

Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project
Education Initiative

Delivering water to ensure the continuity of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh tradition of agriculture



An Historic Overview of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh

Part I

The Gila River Indian Community is home to the Akimel O’otham (Pima) and Pee Posh (Maricopa), two tribes with distinct linguistic and cultural histories. While the Pee Posh are originally from the Lower Colorado River area, the Akimel O’otham have lived in the Gila River Valley for centuries. The Gila Valley has a long history of human occupation, encompassing what archaeologists refer to as nine chronological periods, each of which is characterized by unique social and cultural attributes.

The earliest group is simply known as the Paleo-Indians (10,000-8,500 B.C.), which is characterized by Clovis spear points and nomadic big-game hunters. This is followed by the Archaic period (8,500-1,500 B.C.), in which people are believed to have hunted small to mid-sized game animals and foraged on diverse plant resources. Late in this period metates and manos (grinding stones) are found, indicating the people were gathering edible plants and becoming less nomadic. In the Late Archaic period (1,500 B.C - A.D. 150) people began growing corn, developing large storage facilities and living in semi-sedentary settlements. Although few sites have been found in the middle Gila River Valley, numerous sites have been uncovered in the Tucson basin.

The next cultural period is called the Early Formative period (A.D. 150-650). During this time, there appear an expansion of agricultural efforts, increased sedentism (with the building of pit houses) and the introduction of plain, red and decorated pottery. It is at this time that the first evidence of floodwater irrigation appears. The Snaketown site characterizes the Pioneer period (A.D. 650-750). It is at Snaketown that the emergence of a distinct Hohokam culture appears. The beginning of this integrated culture group appears to have originated in the Salt River (Phoenix) Basin and is characterized by the development of large-scale irrigation agriculture.

During the Colonial period (A.D. 750-950) the Hohokam expanded throughout the river valleys of central Arizona. Ball courts, as a form of public architecture, spread throughout the period. The late Colonial period witnessed substantial growth in the number and size of Hohokam settlements, ball court villages, canal networks, and the use of non-irrigation dry farming. During the Sedentary period (A.D. 950-1150), Hohokam expansion weakened as sites outside the Salt River basin were abandoned and settlements were congregated along rivers and streams. Settlements such as Snaketown and Grewe were depopulated, with the people reorganizing into nearby villages.

During the Classic period (A.D. 1150-1450), a hierarchy of settlements emerged, including villages with one or more walled residential compounds and one or more platform mounds. It was during this time Casa Grande was built and included at least one platform mound and ball court. It is believed settlements such as Casa Grande were distinct irrigation communities. Each community consisted of a series of integrated villages that included one (or more) platform mound villages, which served as administrative centers. All villages were built along a single canal or irrigation system. A collapse of the platform mound communities and a general depopulation of the Salt River basin marked the end of the Classic period. An extended time of drought and flood conditions destroyed or reduced the irrigation systems upon which these communities relied. The people then lived in shallow pit houses in scattered rancherias.

The protohistoric period (A.D. 1450-1694) is the time between the end of the Hohokam culture group and the arrival of the Spanish. During this time the Akimel O’otham, thought by many archaeologists to be one of the descendants of the Hohokam culture group, lived in settlements located

along the Gila River and its tributaries. These small, loosely clustered, brush covered houses, were organized into scattered villages, each of which was self-sufficient, politically autonomous and agriculture-based. Initially, agriculture was based on floodwater irrigation but it later evolved into irrigation distribution, as well.

The Historic period (A.D. 1694-present) refers to the time for which written records exist. While there is limited archaeological evidence available for this period, there is a wide array of ethnohistorical records. The Hispanic era (1694-1853) began with the arrival of Father Kino and Lieutenant Juan Mateo Manje, in 1694. Other Spanish missionaries followed Kino in the 1700s. While limited information was recorded about the Akimel O’otham, the Spanish did record and identify at least six self-sufficient, autonomous villages. These were primarily along the Gila River west of “Casa Grande.”

Each of the Akimel O’otham villages was centered on floodwater farming of corn, beans and squash (the three sisters) as well as melons and cotton. These crops were supplemented by items that could be gathered locally or traded from a distance. Irrigated agriculture appears not to have been used at the time of initial Spanish contact, although by the 1700s the Akimel O’otham were irrigating with the waters of the Gila River. Irrigation became far more important after Spanish contact and the introduction of wheat and a variety of fruits.

Living far beyond the Spanish frontier (which did not extend much north of Tucson), the Akimel O’otham managed to escape involvement in the events and turbulence to the south. They had limited contact with the Spanish, unlike their relatives the Tohono O’odham who had far greater exposure (and two missions built in their territory—San Xavier del Bac and Guevavi). By the late 1700s, the Yuman-speaking Pee Posh—driven up the Gila River through constant warfare with the Quechan, Yavapai and Mojave—confederated with the Akimel O’otham.

