

The Seris and the Comcaac: Sifting fact from fiction about the names and relationships

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*This paper discusses the names that have been used in the literature for the Seri people and the language that they speak, including meanings of those names. It also sorts through proposals that have been made for the relationship of their language to other languages. These topics are presented from a historical perspective so that a non-specialist can understand the facts and see the reasons for the confusion.**

1. Introduction

Many people in the American Southwest and in Mexico are aware of the ethnic group that lives in Sonora, Mexico and is most well known as the Seri Indians. No newcomers to this area,¹ the Seris have had a special place in the history and folklore of northern Mexico. Some people are aware that the name *Seri* is given to the group by outsiders (an exonym) and is not the name that the Seri people use for themselves (an autoethnonym), as discussed below. This is similar to the way in which English speakers refer to the people of Germany as Germans and do not use the term *Deutsche* for them. It is very common for ethnic groups to have names for themselves and for their languages that are different from what outsiders have used to refer to them (see Campbell 1997: 5-6 for the case of languages of the Americas).

There has been a trend in recent years for outsiders to try to use autoethnonyms for other cultural groups, as a way to show greater respect for them. This is sometimes difficult to carry out successfully, for various reasons, including the fact that the autoethnonym may be difficult to pronounce or not have a standardized spelling. Outsiders may also have difficulty distinguishing between the name of the cultural group (the ethnonym) and the name of the language (the glottonym). It is not uncommon for the ethnonym to be different from the glottonym, despite the fact that in some European languages these are often (more or less) identical.² Notice, for instance, that (in English usage) a Spaniard speaks Spanish and a Nahua speaks Náhuatl.

The purpose of this brief article is to help outsiders understand the names that are used to refer to the Seri people, both the common exonym (*Seri*, discussed in section 2) and the autoethnonym (*Comcaac*, discussed in section 3). The latter is different from the name of the language that they speak, *Cmiique litom* (Seri person's word). The name *Cmiique litom* and that spelling have been officially registered in the catalog of languages of Mexico by the Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas (INALI 2005, 2008:

* I thank Lyle Campbell, Richard Felger, Lilián Guerrero, Cathy Marlett, Carolyn O'Meara, David Shaul and Richard White for their helpful comments, suggestions and corrections. All remaining errors and inadequacies are my own. Information on the Seri language presented here that is not cited with references is based on personal fieldwork with the Seri community during the past thirty years, some of which has been published in various works including a dictionary (now in its second edition), and an extensive grammar (unpublished but available on-line in draft form). See the general bibliography available at www.lengamer.org/admin/language_folders/seri/user_uploaded_files/links/File/bibliografia_seri/Bienvenido.html.

¹ Bowen (1983: 232) uses the phrase "since the beginning of ceramic times" to indicate how long they have been in the area. This may be understood as something like a minimum of twelve centuries before present. See also Bowen (1976).

² Goddard (1996: 9) points out that in the language list provided for North America in the volume that he edited, "names of languages that differ from the designations of their speakers have generally been avoided as violating the usual English pattern according to which a language name is identical to the corresponding ethnic adjectival or attributive form."

40). Outsiders sometimes refer to the “Comcaac language”, an anomalous juxtaposition discussed in section 3.3. Some outsiders mistakenly use *Comcaac* to refer to the language, unaware that this is contrary to usage within the language itself, as will be apparent from the discussion in section 3.³

This article also briefly reviews in section 4 the claims about the relationship that the Seri language has with others since this has presented an enormous amount of confusion and is one fact about the language that non-specialists commonly mention.

Quite unsurprisingly, the words *Comcaac* and *Seri* do not appear in the most recent edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary*, although the word *Seri* does appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary Additions* (1993) and derivative works, and in the *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary* (2009). The name *Seri* does appear in the recent two-volume edition of the *Diccionario del Español de México* (2010), referring to both the people and the language.

The following are tentative minimal entries for each term in the abbreviated style of *The American Heritage Dictionary*. (Note well: these are personal proposals within this style; they are not actual entries.)

Seri [sě́ rē] n, pl. Seris. 1. A member of a Native American people of northwestern Sonora, Mexico, who live on the mainland along the Gulf of California north of Guaymas and historically lived on Tiburon Island, San Esteban Island and (according to oral tradition) Baja California. 2. The language of the Seri people (with no established relationship to any other language although hypothesized by a few linguists, especially in the 20th century, as belonging to the putative Hokan family). [17th century variant Heri, 19th century variant Ceri; no known or plausible etymology. This is a name applied by outsiders to the group. See Comcaac and Cmiique Iitom.] — Seri adj.

Comcaac [kōng-käk´] pl n, sg. Cmiique. [kwĩN´kě] Self-designation of the Seri people. [No known or plausible etymology. 20th century variants: Congcáac; Cuícque. Erratic spellings: Konkaak, Kunkak, Kunkaak, Concaac, Comca’ac, Conca’ac, etc.; Kmike, Knoike.] See Cmiique Iitom, the group’s name of their language.

Cmiique Iitom [kwĩN´kě ē´tōm] The name that the Seri people (the Comcaac) use to refer to their own language. It has been suggested, but not shown, that this language is related to Yuman languages, and by extension and by hypothesis to other so-called Hokan languages. The absence of adequate published evidence of any proposed relationship has led to the more conservative view that Seri is a language isolate. [Literally, ‘with which a Seri person speaks’. Variant: Cmiique Iimx]. ISO 639-3 code is [sei].

