

What's In A Name? Some Southern Paiute Names for Mojave Desert Springs as Keys to Environmental Perception

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Abstract

The Southern Paiute people lived in several areas of the Mojave and adjacent deserts where knowing the location and dependability of water resources was a key to survival. In order to hunt, gather food, and travel in this region, they worked out an elaborate set of names for water sources, most of which were springs, and set up a vast trail network between them. The translated names of springs often provide ecological clues as to what resources were present, but are also reflective of Southern Paiute environmental perceptions. Names make the desert a storied place, peopled with animals, plants and other beings that bring it life and give it meaning.

Introduction

The indigenous peoples of the world have long histories of residence in and adaptations to deserts, including the Great Basin and Mojave deserts of western North America. At the time of Spanish exploration in the 1770s, people whom we now call "Paiute," or more properly, Southern Paiute, were among several groups resident in these deserts (Heizer 1978; d'Azevedo 1986). Over hundreds of years, if not considerably longer, they had come to know these areas with a degree of intimacy required when a place is your primary source of subsistence and shelter. For them, knowing the locations and dependability of water sources was a key to survival. To hunt, gather food and travel in the region, they worked out an elaborate set of names for water sources, most of which were springs, and set up a vast trail network between and among them. Their translated names of springs as well as

other geographic points often provide ecological clues as to what resources were present there in the past, as well as what Southern Paiute people found important to name--a guide to their environmental perception.

But springs meant more than survival to Southern Paiute people. Springs and other water sources were also highly symbolic, sacred places, part of a living landscape, a storied place, peopled with animals, plants and other beings that brought it life and gave it meaning. Stories and songs that often include the names of springs and other places celebrate great hunts and other events that turn a desert into much more than simple geographic space. They create a landscape and a homeland that once gave, and in many ways still gives, people a strong sense of being and belonging – a sense of place. For Indian people, landscapes and homelands are often more important than events and time.

The data and discussions that follow focus on Las Vegas - Pahrump Southern Paiute place names for springs and other water sources as well as some of their contextualization in cultural aspects such as song and story. The data are heavily dependent on the extensive field studies in the early 1930s of anthropologist Isabel T. Kelly, as well as on some subsequent work in the area since the 1970s.¹ The purpose is to provide a preliminary account of aspects of Southern Paiute views of water sources and more general landscape perceptions in the Mojave Desert, but also to illustrate some of the cultural values inherent in these resources.

Place Names as a Field of Study

Anthropologists, and particularly ethnographers, or those who focus on living peoples rather than on the archaeological past, have long noted the importance of place names, or toponymy, in providing for people a sense of geography (Boas 1934). But place naming is a complicated linguistic and cultural act that must be analyzed from several perspectives. For example, it is well known that the grammars of languages set at least some parameters for naming, and thus affect both the structure and meaning of the resulting names. Given that most (but by no means all) place names are nouns, how easily does the language in question form new nouns, either based on verbs, on other nouns (e.g., noun compounds), or in some cases, on whole phrases? If the names are not nouns, but are more verbal in character, how does this affect their use and the resulting dynamics of discussions of places? Native American languages can do some amazing things in creating new nouns and verbs, and these linguistic devices definitely shape the character and outcome of naming (Boas 1934).

In addition, to more fully comprehend the meaning and significance of place names, it is important to focus on their function within cultural contexts. In his recent book *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache*, Keith Basso (1996) eloquently pictures what it is like to be part of an active place naming system through which people maintain a deep attachment to place as part of maintaining their sense of self. In four stunning essays, Basso explores a Western Apache sense of landscape and place from multiple perspectives: how places and place names evoke stories of long ago events that gifted narrators can elaborate from the thread provided by the name; how shared knowledge of outcomes and morals of the stories can be triggered by the mere mention of a place name, and thus carry lessons to modern Apache people that can and do change their lives; and how the landscape in general, places in particular,

