Contemporary Storytelling in Tohono O’odham

Narrated by Stella Tucker

Translated by Phillip Miguel and Colleen M. Fitzgerald

Introduction by Colleen M. Fitzgerald and Phillip L. Miguel

The Tohono O’odham language is experiencing the rapid decline in numbers of speakers as seen in other indigenous cultures, especially those of the American Southwest. In fact, the American Southwest was identified in recent publications (i.e., Harrison 2007; National Geographic 2007) as a language 'hotspot', described as an area with high numbers of languages in danger of extinction. As Harrison (2007) and others have noted, language loss correlates with cultural and knowledge loss, and in particular, a loss of the rich verbal arts tradition associated with indigenous cultures.

As languages fall out of use into forgetfulness, entire genres of oral tradition – stories, songs, and epics – rapidly approach extinction. Only a small fraction have ever been recorded or set down in books. And the tales captured in books, when no longer spoken, will exist as mere shadows of a once vibrant tradition. We stand to lose volumes: entire worldviews, religious beliefs, creation myths, observations about life, technologies for how to domesticate animals and cultivate plants, histories of migration and settlement, and collective wisdom. And we will lose insight into how humans fine-tune memory to preserve and transmit epic tales.

(Harrison 2007: 159)

Speakers of the O’odham language are fortunate in that there are a number of recordings of these legends that preserve the original language as told by elders. The storytellers who have

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this specialized knowledge are dwindling, with it becoming more likely that people know only select portions of the entire cycle of legends or individual coyote tales, rather than the entire cycle. Some of these recordings are located at university archives in Berkeley and Tucson, as well as being held by individual researchers. The legends have also been published in O’odham and English. Russell (1908) and Kroeber (1909) represent some of the earlier versions of these stories, while the bilingual versions in Saxton and Saxton (1973) and and the English translation in Bahr (2001) represent more recent additions. The publication of such volumes spans nearly a century.

Storytellers have thus had a central role in preserving and passing on knowledge in the oral culture of the Tohono O’odham, with mostly legends and coyote stories represented in the story genres published. Other genres, such as personal narratives, have been published, but are represented in significantly fewer published materials in the O’odham language. One autobiography has been partially published with some Tohono O’odham narrative (Manuel and Neff 2001), and there is another personal narrative, the autobiography of Juan Dolores, told and published in Tohono O’odham in Mathiot (1991). The limited types of published genres mean that only two texts represent people telling their stories about their lives in the O’odham language: Mathiot (1991) and Manuel and Neff (2001). There are several autobiographies and personal narratives told by O’odham people that are published only in English (i.e., Rios and Sands 2001).

The vibrant oral tradition of the Tohono O’odham continues, with people such as Ofelia Zepeda and Danny Lopez creating literature in Tohono O’odham, using contemporary forms like poetry and traditional forms like songs. In this paper, we present an example of spontaneous contemporary storytelling, defined as a person coming up with a story on the spot. It may be that
it is a story they have told before, but it is a verbal moment generated at that moment, based on an event in which the storyteller is an onlooker or participant. The spontaneous story here was told by Stella Tucker in 2002. We present it in Tohono O’odham and also offer two versions in English, one a retelling by Stella in English, the other a translation from the O’odham crafted by Phillip Miguel. Stella Tucker is a well-known figure in the O’odham community for maintaining an annual summer camp to harvest saguaro fruit. Ms. Tucker shares her cultural knowledge extensively with various audiences (both indigenous and Anglo) in the Tucson-area, especially during the saguaro harvest time in early summer. Here she tells a story from one summer camp where she and her cousin found the ripe fruit was white, rather than its typical red.

Harvesting Saguaro Fruit

The saguaro cactus (known botanically as *Cereus giganteus* and *Carnegiea gigantea*), known as *ha:sañ* in O’odham, dominates the Southwest landscape in southern Arizona. Its large size, and the arms that often shoot off the main trunk, make it readily recognizable and often depicted in characterizations of this part of the country. Even those not from the Southwest often recognize this cactus. Saguaro are often treated as humanlike. One legend from Saxton and Saxton (1973: 215-6) recounts this human association, where a child goes into the earth, and her mother asks Badger to bring the child back. Unfortunately, Badger ends up accidentally removing the child's arm, and the mother buries the arm, which later comes up as a saguaro. Later in this story, the saguaro produces red, ripe fruit, known as *bahidaj*, for eating and for making cactus wine, known as *nawait*. In *Papago Woman*, the autobiography of Chona first published by Ruth Underhill in 1936, the importance of the saguaro fruit and its wine are linked to summer rains:
At last the giant cactus grew ripe on all the hills. It made us laugh to see the fruit on top of all the stalks, so many, and the men would point to it and say: "See the liquor growing." We went to pick it, to the same place where we always camped, and every day my mother and all the women went out with baskets. They knocked the fruit down with cactus poles. It fell on the ground and all the red pulp came out. Then I picked it up, and dug it out of the shell with my fingers, and put it in my mother's basket. She told me always to throw down the skins with the red inside uppermost, because that would bring the rain. (Underhill 1979: 40)

