

## THE SACRED AND THE MUNDANE—CULTURAL LANDSCAPE CONCEPTS AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION IN THE COLORADO DESERT

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*In the Quechan belief system, there is a fundamental interconnection among cultural identity, personal identity and power, cultural history, the natural landscape, and ritual practice. The latter leaves physical remains on the landscape, which are studied by archaeologists. Oftentimes, these physical remains can be mistaken for evidence of activities associated with subsistence pursuits or other mundane activities such as stone tool procurement. Our bias toward material culture and cultural materialism leads us to inappropriate (or very incomplete) interpretations. This paper explores the implications of Quechan conceptions of the landscape for the interpretation of the archaeological record.*

Early in the cultural resource investigations for the North Baja Pipeline (NBP), Native American cultural authorities expressed concerns regarding an expansive cultural landscape that extends north-south along the Colorado River from Newberry Mountain near Laughlin, Nevada, to Pilot Knob on the Mexican border and east-west into the desert interior (Figure 1). This paper explores some of the characteristics of this cultural landscape and the implications it has for archaeological interpretation. Additional information on the project can be found in the final NBP report (Cleland and Apple 2003).

Basic to understanding the lower Colorado cultural landscape is understanding the central role that mythology and dreaming played in the daily lives of the lower Colorado peoples. Speaking of the Mohave, Kroeber (1925:754) made the following observations:

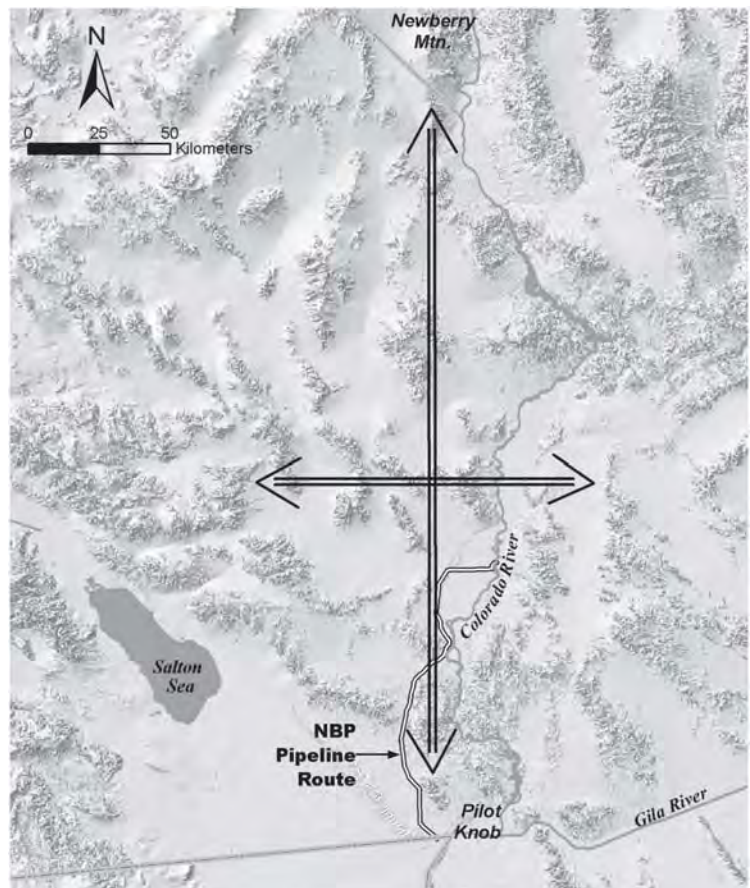
The Mohave adhere to a belief in dreams as the basis of everything in life....Not only all shamanistic power but most myths and songs, bravery and fortune in war, success with women or in gaming, every special ability, are dreamed. Knowledge is not a thing to be learned...but to be acquired by each man according to his dreams.

