



*William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 81, no. 4 (October 2024): 721–66

“‘Related Around the Mountain’: Relational Sovereignty and Coalition Building in the California Interior”

*By Naomi Sussman*

The 1851 Kúpangaxwicham (Cupeño) War was a multinational Native uprising that threatened to destroy U.S. settlements across Southern California. A Native man, Juan Antonio Chem'yuleqa Kústakik, ended the war and saved the United States' foothold in the region. Kústakik's act was not a devil's bargain to shelter his people, the Cahuilla, from impending conquest since the origins of the war lay in the multipolar Indigenous geopolitics of the California interior. The Cahuilla, Kúpangaxwicham, and neighboring peoples drew from a relational framework of sovereignty that prioritized coalition building both within and beyond their nations' boundaries to make themselves resilient to upheaval. When Native peoples on the Colorado River and then Mexican colonists began to invade the California interior in the early nineteenth century, the Cahuilla and Kúpangaxwicham innovated on their relational practices to tie themselves to more powerful neighbors. These alliances put the Kúpangaxwicham and Cahuilla on opposing sides of many battlefields from 1834 to 1851—but both peoples operated within a shared political ontology of relationship building. The California interior's history of overlapping and relational sovereignties made the Cahuilla and Kúpangaxwicham durable in the face of conquest, and offers a model for understanding how other non-expansionist Native peoples enacted power and survived invasion across early America.