



NEWFIELD, Ariz. — Along a stretch of dusty pavement in the middle of the Sonoran Desert, among giant saguaros and low-lying mesquite trees, sits a humble, pueblo-style Catholic church named St. Michael.

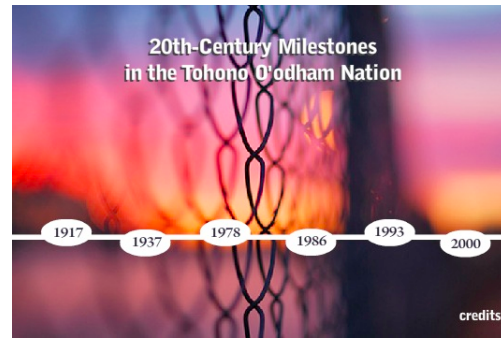
In the courtyard under a wind-beaten American flag, churchgoers lunch on chili, beans and tortillas and a salad garnished with indigenous cholla cactus buds. A concrete basketball court hosts musicians melding traditional Latin rhythms with native chicken scratch song akin to polka.

Emblems of U.S., Mexican and Native American life hold equal sway over the members of the Tohono O’odham Nation. All are carefree this bright September Sunday; children oblivious and adults content to momentarily forget that their 2.8 million acre reservation, 60 miles west of Tucson and nearly the size of Connecticut, is more than a cultural crossroads.

Five hundred feet away stands the U.S.- Mexico border, which stretches across 75

miles of the reservation. These borderlands have become a battle zone as illegal immigrants and drug runners push forth into America and the U.S. Government pushes back. Caught in the middle is the Tohono O'odham, a reluctant participant in a complex political struggle.

As Tristan Reader, director of non-profit tribal organization Tohono O'odham Community Action, said, "It's kind of like living on top of the Berlin Wall."



CHRYSTALL KANYUCK

CLICK IMAGE TO VIEW

View a timeline of the history of the Tohono O'odham Nation.

A nation divided

A muddy white truck, cab and bed full of young male tribal members, pulls up to the San Miguel Gate from Mexico. A Border Patrol gatekeeper asks them for identification. They don't have any so are denied entry. They turn around slowly, then suddenly accelerate kicking up a cloud of dust and exhaust.

One rider yells back over his shoulder: "Pigs!"

Tension between the O'odham and Border Patrol is commonplace here, said Raymond Valenzuela, a tribal member who lives in one of the nine O'odham settlements south of the reservation in Mexico.

"See, now they're probably just going to go around and jump over the fence," he points out.

The San Miguel Gate is an unassuming assembly of barbed wire, wooden pillars and steel poles driven into a bumpy dirt road in a roughly 15-mile valley between Horse Peak and the jutting Baboquivari Mountains, home of Kitt Peak National Observatory.

Originally a cattle guard, it's now one of seven heavily patrolled openings in the fence between Mexico and the reservation. They're not official ports of entry but with a tribal identity card, O'odham can cross anytime, avoiding an hours-long detour to distant entries.

But Valenzuela said he resents having to show ID to traverse his ancestral land.

"When I was a kid, when I was going to school, we never had this problem," Valenzuela said. "We came through and the buses dropped us off on the road and we'd walk home."

"See, now they're probably just going to go around and jump over the fence."

The border was bare until the 1970s when a five-strand barbed-wire fence was raised to contain a Mexican mad cow disease outbreak.

Throughout the 20th century, the U.S. moderately patrolled the border there. But in the 1990s, ramped-up border protection in outlying urban areas—first San Diego and El Paso, Texas, and eventually closer Arizona communities like Nogales, Lukeville and Sasabe—tapered the immigration corridor, funneling illegal activity into the reservation.

Since June 2006, a series of staggered bollards, barbed wire and Normandy-style vehicular barriers have been under construction to contain the crime.

But the \$22 million border barrier has been criticized for physically bisecting the tribe, separating the nearly 25,000 O’odham living in the U.S. from some 2000 relatives still living in small Mexican communities.

The O’odham inhabited the vast arid landscape from Sonora to Phoenix for thousands of years until the 1853 Gadsden Purchase scrawled an international borderline across their ancestral lands. The axiom many O’odham use is “The border crossed us, we didn’t cross the border.”

The purchase initially allowed free cross-border movement for the tribal members but today, those traveling by vehicle must stop at the gates. The government also wanted pedestrian walls.

This was not the intention, though, said Marla Henry, chairwoman of the Chukuk Kuk District, which includes most of the reservation’s borderline.

