in order to focus on the core of each piece.

Book Two begins with a Quech-najuichom (Luiseño) creation myth based on the recitation by Lucario Cuevish to Constance Goddard DuBois in 1908. The myths and songs of Southern California share common characters and themes, though these differ in the telling from family to family, tribe to tribe, and geographic area to geographic area. For example, there are distinct differences between the versions told by groups living near the coast and those living near the mountains. Using Cuevish’s recitation as a base, I weave in other ways of recounting the creation, which suggests the myths’ multiplicity of interpretations and ways of being told (rather than there being only one holy text). Similarly, narrative plots evolve by branching from a core that is well known to the original listeners. More information about my sources and how certain myths were originally performed is found in the notes.

I usually don’t name tribes but instead provide a readily identifiable landmark where each tribe is centered. An overview of tribal boundaries is illustrated on the map as well. Also, early twentieth-century ethnographers recorded the Spanish word meaning “captain” for what we now call “chief,” and the word “doctor” for “shaman.” I have continued this practice.

Southern California has long been a homeland. Even Wilshire Boulevard is a very old trail traveled for millennia. My hope is that understanding the deep character and cultural beauty of the region will open our collective eyes and influence the
ways we live here. Writing this book has changed me. The landscape no longer ends with the concrete. Layers of life beckon from the expanse of the basin and the rise of hills and mountains.

Of course, in a work of this nature there is plenty of mystery to go around. Conclusions taken as fact today eventually will be revised or transformed. Myths also evolve because their recitation is inflected to a region and to an era when they are told. And each performer brings to bear on the text his or her unique talents and insights. This plasticity of science, myths, and songs reminds me that it’s all alive, all changing, always.
SACRED SITES