As this excerpt suggests, the saguaro plays a very important role in the traditional calendar year and ceremonies. At the top of the saguaro, the blossoms turn into the bahidaj fruit, and the ripening of this fruit comes before the summer rains. The O'odham would camp during June for the bahidaj harvest, each family usually having its own spot. The fruit is knocked down with poles, usually poles made from saguaro ribs, known as ku’ipad. The fruit is gathered into a basket and then boiled up until it is cooked into bahidaj sitol, saguaro fruit syrup. Traditionally, most of the fruit would be made into a fermented beverage, nawait. When the bahidaj harvest is over and everyone has returned home, a meeting will be held and a particular time will set for the Nawat I’i. Bahidaj syrup will be collected from households willing to donate a portion of their syrup to be used for ceremonial and fermentation purposes. The nawait was prepared and drunk at a yearly three- or four-day ceremony designed to 'bring down the clouds.' Without summer rains there would be no crops. Neither would there be any life in the desert. (Fontana 1989: 45.)
The saguaro harvest marks the beginning of the calendar year, with the ceremonial drinking of *nawait* and with the song and speech rituals accompanying them, bringing the rains.

The annual tradition of the saguaro camp is fading away, although in the past, families camped out to harvest the saguaro fruit at family sites revisited every year. The late Frances Manuel tells of her experiences harvesting in saguaro camp (Manuel and Neff 2001: 25):

"When I got here [to San Pedro], my in-laws used to camp way out on that side of the mountain [pointing to a mountain called Komalk]. That's to harvest saguaro fruit. I would go with them because that's the only time I got out. Well it was hard, hard work, because we had to get up at four o'clock in the morning, and come back and cook breakfast and eat and cook the saguaro, and then start boiling it. Maybe by two o'clock the syrup will be ready and then we'll go after some more. We'd leave it for the night, and the next day we'd go for some more. We'd do it for five days. But boy, everything was good to eat, we'd be so hungry. That's about all we'd do, we'd go to bed early on the earth."

Stella Tucker told the story that is published here during the summer months of 2002. Stella may currently be the best-known person associated with the saguaro fruit harvest. She does the traditional yearly camp in June in the Saguaro National Park West, near the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, just outside of Tucson. Stella is following the tradition of her great aunt, the late Juanita Ahil, who camped at that site and harvested *bahidaj*. Juanita Ahil, with her traditional knowledge of desert foods, served as a reference for many researchers on Tohono O'odham history, culture, and food before her passing in 1994. The Tohono O'odham online bibliography, complied by Bernard Fontana with the assistance of Michael Owens, lists at least ten publications in which Juanita Ahil played an important role as a cultural educator (National
Park Service 2008), ranging from the *Journal of the Southwest* to *Arizona Highways*. Included in this is her work with ethnobotanist and writer Gary Paul Nabhan, who has written of his work with both Juanita Ahil and Stella Tucker, notably in discussing the saguaro harvest in *Coming Home to Eat* (Nabhan 2001).

Stella Tucker has certainly carried on this tradition as a cultural educator. At the time when this story was recorded, she was working as a cook in the San Xavier Mission School during the school year, and then as the summer began, she would start her annual camp for harvesting *bahidaj*. This location and camp have been in her family for a very long time. Due to her expertise in harvesting and preparing local desert, Stella has done workshops with various institutions in Tucson, including the Arizona State Museum, the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum, the American Indian Language Development Institute, and Tohono O'odham Community College.

Stella has generously shared her knowledge of this important activity with Tohono O'odham community members, among others. A search of her name and "saguaro" yields 4,420 hits on Google (although not all of these reference her), and the Arizona Daily Star, a Tucson newspaper, has published seven articles interviewing her since 1992, with the media collection also including videos on the desert harvest. Now, around the age of sixty herself, Stella Tucker has become the most visible person maintaining the *bahidaj* camp, passing on the knowledge of the harvest, and doing her part to bring down the rain.