2. Seris

Some version of the name *Seris* has been used in Spanish for more than 350 years and in English for nearly as long. The word *Seris* first appears in written documents in that form in 1692, but alternate

³ See, for example, Munguía Duarte (2005), Moctezuma Zamarrón (2007: 155), Munguía Duarte & López Cruz (2009), and the website of the Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de Pueblos Indígenas (http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=758&Itemid=68, accessed 26 June 2011). The title of the dictionary (M. Moser & Marlett 2005), devised by the Seri editorial committee, chose to refer to the language as *Comcaac quih Yaza*, which is the plural form of *Cmiique Iitom*. The word *iitom* is a nominalization formed on the intransitive verb root *√aaitom* meaning ‘speak’, which has a suppletive form in the plural, *√ooza* (M. Moser & Marlett 2005 and 2010). The spelling of the word in the *Vocabulario* (E. Moser & M. Moser 1961: 46), *cuíquúitong*, reflects various phonetic details that are discussed in detail in Marlett (1981).

spellings (which may reflect different pronunciations) appear in various places both earlier and later: Heris (1645), Ceris (1748), Céres (1829), Jeris (1922).⁴

Kroeber (1931: 29) makes important clarifications about the reference of this term.⁵ As he points out, the term today most commonly refers to “the modern fusion of mainlanders and islanders, which evidently includes descendants of all Serian tribes except the Guaymas and Upanguaymas, who became absorbed in the lowermost Yaqui tribe or village of Belem.” Earlier uses of the term may have referred to a particular group among several related cultural groups, and may have actually been used at times for unrelated groups as well.

The pronunciation of the modern name *Seris* is usually just as one expects from Spanish. It is not clear how to understand the phonetics of the spelling Heris, however, and it is also not clear exactly how the words *Seris* or *Ceris* were pronounced four centuries ago, given the complexities of Spanish fricatives and the changes in pronunciation that have taken place.⁶ Investigation of this point could prove to be helpful.

The etymology of the name *Seris* has been the topic of speculation by numerous writers. None of the proposed, or asserted, etymologies has any foundation in fact so far as I have been able to determine. The various speculations are taken up in chronological order. None of these speculative etymologies is pejorative, but none of them seems to be plausible either.⁷

2.1. Putative Spanish origin

Moravian-born Father Gilg states in 1692 that “the name Seris is not an Indian, but a Spanish word which the honorable Spaniards have given to a nation in North America” (Di Peso & Matson 1965: 41). He does not clarify this statement, which does not make immediate sense. Bowen (1983: 248) supposes that “Gilg’s statement refers only to the fact that it is not the Seri self-designation,” and this may be so. Bowen rightly dismisses Gatschet’s (1877-1892, 4: 3) proposed derivation from Spanish *sera* (a kind of large basket, according to the dictionary of the Real Academia Española) as being “unsupportable” (Bowen 1983: 248).

2.2. Putative Opata origin

Peñafiel (1897: 225) gives “Séris” (with the accent) as “nombre de una tribu de Sonora, originario probablemente de la lengua ópata.” Opata was a Uto-Aztecan language (related to Yoeme (Yaqui), Eudeve, Pima, and O’odham) about which there is relatively little published linguistic documentation; see Yetman & Shaul (2010: 65) and Shaul (2010). For a new synthesis of the history about the Opata people, see Yetman (2010). But Peñafiel does not give any basis for this claim (as the format of his work precluded this). McGee (1898: 95, 124) repeats Peñafiel’s claim and elaborates on the supposed Opatan etymology of the term. He writes (p. 9) that the “common appellation is from the Opata, and may be translated ‘spry’.” As he provides much more discussion on subsequent pages, he reveals clearly that he is simply speculating on the meaning of the term by his investigation of the scant Opata data available, searching for words with similar-looking syllables. As with most such speculation done by people without an intimate knowledge of a language (and in this case, without any personal knowledge at all of it), it is undoubtedly spurious. Hernández (1904: 239) repeats McGee’s claim (in Spanish), but condenses it

⁴ For the spelling Seris: Gilg (1692, see Di Peso & Matson 1965: 41), Ortega (1754: 244), Smith (1861: 7), Smith (1863) and Velasco (1860/1985). For the spelling Heris, see Pérez de Ribas (1645/1944: 149) and Sheridan (1999: 23-24). For Ceris: Villa-Señor y Sánchez (1748: 391), Bartlett (1852), Ludewig (1858: 34), Stone (1861: 19). Pajeken (n.d.), and Bancroft (1886: 705). For Céres: Hardy (1829). For Jeris: Vergara Martín (1922: 52). Some of the earlier sources are known today only second-hand as cited in McGee (1898: 100-101, 128-129) as the originals are not readily available, if at all.

⁵ Thanks to Carolyn O’Meara for reminding me of this issue.

⁶ Thanks to Lyle Campbell for reminding me of this issue.

⁷ Some of these facts were discussed in Marlett (1984).

considerably. This etymology has been picked up recently on some web sites.⁸ The *Oxford English Dictionary Additions* (1993) also gives Oyata as the origin of the word; one must presume that McGee (1898) was the source used.

2.3. Putative Yaqui origin

The most common, and very popular, claim has been that the word *Seri* comes from Yaqui and means ‘people of the sand’, or ‘men of the sand’. The claim appears first in Barjau and Iturbide (1981:10), to the best of my knowledge, where it is stated (without documentation) that it means “los que viven en la arena” (those who live on the sand) as well as (confusingly) “la gente” (the people). Barjau had cited McGee (1898, 1980) for the (supposed) meaning of “Cuncaac”, but apparently didn’t feel convinced by McGee’s equally complex etymology of *Seri* (see above); he provides a new etymology for which I have found no precedent. The publisher of Barjau & Iturbide’s photo book was the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (with FONAPAS), which had just translated and published the Spanish version of McGee’s monograph, as McGee (1980).⁹

The claim is repeated in many popular Spanish-language publications that introduce the Seri people, language or culture. The Instituto Nacional Indigenista became the CDI (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas), which has published monographs and articles that repeat the Yaqui etymology, and from there other government publications and websites understandably do the same,¹⁰ and even school curricula (see the *Historia regional de Sonora* 2008: 42). As a result, some English publications are now following suit; see Kuss (2004: 238) where the claim is qualified with ‘probably’. The Smithsonian Institution’s publication of violin music includes a 45-second piece by a Seri musician (originally obtained by the INI, from whom the Smithsonian obtained the recording); the brief introduction to this piece repeats the spurious Yaqui etymology in English, as ‘sand men’ (Sheehy & Ochoa 2007). See also Brockmann (2004:83), as one example of a guidebook that repeats this (for German readers). Martínez Soto (2008: xxv) cites Santillán Mena (1993: 35) as asserting the Yaqui etymology. A rather recent variation on this claim, in a government-sponsored curriculum item for school children in the state of Sonora, confuses the word *Comcaac* with *Seris*, and claims that *Comcaac* means ‘hombres de la arena’ (‘men of the sand’).