The dreams referred to are preferably those experienced during sleep. For the Mohave, though, mythology and dreams are set strongly in the world of everyday experience. Kroeber (1925:754-755) continued:

The precise time of day or night of each...supernatural event is specified....[A] Mohave can not tell a story or a

dream without naming *the exact spot at which each character journeyed or slept or stood or looked about* [emphasis added]....Dreams, then, are the foundation of Mohave life; and dreams throughout are cast in a mythological mold. There is no people whose activities are more shaped by this psychic state...and none *whose civilization is so completely, so deliberately, reflected in their myths* [emphasis added].

Figure 1: Geographic extent of lower Colorado River cultural landscape.



These words convey a strong personal linkage between mythology, dreaming, material existence, and the cultural landscape. Mythology informs dreams and vice versa, and this interplay affects day-to-day decision-making and behavior. In turn, mythology is rooted in real places that are named and can be journeyed to, either materially or in dreams.

Kroeber's description could have applied equally to the other Yuman groups along the river. The following quote from Forbes (1965:3-4) provides a Quechan example of the interplay of mythology, cultural identity, and a specific aspect of the cultural landscape, the regional trail system:

In the beginning...Kwikumat...created real people. He made a Quechan man, a Quechan woman, a Kamia man, a Kamia woman, and so on with all the Yuman groups. The Quechans and the Kamias were immediately friends, and the Cocopas and Maricopas were friends also....The several Yuman tribes all descended from the top of Avikwamé and spread to their respective territories. The Quechans, however, took a special trail called *xam kwatcán* ("another going down"). As a result, the Quechans adopted their tribal name, which is a form of the word *kwatcán*.

Contemporary Quechan Lorey Cachora (1994:14) has described the interconnections between dreaming, tribal history, ethnic identity, practical guidance in daily life, and features of the cultural landscape:

The Quechan were also instructed by the spiritual leaders on power and dreams. They were taught that dreaming enabled them to have direct contact with various supernatural beings in order to gain advice and teaching on how to solve the problems of the living. While dreaming their souls returned to the time of creation to learn....So the mountains along the Colorado River region are highly significant in regional Native American cultural and ethnic identity. Spiritual activities and events are deeply associated with numerous intaglios, petroglyphs, trails, lithic scatters, and cleared circles present along the Colorado River and surrounding hills.

From an archaeological perspective, this connection between material things and spiritual practices is of great interest and could be critical in the interpretation of lower Colorado "settlement patterns." It appears that one must go beyond standard archaeological models of "settlement and subsistence" with their predisposition to explain the distribution of sites across the landscape solely in terms of material need. Once material needs are met, expressive and spiritual needs can be equally motivating (Maslow 1954). In the lower Colorado Desert, in fact, it is beginning to appear that spiritual motivations may outweigh subsistence motivations in

explaining archaeological sites and their distribution in space.

There are two distinct goals of incorporating cultural landscape concepts—one humanistic and the other scientific. The first is to begin to achieve a level of understanding about and appreciation for Native American concerns for the cultural resources of the desert. The second is to explain the settlement patterns encountered in the NBP project area. Settlement patterns in the lower Colorado Desert cannot be fully understood when considered strictly from a materialist perspective.

What are the key elements of the regional cultural landscape? To begin, it is important to acknowledge that contemporary Yuman consultants indicate that the entire desert landscape, natural and cultural, is meaningful to them and must be understood as an entire whole (Baksh 1997; Woods 2001). This point of view can be elucidated by recalling Kroeber's remark that every story and dream is manifested at specific places within the desert landscape and that stories and dreams are central to the Yuman cultural experience.

Two traditionally significant natural places—mountains—are most relevant to the NBP project: Palo Verde Peak and Pilot Knob (Figure 2). Recognition of both places affected the routing of the project during the design phase, so to a degree the assemblage of sites in the area of potential effect underrepresents classes of sites that would be associated with such places. For example, NBP rerouted off the eastern flank of Palo Verde Peak to avoid an area with a high concentration of cultural materials.