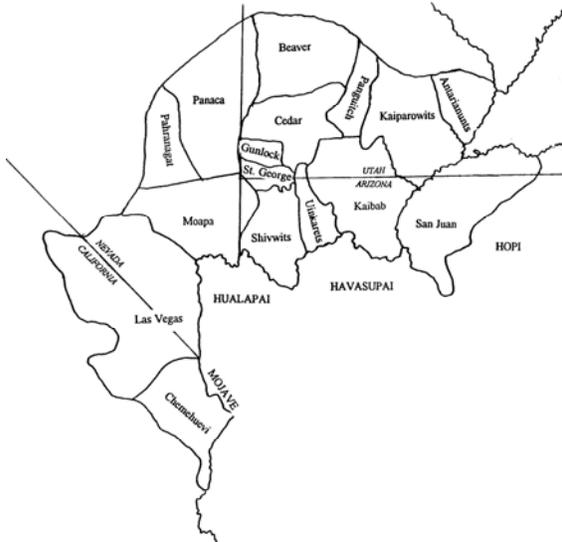
and a sense of place overall, define self and society for Western Apache people. Basso maintains throughout how we all, in many ways we do not fully comprehend, are grounded in places, take lessons from places, and in many senses culturally create places by being “place makers.”

Although the Southern Paiute place name system is no longer active in the same way as Basso describes, largely because of native language loss in the past 20 to 30 years,² is it possible by using linguistic and other tools to reconstruct aspects of their past landscape perceptions through the study of place names? Are there any systematic principles of perceptions of places recoverable from these data, and beyond, are there any stories and lessons hidden in the names that are significant and can be of use to Southern Paiute people today? I think that the answer is yes to all three questions, and that there is yet additional value in attempting such in helping us all better understand and appreciate the broader values that landscapes and their resources hold. In other words, it makes us more aware of the cultural significance of places so that we, too, can be better “place makers.”

The Place Name Data

Through the years, ethnographers and linguists working in the Great Basin cultural region have recorded place names from several of the region’s groups, including the Owens Valley and Northern Paiute peoples (Kelly 1932; Fowler 1992; Steward 1933); Western, Northern, and Wind River Shoshone groups (Miller 1972; Shimkin 1947; Steward 1938); and Southern Paiute (including Chemehuevi) and Ute peoples (Kelly 1964; Sapir 1930-31; Laird 1976; Goss 1972; Givon 1979).³ However, most field workers have gathered these data as adjuncts to general ethnographic work, and thus, although the place names are occasionally numerous, they are rarely the focus of specific analysis. In 1932 and 1933, Isabel Kelly undertook a project that was specifically ethnogeographical, or an attempt to look at a total ethnic landscape,

and that was among 15 remnant Southern Paiute groups of Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and California (Kelly 1932-33; Map 1). But, unfortunately, Kelly was unable to synthesize and publish her materials before her death in 1982, and thus the data, including some 1,500 place names, remain in her field notes. Kelly also did more general ethnographic work among all of these groups, and her materials on other topics are equally voluminous.



Map 1. Southern Paiute Territory (after Kelly 1934). The principal groups in the Mojave Desert are primarily the Las Vegas (western half of territory is Pahrump subgroup) and Chemehuevi.

During her roughly 15 months in the field, Kelly traveled the length and breadth of Southern Paiute traditional territory, collecting the ethnogeographic and other ethnographic materials. She also made several large maps, although she rarely indicates what base or reference maps she was using.⁴ Her field notes include lists of place names with her map references, but, unfortunately, often without larger meaningful contexts into which to place them. It appears from her notes that she was using the extensive place name data to develop a feeling for subsistence and settlement patterns, as well as travel and trail networks, but she does not discuss this. Her

procedures for gathering the data also are not stated, although it appears that she traveled to at least some of the areas she mapped with her consultants. She also seems to have shown consultants what maps she had, and they discussed places and place names using these. In a few cases, her consultants actually drew the maps and noted the places for her.

Although Kelly's ethnographic field work in much of the region was pioneering, there had been some earlier work on the Southern Paiute language and place names by the well-known linguist Edward Sapir in 1910 (Sapir 1930-31). After working with young Carlisle Indian School student Tony Tillohash from Kaibab, Arizona, Sapir took specific note of some of the linguistic aspects that seemed to be represented in the place names of Tony's language, including the level of specificity achieved through various noun formation processes. Sapir (Mandelbaum 1958) says the following:

In the vocabulary of this tribe we find adequate provision made for many topographical features that would in some cases seem almost too precise to be of practical value. Some of the topographical terms of this language that have been collected are: divide, ledge, sand flat, semicircular valley, circular valley or hollow, spot on level ground in mountains surrounded by ridges, plain valley surrounded by mountains, plain, desert, knoll, plateau, canyon without water, canyon with water, wash or gutter, gulch, slope of mountain or canyon wall receiving sunlight, shaded slope of mountain or canyon wall, rolling country intersected by several small ridges, and many others.

