

Who is Katherine Siva Saubel, Cahuilla Elder?

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The Cahuilla Indians are the native people of Southern California. Their territory held tall mountains, deep valleys, rocky canyons, mountain passes and desert flatlands and extended from the Salton Sea to the San Bernardino Mountains to the San Geronio Pass. They lived on this land from the beginning of time. However, in 1774, Juan Bautista de Anza, a Spanish conquistador came looking for an easy passage from Mexico to the Monterey Peninsula. When the Spanish came, that was the beginning of the end for the Cahuilla People and their culture. Katherine Siva Saubel, a Cahuilla Indian, has dedicated her life to the preservation of the culture, language, and time-honored ways of her People.

CHILDHOOD

One of eleven children born to Melana and Juan Capistrano Siva, Katherine Siva Saubel was born on Los Coyotes Reservation high in the San Bernardino Mountains on March 7, 1920. Katherine was one of the youngest siblings. The region was cold and snowy, and Juan was prone to colds that lead to pneumonia. The Shaman suggested they move to a warmer climate, so in 1924, the Saubels moved to the Palm Springs area, to the desert Cahuilla. Before this time, Katherine had never seen a white man. When she did for the first time, she was terrified. Never having seen skin so light in color, Katherine was sure the man must have painted himself to look so white.

Many of Katherine's older siblings attended Saint Boniface Indian School, a place notorious for their cruel treatment of Indian children. Whipped for speaking their Native tongue, the children were punished for even mentioning their culture and ways. Katherine did not attend Saint Boniface, going instead to grammar school in Palm Springs. The teachers discouraged her from speaking Cahuilla, but at least she was not whipped for any momentary lapses. Instead, Katherine was largely ignored. Seated in the back of the classroom with nothing to do, not even a picture book to keep her company, she was not even taught her ABC's.

Katherine's mother spoke only Cahuilla. A medicine woman, Melana took Katherine with her while she gathered the plants she used to soothe and heal. Katherine and her family never saw any other kind of doctor, and visited the Shaman only in the extreme situations.

When Katherine was in the eighth grade, she realized that though she would speak Cahuilla to her friends, they would answer back in English. That's when she realized her language was dying. From that time, Katherine dedicated herself to preserving her Native

tongue. Once in high school, Katherine had to study very hard to catch up to the other students because she had missed so much in the lower grades. However, whenever a spare moment presented itself, Katherine would take out the special notebook she always carried and write down the names and uses of the plants her mother had taught her. That notebook became the book *Temalpakh*, written with anthropologist Dr. Lowell John Bean in 1972. The book covers more than 250 plants and are listed by their Latin, English and original Cahuilla names.

LOVE AND MARRIAGE

When Katherine was about eighteen years old she attended a ceremony with her friend Jessie Mike at the Palm Springs Reservation. The ceremony was a large gathering that commemorated the dead called the *Nukil*. As she sat in the ceremonial circle watching the Shamans purify the area in preparation she noticed a young man across the way. She asked Jessie if she knew who the man was, but Jessie did not. When her nephew joined them, she asked him the same question. He told her the young man was Mariano Saubel, and then asked Katherine why she wanted to know. “Because that man is going to be my husband,” was Katherine’s reply.

Katherine and Mariano saw each other for about two years before he asked her to marry him. Though the couple was very much in love, not everyone was thrilled with the budding romance. The elders were very concerned, and especially one of Katherine’s old aunts. The Cahuilla held very strict rules regarding marriage. Couples too closely related were not allowed to wed. Katherine and Mariano were seventh cousins, and though their union was sanctioned by both the Catholic Church and in secular society, to the Cahuilla elders they were too closely related. Neither Mariano nor Katherine wanted to go against their ways, but they were deeply in love. Katherine decided to speak to her father.

By that time, Katherine’s beloved mother was passed away. However, Juan Siva was Katherine’s inspiration. She admired and looked up to him. Though she wanted to marry Mariano very badly, she would abide by whatever her “tata” said.

