# The Tohono O’odham Author and Instructor: George Van Otten, John A. Dutton e-Education Institute, College of Earth and Mineral Sciences, The Pennsylvania State University

The Tohono O’odham (a Piman people) have occupied the desert region of Southern Arizona and Northern Mexico for centuries. Their traditional semi-nomadic, agricultural lifestyle was intrinsically intertwined with the summer monsoon rains of the desert that brought their crops to fruition. In the O'odham language, Tohono O'odham means Desert People.

Prior to the official demarcation of the Reservation, the Tohono O’odham lived under a family/clan oriented system of governance. Throughout their history, the Tohono O’odham were, and have remained, a peaceful people dedicated to the preservation of their language and their traditions.

In 1687, Father Eusebio Kino initiated his work with the Upper Pima Indians of Northern Mexico and Southern Arizona. When Kino arrived, the Piman people already knew about the way in which the Spanish had conquered and killed indigenous people to the south. Furthermore, the Spanish were somewhat aware of Piman culture because of their association with other closely related groups. The Upper Pimas were an identifiable tribe only because they spoke different dialects of a single language, and because they shared similar cultural and physiological characteristics. Despite cultural similarities, however, there were considerable differences among them. In the eastern part of their territory, the Pimas lived in rancherias supported by irrigated agriculture, whereas in the west, they practiced a way-of-life based on hunting and gathering. Additionally, there was no political organization that linked all Pimas under a central government. For the most part, the Piman people lived in small, family-based independent communities that were self-governing.

Father Kino’s approach to indigenous people was to travel widely throughout the region establishing small missions at a variety of sites. Initially, Kino started working in what is now Sonora, Mexico and later moved north to eventually establish the San Xavier Mission on the banks of the Santa Cruz River near the current location of Tucson, Arizona.

As Father Kino moved north he came into contact with various Piman groups including the Sobaipuri (who have long ago been absorbed into other indigenous groups in the area), the Tohono O’odham (Desert People), the Hia-ced O’odham (a nomadic group of traders), and the Akimel O’odham (River People). From time to time during the 1700s, the Pimas in Mexico revolted against Spanish rule. For example, in 1751, the Pimans in Sonora rebelled against the distribution of their land to Spaniards.

When the Spanish first arrived in the Santa Cruz River Valley of Arizona in the 1680s, they were surprised to find irrigated fields spreading out for several miles on both sides of the river near the village of Bac (near the site of modern-day Tucson). Soon after this, Father Kino arrived in the region and almost immediately initiated the construction of a mission in order to convert the Tohono O’odham (the Spanish called them the Papago), to Catholicism. He also sought to establish European-style ranches and mines. Although he was primarily interested in saving souls, Father Kino also had a passion for farming and ranching. He introduced European crops to indigenous farmers and encouraged them to move into permanent settlements near the missions.

In the 1700s, the Apache began to raid O’odham villages. Despite European influences and Apache raids, the Tohono O’odham continued to cling to their traditions. They were, nonetheless, changed by these encroachments.

### The Tohono O’odham and the United States

The Gadsden Purchase of 1853 resulted in drawing a new border between Mexico and the United States that cut through the middle of the traditional homeland of the Tohono O’odham. Initially, because the portion of the border region that is part of the Tohono O’odham Nation was loosely enforced, the Desert People ignored the border and mostly ignored the governments of Mexico and the United States as well. Within a few years, however, both Mexican and U.S. citizens began to settle on Tohono O’odham land. Moreover, a violent civil war in Mexico caused many O’odham to leave Mexico and settle on the U.S. side of the border in an area that is now part of the Tohono O’odham Reservation. At the same time, American ranchers began to use the desert grasslands in Southern Arizona for their cattle in direct competition with the Tohono O’odham who had been grazing cattle and farming in the region for many years. In Mexico, armed conflicts between O’odham warriors and other Mexican citizens became a relatively frequent occurrence, and on the U.S. side of the border, white ranchers complained that the “wild” Papago Indians were cutting their fences and chasing their cattle from watering holes.

By the mid-1850s, Apache warriors had become accomplished horsemen and effective raiders. Not only did they threaten white and Hispanic settlers on both sides of the border, but they also stepped up their raids on the Tohono O’odham. For the Desert People, Apache raids were a constant threat. The O’odham tended to live in scattered small settlements and, therefore, were easy prey for a well-armed Apache raiding party. Apache raids resulted in many O’odham deaths, and the Apache often attempted to steal children in order to sell them in Mexico as slaves. Apache threats, coupled with increasing tensions between white ranchers and the Desert People, motivated the U.S. government to establish a seventy-thousand-acre reservation at San Xavier (near Tucson) in 1874. In 1882, another ten thousand acre Tohono O’odham reservation was set aside near Gila Bend, Arizona. In 1917, the federal government set aside approximately three million acres to the west of Tucson in order to create the massive Tohono O’odham Reservation. Over the following years, additional land has been added to the Reservation. Currently, the Tohono O’odham Nation controls the second largest Native American land base in the United States. Only the Navajo Reservation is larger.

