The traditions I relate here describe events that took place in southern Arizona around 1450 CE. At that time, ancestors of the ‘Akimeli ‘O’odham, later called Pimas by Europeans, were living along the Middle Gila River between Florence, Arizona, and the Sierra Estrella Mountains about 50 miles west-northwest of Florence. (See page 2 map.) This is the area occupied by the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) today. ‘Akimeli means river. ‘O’odham means people, human beings. ‘O’odham were also living in the Queen Creek floodplain north of the Middle Gila. Still others were living along the Santa Cruz River. Some of them, especially in areas near the Santa Cruz River, may have been ancestors of the Tohono ‘O’odham, Desert People, formerly called Papagos. However there were other people west of the Santa Cruz and south of the Gila who, according to ‘O’odham traditions, were not ‘O’odham. These non-‘O’odham people have been referred to as Chuuw Ko’adam, Jackrabbit Eaters.
Map showing some of the places mentioned in this article
(Harry J. Winters, Jr., and Statistical Research, Inc., Tucson)
by 'O’odham elders right up into this century. They are described as very short and as farmers. The 'O’odham do not know what language they spoke. When the Tohono 'O’odham spread out over the desert after the events I am going to relate, the Chuvv Ko’adam fled. Tohono 'O’odham elders do not know where they went, but according to their traditions, they killed all those who did not flee. Some of the Chuvv Ko’adam hid ollas with seeds in them in cavities in bedrock so that if they were able to return, they would have seeds for planting. They never returned. Tohono is commonly translated as desert. The word is derived from the verb tanoḍ, meaning to shine, as the sun shines. When we say to someone, “S-keeg tanoḍ,” we are commenting that it is a nice, sunny day. A tohono is a place where the sun shines all the time, a desert.

In 1450, ancestors of the Sobaipuris, also 'O’odham, may have been living on the San Pedro and Santa Cruz rivers southeast and east of the 'Akimeli 'O’odham and Tohono 'O’odham. In any case, European explorers found the Sobaipuris along both of those rivers in the second half of the seventeenth century. In my opinion, the Spanish name Sobaípuri is 'O’odham S-‘oba ‘ipuḍ and the full name may have been S-‘oba ‘Ipuḍdam. This makes sense since the accent is on the first syllable in 'O’odham words. An ‘oba is someone from a non-'O’odham nation, or a foreigner, and since ‘ipuḍ means skirt, and already meant skirt as far back as the seventeenth century, my guess is that this name came from the Sobaipuris wearing of skirts like the skirts some foreigners wore or skirts made of materials acquired from foreigners. The Sobaipuris traded with the Hopis prior to the coming of the Europeans, and at one time with the Apaches. See the entries Calzones, Hábito, and Naguas in Pennington (1979; pages 18, 58 and 83). This idea is not so far-fetched when you realize that some 'O’odham elders call Hawaiian girls Vashai ‘Ipuḍdam, Grass Skirt Wearsers, because of the skirts they wear for hula dances.

All these 'O’odham people spoke a common language, with no more difference than there is between the English of Texas and that of London, England. Small dialect differences are recognized, even among groups of Tohono 'O’odham, but they are no impediment to understanding and, in fact, provide some opportunity for fun. All we have left of the Sobaipuri language are Spanish explorers’ spellings of two personal names, about 35 to 40 place names, and one sentence consisting of three words. The one sentence and most of the place names do not indicate any significant difference between the 'O’odham language as spoken by the Sobaipuris and as spoken by 'Akimeli 'O’odham and Tohono 'O’odham.

When first seen by European explorers in the seventeenth century these 'O’odham peoples were not nomadic or seminomadic. They were farmers who owned fields that were watered either by irrigation from intermittent running streams or by ‘ak chiṇ farming, sometimes called flash flood farming because the fields were located downstream from the mouth of a wash where the water spread out in a thin sheet over a floodplain. They supplemented their agricultural food supply by hunting and gathering wild plant foods. They owned watering places in the mountains where they lived when water in the ponds at their fields was exhausted after the harvest. They owned saguaro groves for gathering fruit in summer, colonies of the food plant ‘a’uḍ (Agave deserti) where they harvested and baked its head (mo’oj), mesquite groves for firewood, clay deposits for pottery making, and other resources. Often they traveled far afield to sources of the yucca called takui (Yucca elata) and the Bear-grass called moho (Nolina microcarpa) for basket making. Some of the best sources of ‘a’uḍ and takui were in or on the edge of Yavapai country, near today’s Wickenburg and Superior, Arizona, and unhappy encounters did take place.

Orthography in this Article
Harry J. Winters, Jr.

In this paper all 'O’odham words are written in an alphabet that comes as close as possible to what someone who has learned to read English in American schools would expect. Differences are (1) all glottal stops are included and are written as apostrophes, (2) the English vowel “e” is used for the ‘O’odham vowel that sounds like the “oo” in English book, (3) the ‘O’odham consonant that sounds like the Spanish “d” in donde is written as “ḍ”, and (4) the ‘O’odham consonant that sounds like the “ny” in English canyon is written as “ñ.” This is the alphabet used in Winters (2012:xxxix-xlii) and Winters (2020:xl-v). See either of those references for details.