Juan was concerned about the situation, until he remembered a very crucial element—the moiety. From the beginning of their civilization, the Cahuilla people were divided into two major groups called moieties. One group is called wildcat, the other coyote. One of the strictest regulations regarding marriage was that a wildcat must always marry a coyote, and a coyote must always marry a wildcat. Katherine was wildcat. Mariano was coyote. Juan Siva gave the young couple his blessing.

Mariano and Katherine were married in a small Catholic Church in Banning, California on October 2, 1940. By then, many of the old traditions had already passed away. Katherine had been brought up Catholic. Her father was deeply devout, and Katherine attended Catechism as a young girl. The Catholic ceremony was simple and well attended by family and close friends.

Three years later, their son Alan was born. Determined to bring her child up herself, Katherine stayed home with the boy while Mariano worked in construction and soon went off to war. During those years, Katherine also helped her father-in-law in his almond and apricot orchards.

Although Mariano had fought for his country in North Africa, Italy and Germany, when he returned from WWII the government would not grant him a loan to build a home because they lived on an Indian reservation.

Mariano and Katherine had to scrimp and save in order to build their house.

WORK AND STUDY

When Alan was nine, Katherine went to work outside her home for the first time. She worked for a clothing manufacturer making shirts for 60 cents an hour. Even in 1952, that was quite a poor wage. With her friend Jane Penn, Katherine organized a union, Local 658, and became the first president. Wages increased to \$1.25 an hour with benefits. Although the employees loved her, management viewed her as a rabble-rouser and upstart. After ten years, the manager finally found a way to fire her.

Never one to stay down too long, Katherine soon found work at Doitch Electronics where she stayed for the next eighteen years until she retired. Doitch worked in the Aerospace Industry. Katherine ran a machine that made parts for the Apollo spaceship.

In 1963, the anthropologist Dr. Lowell Bean introduced Katherine to a linguist from UCLA, Dr. Bright. Dr. Bright was studying Native American speakers, and though he visited many tribes such as the Chumash and the Gabrielenos, he could find no one who could speak their original language. Dr. Bright invited Katherine to come to UCLA for a semester to work with him in the linguist department. After being assured by her father that this was not against Cahuilla ways, Katherine went to UCLA. Mariano, ever the dutiful husband stayed home with Alan.

Katherine stayed in a small apartment in Los Angeles. Every morning she would ride the bus to UCLA. After her work with Dr. Bright, she was free to roam the campus, sitting in on whatever classes struck her fancy. Katherine audited archaeology, geology and anthropology courses. Then one day she found a notice tacked up on one of the bulletin boards. President John Fitzgerald Kennedy was offering scholarships to Indian students. The only criterion was to write an essay about something that related to Native Americans. Katherine wrote an essay about her father and won a scholarship to study anthropology.

Twenty-nine tribes took part in the program. The students were flown to Illinois to study at the University of Chicago for four weeks, then to the University of Colorado in Boulder.

In 1964, Katherine met Dr. Seiler. Dr. Seiler had studied Native speakers at the Morongo Reservation in Banning in the early fifties. Wanting to continue his work in 1964, he found that many of the elders he had worked with were now passed away. Dr. Seiler finished his linguist studies with Katherine. In 1971, he invited her to fly to Germany to continue their work at the University of Cologne. Though timid at the prospect of flying by herself so far from home, Katherine, encouraged by Mariano, flew to Germany.

At the airport, Dr. Seiler and his students greeted Katherine in her Native Cahuilla. She was six thousand miles away and she felt as if she was home.

While in Germany, Katherine met Dr. Heoki and his wife Maria. Dr. Heoki was also doing linguist studies at the University. The Heoki's became good friends with

Katherine, inviting her to dinner every night, and teaching her how to eat Japanese food. On their days off, the three traveled all over Western Germany in a VW, picnicking on the Rhine, and enjoying the delicious German cold cuts and cheeses. Though Katherine had been fearful about leaving her homeland, sure she would hate the food and lose weight, she returned to Mariano eight pounds heavier. In 1979, Dr. Heoki invited Katherine to visit Japan.