Each of these very specific features, is expressed in two to three syllables in the Southern Paiute language. Some, such as the equivalent of "desert," "mountain," "plateau," or "knoll"

should not surprise us as English speakers, as they are also relatively short in English. But others, such as “shaded slope of canyon wall,” “rolling country intersected by several small ridges,” “spot of level ground surrounded by ridges,” require an entire phrase in English. In the Southern Paiute language, one can focus in on these types of places and name them in a very short, convenient expression—and add an adjective or some other descriptor to make them even more meaningful.

All of this, Sapir (Mandelbaum 1958) remarked, reflects the interest of the people in specific environmental features—“accurate reference to topography being a necessary thing to dwellers in an inhospitable semi-arid region; so purely practical a need as definitely locating a spring might well require reference to several features of topographic detail”. Sapir felt that the people must have spoken and thought of such things often to have them so well codified in their language.

From the some 230 of place names Kelly collected for the Las Vegas - Pahrump territory, it appears that people named or at least could recall⁵ the names for the following kinds of places: springs (both hot and cold water); tanks, washes, streams, and rivers; camps where water was sufficient for planting; camps where one could not plant; mountain peaks, ranges, saddles, and margins; knolls, hills, and plateaus; islands and parts of islands; some valleys, especially if they have a characteristic cover or feature; trails and parts of trails; and various sacred sites. Of these, names for springs and other water sources and also mountains are most numerous. There are 92 names for springs; 70 for mountains or mountain-related features; and the remainder are other geographic points.

Quite a number of the place names Kelly collected for this region, including the spring names, have suggested etymologies

or partial etymologies, no doubt obtained directly from her consultants. Names derive from various sources: animals, plants, human body parts, spirits, and descriptive features of various kinds. Rarely if ever are personal names used in spring or other place naming, although Kelly did obtain detailed information on the ownership of springs and the residence of specific individuals at various sites (Kelly 1932-33).

Kelly’s translations of the spring names do not bear out quite the level of specificity in naming noted by Sapir, but many are only partial at this point, and additional analysis will doubtless yield at least some of Sapir’s results. A sample of the English translations of spring names (built primarily on the stems -paa, ‘water;’ -paatsipitsi, ‘water comes out;’ or -paatsi, ‘water-diminutive [or small]’ is as follows:

From animals or animal referents:
“Dog Water Comes Out,” “Coyote Water Comes Out,” “Coyote Nose Water Comes Out,” “Badger Water Comes Out,” “Rabbit Trail Water Comes Out”

From plants: “Purple Willow Small Water,” “Chia Water,” “Willow Standing In a Row Water Comes Out,” “Has Willows Water,” “Apocynum Small Water,” “Mesquite Water,” “Cactus Drinking Place,” “Underbrush Water,” “Has Indian Ricegrass Water,” “Has Serviceberry Water,” “Rabbitbrush Water,” “Brushy Water,” several different cane (Phragmites) waters (including “Dry Arrowcane Water”), “Cottonwoods Surround It Water Comes Out,” “Watergrass Water,” “Arrowweed (Pluchea) Water,” “Cattail Water Comes Out,” “Tule Water Comes Out,” and three or four for plants that are not identified thus far

From birds: “Eagle’s Water,” an unidentified “Waterbird Water,” “Quail Water”

Human referents: “Boy Water Comes Out,” “Mountain Spirit Water,” “Navel Water” (a tank), “Water Baby Cries Water,” “Shit Water,” and for various

Geographic referents: “Green River Water” (in the Grand Canyon), “Whitewater,” “Mountain Water,” “White Mountain Base Water,” “Sand Boils Water,” “Dampness on Grass Water,” “Crying Water,” “Rocky Place Water,” “Lava Water,” “Dirt Water,” “Special Rocks Water,” “Playground Water,” “End of the Wash Water,” “Other Side Water,” “Summit Water,” “On the End of Lava Water,” “Round Hole In the Ground Water,” “Sandstone Water,” “Red Ochre Water,” “Running Down Water,” “Water on Rocks Water,” “Water Cave Water,” “Damp Rocks Water,” “Rotten Water,” “Water Mouth,” “Hard Place Water,” “End of Cliff Water,” “Dark Saddle Water,” “Yellow Water,” and “Dripping Water.”

