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## REVIEWS

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### *Mukat's Last Gift: Mortuary Customs Among the Cahuilla Indians*

Lowell J. Bean,  
Banning, Cal.: Malki-Ballena Press, 2017,  
200 pp., ISBN 9780939046362, \$20 (paper).

**Reviewed by Lynn H. Gamble**  
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According to Cahuilla oral tradition, two brothers, *Mukat* and his younger sibling *Temayawet*, were responsible for creating this world. As sometimes occurs among brothers, they occasionally argued. One significant dispute was about whether there should be death among the *Nukatem*, the spiritual precursors of human beings. *Mukat* argued that without death, the planet earth could not accommodate all life, while his younger brother did not approve of their creations dying. To find out how they resolved this disagreement, I invite you to read Lowell Bean's outstanding new book, *Mukat's Last Gift*. Spoiler alert—*Mukat* won.

I can think of no scholar other than Lowell Bean who could have written this book on the sensitive subject of mortuary customs among the Cahuilla Indians in southeastern California. Bean started working with the Cahuilla 60 years ago, and has dedicated his scholarly life to the study of their culture, specializing in social organization, religion, and ethnobiology. Early on as a graduate student, Bean gained the respect of the Cahuilla people; he started out by cleaning chicken eggs, an early test of his commitment to learning. He never abandoned his studies of the Cahuilla, becoming an honored scholar, an advocate, and a trusted friend. It is against this background that Bean writes this informative book about the many aspects of death and mourning among the Cahuilla.

Bean starts this six-chapter book with a brief background on Cahuilla social structure—this provides the reader with the framework and setting for what is to come. In the next chapter, Bean investigates the “beginning of death,” with a thorough review of oral traditions. Included

in this chapter are the ideas surrounding the causes of death, which vary, but include some that many cultures recognize, such as accidents, disease, murder, executions, and warfare, as well as others, such as the misuse of spiritual power and the breaking of important rules. I was particularly struck by the mention of seasonality and death, with March, April, and May noted as the months in which “old Indians die”—the “dangerous months” (p. 26). In the third chapter, Bean addresses the many preparations that surround death and mourning. The chapter starts out with the recognition that death is often anticipated by the mourners, as well as the person dying. Bean emphasizes that among the Cahuilla it is important for all to prepare for death, just as *Mukat* did—he instructed his people how to be ready for his death, and informed them of his wishes for his funeral and cremation. Bean then moves on to describe the eagle-killing ceremony, one that is closely tied to funerals. Using exhaustive direct accounts of the ritual, Bean describes how the Cahuilla and some neighboring groups would take a baby eaglet from its nest and bring it back to their village, where the *net* (chief) would raise it until it was an adult. Then, during the eagle ceremony, a shaman would dance with the live bird, which by the end of the dance would be dead, surreptitiously killed by the powerful shaman; the body was eventually cremated. The eagle was believed by the Cahuilla to have lived since the “beginning,” but “allowed itself to be ‘killed’ periodically so that the lineage was assured of life following the deaths of individual members” (p. 43). In this same chapter, Bean describes the preparation of the body for cremation, and then the burning of the individual after death, followed by the eventual burning of their possessions and house. These practices served to ensure the spirit's journey to the land of the dead and provided closure for the mourners. The many overlapping, detailed accounts here are highly informative, especially to archaeologists and bioarchaeologists who often try to interpret mortuary collections from fragmentary remains.

In Chapter 4, Bean presents details about the spirits and the afterlife. If the proper rites are not followed, spirits can linger with the living. These rituals include the burning of images, the culmination of the burial rites

after death. Images are made of wood and fibers and are intended to be representations of the person who has died. They are often embellished with feathers, and sometimes possessions of the dead. Mourners will make miniature bows and arrows or baskets, depending on the gender of the deceased. During the final ceremony, these effigies are brought out in a procession, accompanied by music. It all ends with the *nukil*, the burning of the images. This can be done for some individuals months after their death. Feasting and singing accompanies all these ceremonies, often lasting for many days, depending on which group is involved. Bean provides, through direct quotations from both ethnographers and indigenous witnesses, details for not only the Cahuilla, but also the Luiseño, Serrano, Cupeño, Kumeyaay, and other surrounding groups.

The next chapter focuses on the socio-political and economic aspects of mourning and death. Bean describes how many clans and tribes were invited to these mourning events, forming fluid regional congregations. Often these and other ceremonies occurred during the late fall or winter so that they did not interfere with food collection and food-producing activities. The redistribution of food and manufactured goods such as beads was an important feature of these ritual congregations. *Peón*, traditional gambling activities, as well as private exchanges of items and the arrangements of marriages, also occurred at mortuary and other ceremonies. Some of the most significant items exchanged during mortuary ceremonies were shell beads—in fact, they were key to many of the interactions between tribes. *Olivella* and other

beads were kept and exchanged by the clan chiefs, not ordinary individuals. The clan leader (*net*) had the great responsibility of keeping both the shell beads and the sacred bundle.

Bean concludes this superb book with a chapter on transitions to somewhat altered customs, as many who were trained in performing the traditional mortuary rites have passed on. Nevertheless, numerous core aspects of customs surrounding death persist or have been revitalized. I know I will personally never forget attending the burning of the possessions of a Kumeyaay leader with Katherine Siva Saubel in 2013. The types of items burned were not always traditional—they included a Jacuzzi, a satellite dish, and a file cabinet, but many aspects were similar to those described in the early accounts compiled by Bean, including the eerie sound of women wailing during the ceremony.

The significance of mortuary ceremonies for all aspects of Cahuilla life cannot be overstated. Bean has pulled together a formidable array of comprehensive and detailed accounts of the many facets of death and mourning. The reader comes away with the realization that death cannot be separated from life, and that it is a core element of traditional Cahuilla culture—which differs greatly in that respect from modern Euro-American culture, which compartmentalizes death into a small corner, thus separating it from the living—who perhaps are too intimidated by death, which we shall all meet. Thank you, Lowell, for your deep understanding and presentation—it is unparalleled.



## ***Talking Stone: Rock Art of the Cosos***

Paul Goldsmith

Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 2007,  
112 pp., ISBN 978-1607815570, \$16.00 (paper).

**Reviewed by Clare Bedford**

University of Central Lancashire

When writing *Talking Stone*, Paul Goldsmith aimed to provide a visual experience for the reader, to explore

a little of the origin and possible meaning of Coso petroglyphs by listening to multiple voices on the subject. However, he also aimed to keep interpretation to a minimum to allow readers to look at the images with fresh eyes and form their own opinions, and to avoid diminishing the mystery, magic, and power of the rock art. I would argue that he was successful in these aims and struck a good balance between imagery, information, and interpretation with this book.