In addition to natural features, constructed elements are also key to the cultural landscape of the Colorado Desert. The trail system is particularly salient in this regard. This complex appears to have been intentionally created and is not simply a result of repeated use. Evidence of this can be seen in the clearing of larger obstructions such as boulders and in the clear associations in many areas between trails and geoglyphs (Johnson 1985; von Werlhof 1987); in some instances the two merge together.

This trail system is accorded mythological importance. For the Quechan, extant trails across the desert mark the locations of the travels of ancestral groups as they came down from Avikwaame and inhabited various areas before settling at the confluence of the Gila River with the Colorado River. Trails also facilitate dream travel to these places and to the times when events mentioned in story and song occurred.

The Native American trail system clearly structures the distribution of prehistoric sites in the NBP study area. Nearly 40 percent of the over 120 prehistoric sites inventoried for the project had trail features. Many other sites were in proximity to long-distance trails. Yuman groups were well known ethnographically for their ability to traverse long distances across the desert. Mohave traders traveled to the Pacific Coast and eastward as far as Hopi settlements (Kroeber 1925). Pilgrimages to distant locations of ritual importance were common and were a component of the ceremonially important *keruk*. Stories of visitations to distant groups are common in mythology and historical narratives (Kroeber 1925; Stone 2001), and war parties traveled great distances to engage the enemy in pitched battles (Forde 1931). All of these activities were facilitated by the trail system.

Geoglyphs and rock features constitute other important types of Native American landscape construction. These can be expansive in scale with individual elements exceeding 30 m in length (Johnson 1985). Others may measure only a meter or two across. Boma Johnson (1985, 2001) has made a convincing case that some anthropomorphic geoglyphs represent mythological characters and events. Geoglyphs and rock features are not randomly distributed across the desert terrain but rather are concentrated at locations of particular traditional significance, such as Avikwalal (Altschul and Ezzo 1994; Woods et al. 1986), Avikwaame (Baksh 1995), and Indian Pass (Pigniolo et al. 1997).

Altschul and Ezzo (1994) make a potentially useful distinction between major and minor (local) ceremonial centers in the Colorado Desert. Major centers, such as Avikwalal, are thought to be associated with public ceremonies such as the *keruk*, while minor centers are associated with repeated use of a place for individual or small-group rituals. The term “minor” should not be