As in my other works, I always write the glottal stop as an apostrophe when it is the first consonant in an 'O’odham word, including in the word 'O’odham. This is to help readers who are not speakers of the ‘O’odham language pronounce the words accurately. Other authors do not write the glottal stop when it is the first consonant of a word, presumably because it is not written in English words.
Almost nothing is known of the old ’O’odham religion. They believed in a creator, Jewuḍ Maakai, whose name means Earth Doctor, but with doctor in the sense of Ph.D., not M.D. They believed there were supernatural beings of orders higher than human beings. The old religion was based on witchcraft. The guardians of that religion were a relatively small group of men called sai jukam. These sai jukam frequently practiced witchcraft, calling on occult powers to aid them. Although they were feared and distrusted by the general populace, they had strong influence over it. They were often killed when they came under suspicion of having caused some evil event such as sickness, death or drought, or of having aided the enemy. Since they only revealed to the general public just as much as they felt necessary to secure their positions and only shared their more complete knowledge with the select few whom they viewed as successors, today we know very little of the old religion.

For centuries the ’O’odham have had men called maakai, with plural mamakai, who diagnose and cure ’O’odham illnesses by supernatural means, sometimes supplemented by natural means such as medicinal plants. ’O’odham illnesses often are diagnosed as having been brought on by running afoul of the way of being, the himdag, of an animal such as the mule deer or the black-tailed jackrabbit. In the old days serious illnesses could also come from physical contact with the enemy in combat and from witchcraft. Some mamakai are diagnosticians; others are healers. Some are both. A small number have had the ability to heal broken bones. Since the arrival of Europeans, some mamakai have achieved power to cure communicable diseases, ‘oimmeddam mumkidag, brought by foreigners. The diagnosis and healing of illnesses by the mamakai are not religious practices but represent a technology developed by the ’O’odham that corresponds to their understanding of the causes of illnesses.

Every summer up into the first half of the twentieth century the ’O’odham harvested saguaro fruit, made a syrup, sitol, and made a weak wine, called navait, from the sitol. A four-day ceremony was held in which large quantities of navait were consumed. The “swelling up” of the drinkers with the navait symbolized the swelling up of the saguaro cactus with rainwater. The purpose of the ceremony was to bring rain. This, again, was not a religious practice. It employed “ ’O’odham technology” for bringing rain based on ’O’odham understanding of how the forces of nature worked. There was no worship of a god involved.

There were a number of non-’O’odham peoples living not far from the ’O’odham in the fifteenth century. The Yavapais, who speak a Yuman language, lived to the north of them. They call themselves Baaja, and their language Baaja Guauja. The Yavapai bands closest to the ’O’odham were (1) the Kwevakapaya, Downstream People, so called because they lived kweva, downstream, on the Verde River from their relatives on the Middle Verde, and (2) the Tolkepaya who lived in the area north of the Gila River and west of its junction with the Salt River, and also in the Bradshaw Mountains and the area to the west of the Bradshaws between the Gila and Bill Williams rivers and as far west as the approaches to the Colorado River. By the time of the events described in this paper or shortly after them, the Yavapais and ’O’odham had become enemies. The ’O’odham word for enemy is ‘oob, and the Yavapais were and still are called ‘Oob. In return, the Yavapai name for the ’O’odham, especially the ’Akimeli ’O’odham, is Jahwa Kahana (my spelling), meaning the main enemy. Fighting between the ’O’odham and Yavapais continued until the 1870s.

The Piipaash, today known as Maricopas, lived downstream on the Gila from near today’s Arlington, Arizona, to a place a few miles west of Agua Caliente. The Piipaash also spoke a Yuman language. They
were to become friends and allies, and in some cases relatives by marriage, of the ‘Akimeli ‘O’odham and Tohono ‘O’odham. They were enemies of the Yavapais, the Quechan (Yumas), and the Mojaves. They were allies of the Halychduum, another Yuman tribe still living on the Colorado. They probably began moving to the Middle Gila to live among the ‘Akimeli ‘O’odham in the late eighteenth century. By 1850, they all had moved to the Middle Gila River to live among the ‘Akimeli ‘O’odham. The Halychduum had joined them there in the 1830s.

The Apaches apparently were not present in central Arizona in large numbers in the fifteenth century. Within 200 to 250 years they would be and would have become mortal enemies of the Sobaipuris and other ‘O’odham. Certain Apache bands would become allies of the Yavapais in raiding and warfare against the ‘Akimeli ‘O’odham and Tohono ‘O’odham. The ‘O’odham also called these new enemies ‘Oob, a name still in use today, and extended to the Navajos.