While not having to deal directly with the Spanish, the Akimel O’otham did experience the effects of disease and the introduction of new crops, livestock and military strategies. They also became the frequent target of Apache, Yavapai and Quechan raiding. To protect themselves, the O’otham moved their villages closer together (and mostly on the south bank of the river), introduced mandatory military service for all males and conducted punitive campaigns with their Tohono O’odham and Pee Posh allies against their enemies. By 1850, they were recognized as both a military and economic power.

The American era began in 1848 with the end of the Mexican-American War. American contact with the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh went back to the 1820s with the arrival of the mountain men, who would do much to disrupt the ecology of the Gila River. After 1846, contact increased as military excursions crossed Arizona and almost always came through the “Pima villages.” After 1848, surveyors, miners, explorers, immigrants and settlers all increased. Akimel O’otham agriculture played a major role in providing for the food needs of these passers-by and newcomers, resulting in a period of prosperity for the O’otham and Pee Posh. In 1859, in acknowledgement of their friendship and alliance with the United States, the Pima Reservation was created.

After 1865, however, these new settlers competed with the O’otham for the resources of the desert, including water. With the construction of upstream canals and the diversion of the water, the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh entered into a period of time known as the “forty years of famine.” During this time the O’otham and Pee Posh “were plunged from the status of independent farmers competing successfully with White farmers to that of wage laborers.”

In the years since, the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh have struggled to reclaim their rightful share of the water. Today, with a water rights settlement imminent, the Gila River Indian Community looks to a bright future. The Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project, created in 1995 to build a 2,400 mile long irrigation distribution system, plays an important role in this new rebirth.

Lesson Plan for “An Historic Overview of the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh”

Terms to know and understand

- Paleo-Indian
- Pit houses
- Platform mounds
- Hierarchy
- Confederated

Critical Thinking:

Read the selection and discuss the following:

- Not all archaeologists agree that the Akimel O’otham are the descendants of the Hohokam. Research the positions of those who support the cultural continuum and those who do not. Then discuss and analyze the data.
- What role do archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, ethnographers and oral traditions play in recording, analyzing and interpreting history?

Activities

- Tell students that over the course of the school year they will be reading about Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh land uses between the late 17th and mid 19th centuries. Inform students that this reading is the first in a series dealing with Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh water, water rights and irrigation. It is produced by the Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project and is designed to help them understand how the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh used the waters of the Gila River (and the land itself) before the river was diverted. Forthcoming selections will deal with some traditional uses of the water among the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh, how the river dried up, and the ecological impact on an over-appropriated watershed in the Gila River Valley.
- Encourage students to discuss what they read with their elders. Consider having your class undertake a research project that relates to traditional or future uses of water. P-MIP especially encourages youth in grades 4, 7 and 11 to participate in the “What the Gila River means to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh” essay contest. This contest begins September 1 and will conclude in February with three essays chosen from each grade, with one from each grade selected as our grand prize winner. These nine students will be recognized by P-MIP and each will receive an award.

About P-MIP

The Pima-Maricopa Irrigation Project is authorized by the Gila River Indian Community to construct all irrigation systems for the Community. When fully completed, P-MIP will provide irrigation for 146,330 acres of farmland. P-MIP is dedicated to three long-range goals:

- Restoring the use of water to the Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh
- Putting Akimel O’otham and Pee Posh rights to the use of water to beneficial use
- Demonstrating and exercising sound management to ensure continuity of the Community’s traditional economy of agriculture

Students will be able to:

1. Identify the broad chronological periods of human occupation in the Middle Gila River Valley.
2. Recognize the long continuum of irrigation and flood water farming in the Gila River Valley.

Objectives

Chronological Periods and Phases in the Middle Gila Valley.

YEAR	PERIOD	PHASE
A.D. 1900	HISTORIC	-
A.D. 1800		
A.D. 1700		
A.D. 1600	PROTOHISTORIC	-
A.D. 1500		
A.D. 1400		
A.D. 1300	CLASSIC	Polovorón? ----- Civano
A.D. 1200		Soho
A.D. 1100		
A.D. 1000	SEDENTARY	Sacaton
A.D. 900	COLONIAL	Santa Cruz
A.D. 800		Gila Butte
A.D. 700	PIONEER	Snaketown
A.D. 600		----- Estrella/Sweetwater
A.D. 500	EARLY FORMATIVE	Vahki
A.D. 400		
A.D. 300		
A.D. 200		Red Mountain
A.D. 100		-----
<<<<<<<	undefined	boundary
100 B.C.	ARCHAIC	Late Archaic
500 B.C.		
1000 B.C.		----- Early Agricultural
2000 B.C.		Middle
3000 B.C.		
5000 B.C.	Early	
7000 B.C.		
9000 B.C.	PALEO-INDIAN	-
10,000 B.C.		