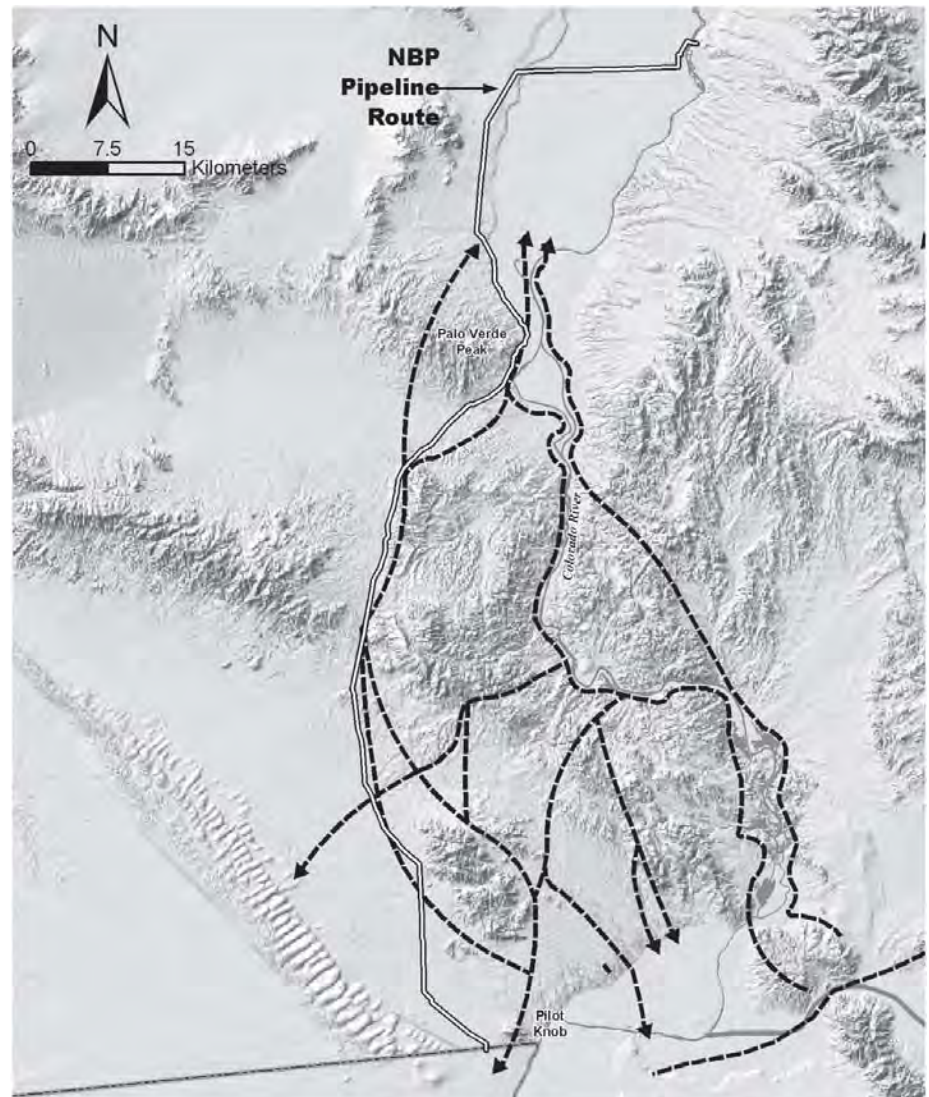


Figure 2: Culturally significant mountains and selected trails in the vicinity of the NBP route.

taken in a pejorative sense to suggest that these centers lack importance. On the contrary, in Yuman spiritual practice individual rituals are performed often and are critical to individual well-being, while public ceremonies are occasional. Individual rituals are performed at major centers as well as minor centers (Altschul and Ezzo 1994:53).

Cleared circles and other cleared areas on desert pavements constitute another key type of cultural landscape construction encountered in the NBP study area. Although appropriately sized cleared areas are sometimes called “sleeping circles,” the function of these features has been the object of considerable debate and speculation (see Pendleton et al. 1986; Pigniolo et al. 1997; Schaefer 1994 for summaries). Recent archaeological and ethnographic evidence is shedding new light on cultural functions and meanings. Contemporary cultural authorities have suggested that

smaller cleared circles approximately 1 m in diameter were utilized in individual rituals, while those approximately 2 m in diameter may have served as temporary habitation spaces. Archaeologically, domestic debris is almost never found in proximal association with cleared circles. Hence, it seems likely that any temporary habitation was indeed very ephemeral and not necessarily of a domestic type (i.e., not associated with small kin-group residence). Rather, cleared circles are most common in vicinities that also contain geoglyphs and rock features. Hence, a function associated with individual rituals seems likely; perhaps “dreaming circle” might be a more apt functional description than “sleeping circle.” The NBP sample suggests that there was often substantial spatial separation between cleared circle features on the one hand and rock features and geoglyphs on the other, even though the feature types co-occur within the confines of a “cultural place” more broadly defined.

The components of the cultural landscape also relate to settlement and subsistence. Major named village sites have been recorded for the Quechan (Bee 1983; Forbes 1965; Forde 1931), but virtually no archaeological investigation of any of these locales has been reported. Many or most are presumed lost. Nonetheless, these locations are very important in cultural identity (Bee 1983).

Subsistence resources were highly concentrated along the river corridor (Stone 1991). There is very little archaeological evidence for the exploitation of subsistence resources in the desert interior. Relatively productive environments such as microphyll woodlands very often do not produce a high frequency of temporary camps or resource exploitation sites (Underwood and Cleland 2002). Conversely, there are concentrations of sites with abundant ceramics and flaked stone debitage in areas such as Indian Pass (Pigniolo et al. 1997) that lack any indication for biotic abundance.