According to archaeologists, some people of a foreign nation arrived from the north in the area along the Salt River west of the Superstition and Mazatzal Mountains and along the Middle Gila River west of Florence after about 1275. Archaeologists refer to these people either as Salado or as Ancestral Pueblo from the Kayenta area. Apparently the ‘O’odham living on the Gila allowed them to settle near them. These foreigners brought their own religion, which may have been based on witchcraft. According to ‘O’odham oral history, these settlers from the north built and occupied the tall structures that are called vapaki by the ‘O’odham. There is no certainty as to their specific use for ceremonial or other purposes.

The ‘O’odham word va’aki, with its plural vapaki, has two meanings. First, va’aki is the word for a large, multi-story structure like the one at Casa Grande Ruins National Monument near Coolidge, Arizona, and other similar structures at archaeological sites along the Middle Gila and Salt rivers. The ‘O’odham call the people who built and used them huhugam. Archaeologists call them Hohokam. The archaeologists’ term is a technical one based on specific cultural traits and a specific time period. The ‘O’odham word, huhugam, however, includes the people archaeologists call Hohokam as well as many other people, for example one’s great-grandparents: people who are gone, who aren’t alive anymore. It is not limited to people whose traits define the archaeologists’ Hohokam. In particular, the word huhugam does not distinguish between different peoples who may have played a role in the construction of the vapaki.

The second meaning of va’aki is found in speeches made in connection with the ‘O’odham annual saguaro
fruit wine (navait) celebration, practiced well into the twentieth century. In these speeches va’aki referred to a village’s jeeñigidakuḍ kii or ‘olas kii, the “house” in which the men of the village gathered in the evenings to smoke and discuss important matters, the items on the jeeñigida or agenda. Meetings were open to all men of the village. Decisions on matters such as building a dike or a new vachki, water pond, had to be unanimous before action was taken. ‘Olas kii just refers to the shape of the house. This house also played an important role in ceremonies, in particular in the navait celebration. In the speeches made in this ceremony, this house was transformed into a place called a va’aki, full of symbols of summer rainstorms. While some authors translated this va’aki as “rainhouse,” they correctly pointed out that this was not a literal translation of the word, but was just the sense of the word. Is there some ancient connection between the use of va’aki in these ’O’odham speeches and the rituals that may have been carried out in the buildings, vapaki, such as at the Casa Grande “Great House”? We do not know.

My ’O’odham friends have told me two place names that include va’aki. The first is Sivañ Va’aki, meaning “Sivañ’s Va’aki,” and is the name of the Casa Grande Ruins National Monument’s “Great House.” I have heard it called Sivañ Va’aki many times. My friends also have told me that Sivañ Va’aki, often shortened to just Va’aki, is also the ’O’odham name for Casa Blanca, Arizona. The name comes from a mound remaining from a Hohokam structure there.

The second place name is ‘O’ðkam Va’aki, “Va’aki At A Gravelly Place.” ’Akimeli ’O’odham elders showed me a place on the north side of the Gila River near the junction of Highway 87 and the road from Sacaton where a structure had stood that they called ‘O’ðkam Va’aki. The old ’O’odham name for Fort McDowell, Arizona, is also ‘O’ðkam Va’aki. Other than the fact that there is a lot of gravel along the Verde River in that area, I do not know when or how this place got that name.

There were two headmen at Sivañ Va’aki, one called Sivañ Maakai and one called Jenashad. Sivañ is
a title, not a personal name. The word implies meanness and cruelty. It is related to the adjective siv. Siv is used to describe things that are bitter to the taste, or plants that cause pain when used in curing, or even bad tempered people. A maakai is a man who is able to diagnose or cure 'O’odham illnesses using natural and supernatural means. The fact that the 'O’odham called one headman Sivañ Maakai shows that he was held to be a cruel man with supernatural powers.

I do not know the meaning of the name Jenashad. When I asked what kind of man Jenashad was, the answer was, “Kus haschu uḍ puḍi?!” “I wonder what he might have been?!” One extremely knowledgeable friend in the Schuk Toak District of the Tohono 'O’odham Nation told me that jenashad is also the name of a kind of lizard. My friends in the Sif Oidak and Hickiwan Districts of the Tohono 'O’odham Nation do not know of a lizard with that name.

According to Tohono 'O’odham of the Sif Oidak and Hickiwan Districts with whom I made a number of visits to the Sivañ Va’aki near Coolidge, the 'O’odham became angry with the two headmen, Sivañ Maakai and Jenashad, who ruled over the place, and with their followers. This was probably because the 'O’odham believed these men were malevolent witches who were doing them great harm by causing sickness and death or crop failure, by corrupting people, or by aiding enemies of the 'O’odham. These are all evils that the 'O’odham attributed to their own malevolent witches, the sai jukam. Some of the sai jukam were still active among the 'O’odham in the early twentieth century. I have been told that by 1930 there were no more than eight to ten of them alive among the Tohono 'O’odham. The very meaning of sai jukam is someone whose activities are aimed at turning others from good to evil, at perverting them.

