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Acknowledging History to Inform Emancipatory Practices:

Reflection on Stories of Place in the Phoenix Valley and the Gila and Salt Rivers

Jorge Morales-Guerrero, Edauri Navarro Pérez, Michele Clark, Michelle Hale, Liliana Caughman, and Nancy Grimm

The narratives or stories we tell about our history materialize in how we act in the world. In Phoenix, Arizona, a prevalent narrative suggests a mysterious event led to the disappearance of the Huhugam, the ancient people of the desert in what is now central Arizona. The lack of consensus among Western academic disciplines regarding why the Huhugam left the canals and the Salt River valley after 1450 creates harmful myths that fuel settler-state expansion.[1] For instance, late 1800s US policies[2] enabled Anglo and Mexican settlers arriving post-1867 to acquire land, which resulted in land exploitation and exclusion of Indigenous nations such as Akimel O'odham, Piipaash-Xalychidom, and Yavapai. These Indigenous communities thrived for centuries along the Onk' Akimel (Salt River) and Akimel (Gila River) in what we know today as the Phoenix Valley. This exclusion is not an exception but a trend characterizing the displacement of Indigenous peoples living in settler states.[3] Our study reflects on how our understanding of Akimel and Onk' Akimel history can lead to *emancipatory practice*s. For us, emancipatory practices[4] are actions that challenge the status quo (i.e., white, cis, hetero, able-bodied, etc.), redress colonial realities and dispossession, and ultimately raise awareness of the logics of genocide-colonialism.[5]

Stories use theories and explain our understanding and ways of being.[6] Settler states use stories to reshape Indigenous peoples' relationship with the land[7] and influence our perception of Indigenous communities.[8] These narratives are also instrumental in promoting antiracist practices[9] and fostering critical insights into contemporary institutions,[10] but they also shield Western institutions from accountability.[11] We built

our argument through the inspiration of previous studies that use stories to question the status quo.[12]

We categorize stories using specific concepts: *beginning stories* and *origin stories*. *Beginning stories* often exclude diverse perspectives, erase Indigenous history, and legitimize Western institutions.[13] Conversely, *origin stories* establish ties between Indigenous ancestors and the land, which acknowledges their rich legacy and complexity.[14] In addition, we use the concept of cultural hegemony to analyze how narratives uphold the status quo by blending coercion and consent, perpetuating colonial structures, and impeding transformative change.[15]

This paper contributes to existing literature by unveiling the narratives that underpin our historical understanding. We challenge dominant narratives by exploring the intersections of race, Indigeneity, and land to understand how settler, mestizo, and Indigenous perspectives influence our historical narratives to promote reconciliation among all these cultural backgrounds.[16] We explore how narratives materialize in what the Salt and Gila Rivers are today. With this understanding, we aim to utilize our positionalities, challenge myths behind beginning stories, foster reflection on the past, transform inequalities, and envision new relationships among communities along the Akimel and Onk' Akimel in Phoenix. To our knowledge, no peer-reviewed article has examined narratives or beginning stories within the Phoenix metropolitan area. We address this gap not by proposing a new universal truth but rather by aiming to stimulate critical historical comprehension through this exploration.

We employed three research methodologies: an analysis of beginning stories of key institutions, a literature review, and a community peer-review process. First, as an act of epistemic disobedience, we analyzed narratives in beginning stories of three settler institutions in Phoenix—Arizona State University (ASU), Salt River Project (SRP), and the City of Phoenix—using data from their websites, timelines, and publications.[17] Second, we conducted a systematic literature review to construct a counternarrative about the Akimel and Onk' Akimel in Phoenix, using Boolean searches across EBSCOhost, JSTOR, and American Indian Histories and Cultures (recently rebranded as *Indigenous Histories and Cultures in North America*) databases. We developed our findings by contrasting the three beginning stories with narratives from the literature review to formulate our findings. Third and last, inspired by the community review process described by scholar Max Liboiron, we shared our results and evaluated their suitability for publication during a roundtable discussion at the American Indian Studies Association Conference held at ASU in February 2023.[18] With the validation of nine positive responses and two constructive suggestions offered by participants in the review process, we revised our manuscript.

We ask the following research questions:

1. How do key actors (ASU, the SRP, and the City of Phoenix) in the Akimel and Onk' Akimel depict their inception (beginning stories)?
2. What is the dominant narrative, and how can we question it?
3. What insights about the Akimel and Onk' Akimel history can we glean from peer-reviewed literature? What counternarratives emerge from the literature review?

4. How can these counternarratives guide our practices as researchers and community members to envision better approaches, foster an equitable future, enhance equity practices, and strengthen relationships among Indigenous nations, settler institutions, and communities?

Stories, Settler States, and Contribution

We ground our argument in an Indigenous studies perspective to unveil the perpetuation of settler colonialism.[19] Our goal is to make explicit the "structures, processes, and discourses of settler colonialism" to find pathways for transformation.[20] Settler colonialism is understood as "a land-centered project entailing permanent settlement" by dominant social groups that erase Indigenous realities.[21] Historically, settler states have erased interactions on stolen land to justify environmental exploitation,[22] imposed deficit narratives to erase Indigenous perspectives, and altered their relationship with the land.[23] Through the mystification of the disappearance of ancient Indigenous groups, settler states justify land ownership, genocide,[24] and water depravation.[25] Inspired by scholars Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui[26] and Walter Mignolo,[27] our work offers insights on how "to analyze the economic strategies and material mechanisms that operate behind discourses."[28]

Stories are permeated by theories and serve as vehicles for understanding our social and physical realities.[29] Tribal critical race theory posits that "stories are not separate from theory; they make up theory and are, therefore, real and legitimate sources of data and ways of being."[30] Similarly, red pedagogy[31] and public pedagogy[32] foster critical thinking that facilitates the identification of dominant and counternarratives in media and institutions, including in the education system. Pedagogies reveal and challenge the hidden curriculum of stories perpetuating the structure of settler colonialism[33] and class domination.[34] For instance, Orr et al.[35] examined how media narratives framed the Havasupai-ASU case (*Havasupai Tribe v. the Arizona Board of Regents*), in which Arizona State University researchers engaged in unethical practices by using Havasupai genetic samples in studies beyond participants' consent.[36] Authors argue that the media portrayed the Havasupai-ASU case as an ethical dilemma rather than a crime or a matter of tribal sovereignty, which ultimately benefited Western institutions.[37]