A sample of etymologies for other types of place names includes: “Red Sandstone on the End” (a mountain base), “Spotted Lizard’s Back” (a rock formation), “Black Serrated” (a mountain crest), “Frost Sits on the Ground” (a mountain valley), “Doctor’s House” (a cave), “Willows Standing in a Line” (a stream bank), “Gypsum Sitting” (a mountain), “Cottonwoods Surround It” (a camp area), etc. There are several more I am still puzzling over, and will need help from fluent speakers to better extract meanings.

Locating these springs and other features on modern maps is not an easy task. Several students and I have been poring over quad sheets, and also earlier maps, for the past three years trying to match general

locations given by Kelly with known spring and other sites. The Las Vegas Valley is particularly problematic, given massive development.⁶ We have had some success, but obviously we could spend much more time. Visiting these locations to check for the resources or conditions described in the names will be another task. And the Kelly data for Las Vegas-Pahrump area represent only about 15 percent of the Kelly place names for the whole of Southern Paiute country.

Trails, Songs, and Stories

But beyond identifications and etymological analysis, which give at least some minimal feel for landscape perceptions and a sense of place for the Las Vegas-Pahrump Southern Paiute people, there are other data in the Kelly notes that are also significant for more environmental understanding. For example, Kelly made some attempt to map trails between and among springs and other water sources and places. All of these sites were linked in a vast network of trails and paths, some more direct than others. Although it is clear that Kelly did not try to follow many (if any) of these out, she says in her correspondence that in many cases she could “see” just about where they would go (I.T. Kelly to A.L. Kroeber, 1953). Some undoubtedly followed animal trails, or at least may have started that way, but others were probably established by people and perhaps later used by both. It might be possible, with additional work, to calculate the distances between some of the water sources covered by these trails, and thus establish more about the travel habits of the people. Others have noted the significance of the vast trail network from the Colorado River to the California Coast, often marked and well used by the Mojave, Southern Paiute, and other tribes in their traverses of the Mojave Desert (Davis 1961).

Some additional data in Kelly’s notes and elsewhere likewise suggest that the people had deeper symbolic views of their lands, and that springs and other places are tied to these as well. For example, there are

data concerning hunting songs and ancient mythic journeys, some of which contain place names, including spring names. Carobeth Laird (1976), in her rich volume on the Chemehuevis (a Southern Paiute offshoot) based on George Laird's narratives, speaks of the importance to them of certain hereditary songs in chartering a man's (and occasionally a woman's) rights to hunt certain animals in certain territories. Although George Laird could recall only small snippets of such songs that he had heard as a boy, he was aware that they contained many references to specific places, and actually charted journeys (and short-cuts) to these places for those entitled to the songs. He recalled that there were at least a Deer Song, a Mountain Sheep Song, a Salt Song, Quail Song, and Day Owl Song. The idea for such songs as well as some of their content is something shared with the Mojave people, but it is also quite thoroughly fixed for the Chemehuevi and the Las Vegas - Pahrump Southern Paiute groups in the Mojave Desert.

Although equally fragmentary in 1933 when Kelly was in the field, she was able to record the following part of a Deer Song from a Las Vegas narrator:

In the deer song, the deer travels around Charleston range looking for food. The snow is deep and it goes from place to place. It starts way up on top of Charleston Peak; then it comes through the snow, finally out of the snow and down the valley. Comes through tsoariuway (Joshua Tree Valley), between Charleston Range and Tule Springs. They sing all this in a song; name every place he stops, everything that he eats (Kelly 1933).