When we worked together in summer 2002, Stella told a variety of stories, mostly from the saguaro camp, to Colleen Fitzgerald, who recorded them. Our work process was straightforward. She would tell the story in Tohono O'odham first, and then retell it in an English version. For each story, there are two versions, one in each language. This is the first
story from that summer to be published in its entirety. The story is about finding some unusual *bahidaj* during the daily morning walk to knock down saguaro fruit. Stella and her cousin Anna were out picking, when instead of red fruit, they found a saguaro that had fruit that was more white than red. The saguaro fruit was, as Stella terms it, albino.

This story also serves as an example of a spontaneously told contemporary story, and few examples like that are found in published literature on Tohono O'odham. In other work, Fitzgerald (2003) has shown that in traditional narratives, the sentences begin with fewer content words (like nouns and main verbs), and more function words (like auxiliary verbs or copulas). These function words also tend to be unstressed, and the preponderance of function words, especially at the beginning of a traditional narrative, may make the meaning of a story more opaque. In Fitzgerald (2003), we see a contrast in these patterns with those of the poetry written by Ofelia Zepeda in Tohono O'odham. This is important given that roughly a third of the community actually speaks the language. Her poetry has more content words. The upshot of genres with more content words earlier in the sentence is that they are likely to be more easily understood by second language learners of Tohono O'odham. A coyote story, with its conventionalized format and large use of functional information, represents a genre that was traditionally told to audiences that already knew the story. These were stories that had teaching purposes and packaged information told every year. We would argue that this ritualized retelling makes the syntax and the meaning more difficult for someone new to the particular coyote story. Think of English, where there are fairy tales that begin with conventionalized language that tells little about the actual content. An example would begin "Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away, there lived a boy."
In contrast, the telling of a spontaneous narrative, such as the one told here by Stella Tucker, represents the packaging of new information. More clues need to be present early in the story for the listener to know what it is about. Nouns and main (or lexical) verbs thus serve as roadmarks for the listener, so that they know the general content of the story. Thus examples like the saguaro story told here can serve as valuable tools for language revitalization and teaching O'odham language and literacy, as their narrative and syntactic structure offer an easier path to comprehension,

All in all, the story is told in a little over three minutes in Tohono O'odham. The audio of this story has been played on many occasions for Tohono O'odham and Milga:n (Anglo) audiences, in both languages. Audiences enjoy it, and both versions also reflect the bilingual nature of the Southwest, with Stella using some English in the Tohono O'odham version, and some Tohono O'odham in the English version. Such linguistic behavior is completely natural for bilinguals, as speakers may look for a word mentally and sometimes only find an equivalent in one language (like "albino"), or they may quote someone who spoke in a language other than the one used in retelling the story.

Orthographic symbols and Tohono O’odham linguistic structure

The Tohono O’odham Nation adopted as its official orthography the writing system developed by Tohono O’odham tribal member Albert Alvarez with the MIT linguist Kenneth Hale. Alvarez and Hale tried to balance the difference sounds of O’odham and the need to represent that special linguistic identity against the common use of the Roman alphabet due to English literacy.
The language has five vowels, /a e i o u/, with /e/ representing a vowel not generally found in American English, a high central unrounded vowel. The vowels can be short, long, represented with a colon after the vowel, as in /a:/, or devoiced, represented with the breve diacritic (˘) above the vowel. Most often, the particular devoiced vowel is an /ĩ/, but other vowels can also devoice.

The consonants of the language represent some contrasts not found or not functioning as phonemes in American English. The glottal stop, /’/, does occur in words like kitten and uh-oh in the middle of these words. Tohono O'odham also has consonants that are retroflex, made with the tip of the tongue curled up. These sounds are indicated with dots underneath, /dʒ/. In addition, there are two nasal consonants, a palatal nasal (as in Spanish words with an ñ or English words often written ny), /ñ/, and a velar nasal (as in English words written ng), /ŋ/.

In addition to these orthographic symbols that are not found in English, Tohono O'odham also makes use of orthographic symbols found in English, but with different phonetic values. The /l/ in O'odham is a palatal lateral flap, and it sounds more like the single r in Spanish words like pero 'but'. The /j/ represents the sound like the j in English jinx, while the /c/ represents the voiceless version of that sound, as in the ch found in chip. The other sounds of Tohono O'odham are represented by symbols that are somewhat similar in sound to how they are used in English, although there is considerable more devoicing in Tohono O'odham.