As with the case of the Oyata etymology, there does not appear to be any factual basis for this claim. The word for sand in modern Yaqui is *see’e* (phonetically something like [se:ʔe]); see Estrada Fernández et al. (2004: 215, 243, 270) and Molina, Valenzuela & Shaul (1999). I have not seen any published discussion — scholarly or otherwise — supporting the relationship between any of these words, or any other, and the word *Seri*. One might imagine a suffix being added to the noun for ‘sand’, and there are some suffixes that lend themselves as possible candidates. However, the case has not been made in print by anyone who understands and speaks Yaqui. John Detrick, a long-term student of the Yaqui language (see Detrick & Casad 1999) as well as a friend and colleague of Edward and Mary Moser, apparently never suggested to them an etymology based on this word. And since the Yaquis were considered allies of the Seris historically as well as in the modern era, it is unlikely that the name they used for the Seris was considered pejorative, *pace* some recent unpublished claims.

⁸ Two websites (one of which directly copies the other) say that the term *Seri* means ‘the one who truly runs fast’ in the Oyata language and ‘men of the sand’ in Yaqui. This statement leaves it to the imagination of the reader to figure out how it can mean such different things in two different but related languages.

⁹ A web-reference to this book translates the meaning of “*Seri*” as ‘people of the sand dunes’ (<http://arts.jrank.org/pages/1101/Mexico.html>, accessed 24 December 2009); this represents a new direction in which this fictitious etymology may be headed since other websites have already copied this.

¹⁰ See http://www.cdi.gob.mx/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=605&Itemid=62, for example (accessed 24 December 2009), http://www.sic.gob.mx/ficha.php?table=grupo_etnico&table_id=51 (accessed 24 December 2009), and <http://www.ife.org.mx/documentos/DEOE/MemoriasProcesos/memorias2006/26/00/cap01.pdf> (accessed 24 December 2009).

We may reasonably speculate that the word *Seri* did indeed have its origin in one or more neighboring languages — the word is obviously a non-Seri word, because of the *r* sound that does not occur in any native Seri words — and that the Spaniards learned it from a neighboring people.¹¹ The word may in fact be as old as the prehistoric contact between the Seris and their primarily Uto-Aztecan neighbors. But we really have no idea what that word may have meant originally or which language it came from. It is possible, however, that future hypotheses about the meaning of this name will come from the examination of very early Spanish documents in which someone wrote some explanation or gave some clue. At this time, however, no documents with such explanations or clues are known to exist.

3. *Comcaac*

The Seri people refer to themselves as the *Comcaac*, the word presented here using the community-based spelling conventions that have developed over the past sixty years (see Marlett 2006a) and most recently standardized to another level in the trilingual dictionary published only a few years ago (M. Moser & Marlett 2005, 2010) with broad community support as well as official support from the governors of the Seri nation during the time that it was being finished.¹² I capitalize the name here because of English conventions. Spanish writing conventions do not capitalize names referring to nationalities¹³ — witness *los ingleses* (the English) and *los franceses* (the French) — and so the word *Comcaac* is written without a capital letter in Spanish language publications and in Seri publications that follow the same conventions, except in special situations, of course, such as in titles of books.

3.1. *Pronunciation and spelling*

The word is pronounced [koŋ¹ka:k]; stress is on the second syllable and the vowel of that syllable is long. The preceding phonetic transcription utilizes the conventions of the International Phonetic Association. If the conventions of the *American Heritage Dictionary* were employed, it would be written kōng-käk´, although the vowel length cannot be adequately represented with these conventions. This is the modern pronunciation of the word.

We are fortunate to have a transcription of this name in a wordlist collected by John Russell Bartlett. For a brief time Bartlett was commissioner for the survey of the boundary between the U.S. and Mexico (Wilcox & Fowler 2002: 138), and visited Hermosillo (the capital of Sonora) at the end of 1851; on New Year's day in 1852 (Bartlett 1852, 1854) he took down about 170 Seri words.¹⁴ This was the first wordlist of any length taken down by anyone of which we have a record (Marlett 2009, 2010), and it was archived with the American Ethnological Society, now under the care of the Smithsonian Institution. Item 14 in Bartlett's list was for 'Indians, people', and was written *komkak*. The use of the *m* by Bartlett, a naïve transcriber, very likely indicates that this nasal consonant was pronounced [m] at that time. Pinart (1879)

¹¹ The name for the Seri people listed in the modern O'odham (Papago/Pima) dictionary (Saxton, Saxton & Enos 1983) is *Shehl* (p. 101), phonetically something like [ʃi:l], with a retroflex sibilant (Saxton 1963). No indication of any etymology is given. This documentation is from varieties spoken north of the U.S.-Mexican border. The variety of O'odham spoken in Mexico five hundred years ago, would likely have been different. I have not seen any documentation of the name in Pima or Papago from another location or time.

¹² The first edition of this dictionary, a book that is more than 940 pages in length, was published with funds provided by the state government of Sonora, the (U.S.) National Science Foundation, and the Instituto Sonorense de Cultura. The second edition of the dictionary was published by the Mexican government as part of the bicentennial celebration of Mexico.