“The vehicle barrier was not meant to stop pedestrians,” she said “It was meant to stop vehicles that are transporting humans or drugs.”

The U.S. Government first approached the tribe with ideas for pedestrian wall, she said—large metal slabs like ones in outlying towns. But because of the unique nature of their Himdag, the O’odham word for their customs, values and way of life, the idea was shot down and continues to be taboo.

But Valenzuela said it’s not part of the Himdag to put up fences, at all.

“It impedes us from coming back and forth freely,” said Valenzuela, who crosses every day to work as a janitor at a reservation high school and on his days off sells white cheese and tortillas for extra money.

Valenzuela is a wiry, middle-aged man with torn clothing, a dirty mustache and few remaining teeth. He served in the U.S. Navy for nearly a decade, but moved back to Mexico after he was discharged.

“When I left and I came back, my grandmother got mad at me and said, ‘Well why did you join? Why did you go in there? The white man’s not going to do anything for you,’” he said. “And here it is, nothing going on for me.”

Recently, the 2007 U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People again tried for

the right to free association across tribal lands. The U.S., however, did not adopt the measure.

Despite years of promises to the contrary, it's been getting increasingly harder to cross, said Joseph Garcia, Lt. Governor of the tribe's Mexican residents. He has come to believe that the borderline itself, not just the physical barrier, is the problem.

“Valenzuela is a wiry, middle-aged man with torn clothing, a dirty mustache and few remaining teeth.”

“We say we are one tribe, but essentially the line did create a division,” Garcia said. “It officially endorses that the O’odham are two tribes.”

Valenzuela added that this outlook generates xenophobia. Though the tribal Constitution defines O’odham membership by blood not residency, he said his own people often alienate him.

“O’odham in Arizona are saying, ‘You guys don’t belong here... because you’re O’odham in Mexico. You’re Mexican,’” he said.

The two regions have separate governments—a chairman and council for the reservation and a governor on the other side. But Garcia said the two try to work closely. Henry said she is adamant about maintaining that relationship, too.

Still, Valenzuela and other O’odham in Mexico live in abject poverty. Tohono O’odham Community Action, or TOCA, figures show 41.7 percent of all reservation households live below the poverty level but in Mexico, many don’t have running water, electricity, adequate health care or Social Security like reservation dwellers.

“And yet I am a U.S. citizen and I have every right (to these amenities), but I can’t because of that border,” Valenzuela said.

If he moved onto the reservation, these problems would be amended, but Mexico is his traditional land and when he dies he believes his spirit will remain there with his ancestors.

“I want people to see and to know that there still is some O’odham left over here,” he said. “I want my kids to learn that they’re from here and keep on fighting for the land.”

There have been some efforts to help. In 2003, U.S. Rep. Raul Grijalva, D-Ariz., introduced the Tohono O’odham Citizenship Act into Congress. If passed it would have granted citizenship to the O’odham in Mexico. The bill never became law and no similar attempts have been made since.

Next year, cross-border travel may become impossible for those who lack U.S. citizenship. In June 2009, the Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative will mandate that to cross, a U.S. Passport be presented.

“I’m worried,” said Garcia, “Come 2009, will the people be able to get passports?”



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The Department of Homeland Security is working with the tribe to find a solution, said spokeswoman Lisa Reed. But for now O’odham in Mexico face being decisively cut off from their kin.

Meanwhile, even with the fence, drug and human trafficking continue to devastate the community, endangering some tribal members’ lives while ensnaring others’ with easy albeit dirty money.

An ever-present problem

A half-hour drive into the reservation lies a dilapidated, boarded up house and an accompanying shed. A thin plank of plywood meant to secure the shed’s entrance has been forced off and shabbily propped back up, held taut by a tattered, flowery loveseat to cover the doorway.

“KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!” Andy Pasqual bangs on the timber. **“Housing! Come out!”** he shouts.

No answer.

“This house is notorious for being used for a drug and illegal (immigrant) pick-up,” says Pasqual, who manages legal services for the reservation’s Housing Authority. **“Vacant homes are usually primarily the target for illegal activity.”**

He tosses the couch aside to reveal the shed’s roughly 8-foot-by-8-foot beat-up interior, littered with remnants of its former squatters—Mexican-brand products, soiled clothes, empty water bottles and several concrete mix bags that Pasqual said smugglers use to give their cars a weighed-down appearance. Once they pick up their load, they’ll leave the bags so savvy Border Patrol agents notice no obvious weight

increases to the vehicles.

