

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Wings in the Desert: A Folk Ornithology of the Northern Pimans. By Amadeo M. Rea.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6203z77f>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 33(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Montgonery-Anderson, Brad

Publication Date

2009

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

[apart], a strong wind sprang up, followed by a heavy downpour that forced everybody, including the guards, to seek refuge. . . . Indians have started saying that the heavens and nature felt the death of the Inca” (140). The Spanish go on to prohibit (or attempt to) all manifestations of Inca consciousness, in dress, books, painting, assertions of Inca blood, and even language.

Yet a tantalizing document is the letter written by Túpac Amaru’s half-brother, Juan Bautista Túpac Amaru, in 1825, shortly after arriving back in Argentina after decades in Spanish prisons. Eighty-six years old, Juan Bautista writes directly to Simón Bolívar, after the defeat of Spain in South America. “I have survived . . . to see consummated the great and always just struggle that will place us in the full enjoyment of our rights and liberty. This was the aim of Don José Gabriel Túpac Amaru, my venerated and affectionate brother and martyr of the Peruvian Empire, whose blood was the plow which prepared that soil to bring forth the best fruits. . . . I, in the name of the spirits of my sacred ancestors, congratulate the American Spirit of the Century” (167).

José Barreiro

Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian

Wings in the Desert: A Folk Ornithology of the Northern Pimans. By Amadeo M. Rea. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2007. 294 pages. \$70.00 cloth.

Wings in the Desert presents as complete a picture of the role of birds in the culture of the Northern Pimans of Southern Arizona and Northern Mexico as possible. Folk biology is the study of how a particular people name and classify animals and plants, and this work is a beautiful example from this field of inquiry. The name Northern Piman includes groups such as the Tohono O’odham (formerly known as Papago) and the Akimel O’odham. Amadeo Rea is, without question, the expert in this area, having already produced works on Piman folk mammalogy and Piman ethnobotany. This attractive book is an artful blend of descriptive work and personal narrative, imbued throughout with a deep respect for Piman knowledge and the desire to describe this knowledge properly so that it may be passed on to a new generation. The bulk of this work—a catalog and description of different bird species—is in the book’s second part. The first part discusses various topics that help show the importance of birds in this culture, including “Bird Keeping and Rearing” (chapter 6) and “Feather Use” (chapter 7). Also included is a thorough review of the sources of knowledge, both in the forms of documentary evidence and interviews with Native consultants.

Rea observes that folk biology is more than just pairing indigenous names for species with their counterparts from Western science: understanding the ordering of the animals is essential in order to understand the Piman worldview. He points out that a “native system is ordered hierarchically, as is a Western or evolutionary system,” and understanding this hierarchy is necessary “in order to appreciate that culture’s traditional knowledge or its metaphors.” He warns that, “there are numerous examples of Piman song,

myth, and other genre suffering at the hands of clumsy or lazy translators” (33). In other words, if the ordering of the birds is lost, their cultural role and importance will be severely misunderstood. The author’s goal is to keep alive an incredibly rich body of knowledge that is in great danger as the language and the natural environment are under threat: “More than just vegetation is lost with environmental degradation. Important cultural metaphors, adding to the quality of life, vanish as well” (248).

Of particular interest is chapter 5, “Birds, Guardians, Shamans, and Healers,” in which Rea discusses how certain animals can cause a staying sickness, the cause of which is an act that showed disrespect for that animal’s sacred nature. A Piman suffering from such a sickness goes to a shaman to be diagnosed, followed by a visit to a healer for the actual curing ceremony. Individuals who have been visited by and received power from a particular animal are known as *meeters* and have the ability to conduct a healing ceremony for a staying sickness associated with that animal. Which animals are considered sacred and which are not is, from an outsider’s perspective, unpredictable; Rea suggest one possibility that sacred animals were animals that the Pimans encountered as they moved into new areas and for which they had a special awe. He makes the interesting observation that, “It is perhaps difficult for Westerners to appreciate the respect the O’odham must hold for certain animals. In the past, it was part of a more pervasive pattern regulating human behavior toward the natural world” (47). The attitudes patterning behavior toward individual bird species are carefully described in the species accounts.