At the dawning of the twentieth century, most O’odham continued to live in relative isolation in their desert homeland. For the most part, their lives focused on tending their animals and fields and participating in traditional ceremonies and gatherings. Some became Catholics and others became Presbyterians (depending on which school they might have attended). Others remained almost totally traditional in their beliefs. Nevertheless, even those who attended Christian churches mostly continued to participate in traditional O’odham religious ceremonies.

Over the years, many O’odham attended church- (or Bureau of Indian Affairs) schools. By the 1920s, most of the people were able to communicate in English and a large number had at least a rudimentary understanding of Spanish and English, as well as total fluency in their own language. Additionally, it became increasingly common for O’odham men and women to work, at least for a few years, in communities such as Tucson and Ajo. Men tended to work in the mines or on ranches, whereas the women sometimes were employed as domestic servants. Despite such contacts with the outside world, however, the Tohono O’odham remained committed to their traditional values, attitudes, and beliefs.

In the mid-1930s, with considerable encouragement from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Tohono O’odham established the Papago Tribe of Arizona. As a result, for the first time, they came under a centralized form of government. Even so, several decades passed before many tribal members actually accepted the authority of the central tribal government in Sells, Arizona. When the O’odham created their new tribal government, they tried to maintain, to the greatest extent possible, the basic elements of their traditional village governance structure. Therefore, the Tohono O’odham Nation is divided into districts and each district is further divided into communities. Each district is governed by a legislative council with representatives from every community within the district. The Tohono O’odham Legislative Council consists of representatives from each district. Additionally, the tribal government also includes judicial and executive branches. The tribal chairperson is elected by a popular vote to a four-year term.

During World War II, many tribal members volunteered for military service (they served with great pride and distinction). After the war, a small number took advantage of the G.I. Bill of Rights and earned college degrees. Even before the war, a few attended colleges and universities. The first Tohono O’odham to earn a degree from the University of Arizona was Christina Garcia in the 1930s.

After World War II, as a result of growing educational levels and an influx of federal dollars, the Tohono O’odham Nation (then called the Papago Tribe) initiated a number of economic development projects including a tribal farm and a tribal mine. Over the years these efforts have met with mixed results. For example, the Nation continues to operate a tribal farming enterprise, but it seldom shows significant profit. On the other hand, the tribal casinos have been very profitable and have added a great deal of money to the tribal treasury.

In the 1980s, the tribal government re-organized under the new name of the Tohono O’odham Nation. Since its inception, the Tohono O’odham Nation has become increasingly dedicated to preserving its sovereignty as an independent government. From the O’odham point of view, their Nation is a sovereign state and they (the Tohono O’odham) are fully in charge of their own destiny. They do not easily accept federal authority, and openly reject the idea that the state of Arizona has a right to say much about what does or does not happen on their Reservation.

In the mid-1980s, tribal attorneys discovered a long-forgotten legal decision called the Winters Doctrine that gave the Tohono O’odham Nation much of the ground water in the Santa Cruz River Valley. At that time, Pima County, including the city of Tucson, depended almost exclusively on well water. Prior to the discovery of the Winters Doctrine, the O’odham could not compete with Tucson for water because the city continued to purchase farm land in order to secure the water rights. Once the city owned the land, it would dig very deep wells and pump until the water table fell below the level of the indigenous growers. As a result of the city’s ground water mining, many O'odham farmers went out of business. Once the O’odham knew about the Winters Doctrine, they set out to negotiate with Tucson and the federal government in order to arrive at a fair distribution of the water. At one time, the federal government planned to bring Colorado River Water to Tucson via the Central Arizona Project. President Jimmy Carter, however, believed that the project was too expensive and encouraged people to use less water instead. Initially, President Ronald Regan agreed with President Carter. With their new-found water rights, however, the Tohono O’odham Nation and the City of Tucson were able to pressure the federal government into going forward with the Central Arizona Project. Furthermore, the Tohono O’odham Nation, in exchange for allowing the City and other entities to continue to pump the ground water in Pima County, were promised thousands of acre feet of Central Arizona Project Water as well as thousands of acre feet of treated waste water. Despite these agreements, however, water rights and water use continue to plague relations between the Tohono O’odham Nation and nearby communities.