Beginning stories have historically justified the erasure of Indigenous heritage. Scholars Bryan Brayboy and Amanda Tachine explain how universities have employed beginning stories to perpetuate myths and rationalize the erasure of Indigenous people and heritage within their connections to place. These myths reinforce Western ideals and align with settler-state policies such as the Morrill Act of 1862, which granted Indigenous land to American universities.[38] Rooted in violence and disparaging stereotypes, these myths serve to legitimize stolen land and the marginalization of Indigenous narratives in institutional origins.[39] Initiatives such as land-grab universities shed light on how beginning stories and myths uphold the creation of fifty-two US universities while obscuring the violence and erasure of Indigenous peoples.[40] Such phenomena exemplify "logics of elimination,"[41] which manifest in various forms,[42] including the

lack of Indigenous representation in decision-making, scarcity of Indigenous faculty in universities, and the erasure of ancestral cultural heritage.

We recognize the interconnectedness of theory and practice, which stresses the necessity for scholars to engage in efforts toward social change.[43] Acknowledging that true decolonization requires tangible decolonizing practices,[44] we hope that the insights provided by our work will be beneficial to practitioners and individuals seeking to embody emancipatory practices in the Phoenix metropolitan area along the Gila and Salt Rivers and beyond.

Methods

Team Science in an ASU Research Project

The project started in summer 2022 as part of the Immersive, Interdisciplinary, Identity-Based Team Science Experiences (IIITSE) fellowship, facilitated by the Earth Systems Science for the Anthropocene (ESSA) Graduate Scholars Network at Arizona State. The fellowship emphasizes participatory research, teamwork by diverse groups of scholars from multiple disciplines, systems thinking, equity, and the incorporation of diverse ways of knowing. The 2022 IIITSE aimed to develop research on culturally sensitive projects that inform conservation practices along the Akimel and Onk' Akimel. The 2022 cohort comprised six graduate students, guided by ESSA mentorship. We collectively decided to explore the past, present, and future of the rivers in Phoenix metro to highlight the importance of each temporal component for informing conservation practices.

Positionality and Indigeneity of Leading Authors

As all identities influence research, we disclose them. The lead authors identify as Latin American *mestizes* from Puerto Rico and México and embrace the Ralámuli word *chabochi*, an umbrella term that includes non-Indigenous individuals, settlers, *mestizes*, and white people.[45] This identity prompts us to recognize our Indigeneity, situated outside traditional racial, ethnic, cultural, and national categories, and acknowledges our privileges as *mestizes* and researchers in Western institutions.[46] Since we live in the United States, we also acknowledge our status as people of color, which highlights the complexities of our positionalities and racialized experiences in Latin America and the States.[47] We are learning how to indigenize our identities respectfully by honoring our Indigenous heritage while challenging the white privilege inherent in our *mestizaje*. As settlers who arrived as graduate students in the Phoenix metropolitan area, we feel responsible for learning about this stolen and unceded land's history.

We also acknowledge the extractive history of universities in research practices.[48] Our positionality drives our decision to start by scrutinizing the narratives of ASU, the institution that brought together our research group at ESSA. We recognize the importance of integrating discussions of race, indigeneity, and land in our research, and we hope to produce research relevant to our local communities, organizations, and the land we inhabit.

Institutions' Beginning Stories

To understand the significance of beginning stories in the Phoenix Valley, we examined narratives from three influential settler-founded institutions that have deep historical roots dating back to Arizona's territorial period before statehood. The City of Phoenix traces its history to 1867, when the first Anglo settlers recognized the valley's potential and the necessity of water for growth.[49] The SRP's history dates from 1868, marked by the completion of the Salt River Valley Canal, which provided water access for Anglo settlements. ASU's timeline, titled "History and Milestones" online,[50] begins from 1885 with the founding of the Territorial Normal School that trained teachers for the growing population. Our analysis included narratives from official websites and publications. Through meetings held from January to April 2023, our team compared and discussed these narratives, identifying themes, similarities, and differences to inform our analysis.

Literature Review Process

In summer 2022, we conducted a systematic literature review using the PRISMA method (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) and employed a Boolean search strategy with three main categories: geographical location (Salt and Gila Rivers); time span (1500 CE to the present); and names of Indigenous nations in the study area, including Akimel O'odham, Ak-Chin O'odham, Pee Pash, Tohono O'odham, Hia-Ced O'odham, Yavapai, Apache, and Chiricahua nations. With input from the IIITSE team and the Labriola National American Indian Data Center at ASU, we refined our search terms and the inclusion-exclusion criteria. Through this process, we selected eleven scholarly sources from EBSCO, eight from JSTOR, and two from the American Indian Histories and Cultures databases. In addition, we included recommendations from colleagues and other relevant literature (forty-five new sources) to this review, which resulted in sixty-six articles, documents, and books.

Codebook in the Literature Review Data Analysis

To answer our research questions, we used Dedoose software version 9.0.90 and qualitative methods for content analysis of the literature.[51] Our iterative and collaborative qualitative analysis involved weekly meetings to develop a codebook outlining structure and categories for analysis. We iteratively refined code definitions, clarified classification criteria, and resolved conflicting coding to ensure reliability. In addition, we presented preliminary results to members of the Labriola data center staff, who provided crucial feedback throughout the process, enabling us to build and compare initial stories with counternarratives.