¹³ This is well known, but see the *Diccionario de la lengua española* (2001) and the *Diccionario del español de México* (2010) for more examples. Writers occasionally may choose to capitalize such names, but it is not the norm to do so.

¹⁴ Bartlett was the compiler of the very popular and original *Dictionary of Americanisms* (Bartlett 1848), co-founder (with former Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin) of the American Ethnological Society, and secretary of the state of Rhode Island (see the website of the John Russell Bartlett Society, www.brown.edu/Facilities/John_Carter_Brown_Library/jrb/about.html).

lists the same form, *komkak*, based on his own fieldwork. And around 1885, another person — this time a person from Sonora, Joaquín Loustaunau — transcribed the word as *comcáackg*; note the *m* (Hernández 1904: 261).

We know that sometime before 1951 the phonetic pronunciation of the consonant /m/ changed in unstressed syllables, with the result that it is pronounced at the point of articulation of the consonant that follows it. So Edward Moser recorded this word as [koŋ¹ka:k] just one hundred years after Bartlett (see E. Moser & M. Moser 1961: 32).¹⁵ The word is correctly analyzed as being phonemically /komkaak/, and this is the basis for writing the word as *Comcaac*, with an *m* rather than with an *n*, since the consonant /n/ does not undergo this kind of assimilation rule in the language.¹⁶ For this reason, the spellings *Concaac*, *Konkaak*, and *Kunkaak* that one occasionally sees — using an *n* — are linguistically incorrect, and reflect more the expectations of an outsider (with expectations from English or Spanish phonology) rather than an insider to the language.

Table 1 presents a chronologically-ordered list of the various spellings of the name *Comcaac*, including most of the erratic ones that I have found. The list is a bit of a mixture of things, however, since it includes “field transcriptions” (such as Bartlett’s 1852 spelling) and more scientific phonetic transcriptions (both types enclosed in square brackets), phonological transcriptions (based on analysis, enclosed in diagonals), and other types of representations (written in italics in the table), including community-based spellings.

The spellings that use an apostrophe between the two a’s are especially curious; there is no explanation for this apostrophe other than a misinterpretation of the simple acute accent over the vowel that is sometimes included to make the word stress explicit, as in the title of the 2005 edition of the dictionary, where it appears as *Comcáac*. Many languages of Mexico use an apostrophe-like symbol to represent a glottal stop or a kind of vowel phonation. Perhaps someone thought the Seri accent was meant to symbolize a similar phonetic fact.

The use of the letter *u* in some spellings reflects the fact that the /o/ in the language is very occasionally heard by outsiders as a [u]; there is no /u/ in the language’s vowel inventory (Moser & Moser 1965; Marlett 1981).

The choice between *c* and *k* has varied for different non-linguistic reasons. The Seri committee charged with making the decisions for the first edition of the recent dictionary, working with the approval of the tribal elders, decided unequivocally not to depart significantly from the basic conventions that had been in use for the previous half century.

The spelling used by Edward and Mary Moser during the years that they were helping to develop the writing system for the Seri language, namely the spelling *Congcaac*, reflected a misanalysis of the velar nasal [ŋ], now understood to be an allophone of /m/ in Seri (but not of /n/) in unstressed syllables (Marlett 1981: 16-18). The spelling was later corrected to the modern *Comcaac*.

¹⁵ Edward and Mary Beck Moser were trained in phonetics and general linguistics. They began work with the Seri people in 1951 under the supervision of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

¹⁶ Seri is unusual in that the labial nasal (the *m*) is the “unmarked” nasal (a concept familiar to linguists), whereas in most languages, including Spanish and English, the unmarked nasal is the coronal one, which would be the *n* in the case of Seri (see Marlett 1981; Marlett, Moreno Herrera & Herrera Astorga 2005, 120; and Rice 2007, 90).

Table 1: Variations in the spelling of the ethnonym, arranged chronologically	
[komkak]	Bartlett (1852), Pinart (1879)
[comcáckg]	Loustaunau, 1885 (in Hernández 1904)
<i>Kunkaak</i> & [kun-kaak]	McGee (1896: 128) ^a & McGee (1898: 9)
[kong ka ' -ahk ay mos ' -aht]	Coolidge & Coolidge (1939: 108)
<i>Kun 'kak</i>	Ashkenazy (1955: 9)
<i>Congcáac</i>	Tercera Cartilla Seri (1959) and Moser & Moser (1961)
[koŋká:k] /koŋká:k/	Moser & Moser (1965)
[kon'kaak], [konkáak]; <i>Konkaak</i>	Nolasco (1967: 135, 192); DeGrazia & Smith (1970: 3) ^b
<i>Cuncaac</i>	Barjau & Iturbide (1981: 10)
[koŋká:k] /komká:k/	Marlett (1981)
<i>Comcaac</i> & <i>Comcáac</i>	Cartilla Seri (1981) and M. Moser & Marlett (2005, 2010)
<i>Kunkaahac</i>	Müller et al. (1989: 94) ^c
<i>Conca 'ac</i>	Historias de los conca 'ac (1996) ^d
<i>Concaac</i> & <i>Concáac</i>	Frazier (1999: 3); Munguía Murillo (2000: 510) ^e
<i>Cun caa 'c</i> (as two words)	cover of a circa 2004 documentary film produced in Hermosillo, Sonora
<i>Comca 'ac</i>	Muñoz Orozco & Guzmán Ornelas (2006) ^f
<i>Köñkáak</i>	Martínez Soto (2008)
<i>Komka 'ac</i>	Historia regional de Sonora (2008: 42)

^a The spelling *Kunkaak* is used as part of the name McGee gives to a certain range of mountains, *Sierra Kunkaak*. See also Smith (1974: 140).