Currently, conditions on the Tohono O’odham Reservation, despite significant casino revenues and large federal expenditures, seem to be deteriorating. Unemployment is very high, single-parent families are increasingly common, alcoholism and the use of illegal drugs impact almost every family, and criminal activities, especially among the young, are growing at an alarming rate. Tribal leaders know about these problems and they continually look for solutions. So far, things do not seem to be getting better. If anything, these problems are more challenging today than they were twenty years ago. One reason for this is that the Reservation has become a haven for smugglers. Smugglers now employ (or coerce) many tribal members to help them move drugs and people from Mexico into the United States.

Unlike many of their parents and grandparents, a significant number of O’odham youth appear to be angry and disengaged. Although they can go to college or trade schools on tribal scholarships that pay for almost everything, only a few actually complete a college degree or a long-term training program. Moreover, the Tohono O’odham Nation supports an accredited community college in Sells. Tuition at the Tohono O’odham Community College is very low for tribal members. Therefore, almost anyone who is an enrolled member of the Tohono O’odham Nation can go to college at almost no out-of-pocket expense. Sadly, too few take advantage of these opportunities.

The appeal of working for the smugglers is that it provides instant income and requires very little effort. A tribal member who feeds a few illegal immigrants and is willing to transport people and/or drugs to Phoenix can bring in seventy or eighty thousand dollars each year (tax-free). There are risks of course, and too many tribal members are now serving jail time for their role in such illegal activities. Nonetheless, the lure of easy money draws people for whom economic security has long been an elusive goal.

For the Tohono O’odham, it has been difficult to bridge the gap between their traditions and those of the dominant society. Whereas many have adopted many of the artifacts of the Anglo and Hispanic cultures, a great many also remain traditional in thought and life style. For example, most white Americans think of their home as an extension of themselves. In other words, their home says a lot about them. People with beautiful well-kept homes are generally thought to be successful. The Tohono O’odham on the other hand, normally do not give a lot of thought to the size or beauty of someone’s home. On the O’odham Reservation, even people with money tend to live in relatively simple homes. Therefore, the accumulation of material wealth is not normally a major goal for most of the Tohono O’odham. Instead, their prestige comes from the ways in which they carry out their responsibilities to the members of their extended families and to the greater community. They also take pride in knowing, understanding, and practicing traditional ways. This does not mean that they do not like a new truck or nice clothing. It is simply a matter of priorities.

Currently, tribal leaders work to bring industry and jobs to the Reservation and attempt to make sense out of the border security policies of the United States and Mexico. For example, many tribal members have family who live on the Mexican side of the border. Just a few years ago, they traveled back and forth over the border with scarce regard for its existence. Now they must go through check points and must be able to produce the proper identification. They resent these requirements as an invasion of their privacy.

The Tohono O’odham, in general, do not like the border fence that has been constructed by the United States. They believe it destroys wildlife habitat and that it makes it very difficult for them to interact with their families and friends in Mexico. They would like to see it torn down. They are also not particularly happy about the presence of the Border Patrol. Many O’odham complain about the indignities they must suffer when they are mistaken for illegal immigrants. Others are angry about the ways in which the Border Patrol agents invade the privacy of their communities and homes in pursuit of illegal immigrants and illegal drugs. For the O’odham, the border has become a symbol of conflict and controversy.

Despite the somewhat dismal situation depicted above, there is great potential for prosperity and happiness for the Tohono O’odham. First of all, the Tohono O’odham Nation is well-endowed with resources. It's water resource base alone provides immense economic development opportunities. Additionally, the Tohono O’odham Nation’s investments in education are beginning to pay off. Although still low, increasing numbers of Tohono O’odham are going to college and earning degrees. Furthermore, many are going on to graduate school in order to study law or to become professionals in a variety of fields. For the Nation, this is good news, because, eventually, they should be able to hire a full complement of O’odham professionals to get things done on the Reservation. Conditions on the Reservation, however, will not get much better as long as smugglers are able to maintain a strong presence there.

Tribal leaders are aware of the challenges that now face the Tohono O'odham people, and he and others are working diligently to find solutions that mesh well with traditional O'odham culture. Nevertheless, their challenge is made more difficult by deteriorating conditions in bordering communities in Mexico and the United States. In Tucson for example, the use and sale of drugs has grown consistently for several decades, and the crime rate remains high. Moreover, criminal gangs have spread from the cities to rural communities including those on the Reservation. Therefore, in many ways, conditions on the Reservation tend to reflect conditions in surrounding communities. Still, despite the somewhat dismal nature of the current situation, enlightened leaders are making a difference by working to restore a sense of pride and purpose in the Nation's youth. They do this by teaching them about traditional values and beliefs, and by encouraging them to develop the self-discipline needed to become self-reliant, morally sound, and aware of their own traditional heritage.

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