Introduction to the Musical Culture
of the Diegueño Indians
from San Diego County Reservations in California

by Barbara J. Kwiatkowska

For most San Diegans the neighboring Diegueno Indian reservations are at best a novelty or an unknown factor. Campo, the nearest reservation can be reached by car within an hour from San Diego city. It lies among the rocky hills south of the main east-west highway. Clear directional signs are lacking, hence one has to rely on the accurate directions from the local residents. Following the dirt road the wooden gate with the sign 'Campo Indian Reservation' soon appears half hidden under the dry tree branches. Further along emerge permanent and temporary single family dwellings. The rugged terrain invites the question of the land’s fertility.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In their early history the Dieguenos inhabited the fertile land along the banks of San Felipe River. Beginning with the 1542 trip by Juan Rodrigues Cabrill to San Diego, the people - who used to call themselves tipai’ (Kroeber 1920), kumiai (Spier 1923), or kumeyay (Langdon 1970) became known by the Iberian name Diegueno which remains today as their identifying name. Similar process of nomenclature change concerned their next of kin, the Cahuilla, Juaneno and Luiseno. While Mexican and later American settlers searched for treasure, colonizers also insisted on possession of productive land. Subsequently the Dieguenos were moved to the Captain Grande Reservation where they lived until 1931. The sale of this land resulted in their continued migration to different designated reservations which lacked water or other natural resources. Hence historical
self-sufficiency became perceived as a utopia. The younger generations were to live and work not by their choice in the urban and agricultural settings away from their families. Soon intermarriages occurred and because the land for the reservations was not fertile, the Dieguenios were forced to migrate to sustain their livelihood. In these circumstances the tradition became less or totally unimportant. Those who still knew the indigenous culture were the older members of the tribe who were residing on the reservations.

**LANGUAGE**

During the two hundred years of forced migration, the Diegueno language, part of the Yuman linguistic stock, exhibits influences from the Luiseno and Cahuilla dialects which is reflected in their song texts. Today, with few exceptions, the song texts consist mostly of syllables; the linguist, M. Langdon (1970), has distinguished Luiseno elements in the language as well.

**MUSICAL HERITAGE**

The music material was generously provided by the oldest Diegueno members: Adelaida Lachappa of Campo, Anna Sandoval and Aida Prieto of Sycuan, George Hyde and Albert Aswayo of Manzanita Reservations. George Hyde, the oldest singer could express the content of certain songs, but he could not provide exact translation of the text. The remaining singers knew neither the text nor its meaning. While attempting to disseminate the songs' origins, the researcher obtained from the performers the information which indicated that even though they learned their songs in early adolescence, their immediate and distant relatives had had no knowledge of the text meaning. In practical sense the above information translates into about one hundred years of songs' contents enigma.

**SONG GENRES**

The singers identified four types of songs: Bird, Funeral, Jumping and Peon Game songs. The latter ones are usually performed during the annual powwow held in September, which also marks the beginning of the New Year. It may last several hours through the night until the game is over. While the Jumping songs accompanies social events, and the Funeral ones celebrate departure of the soul, the exact nature of the Bird Songs has been lost in the process of linguistic changes.

**MUSIC CHARACTERISTICS**

The songs are generally (have repeated verses) and most often use only six different pitches. The undulating melodic contour is dominated by primes (repetition of one important tone). The diverse rhythms are characterized by triplets, dotted rhythms and syncopations. The singing is accompanied by the regular beats of gourd rattles changing to a tremolo which is indicative of ascending melodic movement. The singers demonstrate a relaxed, non-pulsating voice quality with frequent upward and downward glissandi ending in repeated short shouting. Both sexes perform the songs.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the two years span of research process I had many opportunities to visit all ten Diegueno reservations. The senior singer George Hyde from Manzanita Reservation had no electricity in his house. I hope he has it now.

SOURCES


Peon Game Song

wa la la we yo na
wa la la we yo na
cho

ne ne tra
ve ne ne
le wa la la we vo
na le wa la la we vo
na

D.C. al Fine

che ne na tra yo ne ne.
Jumping Song

ko ra ku cha me  na  wa  wuchau  me  e  na  a

me nya wa mo  wa ra  o wa  me  nya mo  wa ra  wa

wa  ko ra  cho  me na  wa  wuchau  cho me.

me  nya mo  wa ra  o wa  wa  ha  ha  ha  ha  ha  ha  a
Bird Song