^b See also Tovar de Garibay (1981: s.p.), Pérez Ruiz (1993: 5), Aguilar Zeleny (2003), Kuss (2004: 238), Munguía Duarte (2005), Ortiz (2008), and Munguía Duarte & López Cruz (2009).

^c See also Rasmussen (2000: 2, 473) and Brockmann (2004: 83), There must have been earlier editions of Müller (1989) and Brockmann (2004) that had these spellings.

^d See also Espinoza Reyna (1997) and <http://www.isc.gob.mx/acerca-isc/infraestructura/museos/museo-de-los-seris.html> (accessed 10 July 2011).

^e See also Rentería Valencia (2007). The word appears as *Concaác* in Rentería Valencia (2009:72).

^f This spelling also occurs on various websites and in a 2006 *La Jornada* article.

Of course, while most Seri individuals have not been trained to read and write the language, the spelling *Comcaac* has now been used for about twenty years by able writers in the language (for example, see Montaña Herrera, in press; Moreno Herrera, in press; and Herrera Casanova, in press) as well as throughout the recent dictionary. This spelling correctly reflects the phonological makeup of the word (hence the *o* rather than a *u*, the *m* rather than some other nasal consonant, and the double vowel rather than a single vowel in the second syllable) without including extraneous material (hence no apostrophe, space, hyphen, nor even accent). The spelling also correctly reflects the fact that the *de facto* choice of the community for more than half a century, and the deliberate choice of the editorial committee for the recent dictionary, has been to use the letter *c* to represent the /k/ sound that appears at the beginning as well as at the end of this word. Regardless of whether or not outsiders are able to pronounce the word correctly or not, it obviously is not a hard word to spell.

3.2. Singular form

The word *Comcaac* is a plural noun;¹⁷ the singular form is *Cmiique*. The singular form was first recorded in history (so far as we know) by the French explorer and philologist Alphonse Pinart, in the year 1879. His wordlist, which was more extensive than Bartlett's, was also archived for posterity and is now available from the Smithsonian Institution. The word *Cmiique* is phonologically /^hkmi:ke/; it was pronounced very similarly to that in the last part of the nineteenth century since Pinart wrote it *kmike*. That pronunciation would be represented as kmḗ-kě if one were using the conventions of the *American Heritage Dictionary*.

By the middle of the twentieth century the word was usually pronounced [k^hwi:k'e], with a weakened form of the nasal consonant (as a nasalized *w*), which then affects the following vowel, causing it to be pronounced nasalized. We know this from the way in which Edward Moser transcribed it in his field notes and later presented it (in E. Moser & M. Moser 1961: 46). Using the conventions of the *American Heritage Dictionary*, the modern pronunciation might be represented as kweN^hke.¹⁸ The analysis of this part of the phonology of Seri also presented complications in the middle of the twentieth century; those details are not relevant here except to note that the difficulties meant that the word was written *cuícque* in the community spelling system for a number of years.¹⁹ The underlining of the vowel was meant to indicate the important phonetic nasalization of the vowel. The length of the vowel *i* was also missed for many years, and fortunately finally corrected during the editing of the 2005 dictionary. A

¹⁷ For this reason, it is jarring to see a plural suffix added to it, as in *Komkaaks* on the English version of a Spanish-language website. It is likewise incongruous to say “a *Comcaac*” or “a *Comcaac* person”, both of which are occasionally seen in publications. Unless one is simply going to invent an English or Spanish term and use it as one wishes (which is certainly possible), the more technically correct phrases would be “the *Comcaac*” (to refer to the group), and “a *Cmiique*”; they speak *Cmiique Iitom*. Or one could continue to use the exonym “Seri”. The use of this noun as an adjective in Spanish or English publications also sometimes leads to some odd phrases, if one takes a Seri person's perspective on it. While it seems fine to say “the American landscape” or “las aves mexicanas” (Mexican birds) in English and Spanish, respectively, a noun-noun construction in the Seri language typically means that the second noun is specifying a subset of the first noun. If one were to compose the phrase *los árboles comcaac* (the trees Seri.people) in an attempt to say something like *Seri trees* (trees in the Seri area), the result sounds like one is talking about trees who are Seri people.

¹⁸ The way to show that the approximant and vowel in the syllable [kwiN] are nasalized seems inadequate or perhaps misleading, since the *American Heritage Dictionary*'s conventions for this are based on French.

¹⁹ The sequence *cqu* was used to indicate the phonetic fact that the /k/ is phonetically long in this position. The length of consonants after a stressed vowel is an interesting topic that complicated the spelling of words for more than twenty years (see Marlett, Moreno Herrera & Herrera Astorga 2005 and Marlett 2006a). Since the 1980's, however, it has not been directly represented in the community-based spelling system.

The word was spelled *knoíke* in the school textbook (Romero Astorga 1994), a creative attempt to present the phonetic reality, but ending up in conflict with the quite different phonological sequence /kn/.

common modern pronunciation of the name (recognized in the dictionary) and used especially by younger people, harmonizes the vowel of the second syllable to match that of the first syllable: *cmiiqui*.