Findings

Beginning Stories

The City of Phoenix

The City of Phoenix's narrative traces its origins to the ancient Huhugam civilization, also known as the "Hohokam," who occupied the land from 700 to 1400 CE.[52] The

S'edav Va'ak Museum, formerly the Pueblo Grande archaeological site, evidences this ancient civilization and highlights the Huhugam's canal system, some of which persists today in a network of canals that supplies water to the Valley. The story explains the city's name choice: the phoenix is a bird that rises from ashes, and the name thus symbolizes its rebirth from the ancient civilization's ashes. It promotes an idea that the arrival of the first Anglo settlers was to *terra nullius*.

The narrative continues with Jack Swilling's arrival in 1867, portrayed as the first white settler pivotal to the city's modern history. Swilling recognized the valley's agricultural potential and established the Swilling Irrigation Canal Company that initiated the construction of the first canal in the Onk' Akimel. By 1868, a small Anglo settlement east of the city gained official recognition, and by 1870, the Salt River Valley Town Association identified a townsite and commenced land acquisition. Through deals such as the "Great Sale," they continued acquiring land in the area. By 1881, the village of Phoenix had expanded significantly, prompting the transition from a townsite-commissioner government to an incorporated city. These changes introduced a democratic governance system with a mayor and four council members elected.

Subsequent events in the narrative include the establishment of the first power plant in 1886, the arrival of the first train from Maricopa Wells in 1887, and the connection of Phoenix with Prescott and Santa Fe by train in 1895. In 1890, the *Arizona Republic* became the city's daily newspaper, while 1891 marked Phoenix's most significant flood. The enactment of the National Reclamation or Irrigation Act of 1902 led to the establishment of the Salt River Valley Water Users' Association. This initiative aimed to secure a reliable water supply and culminated in the commencement of Theodore Roosevelt Dam's construction in 1906. Arizona attained statehood in 1912 under President William Howard Taft, and the City of Phoenix hosted the First Arizona State Legislature session called by Governor George W. P. Hunt.

This narrative overlooks Indigenous realities and experiences. The myth of a city that emerged out of the ashes of a previous civilization ignores the accomplishments and legacy that Indigenous communities built before, during, and after the settlers' arrival. Indigenous people were living in the area throughout this narrative's history but were continually pushed back, herded into reservations, and denied access to their homelands. Indigenous communities have always inhabited the Phoenix valley and their existence was affected as the City of Phoenix was founded and expanded.

Salt River Project

The Salt River Project (SRP) is one of the primary utilities supplying electricity and water to the Phoenix metropolitan area. Established in 1903 by settler landowners, the SRP has been pivotal in the development of the Phoenix metropolitan area.[53] The SRP's beginning story dates back to the 1860s, when Anglo settlers recognized the potential of the Huhugam canals. With US military protection from Fort McDowell and led by Jack Swilling, Anglo settlers reestablished the first canal in 1868.[54] By 1870, organized canal rehabilitation began through the Salt River Valley Town Association. Subsequent events, including a devastating flood in 1891 and droughts from 1898 to

1904, highlighted water management challenges.[55] The growth of the SRP flourished through key legislation such as the 1863 Howell Code that established the principle of appropriation, the Kibbey Decree in 1892 that established the appurtenance of water to the land (instead of to the owner), the national Reclamation Act of 1902, and the Kent Decree in 1910 that granted water rights based on historical water use.[56] The interest of local farmers and the association to maintain a healthy forest to supply water to the valley led to the protection of the forest in the Onk' Akimel and Verde rivers watersheds under the 1891 General Land Law Revision Act.

The Reclamation Act of 1902 allowed local organizations to compete for federal investments in exchange for revenue from selling public lands. Supporters in Pinal County of the San Carlos Irrigation Project, which aimed to benefit Indigenous communities along the Akimel, sought to delay the SRP project. However, engineering concerns in the San Carlos Project and a strong lobby strategy by the Salt River Valley Town Association ultimately favored the SRP.[57] In 1903, the landowners from the Salt River Valley Water Users' Association pledged their land as collateral for a loan to construct Roosevelt Dam.[58] The Salt River Valley Water Users' Association received one of the first reclamation projects under the 1902 Reclamation Act. The strong support of the federal government, coupled with local support from the Salt River Valley Water Users' Association, facilitated the transfer of the operation of the first project developed through the Reclamation Act in 1917. Since its inception, the SRP has collaborated closely with the federal government.

Electricity revenues are key to the SRP's water-system development. Even before completing the Roosevelt Dam, engineers generated electricity using water flow for construction and pumping groundwater. The Salt River Project Act of 1922 permitted the association to sell surplus electricity. In 1936, the Salt River Project Agricultural Improvement and Power District was created; in 1937, the district gained tax-exempt status as a political subdivision under Arizona state law.[59] These tax benefits and electricity revenue subsidized the SRP's water system to ensure affordable rates, foster economic growth, and expand power and water networks.[60] The Territorial Agreement signed by the SRP and Arizona Public Service (the largest local electric utility in the valley) in 1955 established the contemporary utility service territory boundaries.[61]

Mentions of Indigenous people in SRP beginning stories are scant but present. The Huhugam are acknowledged for their advanced farming techniques and for the canal system later utilized by Anglo settlers upon their arrival. The Huhugam's departure around 1450 is cited to explain why canals fell into disuse.[62] The next mention highlights Pima cotton, developed after 1901 by the US Department of Agriculture in the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (SRPMIC), and its importance during World War I. Indigenous experiences and collaborations are not mentioned again until 1916, when the SRP created a lease agreement to build four large basins in the riverbed and a delivery canal to carry water from the south canal to the SRPMIC reservation.[63]

Indigenous nations living in the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) and the SRPMIC have historically negotiated water rights. SRPMIC secured 500 inches