Pasqual said the ex-residents of the house were found harboring immigrants and drugs. As a division of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the tribal Housing Authority is obligated to act.

“If one of our residents is caught engaging in illegal activity it’s pretty much an automatic termination of their lease agreement and an eviction from their home,” he said.

Scores of similarly vacant houses dot the landscape. The lure of smuggling is ever-present on a reservation with a 2008 per capita income of \$6,998, compared with \$21,994 nationally—the lowest of all U.S. reservations, according to Tohono O’odham Community Action, or TOCA. The 2008 unemployment rate is close to 70 percent, according to the group.

And O’odham in Mexico who live in even poorer conditions are not above the snare of smuggling, either, said Garcia. He’s come across acquaintances with bundles of marijuana.

“When you don’t have work and you have your bills to pay and knowing that there are people recruiting,” he said. “It’s very tempting to people. It’s easy money.”

Border Patrol supervisor for the Casa Grande station, Jose Gonzalez, said it’s an unfortunate reality that he encounters almost daily.

“We arrest a lot of tribal members smuggling both immigrants and narcotics,” he said.

And drug cartels are unrelenting in recruitment and objective, said Tribal Vice Chairman Isidro Lopez.

“When the drug runners run, they don’t have but one goal in mind and that’s to get their drugs across,” he said.

While it’s a near impossibility to drive through the vehicular barrier, smugglers have been found dropping their load across to counterparts on foot. Sometimes, traffickers erect metal ramps and simply drive over.

Although U.S. government figures specific to the reservation are not kept Gonzalez said nearly half of all marijuana seizures nationwide happen in the Border Patrol designated Tucson Sector, of which the reservation comprises nearly a third.

“When the drug runners run, they don’t have but one goal in mind and that’s to get their drugs across.”

“The Tucson Sector has been ground zero for the Border Patrol for the issue of securing our nation’s borders,” he said.

In 2007 more than 230,000 illegal immigrants were caught there, he said. The dry,

sandy riverbeds along the borderline are littered with footprints.

Border towns have it worst, said Lopez, because immigrants break into houses—even with residents present—and take clothes, food, water and other essentials.

Years ago, he said, he'd willingly feed them and give water, but the sheer numbers made that eventually impractical.

"I've been hostage in my own home, not leaving it because there were about 50 [illegal immigrants] right in the area," he said. "And if I leave, my car leaves, they know nobody's home."

At one time, Henry said, it was not uncommon to see 100 illegal immigrants cross daily. Now, they'll see maybe 20 a day, but without the border protection, she said it would surely balloon.

"We'd be the corridor and we'd probably see 300 coming through every day," she said.

Gonzalez said he's been working up to three shifts a week for four years on the reservation.

"There are some days when you might encounter a group of 20 to 30 and other days when you catch two or three," he said, adding that numbers aside, immigration arrests are made every day.

Tribal health services incur immense costs treating ailing immigrants found in the desert. On a reservation where, according to TOCA, half of all adults have Type 2 diabetes, every penny towards health care is needed.

The reservation is riddled with gang violence, too, and has a homicide rate three times the national average, according to TOCA, yet patrolling the reservation for immigrants and smugglers has cost the Tohono O'odham Police Department over \$3 million per year since 2001, said Lopez, who thinks the tribe should be paid back.

"We have a running tab that the federal government needs to reimburse us," he added.

Still, Pasqual said while immigrants may be an expensive nuisance, they generally pose no physical threat to tribe members.

"They're trying to get in quietly. They don't really bother the people," he said. "The drug traffickers, those are the ones that bother the people."

They have made the reservation an even more dangerous place, said Aaron Brown, a Tohono O'odham Police Department detective for more than a decade.

"When I first came out here... weapons wasn't a major issue," he said. "Now it's normal to find a group with weapons."

In October, tribal walkers en route to the Church of St. Francis in Magdalena, Mexico on an annual pilgrimage—an amalgamation of Catholic ritual and native custom—were forced to turn back for fear of their lives.

Sara Williams, a resident of Sells, Ariz., the reservation's capitol, was one of about 160 pilgrims. She said they made it halfway when they got word from the tribal government that something was wrong.

"They were saying that walkers were getting shot by the Mexican Mafia, so they advised us to turn around," Williams said.

The Tohono O'odham government issued an official warning of heightened violence in the area discouraging people from traveling and offering to send vans to pick up those already there.

"A lot of people were going crazy on the Nation," Williams said. "They were just worried about the walkers."

She and some companions, including a 5-year-old child, holed up in a small church, she said, cowering from the sounds of gunshots until they could find a ride.