Kelly then gives two samples of parts of the song, both of which name three places that the deer stops, two of which are springs. One singer, who sings until midnight, takes the deer around Charleston Peak and down about half way to the valley. A second singer, who starts after midnight, covers all

the places the deer stops when it comes down the rest of the way and emerges from the snow into the valley. Kelly reports that an abbreviated version of this song was sung for dances and funerals, but that hunters who owned it sang the full version upon request by other hunters who were about to go out for game and needed the power [and perhaps geographic lesson] of the song.

Kelly (1933) adds that the Vegas Mountain Sheep Song starts from Coachella Mountain near Los Angeles, travels to San Bernardino Mountain, then to two other mountains for which she gives Southern Paiute names and ends at Charleston Mountain. And she adds, "They arrive here in the early morning; are maybe 200 different verses all told; lasts all night, until sunrise." All of this indicates that the proper singing must have been an exceedingly rich and informative experience, both in terms of the places named and visited as well as the foods for the deer: a virtual environmental inventory.

Briefly, two other sacred song cycles not related to hunting but often part of funeral observances and other gatherings were also rich in place names and communicate a sense of cultural landscape. These are the Salt Song and the Talk Song, both of which Kelly sketched out with Las Vegas consultants. Kelly (1933) writes:

[The Salt Song] concerned the travels of two sisters (YarHk, wild goose and Avinankawatsi, a small unidentified water bird). Lived at the mountain called Agai, between Searchlight and Fort Mohave [Newberry Mountain]. They sang en route as traveling along, naming everything they saw—mountains, springs, everything. Traveled to Ft. Mohave on the other side of the river. Crossed to the other shore at Ft. Mohave and came up the river on the east side, at a place called Mowavit. Crossed the Colorado at the junction of the Virgin; went up to the salt cave there and named it;

from there came to Charleston Peak, then to Ash Meadows; then to the salt lake below the town of Shoshone called panHgH; went to Blythe, crossing the river once more. Came up the east side, arriving just before daylight at Kwinava. Went into these mountains in the morning; there is a large cave there, two in fact. They entered one of the caves, thereupon the tale ends.

And, a small piece of the Talk Song (Kelly 1933):

This comes from the ocean, this song. In the mornings the ocean is covered with mist or steam rising. In the beginning white birds, large ones called parosabH are in the fog. The man stands in his dream and watches the birds. They come out on dry ground, flapping their wings. As the birds fly out they name a mountain (Ikanavanti) in Cahuilla country. As they fly over the mountain, the longest feather swept the top of the mountain. As the bird passed over the mountain he said, 'I am passing through a land of jimson weed.' But this is not so; there was only one plant there. The bird passed over OsapimaganH, and right on the plain where there are no rocks he sees a pita, eagle feathers tied together to make warrior's headgear. He sees this and picks it up. The bird is traveling east. He flies over a wash west of Natapiagant; he looks at his shadow below and sees that the shadow of his wings just reaches from one end of the wash to the other...

Unfortunately, Kelly did not have a tape recorder (were only wire recorders in those days), and thus she was only able to transcribe fragments of this long tale and song. But what she did get goes on to take the bird many more places, ultimately

ending in Hopi Country, naming all the while. This song is at least some indication of the wider traveling habits of the Las Vegas-Pahrump people, and their knowledge of the areas outside their immediate traditional territories – well to the Pacific Ocean, up and down the Colorado River, and into Hopi Country in what is now northeastern Arizona.

The Salt Song and the Talk Song are primarily funeral songs, sung in conjunction with the Mourning Ceremony (Laird 1976), and thus within the realm of the sacred. But sacred times were also times for practical learning, when people could visualize these places and the ways to get to them, and what one would see and hear along the way. In many ways, the songs "fixed" people, living and deceased, to the country and in the country through their recitation. They mapped trails both on the ground from spring to spring, as well as "as the bird flies" in grand arcs and circles.