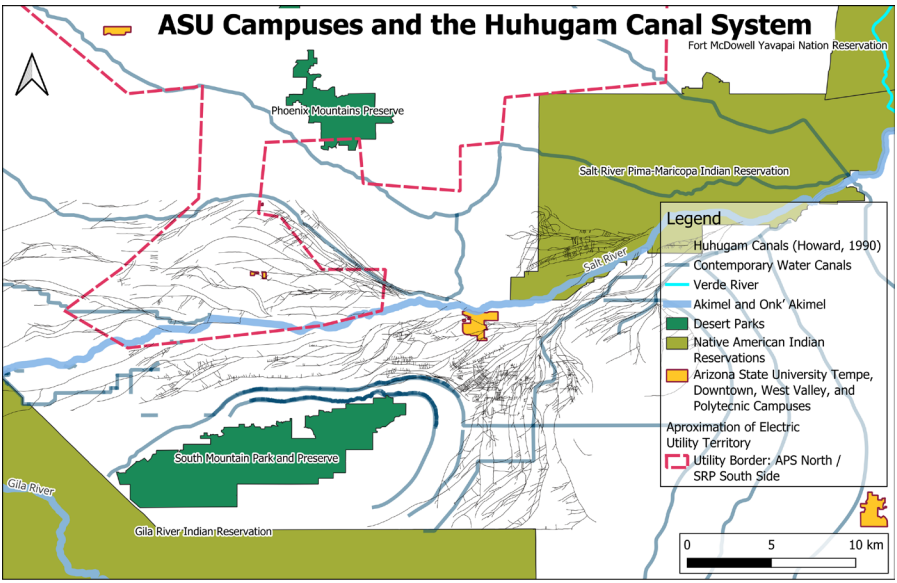
of water along all stages of the north side of the Onk' Akimel thanks to the water budget they had received between 1890 and 1905.[64] Water settlements for tribal water rights with the SRPMIC date back to 1988.[65] The Arizona Water Settlement Act of 2004 facilitated the transfer of operations of the C. C. Cragin Reservoir to the SRP, which supplied water to the GRIC and northern Gila County. In addition, the 2012 agreement between GRIC and SRP granted GRIC a larger water allocation from the Central Arizona Project.[66] The SRP's narrative also acknowledges the Yaqui workforce that conducted canal maintenance around the 1950s.[67] Recent developments include the Kayenta Solar generation facility's expansion through an agreement with the Navajo Tribal Utility Authority in 2018 and the decommissioning of the Navajo Generating Station coal power plant in 2019.[68] These events highlight continued collaborations between the utility and Indigenous nations.

Arizona State University

The ASU timeline starts in 1885, when the Thirteenth Territorial Legislature established the "Territorial Normal School" and describes how Old Main was the first building in Tempe to receive electrification in 1898.[69] ASU roots have served to develop the workforce that fueled the development of the Phoenix metro and the whole United States. In 1911, President Theodore Roosevelt gave a speech at the Normal School mentioning that seven men of his team were alumni of this school. From 1925 to 1945, the Normal School had three other names until it became Arizona State University. The rest of the timeline describes years of innovation (1951–2001) and the New American University (2002–present) that allowed ASU to be recognized as the "most innovative" US university.[70]

The timeline omits mentioning that the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 contributed to ASU's development by establishing a land-grant framework. It also omits the presence of Indigenous nations in its inception. It hinders the profound impact that universities and educational institutions have in perpetuating socioeconomic inequalities by privileging access to education for affluent individuals.[71] The establishment of universities by European and North American nations served colonial interests; they bolstered intellectual assets that facilitated "the decline of Indian nations and the rise of African slavery."[72] The erasure of Indigenous presence has been pivotal in concealing the systematic dispossession of land attributed to the university system throughout the United States.[73]

Figure 1 shows how the ASU Tempe and Downtown campuses are situated atop some of the ancient Huhugam canals identified by archaeologists. The green polygons indicate contemporary Indigenous reservations, while the blue lines represent the contemporary canal system and rivers. The red dashed line shows an approximation of the contemporary Arizona Public Service/Salt River Project electric utility service territories.



Data from: https://www.census.gov/data.html, https://portal.edirepository.org/, and McCartney, P. and R. (2021). Hohokam canals as multiuse facilities: prehistoric canal system in the central Arizona-Phoenix metropolitan area. Environmental Data Initiative: https://doi.org/10.6073/pasta/268a0738c61fc36244e13c77910bfc4e, and https://atlas.eia.gov/maps/geoplatform::electric-retail-service-territories-2.

Figure 1. *Map showing ASU territory and its overlap with the Huhugam canal system.*[74]

We commend ASU for its ongoing initiatives that are reshaping the settler-Indigenous landscape. The Labriola data center, an Indigenous-led library, stands as a prime example of how internal initiatives within the institution are preserving Indigenous data sovereignty and ultimately fostering Indigenous representation in libraries and higher-education environments. The Indigenous Knowledge Focal Area Laboratory, a part of the Global Futures college initiative and led by Melissa Nelson, serves as a platform for challenging the hegemony of the Western knowledge paradigm in academia.[75] ASU initiatives indigenize academia and revolutionize our knowledge-production processes for a more equitable and sustainable future.

Moments in Time That Build a Counternarrative

We juxtapose the preceding three beginning stories of Arizona's institutions with a synthesis of seven historical moments identified in our literature review. Figure 2 showcases our synthesis and key terms organized chronologically. Although the segmentation of these events was arbitrary, they aid in reflecting on the narratives about our history and connection with the land. The color gradient represents a time continuum, the darker colors symbolize the past, while lighter colors suggest a closer proximity to the present. The right side of the time spiral presents the concepts found in dominant narratives, while concepts on the left represent the counternarrative we identified through the literature review for each moment in time.