In examining the Tohono O'odham version of the story below, a reader unfamiliar with the language is sure to notice the use of certain forms. Averb of speech, kaij 'saying', occurs frequently because the storyteller relates a conversation between herself and her cousin. But this also occurs because the grammar of Tohono O'odham is rich in evidential marking, which means that there are markers indicating the source of information, such as it comes from someone.
having said it, or comes from reported information. So the sources of information are marked, either with speech verbs or with the suffix –ṣ on auxiliary verbs to mark reportative.

In terms of the use of hyphens in the O'odham text, they appear when there are clitics that precede the verb (or noun or postposition), such as object markers, reflexives, and possessives. The hyphen also is used when the stative marker, s-, is part of the word. Prefixes and suffixes do not generally get separated out from the word, similar to English.

Another element required in O'odham syntax is the auxiliary verb, which indicates the person and number of the subject, as well as aspect information and when required, a subordinate clause marker, the prefix m-. First person singular information is often packaged using a palatal nasal; 'añ is the long version of the imperfective auxiliary, but in connected speech, it is more often the short version, ñ, which gets used. Markers that go on verbs to indicate first person singular (direct and indirect object, reflexive) and on nouns to mark possessives have the same shape, ñ. Unsurprisingly, these surface in a variety of contexts in the O'odham version of the story since it is a first person narrative.

We have used "…" below to indicate false starts and repetitions by the storyteller.

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Acknowledgements

We dedicate this paper to Danny Lopez, a tireless voice for the Tohono O'odham way of life, or himdag, especially the language. Many thanks to Ofelia Zepeda for discussion and help with some aspects of the transcription.

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References Cited and Recommended Reading


The Albino Saguaro – An actual translation to English from Tohono O’odham

One time, one morning, when we were going to go pick bahidaj, we were there with my relative, Anna, picking the bahidaj. I went a little further ahead of where she was, and there stood a cactus with white bahidaj on it. I stared at it, then took one down and looked at it more closely. I called to my relative, “come here, I am going to show you something.” She came over and I showed her the bahidaj that was white. She looked at it and said, “why does it look like that?” I told her, “why don’t you taste it?” and she said, “ didn’t you taste it?” I said, “huh-uh, no, I didn’t taste it.” I was looking at the other (bahidaj), they were all the same color, white.

She said …. I asked her, ”did you taste it?” She said, “Yes, it is sweet.” I kind of laughed as I looked at her.
I said, “let’s take all of them down, they are all ripe and some are already dry, dried up all of them.”

The cactus was not that tall.

I too, tasted one and it tasted just like the bahidaj. It was sweet.

I said, “we’ll take them back and show the others back at the camp. Let’s see what they say about the cactus. We showed them and they said that some were like that, that the milga:n called them “albinos.”

“Oh! That is what I kind of thought, that it was one of them.”

I said, “I’ll show them to those milga:n that came, if they have ever seen any like these.” “I will just keep them here.”

The other campers said, “ok, because some of the bahidaj are like that.”

“I have never seen one, yet, I have been here a long time and this is my first time.”

“I have never seen one like that cactus.”

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The Albino Saguaro – A retelling in English

I said, one morning we were out picking, with my cousin Anna. And we were out picking and, like we do our routine morning pick. We were out, and you know, usually we go in different areas. And this area was, you know, one area we've al...we've been to before. But there was this one saguaro that I ran upon. You know, I looked at this saguaro, and the fruit on it looked so strange. It looked all white, it was white! And I knocked it down and I said, "Anna!" And she wasn't too far away from me.

And I said, "Come here! Come here," I said. "I'm gonna show you something."

And I showed her this fruit, and it was white.
And she says, "Why is it, why is it white? Why does it look white like that?"

And I said, I said - you know, and to myself I thought, well, I think it's an albino saguaro.

And she said "Look at the difference, it's white and, and it's supposed to be red."

And I… and she said, "Are they all like that?"

And I said, "Yeah."

And she said, "Did you taste it?"

And I said, "No. Why don't you taste it?" [chuckling]

And so she tasted it, and she says, "Umm, it's pretty good, it tastes like fruit." And so I got one and I tasted one, and she says, "Eda 'añt hio ko'ito."[In O'odham, "Well, you know me, I'm going to eat it up."] I mean, she said in O'odham, she said, "Well, I ate it all up."

And I said, "Well, I'm gonna eat mine up, too." So I said, "I'm gonna take, knock 'em all down." Because there maybe just was a few, there wasn't that many, maybe…maybe about seven of 'em. And some were already dried. And even the…the skin was white.

So I knocked 'em all down, and I said, "Well, let's take them back to the camp and show the other campers."