3.3. *Meaning*

It is tempting to look for the meaning of a word, and especially a name, although it is not always correct to expect that a name has any meaning other than the entity to which it refers (Bright 2003: 674-675; 2004: 13-14). Probably the best meaning for *Comcaac* is ‘Seri persons’ or ‘Seri people’. (This makes it difficult to use as an adjective in English or Spanish, since the plural noun of the original does not combine well in a phrase such as ‘the *Comcaac* language’ (‘the Seri people language’?) or ‘a *Comcaac* person’ (‘a Seri people person’?). For this reason I continue to use the word *Seri* when I write in English or Spanish. However, this is a matter of taste and custom for Spanish and English writers to sort out.²⁰

The word *Comcaac* is used in contrast with people of other ethnic groups, including other indigenous groups. Some of the ethnonyms that occur in Seri include: *Yequim*, *Yectz* (Yaqui, Yaquis); *Hapats* (Apache); *Hapaay* (O’odham); *Maricaana*, *Maricaanaj* or *Ziix Xepe iti Quiih*, *Xiica Xepe iti Coii* (American, Americans); and *Cocsar* (Spanish-speaking non-Indian, especially Mexican, both singular and plural) (M. Moser & Marlett 2005, 2010). The general expression for other Indian people is *xiica comcaac cmis* ‘things that resemble the Seris’. The expressions for ‘person, people’ are *ziix quiisax* (‘thing that has life/breath’) and *xiica quiistox* (‘things that have life/breath’). In extremely restricted contexts the words *Cmiique* and *Comcaac* may refer to people in general,²¹ but in general contexts they only mean ‘Seri person’ and ‘Seri people’, respectively. They may be most appropriately *translated* in particular contexts as ‘person’ and ‘people’, respectively, when the contrast with non-Seris is not relevant (and this may be the cause for some of the confusion), but according to my Seri consultants on the matter over the years, whenever non-Seris are included in the group, the expression *Comcaac* becomes inappropriate.²²

With this background, we can see that the very common claim that *Comcaac* means ‘the people’ (or ‘la gente’, in Spanish) is actually inaccurate, although not too far off the mark. E. Moser & M. Moser (1961: 32) say that it means ‘people, essentially Seri people’ (my translation). The simpler and less helpful statement that it simply means ‘people’ or ‘gente’ (in Spanish) appeared first, perhaps, in modern times in Moser (1963: 14). The same claim is made in Nolasco (1967: 135), citing Olivera de Vásquez & Sánchez (1965), and in many more recent publications and on various websites. Martínez Soto (2008: xxv) expands this, perhaps basing it on Santillán Mena (1993: 35), which I have not been able to consult, to be ‘la gente que es del lugar’ (the people who are of the place); this elaboration is unwarranted.

McGee (1898: 123-123) speculates at length about this word, but as one who was working out of his field. It is worth reading what he wrote only to see the flights of imagination that McGee could have on this topic (among others):

On the whole, the [first] syllable [of the word Kunkáak] appears to be an ill-formulated or uncrystallized expression, denoting at once age and associatively (1) the state of living or being, (2) personality, (3) age or ancientness (or both), and (4) either femininity or maternity (much more probably the latter), this inchoate condition of the term being quite in accord with other characters of the Seri tongue, and frequently paralleled among other primitive languages. The syllable kaak ... would seem to be a still more vague and colloidal term ... There are fairly decisive indications that it is composite, the initial portion denoting place

²⁰ See Nabhan (2003) for one example of the use of both *Comcaac* (as noun and adjective) and *Seri* (as adjective when a singular referent is involved) that avoids some of the infelicitous juxtapositions that are found in other work.

²¹ These limited contexts include certain idiomatic expressions and unspecified person in a passive clause.

²² Loustaunau’s word list published in Hernández (1904) includes the word *comcáckg* and gives the translation ‘gente’. I presume that Loustaunau asked the informant how to say ‘gente’, and elicited this response. For the word ‘indio’, he elicited *cogmickg* (see the discussion of *cmiique* in this paper). The Seri words are simply the plural and singular forms of the same word.

and the final portion perhaps more vaguely connoting class or kind with an implication of excellence On the whole, *kaak* would appear to be a typical egocentric or ethnocentric term, designating and dignifying Person, Place, Time, and Mode, after the manner characteristic of primitive thought; so that it may perhaps be translated “Our-Great-(or Strong-)Kind-Now-Here”. The combination of the two syllables affords a characteristically colloidal connotation of concepts, common enough in primitive use, but not expressible by any single term of modern language; in a descriptive way the complete term might be interpreted as “Our-Living-Ancient-Strongkind-Elderwomen-Now-Here,” while with the utmost elision the interpretation could hardly be reduced beyond “Our-Great-Motherfolk-Here” without fatal loss of original signification. It should be noted that the designation is made to cover the animals of Seriland (at least the zoic tutelaries of the tribe) and fire as well as the human folk.

Another famous book, Coolidge & Coolidge (1939),²³ states that “the name of the Seri tribe, Kong Ka´-ahk ay mos´-aht, means Children Born of a High Rank Woman” (p. 108) and “this is the name [the families of twelve sisters in a supposed legend heard by the Coolidges] gave themselves when they all came together” (p. 109). The authors do not tell where they obtained this information, and the second part of this “name” is unrecognizable; none of this name has the meaning they assign to it. The first part is obviously *Comcaac*.

Surprisingly enough, McGee (1898), translated and published by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista as McGee (1980), was given as the source of Barjau’s claim (Barjau & Iturbide 1981:10) that *Cuncaac* [sic] means, “aproximadamente, ‘nuestra-gran-raza-materna-aquí.’” This was picked up by some travel guidebooks in English and German (Müller et al. 1989:94, Brockmann 2004:83), which render it as ‘Our Great Mother race’ (without documentation, as might be expected for such books, which like other popular travel guides contain vast amounts of misinformation about the Seris). One specialized encyclopedia (Rasmussen 2000: 2, 473) gives the same meaning.

4. Relationship with other languages

Since the earliest times of contact with the Seri people, outsiders have considered, remarked on, and hypothesized about the relationship of the Seri language with other languages. I do not provide here a complete historical account of these remarks or hypotheses, as interesting as that might be (see Langdon 1974, Jacobsen 1979, Campbell & Mithun 1979 as well as Kaufman 1988 and Campbell 1997: 291-296, each of which is a partial account of the convoluted story).