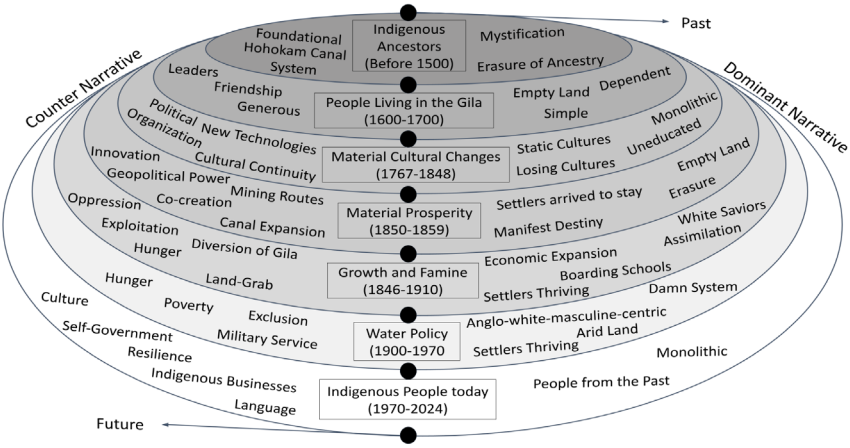


Figure 2. *Spiral of the seven moments in time in our review.*

Indigenous Ancestors (Before 1500 CE)

From 300 to 1500 CE, the Huhugam inhabited the Sonoran Desert, particularly along the Akimel and the confluence of the Akimel and Onk' Akimel Rivers.[76] The term *Huhugam* is derived from the O'odham language, meaning "Those Who Are Gone," and they are the Indigenous ancestors of the present-day Akimel O'odham residing in the Gila River Indian Community, the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, the Ak-Chin Indian Community, and the Fort McDowell Yavapai Community.[77]

The Huhugam people constructed one of North America's largest pre-Columbian irrigation canal systems.[78] These canals were engineered and operated with platform mounds to maintain a constant water level and flow to prevent erosion and sediment accumulation that could alter the canal's shape.[79] Canals facilitated the cultivation of Mesoamerican and local crops,[80] and the Huhugam legacy played a crucial role in shaping Akimel O'odham agricultural practices, such as the two yearly harvesting seasons.[81] The Huhugam also influenced material assets such as vessels and ceramics used for storing and transporting water within a complex social structure across cultures in the Sonoran Desert.[82]

The abandonment of Huhugam sites around 1500 CE is attributed to several events. Old Pima legends suggest that their ancestors' migration was caused by enemy tribes from the East.[83] Others hypothesize that their collapse might have been influenced by environmental conditions like soil salinization, droughts and floods, warfare, diseases, migration, overpopulation,[84] and unknown causes.[85]

Scholars have recognized the cultural continuity between Huhugam and O'odham communities, despite the varying interpretations of the decline of the Huhugam.[86] The nation-state has portrayed archaeological sites like Casa Grande as mysterious enigmas that disconnected these civilizations from contemporary Indigenous nations.[87] Yet cultural continuity has been supported by origin stories and material traditions.[88]

Some suggest that the Huhugam never completely left the Sonoran Desert.[89] An analysis of historical obsidian from the Sacate site in the Phoenix Basin provides evidence of cultural continuities indicating that the Akimel O'odham are the cultural successors of the Huhugam.[90] The O'odham language, a family of the Uto-Aztecan languages, is also evidence that signals a connection between O'odham nations and the Huhugam.[91]

People Living in the Gila River (1600–1700)

After the initial contact in 1492, European explorers and missionaries visited the southwestern desert and documented that Akimel O'odham communities were living along the Akimel.[92] Fray Marcos de Niza might have been the first white man that visited what we know today as Arizona around 1538.[93] Jesuits arrived in New Spain in 1560, but it was not until the 1690s that Friar Eusebio Francisco Kino conducted the first expeditions in the north of New Spain that crossed the Akimel and Onk' Akimel area.[94] Kino's expeditions led to the documentation of significant ruins, including Casa Grande, described as a four-story castle as big as the largest Sonoran churches at the time.[95] Subsequent expeditions by Kino in the late seventeenth century and Anza in 1775 furthered exploration in the region.[96] During this time, Akimel O'odham nations were prosperous and self-governed farming people.[97]

Southwest missions extended into the seventeenth century.[98] Around 1732, the Mission San Xavier del Bac was founded a few miles south from Tucson.[99] Historical documents reveal the negative impact of these missions, particularly by forbidding Indigenous language use and enslaving Indigenous communities.[100] These actions were justified by settlers as a means of "civilizing" Indigenous peoples.[101]

The written evidence describes Akimel O'odham communities as generous and hospitable to foreign visitors.[102] Akimel O'odham carried out military operations against the Apaches that maintained a safe and peaceful environment;[103] they were known for their leadership, strategic position, and defensive skills.[104] For thousands of years, the Akimel O'odham have cultivated the floodplains along the Onk' Akimel and Akimel rivers in central Arizona,[105] and they supplemented their diet by hunting and gathering.[106] Despite the complexity in maintaining an agricultural system with the errant rivers in the Phoenix Basin, the dominant narrative tends to simplify Indigenous technology and ways of life.[107]

Material Culture Changes (1767–1848)

Interactions with Spanish settlers prompted Indigenous communities to strategically adopt new technologies.[108] Arms, horses, and riding gear empowered Akimel O'odham communities militarily and contributed to cultural transformations.[109] Diverse strategies such as denser[110] and dispersed settlement patterns also facilitated the protection against attacks from neighboring groups.[111] Military stability created by Akimel O'odham people[112] facilitated the migration of Piipaash communities to the Akimel and Onk' Akimel as they faced disagreements with local groups from the 1700s on.[113]

Around 1840, Akimel O'odham communities became the first agricultural entrepreneurs in the Phoenix Valley.[114] New agricultural practices like the production of wheat enhanced environmental resilience and agricultural efficiency of the Akimel O'odham.[115] As Akimel O'odham adopted non-Native practices, they maintained a

dynamic culture that demonstrated adaptability[116] and exercised autonomy in cultural adaptation.[117]

In 1651, the region witnessed conflict between Indigenous communities and Spanish settlers over expansion, gold acquisition, and the imposition of religion. The conflict developed after the deteriorating relationships between Akimel O'odham and Spanish settlers.[118] Akimel O'odham leader Luis Oacpicagigua led O'odham, Apaches, and Piipaash to revolt against slavery and the missionaries, resulting in the abandonment of haciendas and missions as all white men left the Arizona territory.[119] The Jesuits' expulsion in 1767 marked a shift, and Franciscans became the predominant religious group that visited the area. Writings from Franciscans also provided evidence of O'odham presence along the Akimel and Onk' Akimel rivers.[120]

The Akimel and Onk' Akimel area became part of Mexico as the country gained independence in 1821. The Gila Pimas' awareness of such political change is unclear, yet Mexicans regarded them as allies in the new Mexican nation.[121] Influenced by Spanish and Mexican policy, each village recognized one tribal governor, and the Mexican state signed a treaty that sought to seek peace between Akimel O'odham, Yumas, and Piipaash nations.[122] Years later, the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 marked a significant historical juncture, concluding the Mexican-American War that established the Akimel as the new US-Mexico border.

