Note on Languages, Territories, and Names of California Indian Tribes

The native peoples of California can be grouped in several different ways. The map that appears in this book on page 36 is linguistic, identifying groups of people that spoke the same language or dialect. Anthropologists have most commonly grouped the native peoples of California in this way, because classification by language is relatively straightforward, and because peoples speaking the same language tend to have other cultural traits in common. However, the bonds between people that share a language are often less important than those created by other sorts of relationships. This was especially true in most of native California, where the nature of trade, warfare, cooperation, and almost every other kind of interaction depended on whether the individuals involved belonged to the same sociopolitical group, not whether they spoke a common language. There is, thus, a disconnect between the linguistic map used here and the groupings that determined day-to-day behavior in native California, since the individual language groups often comprised many independent sociopolitical groups. In most cases, everyone in a sociopolitical unit spoke the same language, but speaking the same language did not ensure membership in the same sociopolitical unit. The picture in native California is further complicated because sociopolitical groups differed in kind and composition across the state, and because these groups were displaced and disrupted by European and American contact and occupation.

Prior to contact, many language groups, particularly in northern California, were subdivided into politically and economically independent groups consisting of several unrelated families that collectively owned and defended a specific tract of land. Alfred Kroeber called these groups “village communities” or “tribelets,” to distinguish these political entities from the more familiar Plains tribes, which were much larger and more unified. Tribe-
lets spoke a particular dialect, but they were independent from adjoining tribelets that spoke the same dialect. In other places, particularly in southern California and the San Joaquin Valley, otherwise independent sociopolitical units were somewhat unified by moiety that divided the whole of society into two ritually interdependent halves, forcing them to cooperate in giving first fruit rites and other ritual affairs. In still other places, notably northwestern California, there were no tribelets at all, nor indeed were there any sociopolitical units larger than the family. This diverse sociopolitical landscape was drastically transformed by European and American occupation. Many groups disappeared altogether; many independent groups joined to form new social units. Contributing to this joining and mixing was the policy of the federal government to grant services (through the BIA) only to groups designated as Federally Recognized Tribes (such as the Big Valley, Hopland, and Robinson Rancherias among the Pomo, for example).

All this explains why the linguistic map in this book does not show all the groups mentioned in the text. Some of the tribal names in use today reflect traditional geographic designations, referring to a characteristic feature or landmark of the place inhabited by the group. The Pit River tribe, for example, takes its name from that major river, yet on the linguistic map the tribe is also called by the name of its language, Achumawi. In this case there is a one-to-one correspondence between language and political unit. Because the language groups shown on the linguistic map frequently comprised multiple independent units, and because so few of these were documented by ethnographers, it is impossible to present a comprehensive sociopolitical map, which might show five to six hundred groups. See Robert Heizer’s *Languages, Territories and Names of California Indian Tribes* for a more detailed discussion and presentation of data and sources.

Because some groups had no specific name for themselves (after all, they knew who they were), they were given the names used by their neighbors, with predictable results when neighboring tribes were not on friendly terms! More common are the names imposed by anthropologists. The Karuk, for example, have created their name by varying the spelling of Karok, the term used by anthropologists for the tribe’s language. Karok, meaning “upriver,” was not in use as a tribal name aboriginally. The neighboring Yurok, in turn, take their name from the anthropological name for their language, which was derived from the Karok term yurok, meaning “downriver.”

To further complicate matters, there are many variations on the spelling of almost every language group and tribal name. The Choynumne are also referred to as Choinumni and Choynimni. Frequently this variation is intentional, as tribal groups change the spelling of terms used by anthropol-
ologists. Thus, the Washo of the anthropologist has become the Washoe. Karok/Karuk, Yawelmani/Yaw lumne, and Kato/Cahto are other examples of this change. For various tribal names and spellings, see the synonymies in the *Handbook of North American Indians* (volumes 8, 10, 11, and 12 cover California, Southwest, Great Basin, and Plateau tribes).

In this book, when two tribal memberships are listed for an informant (Mono/Dumna, for example), the person claims both language affiliations because one or both parents have that ethnic background.

This note is based upon discussions with and comments from anthropologist Robert Bettinger and linguists Victor Golla and Leanne Hinton.