At one time there were several dialects or closely related languages that we might call Serian (Kroeber 1931: 29, E. Moser 1963: 17-18).²⁴ Today, however, as by the mid twentieth century, major historical dialect differences are not found in the community (Marlett 2006b). Some of the former language varieties probably just disappeared as their speakers died, were killed or were absorbed into other non-Seri populations (Kroeber, loc. cit.), but others may have merged together as various Seri groups were physically united during the past couple of centuries.

A big question has been, What is the relationship between Seri (or Serian) and other (non-Serian) languages? The answer has not been obvious nor clear. And the answers given a century ago, a half century ago, and today are not the same. This is not atypical for the scientific enterprise, but the general public today is confused, in part because of the public not being aware of changes based on research, and also in part because of the somewhat unclear answers that linguists have given. At the same time, poor scholarship by some popular writers has exacerbated the situation unnecessarily.

²³ The accents are written here as in Coolidge & Coolidge’s work (directly following the preceding symbol).

²⁴ This usage should be sharply distinguished from that of Swadesh (1967: 100) where it refers to the hypothetical family consisting of Seri, Yuman languages, and Esselen.

Early on it was recognized that Seri (or Serian) was unlike other languages in the immediate area, primarily those that were in the Uto-Aztecan family (O’odham, Yaqui, Opata, Pima, etc.). That assessment has not changed with time.

4.1. *Seri and Yuman*

Since the late nineteenth century it has been hypothesized that Seri is related to Yuman languages, which are found to the north of the Seri area and also on the Baja California peninsula (Gatschet 1883: 133, followed by Powell 1891: 136-138; but see Gatschet 1900: 558 where the claim is reversed; see the discussion in Langdon 1974: 15-16). The well-known anthropologist Alfred Kroeber made a trip to the Seri area in 1930 and obtained data that convinced him that Seri was indeed related to Yuman and Cochimi (an extinct language of Baja California), but that it was a sister to both of those and not an actual Yuman language (Kroeber 1931: 35). Despite this assessment based on slightly more data, Greenberg & Swadesh (1953: 220) thought the relationship between Yuman and Seri was close enough that Yuma could serve as a model Seri-Yuman language. As we have learned more about these languages based on careful research, however, the relationship between Yuman and Cochimi has been established (see Troike 1976 and Mixco 1978) but no relationship with Seri has been convincingly demonstrated.

4.2. *Seri and Salinan*

At the same time, some publications claimed that Seri is closely related to Salinan, another putative Hokan language once spoken in California; see Gordon (2005) and Bright (1992), for example, based on an interpretation of Bright (1956) and a proposal made in Sapir (1929).²⁵

4.3. *Seri and Hokan or Hokan-Coahuiltecan*

At the beginning of the twentieth century there was great interest in making sense of the mosaic of Native American language families in North America, and attention was given to putting each language into larger families (phyla or stocks, to use the terminology of the time). When a small amount of data made it plausible that Seri was related to Yuman or Salinan (or both), the “lumpers” were satisfied with the proposal. And then this group was put into the Hokan stock with a bit of evidence, after which Hokan was linked to so-called Coahuiltecan languages with a bit of evidence, and finally that superfamily was linked to Siouan languages with a bit less evidence. The large scheme was tentatively outlined in Sapir (1929), a publication that shaped subsequent work including the highly influential linguistic maps and classifications of Voegelin & Voegelin (1966, 1977), the *Atlas Cultural de México* (Manrique Castañeda 1988: 29), and Robles U. & Bruce S. (1974).²⁶ Kaufman (1988) keeps the general idea alive since he groups many of the languages previously classified as Hokan-Coahuiltecan into his version of the proposed Hokan family. The idea of Hokan (perhaps excluding the so-called Coahuiltecan languages) became commonplace and accepted enough, however, such that the place of Seri in it has been asserted in the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1984: IX, 70), Bowen & Moser (1995: 232), the *International Encyclopedia of Linguistics* (Bright 1992), various editions of the *Ethnologue* (such as Gordon 2005), the *Oxford English Dictionary Additions* (1993), and the *Random House Webster’s Unabridged Dictionary*, despite the more cautious presentation in Kaufman’s *Encyclopædia Britannica* article (1984: 960) and

²⁵ See also <http://multitree.linguistlist.org/codes/sase> (accessed 27 July 2011).

²⁶ In Spanish publications the hypothesis appears sometime as Seri belonging to the “tronco yuma-pacua del grupo Joca meridional [i.e., southern Hokan — SMJ]” (Nolasco 1967: 135, citing Olivera & Sánchez 1965: 9; see also Pérez González 1975 (referring to an undocumented classification referred to as Swadesh & Arana 1962-1964) and Tovar de Garibay 1981: s.p.). I have been unable to track down the source of the label “yuma-pacua” and do not know what “pacua” refers to. Swadesh (1959: 17) proposed a family called “Macro-Yuma” that included a subfamily called “Esselen-Yuma-Seri” (referred to as “Serian” in Swadesh 1967: 100) that had a proposed hypothetical internal divergence of a minimum of 49 centuries, while Macro-Yuma had a proposed divergence of a minimum of 92 centuries. All of this hypothesizing is taking place with an extremely small amount of data.

Goddard's (1996:6) use of the phrase “proposed Hokan superfamily”.²⁷ On the other hand, Golla (2011: 126), citing Kroeber (1915) and Kaufman (1988), accepts that Seri “can be fairly securely assigned” to Hokan as a “classificatory isolate” while recognizing the need for further study.

4.4. A sober assessment

The key words in the preceding paragraphs are “small amount”, “bit” and “bit less”, because as it turns out, the standard expectations of historical linguistics were never met, and convincing evidence (as opposed to suggestive data) never presented nor published, despite the keen interest of competent and interested people over many decades (see Langdon 1974 and Kaufman 1988, for example). Regarding Seri and Salinan, no serious systematic comparison has been done; see Marlett (2008) for a critical appraisal of the proposal. The same is true of Seri and Yuman except for an attempt by Crawford (1976) with inadequate resources and inadequate understanding of Seri.