The 'O’odham planning to attack the vapaki asked 'I’itoi, a supernatural person, to help them. He gathered a force whose members are called wuushkam in 'O’odham traditions. Wuushkam has been translated as people who came out from underground, but that can be misleading. Wuushkam comes from the

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A verb wuushañ meaning to come out or go out. For example, if I am in a house I may say, “Nt o ‘i wuush ‘am jegk’eḏa.,” meaning, “I’m going to go outside.” Wuushañ can mean to emerge from the ground as new plants do, to walk through the brush and come out the other side, to walk out of a canyon or an opening in the hills, or even to be born. In this case the wuushkam, the people who came out from wherever they were when he sent for them, could have come from many different places. They included ancestors of the Tohono ‘O’odham.

At the time of the ‘O’odham attack on the vapaki, warfare had two components, just as it still did in the nineteenth century in ‘O’odham battles with the Yavapais and Apaches. These components were (1) physical attack with warriors and weapons and (2) witchcraft. In the case of the attack on Sivañ Va’aki, the ‘O’odham first demoralized the enemy by singing this song:

| Ganhu g muuki va’aki keek                                        | Over there stands the doomed va’aki                      |
| ‘Am ‘o va’akidam sivañ memeḏa                                     | Sivañ is running back and forth on top of the va’aki    |
| S-‘uama vapavañ ‘am ‘iks                                          | Soaking his breech cloth yellow                          |
| S-‘uama vapavañ ‘am ‘iks                                          | Soaking his breech cloth yellow                          |

Muuki means at the point of death or done for. The last two lines are a euphemism for defecating in his breech cloth. You can use the same words to describe a baby soiling its diaper. The singers referred to his breech cloth as ‘iks, a piece of cloth or rag, instead of using the proper word, ‘atosha. This singing is what we would call psychological warfare today.

The ‘O’odham sai jukam then called down two kinds of lightning on the va’aki. The first was wepegi, the kind that flashes red in the sky. The second was wuihom, the kind that strikes the ground. I was told, “Wepegi ‘ab ha’ichu chum ‘i da’iḏeh. ‘In ash ‘i cheesh daam. Gamhu ash gei Ge Kaachk’ėd. Ba g wuihom ‘ep ‘i da’iḏeh. Ahawa gei va’aki’ab. Ahawa paḏch. Wenog ‘i gei wuihom, paḏch ‘iia.” This means, “Wepegi climbed up fast onto something. He climbed to the top. He just fell way over there into the Gulf of California. But wuihom climbed up fast too. Then he fell on this (the va’aki). Then it was ruined. When the wuihom fell, this place was ruined.” The enemy was terrified, the ‘O’odham attacked, and Sivañ Maakai, Jenashad and their followers were defeated. According to tradition, long ago wepegi and wuihom had characteristics of the ‘O’odham. Wuihom had a cave, was jealous of his fire and could shoot with a bow and arrows. Therefore, wepegi and wuihom can be described as climbing and leaping across the sky as they are in this tradition.

Jenashad and some of the other occupants of the site escaped and fled southwest to the mountains called Ku’ukchelik, a group of wave-shaped peaks in the northern part of the Sawtooth Mountains, about 29 miles south-southwest of Coolidge (see page 2 map and photo above). The ‘O’odham pursued them, cornered them and finally defeated them there. Whether Sivañ Maakai was killed at Sivañ Va’aki or at Ku’ukchelik is not known, but he was never seen again. On the other hand, Jenashad escaped once again. As my friends told me, “ ‘Aahim heg Jenashad ‘am wui heg Chemmod. Ha’ap wuush Chemmod’ab. Ahawa keek masma mo heg kui.” This means, “Jenashad fled toward Chemmod and hid. He came out over that way at Chemmod. Now he was standing there like a mesquite tree.” So Jenashad resurfaced disguised as a mesquite tree at a mountain called Chemmod about 42 miles to the west of Ku’ukchelik and
about 27 miles southeast of Gila Bend, Arizona. This Chemmod is inside today’s Barry M. Goldwater Range. It is called Dragons Tooth on U.S. Geological Survey maps (see page 2 map and photo above). The ’O’odham were not fooled. They discovered Jenashad at Chemmod and tried to kill him. To escape them he climbed part of the way up Chemmod. Chemmod is very steep and difficult to climb, but the ’O’odham climbed up after him. He went farther up, but still they followed him. After their fourth attempt to reach him, they had driven him to the top, well over 1,000 feet above the desert floor. He was out of reach there and the ’O’odham were unable to kill him. Jenashad was never seen again. “Ganhu si daam e ‘eesto heg Jenashad.” “Jenashad hid himself way up there on the very top.”

The name Chemmod comes from the verb cheemo. One of its meanings is to force a person or animal up against something. If you are hunting bighorn sheep, cheshoñ in ’O’odham, and you drive one up a cliff to a ledge from which there is no escape, you “cheemo” it. In this case the name of the butte, Chemmod, could come from the cornering of Jenashad or from bighorn sheep hunting.