Whenever she traveled abroad to study and lecture, Katherine always managed to obtain a leave of absence from Doitch. Mariano was always willing to do whatever it took to help his wife do the work he knew she was destined to do.

DEATH AND PASSINGS

On October 2, 1985, Mariano and Katherine celebrated their forty-fifth wedding anniversary. Surprising her, Mariano took Katherine to a lovely restaurant where they ordered champagne and toasted their long and happy life together. Taking her hand, Mariano told her how happy he was that he had married her. Though the couple never had a lot of money, they always had each other.

Less than two months later, on December 14, Mariano died. A sudden heart attack came with no warning. Katherine later realized that their anniversary dinner had been their time to say goodbye.

A devout spiritual woman, Katherine believes no one knows what God has in store for us. Nobody can know how it will all end. Three years before Mariano's death, Katherine had retired from Doitch. She was grateful for the final years she had with him. During that time, they planted orchards and gardens on their property. Mariano could make anything grow. They also spent much time with their family and close friends.

Mariano's funeral was held in the same Catholic Church where they were married. By 1985, the Cahuilla social structure had almost completely broken down. No one remained who knew how to perform the death rites properly. If the rituals cannot be performed in the proper manner, it is best not to perform them at all.

The last Cahuilla Shaman died in 1989. There was no one to pass the traditions on to, and so the Ceremonial House with all the Shaman's belongings was burned to the ground. The Cahuilla Indians gathered to watch the house burn, chanting, and singing songs all night long until nothing was left but ash. Then it was finished. It was all finished.

So much of the Cahuilla culture has passed away. Katherine Siva Saubel has dedicated her life to saving all she can.

In 1964 with Jane Penn and Mariano, Katherine founded the Malki Museum at the Morongo Reservation. The Malki is the first Native American museum created and run by Native Americans. The Malki Museum is dedicated to the preservation of the heritage of the Cahuilla Indian people and other Indian groups of Southern California.

A beloved Cahuilla elder, nurturer, scholar, educator, and activist, Katherine Siva Saubel is an inspiration to her people and all people who come to know her. On March 7, 2000, Katherine will turn eighty. She is still working and going strong. Katherine is writing a book about the history of Southern California, the first tome that will include the contributions of the Cahuilla Indian. She is also planning a much-anticipated trip to New Zealand for the new millennium.

BOOKS and WRITING

- ❑ *Temalpakh: Cahuillan Indian Knowledge and Usage of Plants*
- ❑ *Cahuilla Ethnobotanical Notes; Oak*, with Lowell Bean
- ❑ *Cahuilla Ethnobotanical Notes: Mesquite and Screwbean* with Dr. Bean
- ❑ *I'Isniyatam, (Designs, a children's book)*
- ❑ *Chem'ivillu' (Let's speak Cahuilla)* with Pamela Munro
- ❑ Editorials published in the Journal of California Anthropology and Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND AWARDS

- ❑ President of the Malki Museum
- ❑ Member of the Riverside County Historical Commission
- ❑ Member of the Los Coyotes Tribal Council.
- ❑ Member of the Governor's California Native Heritage Commission
- ❑ County Historian of the Year 1986
- ❑ First Native American inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.
- ❑ Recipient of the Young Women's Christian Association Achievement Award
- ❑ Recipient of the Desert Protective Council Award
- ❑ Recipient of the National Museum of the American Indian of the Smithsonian Institution first Art and Cultural Achievement Award

- ❑ Mounted *Cahuilla Voices: We are still here*. Art exhibit shown at the Grace Hudson Museum in Ukiah, California, The Reese Bullen Gallery at Humboldt State University, The Southwest Museum in Los Angeles, and Palm Springs Desert Museum, Palm Springs, California.