No O'odham ended up injured, but the fear was palpable enough to make them apprehensive about whether to continue the tradition that has endured for more than a century, said Williams. For her, it's not a choice: She's walking for her mother who died without being able to complete her last pilgrimage.

"Most of us are walking for someone who has passed on," she said.

For this reason, Williams said, the pilgrimage will not stop and O'odham persist in their traditions despite dangerous circumstances.

"Unfortunately it's nothing new to the Tohono O'odham Nation," she said. "A lot of drugs are on our borders. We understand that."

But as the border barrier nears completion, questions of its effectiveness linger.

"That's forthcoming," said Brown. "Once they complete the fence, in the next few months, to see if that's actually going to stop vehicles from coming across... We'll see if it will work."

And though the Border Patrol aims to protect the tribe from these threats, many residents complain that agents routinely overstep their bounds.

BY THE NUMBERS

The Tohono O'odham are indigenous to the Sonoran Desert of Arizona and Mexico. With tribal members on both sides of the US Mexico border fence, the Tohono O'odham Nation straddles two nations.

2.8 Million acres in the Tohono O'odham reservation

9 Tohono settlements in Mexico

75 miles of US Mexico border fence run through Tohono lands

7 openings in the fence for tribal members to cross between the US and Mexico

25,000 O'odham tribal members live on the US side of the border

2,000 members live on the Mexico side

\$22 Million cost of US Mexico border barrier

41.7% percentage of Tohono reservation households live below poverty level

\$21,994 per capita income in the US for 2008

\$6,998 per capita income on the Tohono reservation for 2008

70% percentage of O'odham on the reservation who are unemployed

\$3 Million cost to tribal police to patrol for illegal immigrants and smugglers of tribal lands

Sources: Tohono O'odham Nation officials (1-6, 12)

Tohono O'odham Community Action (8, 10, 11)

US Census (9)

Culture clash

—By Chrystall Kanyuck

Angelita Ramon, along with her husband and five children, lives in a sparsely furnished, run-down four-room shanty on a nameless Sells, Ariz., dirt road unofficially called Poltergeist.

The road's namesake is a cemetery adjacent to Ramon's house—the same cemetery where within the last decade she has buried her two sons.

The younger committed suicide at age 16 and her oldest, 18-year-old Bennett Patricio, Jr., was run over and killed by a Border Patrol vehicle in the early morning hours of April 9, 2002.

“His body was fully crushed from his skull to his feet,” Ramon said, choking back tears. They had to put him in a body cast just to bury him, she added.

Ramon is a quiet, stout woman with sad eyes. She's been wearied by years of litigation with the U.S. Government over her son's death and has gone broke trying to win the case, selling furniture, clothes and the family car to pay for a trip to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit in San Francisco. She suspects foul play in the death, but the case was thrown out for lack of evidence. She plans to appeal again.

“They had to put him in a body cast just to bury him.”

Lisa Reed from the Department of Homeland Security said she couldn't comment on ongoing cases, but Ramon said the agent who was driving the truck claimed in court that Patricio had been passed out in the middle of the road and the vehicle couldn't stop in time.

The truth about what happened that night might never be known, but the ordeal has fostered deep distrust of all Border Patrol among the Ramon family. So paranoid are they, that they carry a police scanner on family outings.

The Ramons are not the only O'odham cynical of agents' intentions. Conflict between Border Patrol and tribe members is regular—everything from violence to racism to verbal threats has been alleged.

As planes zoom around the airspace over the reservation and massive patrol SUVs traverse its roads, many tribal members, like former Gu Vo District Chairman Michael Flores, believe the tribe is losing its autonomy.

“We're under military occupation here,” said Flores, who left his government post over disagreements about allowing Border Patrol on the reservation. “We're losing our tribal sovereignty on a daily basis.”

Though the U.S. Government recognizes tribal sovereignty, the reservation is federal trust land, meaning while O'odham can use the land, its ultimate control remains with the federal government.

Agents operate out of two outposts shared with tribal police on the territory, but checkpoints rest at all corners of the reservation. Cars driving between the U.S. and tribal land are stopped and searched.

Despite his own efforts to curb drug trafficking, Pasqual of the Housing Authority feels at times he gets treated as a suspected smuggler there.



DEANNA DENT

“Even if I work closely with them, I get harassed by the Border Patrol at the checkpoints because I have a nice car,” he said. “In one aspect we look to the Border Patrol... to protect us, but it seems that in turn, the Border Patrol more or less harasses us.”