Although in the last examples of song cycles, springs have not been given by name, it is quite clear from Kelly's fragmentary notes, as well as from her maps, that they are a definite part of the oration. Thus, springs, and water in general, take on symbolic as well as life sustaining functions. Water itself is a sacred substance to Southern Paiute people, and it must always be approached as a living thing, which means prayerfully. It has its own spirit, and there may also be other specific spirits that live in springs and other water sources that need to be carefully considered. Some of these can be harmful to humans, and thus they, and their water homes, need to be approached with great caution and respect. Springs are viewed as interconnected, with water in many ways being like the blood of the earth, flowing in veins under the ground and emerging to the surface only occasionally. The Doctors and other men of power could often travel on these underground trails. Water was their mechanism, and the interconnection of springs their pathways. Water spirits can do the same, although the Old People used to

say that they, like people, had preferred homes – certain springs that they preferred and where they stayed. People knew where these were and always approached these very cautiously and with the utmost respect.

Springs not inhabited by specific spirits were often owned by known persons. Southern Paiute people are somewhat unique in the literature on Great Basin peoples, and on hunters and gatherers in general, in their claims to spring ownership. Again, it was Isabel Kelly, based on her work in the 1930s, who first spoke of spring ownership, this time in published accounts on the Kaibab Southern Paiute people (Kelly 1964). Heads of families (men or women) could and did own springs, and passed these springs on to their children or other relatives. Kelly's published reports, as well as her unpublished field notes, contain lists of spring owners, sometimes traced back two to three generations (this was sometimes difficult, given that there are strict rules governing the use of the name of the dead, and people do not like to mention by name those who have passed on). But suffice it to say that in all likelihood many, if not all of the principal water sources (springs and tanks), except those known to be controlled by specific spirits, were owned by real persons. And this pattern well predated the arrival of Europeans. In the Las Vegas Valley, some of the bigger springs were also gardening sites, with Southern Paiute people having planted corn, beans, squash, amaranth, sunflowers, and a few other plants there for some time before the arrival of Europeans.

Conclusion

Thus, to return to What's In a Name. Can we gain a deeper sense of Southern Paiute views of springs and broader perceptions of landscapes from data such as place names and songs and stories? I think that with additional work, including more time on the ground locating some of these places that we can. Locating them on modern maps, something that is underway, is a first step. A second is finding out if any remnants of the songs are preserved in living

memory, as it obviously is the songs and related tales that are the richest sources for tying the place names to real activities and a fuller sense of geography. Perhaps these plus good etymologies will replace something of the soul of these materials, giving all of us, but particularly the grandchildren and great grandchildren of the original place-makers, an enhanced view of their country. A number of young Southern Paiute people today are trying very hard to develop their own sense of place, reclaim their history, and continue their journeys in place-making. Perhaps these data from the distant past will help in part to serve that purpose for them. And for all the rest of us who frequent these water sources and observe their life-giving qualities for the many plants and animals that live within them or from them, perhaps we too can gain a new respect from this small part of the human history of these places. Pausing to think of their names and their interconnections back through time gives them additional meaning in a contemporary world.

Notes

1. Robert Van Kemper, Southern Methodist University, has kindly granted me access to the Kelly archive over the years. The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research has provided research support for additional field studies and for graduate students to help with the mapping. Additional thanks are extended to Laurie Walsh and Barbra Erickson for their conscientious attention to mapping details.
2. Most Southern Paiute communities today are facing significant language loss, as English becomes not only their first language but their only language. Several communities have instituted language programs in an attempt to counteract this trend, and these efforts will likely continue.
3. Each of these three clusters of languages constitutes a sub-branch of the Numic

branch of the Uto-Aztecan language family. Other Uto-Aztecan languages are spoken in southern California, Arizona, and Mexico.

4. There were a few U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) quad sheets available for this region but not many. Kelly apparently used some automobile maps, and also for the Mojave area, the map accompanying USGS Water Supply Paper No. 224, titled "Better Known Springs and Wells in the Mohave and Adjacent Deserts of Southeastern California and Southwestern Nevada," dated 1908.
5. These data come primarily from three individuals, two of whom were able to provide extensive lists of names and general locations. Had there been more individuals available, undoubtedly the lists would have been even more extensive. Hunn (1994) has suggested that for hunter-gatherer groups, a number near 500 is perhaps the norm.
6. Dr. Elizabeth Warren, Goodsprings, NV, who has done considerable research on the early water history of the Las Vegas Valley, has aided my search for these springs immeasurably.

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