Traditions tell us that after the victory at Sivañ Va’aki near Coolidge, the ’O’odham targeted the rulers of several other vapaki. The traditions include locations, names of rulers and songs that were sung before attacking those other vapaki. ’O’odham traditions also tell us that after the sisivañ were eliminated, the ’O’odham spread out and claimed new areas for farming and new watering places in the desert south of the Gila River. I have never heard anyone use language that suggested a massive invasion or conquest of the whole Middle Gila River and Lower Salt River Region by the ’O’odham. The ’O’odham referred to the attack on Sivañ Va’aki as a cheggiaḍag, a battle. In my opinion, the attacks on the vapaki were targeted at specific individuals and their supporters at a limited number of locations. The objective was to remove those individuals whom the ’O’odham living in the area believed to be practicing malicious witchcraft aimed at harming them. Those ’O’odham brought in reinforcements from outside to assist them. I have never heard any details about the origin of the ancestors of the rulers of the vapaki. I have only heard that they came “from the north”, “juupińjeḍ.” Perhaps those ancestors brought a foreign religion and their own brand of witchcraft.

About the Author

Harry J. Winters, Jr., PhD, is a geological engineer who has had a lifelong friendship with many ’O’odham throughout their lands. He is a fluent speaker of the ’O’odham language and is author of ’O’odham Place Names (2012, 2020) and Maricopa Place Names (2018). He speaks enough of the Maricopa and Yavapai languages not to starve in their company.

Acknowledgments. The author acknowledges the friendship, openness and generosity of the ’O’odham elders, particularly those of the Sif Oidak and Hickiwan districts of the Tohono ’O’odham Nation, who traveled to the Sivañ Va’aki with him, often at their own request. It was fascinating to hear their traditions literally in the shadows of the va’aki and then to visit other sites identified in the traditions with them. On top of that we could buy tepary beans, wepeg bavi and toota bavi, at the Blackwater store before heading home.

References Cited


Author Dr. Harry J. Winters, Jr., is making his 'O’odham Place Names and Maricopa Place Names books available for sale through Old Pueblo Archaeology Center to benefit Old Pueblo’s education programs. These volumes are used by several Arizona tribal communities as the go-to sources of information about place names in their native languages.

The original version of 'O’odham Place Names: Meanings, Origins, and Histories, Arizona and Sonora, published in 2012, runs for 741 pages not counting the front matter pages (title page, table of contents, figures list, preface, pronunciation guide, etc.). The late Dr. Bernard L. Fontana, well-known Tohono ‘O’odham ethnohistorian, wrote “This encyclopedia of O’odham place names in southern Arizona and northern Sonora is majesterial in scope, a labor of love by a man who spent more than five decades with O’odham friends learning their language and extracting from them their knowledge of native place names for settlements and geographic features. It is safe to assert that no other Indian reservation in the United States has had its native place names this thoroughly documented. It is a study in O’odham linguistics, history, and folklore, one sure to be deeply appreciated by future generations of O’odham as well as by scholars of O’odham culture.” The 2012 edition of 'O’odham Place Names originally sold for $179 but Old Pueblo Archaeology Center offers it for just $120.

In 2020, Dr. Winters published 'O’odham Place Names, Meanings, Origins and Histories, Arizona and Sonora, Second Edition. Old Pueblo offers this greatly expanded new version (1,072 pages not counting front matter) for sale at $175.

Maricopa Place Names lists and describes names used by the Piipaash (Maricopa) and Halychduum (Halchidom) peoples for places along the Middle and Lower Gila River, the Colorado River segment dividing Arizona from California, and some areas north of the Salt River, west of Hassayampa Creek, in the Santa Catalina Mountains, and in Sonora and Baja California. Published in 2018, Maricopa Place Names includes 154 pages not counting the front matter. Old Pueblo offers this volume for sale at just $120.

For US Postal Service shipping (Priority Mail in medium flat rate box) add $15 to the purchase price for each book. To avoid shipping charges any of these books can be picked up by appointment only at Old Pueblo Archaeology Center, 2201 W. 44th St., Tucson.

Proceeds from sales of all three of Dr. Winters’ books benefit Old Pueblo’s education programs.

For ordering information please visit www.oldpueblo.org/dr-harry-j-winters-jr-oodham-place-names-and-maricopa-place-names/.
From a century of knowledge gained through scientific excavations of archaeological sites in the Gila and Salt River valleys of Arizona, archaeologists have identified a sequence of pre-European contact (pre-contact) culture phases of the Hohokam, the Indigenous people who inhabited the southern part of the state from approximately 450 to 1450 CE. In the Phoenix Basin and the broader area reaching approximately from the town of Picacho northward to Payson, and from Gila Bend eastward to Safford, Hohokam culture phases that have been identified by archaeologists have been assigned the sequential names Vahki (the earliest), Estrella, Sweetwater, Snaketown, Gila Butte, Santa Cruz, Sacaton, Soho, and Civano. The Civano phase generally has been considered the latest era of Hohokam cultural development, lasting from about 1300 to 1450 (Haury 1976:39).

The Estrella, Sweetwater, and Snaketown phase names also are used to characterize Hohokam archaeological materials in the Tucson area between 650 and 750 CE. In Tucson, however, the pre-650 local equivalent manifestation of the Vahki phase has been split into the Agua Caliente and Tortolita phases, and the phase names Cañada del Oro, Rillito, Rincon, Tanque Verde, and Tucson are used for the local Hohokam counterparts of the Gila Butte through Civano culture phases, respectively (Mabry 1997:29). The accompanying chronology chart illustrates the relationships of the Hohokam culture phases of the Gila-Salt (Phoenix Basin) and Tucson areas.

![Comparative Hohokam archaeological phases for the Tucson and Phoenix areas](Old Pueblo Archaeology Center)
Akimel O’odham and Tohono O’odham Names and Associations

The Vahki, Soho, and Civano archaeological phase names are derived from words in the Piman language the of Akimel O’odham (River People, also called Pima) and the Tohono O’odham (Desert People, formerly called Papago). In their language, “va’aki” (also spelled “wa’aki”) means ‘great house.’ “Es-trella” is said to derive from “S-e’ehe” or “Siuhu,” the Akimel O’odham name for the culture hero whose name is translated as ‘Elder Brother’ (and who is called I’itoi by the Tohono O’odham). “Civano” is from “sivañ,” which means ‘chief of a great house’ (Bahr et al. 1994:292; Teague 1993:438) or, as translated by Harry Winters, Jr., in this bulletin, as meaning mean and cruel. Winters notes that the word sivañ is related to the adjective siv that means bitter, for example, bitter or disagreeable to taste or smell. It also can mean exhibiting animosity or rancor or severely painful (Winters 2012; 707-708).

The Akimel O’odham name “sivañ” (with plural “sisivañ”) also has been spelled “s’i’vany” (Russell 1975:24) and was first recorded as “Siba” (actually “El Siba”) by Juan Mateo Manje, the Spanish army captain who accompanied the Jesuit missionary Eusebio Francisco Kino on most of the padre’s early expeditions into southern Arizona. In 1697, during a visit with Father Kino to the Casa Grande – Arizona’s landmark archaeological site along the Gila River near Coolidge – Manje wrote that the Pimas (Akimel O’odham) there told him that the Casa Grande and several other great adobe houses nearby were built by a people whose chief was called Siba. Manje’s Akimel O’odham informants translated “Siba” as ‘the bitter man’ or ‘the cruel man’ and told Manje that Siba was a historical figure who had been involved in bloody wars involving over 20 distinct Indian groups. According to Manje’s account, these wars, in which many died, resulted in the migration of many people out of central Arizona (Bolton 1936:370).

Manje may have misunderstood his Akimel O’odham informants when he concluded that “Siba” was a single chief, because by the early twentieth century the Gila River Akimel O’odham referred to all ancient Hohokam chiefs as “s’i’vany.” In the early 1900s apparently none of the Akimel O’odham knew the actual meaning of the word, and they called each major Hohokam ruin “va-aki,” meaning ‘ancient house.’ However, in their stories the early 1900s Akimel O’odham added a name to each ruin to distinguish it from others, plus the additional term “s’i’vany, to identify one chief’s house from another. When a single chief was referred to in the early twentieth century he usually was called “S’i’vany,” and when the full name was given the surname “S’i’vany” always was added. Therefore, it is not surprising that Manje and others, including the nineteenth century anthropologist Adolph Bandelier, should have supposed that the Casa Grande pueblo was under the control of a single man named “Siba” or “S’i’vany” (Russell 1975:24).

Akimel O’odham and Tohono O’odham accounts state that after the creation, and before the great Hohokam conflict era, Elder Brother was living among the Hohokam. However, along the Gila and Salt rivers there were several great houses occupied by the Sivanyi, who were the chiefs and principal priests of the major Hohokam settlements. Eventually the Hohokam Sivanyi became angry with Elder Brother and tried to kill him several times, after which Elder Brother set out to exact revenge through armed conflict. The O’odham oral traditions state that Elder Brother assembled many disaffected people from as far away as the Benson and Sierra Vista areas of Arizona, and even from the Río Sonora valley in Mexico, and with their help he attacked the Sivanyi living in the great houses. However, the accounts specify that the attacks were not directed at all of the Hohokam. Elder Brother’s forces are said to have killed many and to have driven the rest of the Sivanyi out of the Gila and Salt River valleys. The settlements of the Sivanyi correspond to large archaeological sites where great communal structures called platform mounds were constructed by the Hohokam along the Gila and Salt rivers and stand in ruins today (Russell 1975:222-229; Teague 1993:438-442).
The Archaeological Periods and Phases

Previous archaeological investigations indicate that people have occupied southern Arizona for at least 11,000 years. Five sequential precontact cultural periods called the Paleoindian (ca. 11,000-8500 BCE), Archaic 8500 BCE-2100 BCE), Late Archaic/Early Agricultural (2100 BCE-50 CE), Early Ceramic (50-450 CE), and Hohokam (450-1450 CE) have been identified by archaeologists in southern Arizona (see page 11 chronology chart).

Who were the Hohokam? Archaeological findings indicate they were a sedentary agricultural people who constructed houses built in shallow pits and produced both plain and decorated pottery along with numerous other crafts of stone, shell, and clay. In the Salt and Gila River valleys of Arizona they constructed extensive irrigation canal systems. Irrigation works of a more limited extent were used along the Santa Cruz River and its tributary streams in the Tucson Basin.

Archaeologists envision the Hohokam culture as a regional social system in which various peoples may have shared a common culture and thus been united through political and economic interaction rather than necessarily through shared genetics and language (Wilcox and Sternberg 1981; Wilcox et al. 1981). The chronological period and phase sequence for the Hohokam (see chart) was first developed in the Salt-Gila Basin, but the Tucson Basin chronology closely follows the Salt-Gila chronology. For the purpose of this discussion the Hohokam chronological sequence can be divided down into two main periods, the Preclassic (650-1100 CE) and Classic (1100-1450).

At Preclassic Hohokam villages, in the Tucson area as well as the Salt-Gila River basin, archaeologists have identified a recognizable cultural assemblage that includes houses built in shallow pits, cremation burials, distinctive red-on-buff or red-on-brown pottery, and a subsistence base dependent on but not limited to agriculture. A salient architectural feature in many Preclassic villages is the so-called Hohokam ballcourt, a flat-bottomed, oval depression ranging from 20 to 80 meters long, with banked-up sides and often with clay-plastered floors (Haury 1976; Wilcox and Sternberg 1983). Although they are called ballcourts, the actual function of these large features is unknown. Community rituals focused on them may have been part of a regional system of exchange that made food available to the entire society when crops failed here and there on local levels (Wilcox et al. 1981).

Major changes took place in the Hohokam culture during the Classic period, which began around 1100 CE. Many large village sites that had been occupied throughout the Preclassic period were abandoned or moved, and sedentary populations became concentrated into a smaller number of large, integrated central communities (Elson 1986). Architectural styles changed, with adobe-walled, above-ground houses becoming as common as the earlier-style houses in pits. Other important changes included expanded use of upland environmental zones for agriculture, the addition of inhumation to cremation as a method for disposing of the dead, the growth of walled village compounds, a drastic reduction in the number of ballcourts, and a concomitant florescence of a new kind of community architectural feature called the platform mound. After 1100, the Hohokam placed great emphasis on constructing these mounds, which are reminiscent of the flat-topped pyramids of central Mexico (Wallace and Holmlund 1984; Doyel 1986).

The Civano phase is the Gila-Salt River basin equivalent of the Tucson Basin’s Tucson phase, each of which lasted from 1300 to 1450. During this phase a distinctive type of red, white, and black pottery – Salado Polychrome – became popular throughout much of southern Arizona; and at the beginning of this “late Classic” period large multistoried “great houses” best illustrated by the one in the Casa Grande Ruins National Monument in Coolidge were constructed inside walled housing compounds along the Gila and Salt rivers. Shortly after 1300, however, these walled settlements began to be abandoned, and the people returned to a simpler way of life. No ballcourts, platform mounds, or great houses were constructed.
after 1450, and not long after that the Hohokam returned to living in individual wood and mud pit-structures similar to those that had been in vogue prior to 1100 (Doyel 1986:8).

These changes back and forth that are so evident in the archaeological record appear to support the Akimel O’odham/Tohono O’odham legends’ contentions that the generations not long before Kino’s and Manje’s first visits to the Casa Grande had experienced great hardship and social conflict. What archaeologists recognize as the Hohokam culture came to an end at the end of the Civano/Tucson phase, around 1450. The region’s population decreased dramatically, and in the subsequent “Protohistoric” period (which lasted from about 1450 until the time of the first Spanish missionary explorations into southern Arizona in the 1690s) there was a decided reduction in the abundance and variety in Native American material culture throughout the territory.

The O’odham (Piman) peoples who were encountered in the 1690s by the first European chroniclers of the region built more ephemeral homes than their Hohokam predecessors had, and apparently did not add painted designs to their pottery. These and other major differences between the Hohokam and the Protohistoric period people have led archaeologists, as well as some of the historical Akimel O’odham and Tohono O’odham recorded oral histories, to question whether the Hohokam were genetically ancestral to the modern Akimel O’odham and Tohono O’odham, or whether the latter represent a separate people who migrated into southern Arizona from northern Mexico following the drastic Classic period decline in the Hohokam population (Teague 1993).

Actual written history in southern Arizona began with the first exploratory expeditions into the region by Spanish clergy and military men in the 1690s. The introduction of Europeans and Christianity changed the native ways of life profoundly. Livestock, wheat, and other domesticates were added to the economy, diseases introduced by Europeans wiped out entire Indian communities, and the native settlements of Sonora and Arizona were reorganized with a new focus on mission communities. Presidios, or forts, were established by the Spanish at strategic places, originally for protection against Apaches and other nomadic peoples. However, these military outposts were also occasionally utilized to keep the usually friendly Pimans in check (Bolton 1936).