Flores, too, said he has been detained while he was a district chairman—even on the way to tribal government functions.

“Everybody’s a suspect over here,” he said. “There’s a lot of profiling.”

But Border Patrol supervisor Gonzalez said though they do arrest many tribal members, he knows not all O’odham are criminals.

Tribal Detective Brown admitted there are certain characteristics police and Border Patrol look for. In such a tight knit community, flashy cars, Hispanics and Caucasians tend to stick out.

“In some ways you have to profile,” he said.

He feels the agents are an asset to a community so overrun with smugglers.

“We don’t have the manpower to always have somebody there on the border,” he said. “They’re here to basically assist us with what we need to do, but also keep our borders safe.”

But it's no comfort for Irvin Ramon, Angelita's husband, who said family picnics and camping trips get mistaken for illegal immigrant encampments.

"I remember you could sleep peacefully and not even worry about a thing," he said. "But now, you go out to camp near a saguaro cactus and you have a whole SWAT team surrounding you."

Pasqual said being taken for Hispanic is extremely aggravating.

"Sometimes, if I'm in the worst mood, I'll look at them and say, 'How can you not tell I'm Native? I have every right to be out here, more than the miliga:n'" he said, using the O'odham word for Americans.

It's this lack of knowledge of O'odham culture that leads to the misunderstandings, said Gonzalez. When agents first started patrolling the reservation, they knew little, he said. Now they know, for instance, not to drive off-road, because it desecrates the land and can damage the sacred cacti.

Reed said they now hold regular meetings to address ongoing issues.

To deter further misunderstandings, agents new to the reservation must watch a video about the O'odham culture and Vice Chairman Lopez teaches cultural sensitivity classes.

"Because the Border Patrol changes its shifts or people that are on the nation every three months, we have to reeducate them on culture sensitivity, and we do that," Lopez said. "But unfortunately you're always going to have bad apples in the bunch."

As Pasqual put it, "A lot of them come into those positions gung ho thinking that this is the Wild West or something."

In this case, Reed encouraged any tribal members to voice their grievances.

Formal tribal complaints are directed to the Homeland Security Joint Intake Center in Washington, D.C., where they are investigated by Internal Affairs, said Reed.

But the problem is that if the officer is reprimanded, privacy laws forbid it from being made public. Consequently, many tribal members are skeptical that any action is actually taken, said Lopez.

Gonzalez said no terminations stemming from tribal complaints have occurred during the time he's worked on the reservation. He said whereas things used to be much worse, the Border Patrol and the tribe have the best working relationship now that they've ever had.

But tribal members and government alike want the Border Patrol to stay on the border rather than on reservation highways and in villages, said Lopez.

"There are a couple of legislative council members who say, 'Put the Border Patrol on the border, not running around our area or desecrating our lands,'" he said.

Pasqual said the fence could use the added protection considering trafficking



CLICK IMAGE TO VIEW MAP

This map shows the Tohono O'odham Nation's 11 districts in Arizona. Officials report total tribal enrollment as 28,083, with 13,469 living on reservation land.

persists.

“If they're intent is using that fence as a means of protection for the U.S.,” he said, “They need to be guarding the damn thing.”

And while some amends can be made, other grievances are unforgivable, Flores said. Early construction of the border fence dug up tribal burial sites.

“This is causing our way of life to be unbalanced, especially when we have to go

rebury our dead,” he said. “It disturbs our minds as well as our hearts and spirits.”

Irvin Ramon and others now work to shepherd the construction, overseeing the border barrier project to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Yet tribe members like Flores accuse tribal government officials of pandering to U.S. needs instead of challenging American interests detrimental to the tribe.

“The tribal government is complicit with the (federal) government in the way they're unbalancing tribal life here,” he said.

But Chairwoman Henry said given the history of U.S.-tribal relations, she's as distrustful of the U.S. Government as anybody on the reservation. They'll say one thing, but do another, she said. Though they promise no pedestrian wall for the time being, she's unsure that will hold years from now.

And as far as yielding to the U.S., Lopez said it's nothing new.

“I know the tribal government has given limited waivers of sovereignty, but we'll do what we can to protect our sovereignty,” he said. “If you really look at it, the whole United States imposed on our lands a long, long, long time ago.”

“Have we conceded to that?” he added. “We had to unfortunately.”

JUMP TO TOP

THE CRONKITE ZINE SHOWCASES THE COURSEWORK OF INDIVIDUAL STUDENTS AT THE WALTER CRONKITE SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM AND MASS COMMUNICATION, ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY.