Abstract:

Scientific interpretation of the ancient people of southern Arizona has often ignored or doubted O’odham beliefs about heritage. Native understanding of people archaeologists came to call Hohokam was found to be lacking the structures of reason and standards of evidence valued by scholars. But for Hohokam archaeology to be truly anthropological it must embrace the emic perspective of heritage. Recognizing Native perspectives is an ethical obligation, but it also offers a richer and more accurate sense of the connections among all living people and their ancestors. The value of this approach is taking hold in archaeology today, as Native insights and premises are integrated into scientific thought. Native heritage programs approach the past with an emphasis on success and life in an ongoing generational movement. Engaging multiple perspectives illuminates the nature of past societies and our relationships to them. In the first part of this presentation, Hill illustrates a possible connection between the O’odham ‘Man in the Maze’ symbol and Casa Grande Ruins National Monument, which merges these icons into a metaphor for the kind of understanding that comes from listening. In the second half, Martínez replies from an O’odham perspective.
The great house ruins known singularly as “The” Casa Grande have long meant different things to different people. Those meanings reflected beliefs about its builders, and evolved as the destruction of the ruins grew more remote in time. Recovering meanings provides a compelling challenge, but one that offers opportunity for new meanings to emerge. Casa Grande is one of several metaphors in this story, and I argue that one of its meanings may be found in the Man in the Maze, or I’itoi ki.

The I’itoi ki symbol is ubiquitous among the Four Southern Tribes, appearing in important and sacred places, as well as more mundane. According to Elder Dorothy Lewis, it is used to teach children the meaning of life and represents the individual’s twisting and turning path of happiness and sadness, toward a dream and the Sun God’s blessing at death. Elder, Bernard Siquiers likewise refers to a journey of life and emphasizes that everyone is on such a path, which leads to a center of peace and serenity.
I’itoi ki is more than just a symbol, though; it is also a place on the landscape. At the foot of tall cliffs, at the base of Baboquivari Peak is a cave that also goes by that name.

Se’ehe ki

“A symbol of life ... happiness, sadness...you reach that dream when you get to the middle.”

(Dorothy Lewis 2015)

I’itoi ki

“A symbol of the Creator and the journey of life. The center is peace and serenity.”

(Bernard Siquieros 2019)
At first glance this cave does not bear much resemblance to the common labyrinth symbol. But access to this I’itoi ki is up a 36-switchback trail, which rises a thousand feet in a mile, on a steep talus slope. At the foot of the cliff, one finds a narrow entrance into a small cave and shrine, where visitors leave offerings and ask for blessings.

...you fall and you feel bad ...

you get up, turn around and go again...

(Dorothy Lewis 2015)
Viewed in plan, this path lacks the intricate elaboration of a maze, but it is easy to imagine a common theme of arduous twisting and turning, concluding in a sacred inner chamber. If one understands it as a subjective experience, rather than a plan view, the symbolic value of the maze is replaced by the metaphoric value of the path. The resemblance between the two I’itoi ki is stronger from a phenomenological perspective, focusing on what it feels like to walk along this path, rather than how it appears in a visual representation.

What does this reveal about Casa Grande? Casa Grande has been an iconic symbol of ancient people in the Sonoran Desert for centuries. From the earliest Spanish records it stood out as a singular monument in the region. Father Kino held mass there in 1697, and Manje made the first drawing of the ruins. It is notable that he made both an elevation and plan view. It is difficult to know how accurate his elevation was because much has since fallen from the upper structure, but it is certain that he misunderstood the floor plan.
Later generations of explorers always took time to visit and describe Casa Grande. It was special because it was the last standing great house. Many other great houses were found in the region, and some were reputed to be larger than Casa Grande, but it was unique in its architectural integrity. It became a symbol of all Hohokam great houses and soon became America’s first prehistoric and cultural reserve, and then a National Monument.
Plan views of Casa Grande improved on Manje’s sketch with ever more detailed drawings, but it took two hundred and twenty years to get it right. Font drew a much too symmetrical structure, and even though his plan of the great house is better than Manje’s, he introduced a doorway connecting the central room and the west room. Such a passage is not apparent today in the ground floor plan.
Bandelier improved on Font’s proportions and accuracy, but he also introduced a doorway, between the east and south rooms, where none is apparent today. This imagined layout, however, supported Cushing’s belief that there was a ritual pathway through Casa Grande, leading from the east entrance, in a circuit through the north, west, and south, then returning to the east, before entering the central room. As David Wilcox has noted, this circuit would not be possible because there is no doorway connecting the south and east rooms.

Finally in 1907, Fewkes got it right and produced the first scientifically accurate drawings of the ruins. Also in 1907, Fewkes published his analysis of a design pecked into the wall of the central room of the second story.