The Hokan hypothesis in general continues to founder as well, despite being a strong working hypothesis. The problem in part has been the diminished interest in historical linguistics in recent decades, or at least fewer people who are working in this area in certain linguistic families of North America. Part of the problem also was, as Bright (1976: 361) pointed out, that until as recently as fifteen years earlier,²⁸ “there was no modern grammar or dictionary available for any Hokan language. The comparative studies by Dixon and Kroeber and by Sapir, although sometimes brilliantly insightful, rested on a rather scanty data base.” Since that date, many so-called Hokan languages have become much better documented. In the case of Seri, a modest but pioneering *Vocabulario* (E. Moser & M. Moser 1961) was published, followed by a major dictionary forty-some years later (M. Moser & Marlett 2005, 2010).

Nevertheless, the yawning breach between the hypotheses and the evidence has been pointed out in recent years (Poser 1995, Campbell 1997: 160, Marlett 2007). The strongest contemporary case was Kaufman (1988),²⁹ regarding which Campbell remarks (p. 296): “Kaufman’s evidence is largely lexical, though unfortunately he did not present the forms on which his judgments were based; he provided only his phonological formulas representing tentative reconstructions. ... While Kaufman’s proposals have stimulated some other linguists to accept more positive attitudes toward Hokan, they can be evaluated appropriately only after he presents the lexical evidence upon which they are based.” Twenty-three years after the publication of Kaufman (1988) and fourteen years after Campbell’s critique, the lexical evidence has still not been published. One interesting development in recent years has been the Automated Similarity Judgment Program carried out at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.³⁰ The project, which uses only forty words for comparison, has come up with some suggestive results for Hokan that should encourage future research, but does not replace it. See the discussion in Urban (2009).

Campbell’s (1997) conclusion regarding Hokan generally is that “... we are left with essentially the same uncertainty that has always attended the Hokan hypothesis — there certainly is enough there to make one sympathetic to the possibility of genetic relationship, and yet the evidence presented to date is not sufficient to confirm the hypothesis, regardless of which languages are included” (1997: 296). And, “if Hokan is considered controversial, it is safe to say that Sapir’s [1929] broader Hokan-Siouan proposal

²⁷ The Hokan classification and the Seri-Yuman grouping are also adopted in Greenberg’s (1987) and Greenberg & Ruhlen’s (2007) sweeping and controversial proposals for so-called Amerind (rejected by many linguists; see Campbell 1997 for extensive discussion).

²⁸ Presumably the point of reference is the date of composition of his remarks, published in 1976. But as the remarks were about papers given at a conference in 1970, there is some uncertainty.

²⁹ This work is very broad in nature and almost as a natural consequence has gaps and errors. In the case of Seri, no reference was made to work on the language between 1965 and 1988. Therefore the presentation of the phonological contrasts was out-dated, but also inaccurate as presented. Furthermore, reference is made only to groups of languages, and Seri is just lumped in with “Southwest” (Yuman-Cochimi, Seri), and S (“Southern languages”) (p. 113). This makes it difficult to evaluate the proposal, although it indicates the author’s confidence in his work.

³⁰ See <http://email.eva.mpg.de/~wichmann/ASJPHomePage.htm>, accessed 12 June 2011.

[that includes Coahuiltecan] has been completely abandoned Sapir himself referred to it as his ‘wastepaper basket stock’....” (p. 296). Poser (1995: 142) comments that “the reason that the Hokan family has been and remains controversial is that for many of the links that make up the overall family, evidence of genetic affiliation of the sort considered probative by most historical linguists has been unacceptably thin.” As Hamp (1998: 15) wrote about such things generally, “it is illicit to claim a genetic relation for a language or tree where such a tree relation has not been shown. We do not have a usual name for not-doing or not-finding”

4.5. *The popular literature*

This investigation, or interest in investigation of relationships, has led to an understandable confusion in the popular literature as well as some general academic literature. As Hamp (1998: 16) wrote about over-reaching statements generally, “the dissemination of such extended claims gravely misleads the public, a public not equipped to test for such technical failures.” Therefore the academic community needs to be very careful about what it says. Some authorities and websites, quite unaware of the complex history of the proposals or confident in the reliability of their sources, confidently state that Seri is a Hokan-Coahuiltecan language, or even related to Sioux. Other authors continue to state that Seri is a Hokan language or that the Seri people are definitely related to Yuman language speakers or to Salinan.³¹ Entire scenarios of prehistorical movements are traced out based on the proposal of these relationships (see the maps in Manrique Castañeda 1989: 160-161 and the discussion of migrations in Rentería Valencia 2007: 7).

4.6. *Seri as an isolate*

The state of affairs sketched above has prompted a return to the label of “isolate” for Seri (Marlett 1984: 257, Campbell 1997: 160, Marlett 2008, INALI 2008, Lewis 2009). This is the appropriate term to use until evidence of a genetic relationship to another language family has been appropriately presented, evaluated publicly, and generally accepted by historical linguists.

Of course the Seri language had a genetic relationship to some other languages in the past. But those other languages may or may not have been documented, and they may or may not be spoken today. Many languages of the northern Mexico and of Baja California became extinct with minimal or no records of them (see Campbell 1997). It is entirely possible that a convincing case of a genetic relationship between Seri and one or more of these, perhaps the Yuman languages and perhaps others, will be demonstrated in the future. That would be an important achievement that has not been realized yet despite more than a hundred years of trying. In the meantime, responsible scholarship that discusses what we *know* must view the language as an isolate.

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³¹ See <http://www.sonoraturismo.gob.mx/Seris.php> (accessed 7 September 2011), <http://www.native-languages.org/salinan-legends.htm> (accessed 15 December 2009) and http://www.natureali.org/KC_natives.htm (accessed 15 December 2009), for a few examples.

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