Throughout this work Rea reminds the reader of the inseparable link between environmental degradation, rapid cultural change, and the erosion of traditional knowledge. He notes a dramatic decline in knowledge of local plants and animals for River Pima speakers born after 1920, and he links it to a catastrophic change in the ecology of the Gila River. The introduction of Western schooling and the English language have accompanied a dramatic shift from an active to a sedentary lifestyle. The change in activity level, as well as the rapid introduction of new foods, further compounds this cultural devastation. Rea is at his best when he makes such links: “The ultimate toll has been the twin scourge of obesity and adult-onset diabetes. The ramifications of the disruption of a local ecology and the culture that had evolved in it continue to unfold. Not just bird knowledge was lost” (44). The goal of *Wings in the Desert* is to preserve as accurately as possible this rapidly disappearing traditional knowledge by exhaustively cataloging the species the Pimans recognize and what roles these species play in the traditional culture.

These species accounts make up the bulk of this book. Rea states that the primary function of these descriptions is to “help the reader, especially younger generations of O’odham, identify the birds in the desert and the torn scrub that older O’odham once knew so well” (92). Each of these accounts is a self-contained glimpse into the Piman worldview, and in them Rea skillfully meshes personal observations and narrative with evocative descriptions. He also includes copious examples of songs and narratives that further exemplify the cultural role of a particular species. Rea’s observations are accurate and pithy; to offer just one example, the entry on the Cactus Wren begins: “These clowns

of the desert seem the antithesis of wren-dom (typically small, furtive, dull-colored birds with elaborate melodious songs). Cactus Wrens do everything wrong” (219). The overall result is a work that is authoritative yet approachable with its combination of first-person narrative, lively descriptions, and exhaustive use of existing documentation. Rea’s knowledge in this area is profound, but he freely admits where information is lacking and avoids presenting speculation as fact. Some species accounts have a comparative linguistics note; many accounts discuss misidentifications where the result is that one “misses the metaphor” (218). All of the species are accompanied by attractive hand drawings of the bird under discussion, often drawn by the author.

For a book that is so thorough, it almost seems ungrateful to ask for more. However, there is an absence of a brief discussion of the language. The beginning of *Wings in the Desert* contains only the most cursory descriptions of the sound system, and a one-page “Orthography: The Sound of Akimel and Tohono O’odham” found on the book’s last page seems like it should be expanded and placed at the front. Adding just a few pages on the language would help the reader better appreciate the naming patterns. For example, it seems that many of the names contain an element of “it-has-X.” Because the book is essentially organized around a set of names, it would not be out of place to have a brief description of the way in which nouns are formed from other parts of speech. A short introduction to the language would allow the reader to appreciate the important distinction Rea makes among nonanalyzable, partially analyzable, and analyzable names of birds better. Because many of the birds described play an important role in Piman myths, it would also be more desirable to have more introductory material on this topic. A brief discussion of the cultural significance of colors would also be relevant, as this aspect occasionally arises in the species accounts. Some brief discussion of these topics—language, myth, and colors—might make this book more accessible to the nonspecialist.

Wings in the Desert is essentially a reference work; two-thirds of the book is a catalog and description of about seventy-five bird species. The main audience for the book will be the specialist in folk biology, ornithology, or Piman culture in general. For a younger generation of Pimans this book is a treasure trove of rapidly disappearing cultural information. The amount of Native knowledge contained in this book is vast and awe inspiring, and it is an indispensable read for anyone interested in the cultures of this region.

Brad Montgomery-Anderson
Northeastern State University

Women Who Pioneered Oklahoma: Stories from the WPA Narratives. Edited by Terri M. Baker and Connie Oliver Henshaw with a foreword by M. Susan Savage. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007. 226 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

In this volume, editors Terri M. Baker and Connie Oliver Henshaw gather dozens of excerpts from the narratives of white, American Indian, and African American Oklahoma women as written and edited by Works Progress