Se’ehe ki (House of Elder Brother - Thin Leather)

“Fictitious Ruin” (Fewkes 1907)

O’odham Elder, Thin Leather, told him it was called Se’ehe ki, but he called it instead a fictitious ruin. Fewkes noticed its similarity to another design shown to Nentvig in 1764, when he had asked his Native guides about other buildings like Casa Grande.
Nentvig called it a house of amusement. Neither Nentvig, nor Fewkes acknowledged any significance in the drawing.

“Pimas tell of another house...farther up the river”

“House of amusement” (Nentvig 1764)

Though Cushing seems to have misunderstood the ritual pathway, he had seen ritual pathways through Native buildings and it was a reasonable idea to consider. What if he was wrong only about the details? What would a ritual pathway through Casa Grande look like? If one entered from the east, where the chief was said to watch the sun rise, there would only be two options: pass straight to the central room, or turn right. If one desired to pass through any other rooms before entering the central room, the path would necessarily return upon itself. Moreover, the path would be repeated on multiple floors connected by ladders, through a distinctly labyrinthine design. This plan seems intended to structure movement in a complicated way.
Such a recursive pathway looks suspiciously similar to designs seen by Nentvig and Fewkes, as well as to the contemporary I’itoi ki symbol. I propose that what Nentvig’s guides were describing was not an architectural drawing, as he expected, but the experience of moving through such a building. This interpretation presents a subjective understanding and emphasizes the feeling of movement and mystery rather than the appearance of a building. Lakoff and Johnson might call it an orientational metaphor for life. This interpretation potentially connects the central symbol of O’odham identity to the most iconic structure in the region at least two and a half centuries ago. This interpretation does not establish who built Casa Grande, whose meaning has changed over time. Further mysteries lurk in the fact that many of Casa Grande’s doors were closed off and remodeled in different periods, altering access to different rooms and changing whatever pathways may once have existed. But it does potentially link O’odham to the great house in a significant way for a long time.
Interpretations like this are intriguing and command the attention of anthropologists, but strain falsifiability on at least two fronts. It would be impossible to disprove that I’itoi ki ever referred to a ritual path through Casa Grande, and it would be impossible to prevent it from ever meaning that in the future. As perilous as it is the potential gain is equally enticing. The possibility of reviving a lost idea, or resolving a past misunderstanding is tempting, but it also raises ethical questions. Who is served by interpretations of the past, and how are the benefits, rights, and harms of interpretation distributed? Cultural sovereignty and the authority of descendant communities over how their heritage is produced and disseminated must be recognized. Ultimately it is not my place to say what these things mean to others, certainly not Thin Leather.

At the same time, I am an anthropologist, and that comes with a belief in our common humanity. Studies of ancient collapse have always been justified by lessons for the future. Likewise, as David Martinez argues, heritage doesn’t only happen in past; it involves the future as well when applied to prescriptions for living in balance with the land. I hope that the value of understanding something from the O’odham past may be shared more broadly if it is seen to be wise. I will reserve my discussion to lessons for anthropology, which I argue derive from a subjective perspective on heritage and its implications for us all. Thus, I propose this pathway as a metaphor for the ongoing twists and turns of constructive dialogue. Martinez argues that Native people do not need archaeology and that the future of the Huhugam is to reaffirm the values of ancestors to their descendants. I hope they do that well, but also I hope that anthropologists can share in these valuable lessons.
Roger Echo-Hawk once wondered what would happen if archaeologists began to work in full partnership with Indians. Michael Wilcox called it a tectonic shift when they did so. In Arizona, the new century has produced many examples of research programs designed to improve collaboration among Native and non-Native in heritage and archaeology. Working with more diverse premises and data, these projects have been fountains of insight. Working with lesser known materials and sites on tribal lands, archaeologists add complexity to models of demography, hydrology, and cultural landscape. Working with elders and oral traditions, they produce more personal senses of heritage and connection among descendent communities. Working from a premise of continuity among present and ancient peoples, they reveal that concepts like adaptation, collapse, and even significance are more complicated than once imagined.

Scholars historically dismissed Native accounts of the past, as unreliable and misleading. But one of the most significant developments in Hohokam archaeology over the last fifteen years has been that collaboration among Native and non-native has been intellectually stimulating and produced no visible signs of decline in the field. Furthermore, archaeologists have discovered that our understanding of Hohokam corresponds well with what Native people have been saying all along.

On the continuity question: are the O’odham descended from the Hohokam? First, let us dispense with the idea of O’odham uncertainty about their ancestry. I believe that idea is an historical misunderstanding, and that O’odham have a coherent understanding of their relationships with ancestors and the land. Furthermore, we can argue with high confidence that they are descended from the Hohokam in precisely the way that they
mean it. Everyone has two parents, four grandparents, etc., in an exponential growth that results in each one today having millions of ancestors living when Casa Grande was built.

These were not individual people but relationships of descent, and the reason the two numbers are not equal is because lineages are folded over and over in consanguineal mating. This mating is structured largely by place, among neighbors. Anyone whose descent is traced back more than three centuries in the Sonoran Desert is likely descended from people living in the same place centuries earlier, through these millions of relationships.

Many culturally variable groups of people passed through the region, and one of the most common themes in O’odham heritage is the ubiquity of intermarriage. An even larger theme is on the importance of children and grandchildren, and their diverse relationships of descent. Even simple rate-estimates are extraordinary in their implications. If \( P \) is percentage of endogamous marriage, and \( x \) the number of generations, then \( P^x \) is the percentage of unmixed descendants remaining through time. It is difficult to know how frequently intermarriage occurred in the past, but even if only
one marriage in ten were exogamous, more than 90 percent of their descendants would be of mixed ancestry in the time since Casa Grande was last occupied. The Pew Research Center indicates today more than half of Native American marriages are with people of different races. Rates of intermarriage undoubtedly varied in time and place, but during periods of migration and upheaval, they probably increased.

It seems very likely that most Native people whose ancestors passed through this region since Casa Grande was occupied can count among their ancestors someone whom archaeologists would call Hohokam. This likelihood seems greatest for O’odham who have inhabited the region since that time. All of those relationships took place somewhere and for O’odham that was the Sonoran Desert.

The second important point to take from Native accounts of the past regards its shape. O’odham heritage is filled with themes of division and remergence among countless different identity groups, related to one another in continuous waves across the landscape, and across generations. Groups are continually joined and left behind, in a view of heritage that is compatible with contemporary archaeological views, which describe a multiethnic composite, including groups with connections throughout the region. Archaeologists today find fluid patterns of migration, diaspora, and return, which bear a striking resemblance to those described by Native authors for generations.
Genomic analyses worldwide reveal the biology of an unending intersection of ancient populations in a braided stream of relationships. The braided stream, or rhyzotic model of ethnogenesis recognizes “that each human society and culture is built from elements derived from two or more antecedent societies” (Moore 1994). The Hohokam derived from multiple antecedent societies who moved through the area, but it seems noteworthy that the Hohokam core, of the Lower Salt and Middle Gila River Valleys, is located at the intersection of cultural and geographical zones. It was long recognized as the frontier between the Pimeria and the Apacheria, the Spanish avoided it for nearly three centuries, and it was once the boundary between the US and Mexico.
It was also a boundary zone between the Sonoran Desert and uplands to the northeast.
And it was a boundary zone between language groups, at the northern edge of the Tepiman corridor.

Hohokam must have been in ways a border place, where more cosmopolitan interests were reflected in distinctive material culture. The disappearance of the Hohokam was in part a breakdown in the peaceful interaction between people from different places, such as that modeled by social network analysts (Mills et al. 2013).
In the braided stream metaphor these different groups are imagined as different channels merging and diverging, and perspective is from outside the stream, in an objective position.

Viewed in cross section, though, Maps of social networks in space are fragmentary cross-sections of a braided stream, snapshots of relationships that divide and remerge through time.
The connections modeled by similarities in pottery type are not quite complete models of ethnogenesis, but they may be its rivulets. Similar analyses of relationships with neighbors to the west and south should be interesting. There were also relationships in those directions, but from a distance, they do not look quite like the ones to the northeast. Salado pottery made social network analyses possible in that direction, but material culture connections in other directions are not as clear. When they do occur, they seem to make a curious leap over a gap to the south.

In conclusion, categories like Hohokam have long resisted precision as units of social reality, but they linger as convenient units of discourse, and continue to permeate popular understanding. Variations in meaning lead to different understandings of what lessons they offer, but one meaning they offer everyone is on the magnitude and diversity of all human heritage. It is grounds for optimism that archaeologists and Native people find convergence in how to imagine this diversity. Human classification and division
rank among humankind’s greatest threats, and recognizing what we share is at least as important as what divides us.

Many Thanks To:

- Tohono O’odham Nation
- Gila River Indian Community
- Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community
- Ak-Chin Indian Community
- Charles Prentiss Hough
- Hendrix Odyssey Program
- Archaeology Southwest
- Session organizers Glen Rice, Arleyn Simon, and Chris Loendorf
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Pew Research Center

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2019 Lecture at Hendrix College, Conway Arkansas. 2/13/19.

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