Pot drops and flaked stone chipping stations mark the locations of single events involving Native American utilization of the landscape. In some instances, pot drops might mark the locations of accidental breakage of ceramic vessels during travels, but Rogers (1945) noted that whole and partial pots were often left intentionally as symbolic offerings along trails and at trail shrines. Desert pavements, in addition to offering a landscape “canvas” for symbolic representations such as geoglyphs, also provided a source for the acquisition of raw materials for flaked stone tools. It is not uncommon to find numerous flaking stations in association with concentrations of small geoglyphs, rock features, and cleared circles; examples include Indian Pass (Pigniolo et al. 1997) and

Picacho Basin (Pendleton et al. 1986) east of the NBP route, and Pilot Knob Mesa (Moreno et al. 1995) near the southern end of the NBP route. This would suggest that flaked stone procurement activities may have been embedded in travel to locations for ritual purposes. Additionally, contemporary Native American authorities have indicated that stone flaking was sometimes done for symbolic purposes. This is particularly the case for white quartz but could include other material types as well.

The richest array of cultural resources in the NBP project area was encountered in the Palo Verde Hills segment. Sites of high symbolic content abound, and ethnographic evidence indicates that major long-distance trails converged in this area (Johnson 2001). This vicinity, out of the entire NBP route, would also have had the best combination of access to the rich subsistence resources of the Colorado River corridor and habitable land during the flood season. Hence it would be predicted to have the highest potential to yield long-term habitation sites similar to the large villages described by ethnohistoric accounts further to the south. This prediction can be said to be partially correct in that the most conclusive evidence for subsistence resource procurement and consumption and temporary domestic residence was indeed found in this segment. However, none of the sites, surface or subsurface, come close to yielding the type of assemblage that would be expected at a major long-term residential site.

What is clear is that the symbolic content of the Palo Verde Peak vicinity was a primary motivation for the activities that created the archaeological sites encountered west of the floodplain. In their block survey of a portion of the Palo Verde Point vicinity up to 2 km inland of the NBP project area, Ezzo and Altschul (1993) found an assemblage of sites dominated by rock features and trails, although groundstone quarries were also found. The rock features are similar to those found in other areas of high symbolic importance, such as Indian Pass and Pilot Knob, and are consistent with features reported by Boma Johnson (1985) in his surveys of sites with ground figures. Again, little evidence of subsistence resource acquisition or processing was found in the Ezzo and Altschul survey area, although groundstone production does appear to have been a significant draw. This lack of subsistence activities is not surprising given the proximity of the river corridor, which offers a much richer array of subsistence resources than do the eastern foothills.

As the NBP veers away from the river corridor along the Midway and South-Central segments, site density is much reduced. This is consistent with reduced human

activity as a function of distance from presumed population centers along the river corridor. The NBP investigation produced essentially no evidence for the procurement of subsistence resources from the desert interior (Midway, South-Central, and Ogilby segments). Flaked stone procurement is evidenced, however, and it appears that this activity may well have been embedded in travel for ritual, social, trade, and military purposes. Ritual activities are particularly well represented in the NBP sample of the desert interior, including geoglyphs, rock features, and cleared circles, all of which were avoided by NBP construction. The importance of ritual is perhaps most abundantly clear from the astounding concentration of pot drops, rock features, and other cultural materials found during the non-collecting recordation of trail CA-IMP-398, as discussed by Rebecca Apple elsewhere in this volume. At this trail site, a concentration of features, including rock features, cleared circles, and especially pot drops, was found at its intersection with another major Native American trail. This is not an area of particular interest for resource exploitation, but rather one that had symbolic significance to Native Americans.

In this paper I have tried to cite some examples of “anomalous” archaeological site distributions and to suggest that the anomalies exist only in the sense that sites do not fall into neat patterns based on the availability of subsistence resources. Rather, they reflect a long-term pattern of ritual use of the desert (see Altschul and Ezzo 1994). The density of archaeological manifestations reflects a consciously constructed, “designed” cultural landscape of extensive scale. This constructed environment is informed both by culturally mediated myths and by the insights of individual dreamers.

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