The dynamism of Indigenous societies along the rivers, characterized by migration, adaptation, and resistance, is present in this moment in time.[123] Such dynamism challenges dominant narratives that portray cultural changes as inevitably leading to a loss of cultural identity and omit the agency and autonomy of Indigenous nations to decide who they want to be.[124] This moment in time challenges assumptions of Indigenous cultures living in the past and unable to cope with modernity,[125] highlighting Indigenous agency in cultural adaptation, transformation, and resistance against colonial impositions.[126]

Material Prosperity (1850–1859)

Akimel O'odham and Piipaash communities experienced prosperity and socioeconomic growth through previous material changes and their strategic geopolitical position.[127] Akimel and Piipaash capitalized the fertility of the Akimel and adapted to environmental conditions through irrigation canals.[128] The discovery of gold in California drew individuals from various parts of the globe.[129] Thousands of travelers and mining workers that passed through the region[130] benefited from Akimel and Piipaash hospitality[131] and protection from hostile outside groups.[132] From 1848 to 1854, Akimel O'odham farmers produced enough food to feed around 60,000 visitors traveling on their way to California.[133]

Akimel O'odham and Piipaash agriculture fostered a thriving economy by bartering and selling produce to newcomers and travelers. Communities transitioned to a cash-based economy as they were using wheat as a currency[134] and exchanging agricultural products for goods like firearms and clothing.[135] Akimel women actively participated in trade, contributing significantly to economic exchanges[136] and continued to weave cotton into blankets adorned with Indigenous art.[137] Amidst economic

expansion, Akimel O'odham continued to retain their cultural values and traditions while embracing new technologies and economic practices.[138]

Akimel O'odham played a crucial role in the Anglo-American expansion in the Southwest. They provided support to the US military and even joined militias during the Civil War.[139] Akimel O'odham leaders such as Antonio Azul protected their territory through forged alliances with neighboring Indigenous nations, including the Tohono O'odham Nation.[140] This is evidence that Akimel O'odham were both peaceful people and good warriors,[141] which facilitated the arrival of white settlers to the Southwest.[142]

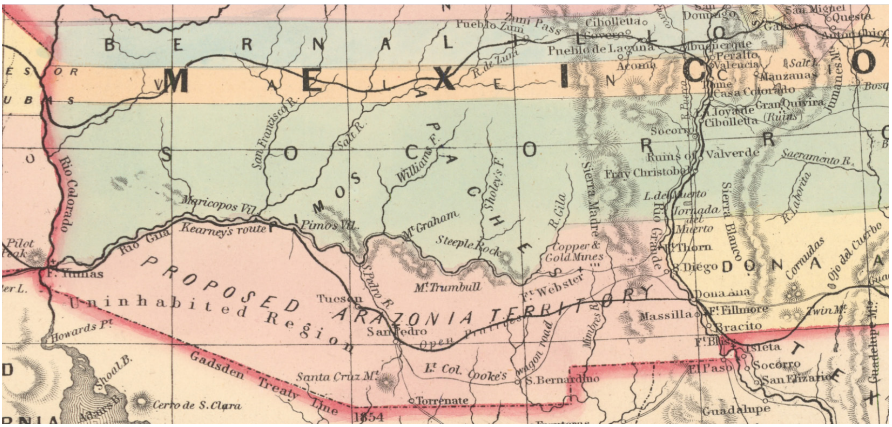


Figure 3. *The Gadsden Purchase treaty redrew territorial lines into the contemporary US-Mexico border. Image courtesy of the ASU Geospatial Hub.*

Figure 3 displays the boundaries proposed by the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, which altered the U.S.-Mexico border to its current position, a few kilometers south of the Akimel. The map indicates that settlers were aware of the presence of Pima and Maricopa communities along the Akimel and Onk' Akimel areas. Arizona territory was initially part of New Mexico in 1863 and remained a territorial entity until 1912.

Narratives of the first US explorers, such as Charles D. Poston (who declared in 1854 that no civilized people inhabited the newly acquired territory[143]), are examples of stories that attempt to diminish the Indigenous and Mexican heritage in the Arizona territory.[144] These narratives center whiteness and masculinity at its core.[145] Settlers boast their achievements by describing how they "tamed" the landscape in the arid desert[146] and represent Indigenous nations as "prehistoric people" that had no place in the territory's future.[147] Yet historical accounts reveal the continuous presence and contributions of Akimel O'odham in the region.[148] Since 1859, the Akimel O'odham and Piipaash have been advocating to the US federal government about the limitations in their reservations, which have been successfully expanded more than ten times.[149]

Growth and Famine (1860–1910)

The material prosperity of the Akimel O'odham and Piipaash eventually faced a significant change as new Anglo settlers started to rehabilitate the Huhugam canal system and irrigated fields to their advantage. This situation led to the growth and prosperity of new settlements, but it compromised Akimel O'odham and Piipaash resources.[150] The construction of dams and canals disrupted water flow of the Onk' Akimel[151] and Akimel Rivers,[152] which depleted environmental resources. Akimel O'odham and Piippash communities experienced water shortages and famine for forty years (1871–1910).[153]