By the time of the Gadsden Purchase by the United States in 1854, Spanish and later Mexican settlements were well established in southern Arizona, and ranching and mining had replaced much of the traditional agricultural subsistence base. Since Arizona became a state in 1912, government-sponsored programs of the United States and the State of Arizona have brought improvements in transportation, education, and agriculture. Copper mining has become a major economic force but farming and ranching have remained important.

Modern Uses of the Name Civano

A few places in Arizona are named Civano. For example, there is a Civano coffeehouse and nightclub in Flagstaff and a Civano Drive in Gold Canyon. Ironically, considering that the Civano phase describes a Hohokam culture development stage in the Phoenix area, I did not find any Civano place names there, and apparently the most extensive application of the Civano name is in southeastern Tucson where a neighborhood named the Community of Civano was conceived and developed late in the last century as a model for a sustainable community. That community since then has spawned numerous associated businesses and a school all named Civano. Perhaps to those who adopted the Civano name for their homes and businesses,
“Civano” calls up a romanticized precontact time in southwestern history, the late Classic period of the Indigenous Hohokam people who inhabited the Phoenix area. During the Civano phase between 1300 and 1450 the Hohokam developed sophisticated social, artistic, and economic systems, as evidenced by the Casa Grande and other great structures, strikingly beautiful polychrome pottery, and fine artistry in stone, seashells, and even weaving. Some of the Hohokam Civano phase villages covered more than a square mile and usually incorporated platform mounds and plazas that obviously were central community gathering places.

The romanticized notions of the late Classic period Hohokam, however, miss some important attributes of that ancient era. Something remarkable, and apparently not pleasant, happened in the Hohokam society shortly after the beginning of the Civano phase, an event or events that ultimately caused people to move out of the great-house villages and a return to a simpler way of life.

Archaeologists have found evidence that these changes were brought on by a series of alternating flooding and drought years – environmental disasters that decimated the Hohokam food supply. Akimel O’odham and Tohono O’odham oral traditions say that eventually there was major social conflict, which one could logically expect in a society whose subsistence base has been wiped out. Thus, while it is likely that the Civano phase Hohokam strived to live in balance with their natural environment, in the end they were not too successful, and the result was a profound change in their way of life.

About the Author

Allen Dart, a Registered Professional Archaeologist, has worked professionally in archaeology since 1975 and has been Old Pueblo Archaeology Center’s executive director since 1993.

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References Cited


Some Old Pueblo Archaeology Center Upcoming Activities

**Thursday November 18, 2021, 7 to 8:30 p.m. Mountain Standard Time**

**Horses in Rock Art** free Zoom presentation by archaeologist Dr. Larry Loendorf for Old Pueblo’s Third Thursday Food for Thought series:

https://us06web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_8GG8qpgjRPOeqFpve1hQ

**Thursday December 16, 2021, 7 to 8:30 p.m. Mountain Standard Time**

**Apache Warriors Tell Their Side** free Zoom presentation by author-historian Lynda A. Sánchez for Old Pueblo’s Third Thursday Food for Thought series:

https://zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_JYWiXGrjRjOBGKe5OW0rfA

**Tuesday December 21, 2021, 8 a.m. to noon Mountain Standard Time**

**Winter Solstice Tour to Los Morteros and Picture Rocks Petroglyphs Archaeological Sites** with archaeologist Allen Dart, Marana and Tucson areas, Arizona; $30 donation ($24 for Old Pueblo Archaeology Center and Friends of Pueblo Grande Museum members):


**Mondays January 10-March 28, 2022, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Arizona/Mountain Standard Time**

**The Mogollon Culture of the US Southwest** 12-session adult education class online via Zoom, taught by archaeologist Allen Dart; $99 donation ($80 for Old Pueblo Archaeology Center, Friends of Pueblo Grande Museum, and Arizona Archaeological Society members):


**Saturday February 26, 2022, 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Arizona Mountain Standard Time**

**Tucson and Marana Yoeme (Yaqui Indian) Communities car-caravan cultural sites tour** with Yoeme traditional culture specialist Felipe S. Molina, Tucson and Marana areas, Arizona; $35 donation ($28 for Old Pueblo Archaeology Center and Friends of Pueblo Grande Museum members):


*Typical home in Yoem Village, Marana, Arizona, in 1936: Homes were built with railroad ties, saguaro cactus ribs, metal roofing and mud; R. B. Spicer photo courtesy of Felipe Molina*
Upcoming Activities (Continued)

**Wednesdays June 8-August 24, 2022, 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. Arizona/Mountain Standard Time**

**Archaeology of the Southwest** 12-session adult education class online via Zoom, taught by archaeologist Allen Dart; $99 donation ($80 for Old Pueblo Archaeology Center, Friends of Pueblo Grande Museum, and Arizona Archaeological Society members):


* Southern Arizona does not switch to Daylight Saving Time each year, so when the rest of the US does, Mountain Standard Time is the same as Pacific Daylight Time.

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