And so when we took them back, I showed it to them and they said, I guess, well, the older… the older uncle said, "Well, I've seen one before, but I just never picked it, you know, 'cause it looks different." [laughing]

And so I said, "Well I'm gonna show it to one of the guys from the Desert Museum, and see if, you know, he…if they recognize…if they've seen one before."

So, I did, I did and showed it to him. And he said, "Yeah, there is some albinos."

And I said, "Well, all these years that I've been picking in the desert out here, I've never ran into one before, like this one."
And they asked me, "Do you remember where it was?"

And I said, "Yeah, I remember where it was." End of story. But really, it was strange, I've never seen one before. Yeah.

The Albino Saguaro – Tohono O'odham version

Wenog hema...hemako si'alim mac 'am 'oyopo, c ma ḍ mo behim g bahidaj.
C 'am 'oyopo g ŋ-hajuñ we:m, Anna.
C 'am 'u'u g bahidaj.
Ñ ḍ 'an 'am hejel hi:.' Im hab ṣa baic, mo 'am 'oimeḍ.
K 'am haṣ hema ke:k g ha:ṣaŋ.
Ge s-to:tam 'ab daḍha g bahidaj.
Ñ 'ab si ņeid.
C 'am ha hema 'i-hu:duñ, hema 'i-hu:duñ. K...
Ñ 'am si ņeid.
Ñ 'am si waid g ŋ-hajuñ, kc hab 'a:g "Oig 'i."
Nt o ha'i cum je:k.
D ḍ 'ab 'i-hi:, ņ 'am cegid hegai bahidaj mo ge..ge s-tuha.
K 'am si ņeid kc hab kaij "K hascu 'a:g hab ge ma:s?"
Ñ 'ab 'a:g "Sascuḍ,¹ k hascu 'a:g hab ge ma:s?
Ki:g ṣa je:k.
Ba ki:g ṣa je:k." B 'aņ 'a:g.
K hab kaij, "Napt pi 'ab ho ha-je:?"

¹In this example, the phrase kus hascu wuḍ was reduced in connected/fast speech to sascuḍ.
"Ha’a pi ’ant ’ab ho ha-je::"

And… K hab kaij, "Ñ’êđa ’imhu ñeid c hab ha’i…ma ha-ñeid ha’i mo wes hab mas, heg ’ab ha…ha:sañ."

K hab kaij, ņ ’am ha-kakke, "Napt ’ab ha-je:?"

K hab kaij, "Hau’u, s-’i’ow ’o.’

Ñ’as ša hehem c ’ab ñeid.

C ’ab ñeid, c hab kaij,

"Di: g ’o wes ’ab ’i: ha-huhuts ñe…natp pi wes bai. Ge ’êđa we:…ha’i gagagş.

S-gag…gagidag ņ’ḍ ’epo wes ’ihia huhuts.

Pi’a mui si cewaj ’i:da ha:sañ.

Ñ’ḍ ’añ ba ’ab hema je:k ba ka:k mo g bahidaj c ge s-’i’ow.

Ñ hab kaij, ḋ o ’u’uk ’am ’u:hum.

K mo je:k hegam mo’om ḋ we:m ka:mbo."

Saso2 cei ’ab ’amjeđ, ’i:da ha:sañ.

Tt ’am ha-ce:k, k hab kaij, mașma hai’a b hi’a mams ha’ap.

Şab ha ’a’aga hegam milga:n, "albinos."

Ñ hab kaij, "Oh, s-ma:c, b ’añ b ’a ša ‘elid mo…mo hab…mo ḋ hema hegam."

K hab kaij, kc hab kaij…kaij "Nt hig o hema ha-ce:k hegam mo…hegam mo ’i’a daiwu milga:n ma:s hebai hema ’i-ñeid hab mascu."

’Ant ’i’a şo ho-to’akcid.3

K hab kaij, k hab kaij hegam mo ņ-we:m ka:mbo, mo s-’ape…you know …ma s-’ape…ha’i ’atp ’ap pi’a mams c ’êđa, ņ’êđa pi he:kid ša’i hema ñeid ’a:ňi, ba ņ ’a:g, ’a:ňi.

2In this example, kus has ’o was reduced in connected/fast speech to saso.
3In this example, ’as o ha-to’akcid was pronounced in connected/fast speech as şo ho-to’akcid, showing reduction and some round harmony.
Pi hekid hema şa...şa’i ‘e-ñeid mo, mo b mams ‘eđa mañ taş...taş ’i:a bei bahidaj g ’i:da Ḟ
we:peg mañ hema.
Mañ hema ņei m ’ab ma:s hegai ha:şañ.