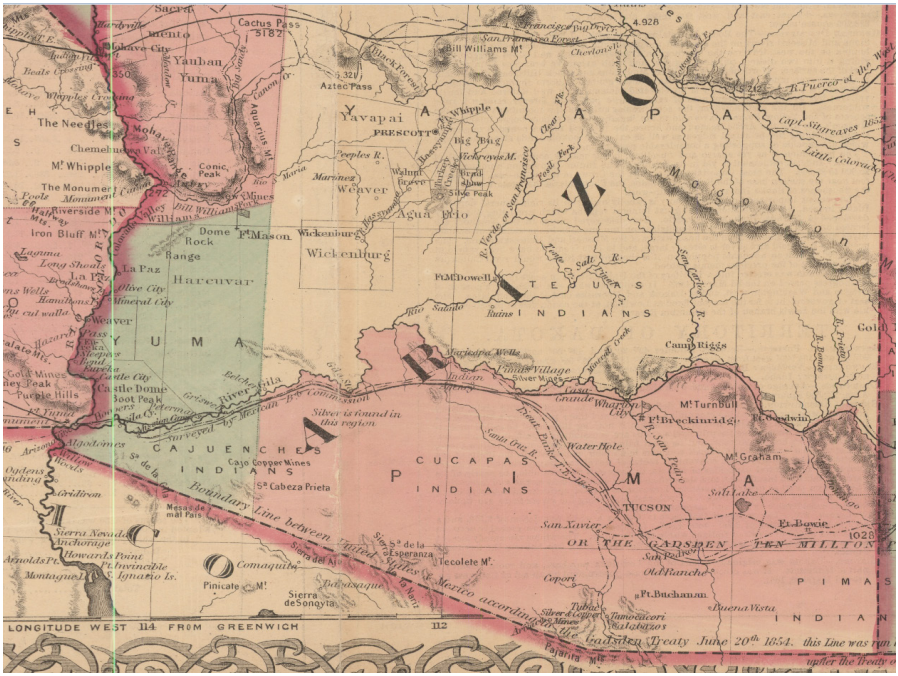


Figure 4. *Map of Arizona Territory in 1865. Image courtesy of the ASU Geospatial Hub.*

The US military's expansion and new government policies facilitated the growth of settler communities. By the 1860s, the military presence extended to Camp McDowell near the Verde and Onk' Akimel, where canals were constructed for farming.[154] Anglo settlers utilized military protection against Apache, Piipaash, and Akimel O'odham raids.[155] Figure 4 shows Fort McDowell along the Verde River, with the term "ruins" where Phoenix is today. Wickenburg, the origin city of the first settlers who established Phoenix, is indicated on the map as well.

Federal policies further marginalized Indigenous communities.[156] In 1887, the Dawes Act prevented Indian nations in the US territory from being recognized as independent nations.[157] In 1879, boarding schools were institutions that established

assimilation practices[158] and other such abuses of power.[159] Such efforts spurred the proliferation of unwarranted ideas that Indigenous peoples needed to be civilized.[160] The Homestead Act of 1862 and the 1871 Indian Appropriations Act facilitated land acquisition by settlers that contributed to a significant increase in the settler population.[161] While Federal policies continued preventing Akimel O'odham farmers from integrating into the US economy,[162] settlers also implemented other exploitative practices such as mismanagement and fraud of resources that contributed to keeping Indigenous communities in poverty.[163]

Negative perceptions of settlers toward Indigenous peoples justified the removal of Indigenous communities from water acquisition. By 1866, settlers were already present in Chasetown, Adamsville, and Florence, and in 1877, Mormon settlers had already rehabilitated the Huhugam canals in the Onk' Akimel.[164] In 1874, Mexican colonists arrived in Graham County on the upper Akimel followed by Mormons.[165] In the same year, the federal government had subdued the Apache, which facilitated the settlements of newcomers.[166]

Akimel and Piipaash resilience allowed them to relocate their villages along the Akimel to locations that had running water for longer periods of time, such as Gila Crossing, Maricopa Colony, and the Blackwater district that has an alluvial spring. These locations were incorporated to the Gila River Indian Community (GRIC) in 1879 through an executive order.[167] Records from missionaries like Charles H. Cook and military officials like Brigadier General Oliver Otis Howard, sent to seek peace among Arizona tribes, provide evidence that the settler community was aware of the water scarcity that local tribes were facing.[168] Howard's solution was to relocate Indigenous communities.

During 1873–74, Chief Antonio Azul led a resistance movement that prevented the forced relocation of Akimel and Piipaash communities to Oklahoma, pressuring the US government into negotiating the establishment of the contemporary boundaries of reservations.[169] In 1877, around 500 Akimel and Piipaash individuals were sustaining themselves on land along the Onk' Akimel, but were then relocated to the GRIC.[170] The establishment of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community (SRPMIC) began as a provisional measure, culminating in January 1879 with an executive order. In 1882, the northern portion of the GRIC near the confluence of the Akimel with the Onk' Akimel was added to the reservation as well. Despite the acquisition of land, Indigenous water scarcity in the GRIC continued.[171] In addition, when the Roosevelt Dam was completed in 1911, the water in the Onk' Akimel stopped flowing, reducing SRPMIC access to water resources.[172]

Water Land Policy and Resistance (1910–70)

As Arizona achieved statehood in 1912, the settler government continued to enact water policies that facilitated the development of the dam system that persists today. Projects like the national Reclamation Act of 1902 empowered settler organizations, such as the Salt River Valley Water Users' Association, to control water resources.[173] The construction of various dams, including Roosevelt Dam, Horse Mesa Dam,

Mormon Flat, Stewart Mountain, and others, facilitated the diversion of the Onk' Akimel to benefit non-Indigenous agricultural communities.[174]

Water scarcity for local Indigenous communities continued and exacerbated poverty, starvation, and resource inequality.[175] US Bureau of Indian Affairs documents from 1899 show how Akimel O'odham and Piipaash communities lost 62 percent of their share of the river water, forcing communities to be displaced.[176] The SRPMIC used waters allocated from the Kent Decree, Bartlett Dam, and groundwater to irrigate between 10,000 to 15,000 acres of land, while they had been disputing irrigation for 29,000 acres.[177]

From 1905 to 1911, Indigenous workers also faced precarious working conditions during the construction of infrastructure such as Roosevelt Dam[178] and the maintenance of canals in the early 1990s.[179] Meanwhile, the Anglo-settler population of Arizona surged, and their cotton farms expanded exponentially.[180] During 1941–42, the average gross income in Anglo-settler land was $60 per acre; in the GRIC, it was less than $18 per acre.[181] This evidences the prevailing disparities among settlers and Indigenous groups.

While negotiations between Akimel O'odham and Anglo-American farmers persisted, Indigenous communities emphasized their historical generosity and advocated for shared resource management.[182] Petitions and resistance efforts led to significant changes, including the construction of Coolidge Dam in 1924 that was part of the San Carlos Irrigation Project, which restored water access to the GRIC.[183] The San Carlos Project Act and subsequent legislation improved water delivery, revitalizing Indigenous agricultural practices.[184] The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 and the adoption of the GRIC's initial constitution provided Indigenous communities the opportunity to govern themselves and gain federal recognition as governments,[185] incentivizing economic development. In the 1930s, the GRIC exercised self-determination by incorporating traditional knowledge about the construction, maintenance, and mapping of the irrigation canal system into their education and governance system.[186] In 1948, voting rights were granted to Indigenous peoples in Arizona, and by 1950, the GRIC had begun to take control of its political affairs and modernize according to its own plans for progress.[187]

Indigenous Groups Today (1970–Present)

Despite the challenges and discrimination previously described, Indigenous nations resisted and prospered. Akimel O'Odham and Piipaash communities continue to inhabit their ancestral homeland.[188] O'Odham religion is still present,[189] and self-governance has empowered the SRPMIC to manage a diverse range of businesses while balancing economic opportunities with environmental and cultural preservation.[190] The SRPMIC Water Rights Settlement of 1988 is another example of Indigenous resiliency to negotiate water resources; through this settlement, the SRPMIC received the use of 12,400 acre-feet per year.[191] The Arizona Water Settlement Act of 2004 facilitated the transfer of the C. C. Cragin Reservoir to the GRIC in 2005. In addition, the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act in 1988 fostered economic growth within the reservations.[192]

The Indigenous economy capitalizes on its cultural legacy. Indigenous businesses showcase their culture and art, with casinos like the Talking Stick Resort Hotel displaying Indigenous art collections curated by experts like Aleta Ringlero.[193] Traditional stories and customs are shared with visitors, preserving cultural heritage while embracing modern economic opportunities.[194] The architecture and the preservation of traditional practices such as basket weaving reflect a commitment to cultural, spiritual, and environmental values.[195] These examples emphasize the contemporary resilience and prosperity of Akimel O'Odham and Piipaash communities despite the inhospitable context.

Conclusion

The analysis of institutional beginning stories and scholarly literature on the Akimel and Onk' Akimel in Phoenix metro reveals dominant and counternarratives. The City of Phoenix and SRP stories acknowledge the Huhugam legacy but overlook the cultural continuity between the Huhugam and contemporary Indigenous nations like the Akimel O'odham. Although only seven out of the sixty-six sources in this review were Indigenous authors, the literature offers arguments that deconstruct the myth of a vanished civilization tied to Phoenix's beginnings. Spanish and missionary records are evidence of Indigenous presence dating back to the 1600s. Yet the absence of Indigenous continuity in beginning stories justifies settler appropriation of resources and the oppression of Indigenous communities. By shedding light on this erasure, this study supports Indigenous oral traditions that challenge the *terra nullius* myth.

The seven moments in time depict Indigenous-settler dynamics. The Akimel O'odham's early adaptation to new technologies and wheat production under Spanish rule reflects Indigenous cultural transformation and adaptation. Their strategic geopolitical position along trade and mining routes fostered prosperity until the 1850s. The generosity of Akimel and Piipaash and their military organization facilitated the arrival of the Anglo settlers once Arizona became a US territory—yet Akimel and Piipaash prosperity was short-lived. Newcomers benefited from US policy that allowed them to purchase land and divert river waters for sustenance. This led Indigenous communities to face at least forty years of famine. These findings exposed the historical disparities between settlers and Indigenous groups.

Despite the hostile environment, Akimel O'odham and Piipaash communities' resilience allowed them to overcome resource deprivation, negotiate the creation and expansion of reservations, establish Indigenous governments, and develop successful businesses. Recent water settlements acknowledge previous wrongdoings by the settler government and demonstrate the perseverance of Indigenous communities in restoring stolen resources. Such actions highlight the Indigenous pathways, cultural continuity, adaptation, and pursuit of autonomy and self-determination they have undertaken.

Contemporary settler-Indigenous issues persist. The dominance of settler perspectives in academic literature underscores the need for greater inclusion of Indigenous voices and knowledge systems in the study of history. Health disparities, such as higher rates of diabetes among Indigenous communities, also show the legacy of colonial

times.[196] Dialogue and accountable actions between Indigenous nations and settler communities need to continue to find solutions to these contemporary problems.

Instead of providing a new universal truth about our history, we invite the reader to scrutinize and question the narratives that they use to articulate the history of Phoenix. We hope this reflection makes explicit to our *chabochi* and settler peers how stories establish hegemonic systems that we assume are normal and that go unquestioned. This paper acknowledges historical injustices and challenges dominant narratives, yet this is only the first step to foster reconciliation and justice. Our work cannot merely end in a reflection: this information needs to be incorporated into our practices as community members, researchers, organizers, governments, institutions, and corporations. We hope this reflection inspires emancipatory actions that fosters better relationships and promotes racial reconciliation in our communities along the Akimel and Onk' Akimel and beyond.

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