

Once Divided:

Indigenous Peoples in the US and Mexico Unite Across the Border

AUKA MAJ KUAR KUAR was the First Historical Encounter of Indigenous Peoples of Baja California and the United States border states of New Mexico and Arizona. At this encounter, Indigenous peoples divided by nation-state borders attempted to rebuild their sense of unity by exchanging views and analyzing their current position regarding the ongoing process of organizing on a regional level. What follows is a brief report on this encounter.

based on article by Carolina de la Peña and Eugenio Bermejillo, Ojarasca, Mexico

In June of 1994, the First Indigenous US/Mexico Border Auka Maj Kuar Kuar Encounter took place in Tecate, Baja California. Unlike similar conferences, attendance was not limited to tribal leaders. Members of all ranks represented their communities at the Encounter. These communities included those associated with UECI (The Common Land and Indigenous Communities of Baja California Union), Peace and Dignity, and The Native Cultures of B.C. Institute. However, tribal leaders were by no means absent. Leaders from communities across Mexico, Baja California, and the US were present.

The Encounter's purpose was to initiate communication among Indigenous peoples in Mexico and the United States. Several issues were discussed. One of the most important being the difficult situation faced by bi-national Indigenous communities (communities that are divided by the US/Mexico border).

These discussions resulted in the drafting of a declaration concerning this problem that was later sent to bi-national Indigenous communities for approval. Part of the declaration reads as follows: "Our

rights have been limited by the Guadalupe-Hidalgo Treatise of 1848, which does not recognize the historical and natural rights of freedom of movement within our Indigenous communities, linked both linguistically and culturally, on either side of the border." The signers of the declaration demanded the right to cross freely for ceremonial and religious purposes, advocated the toppling of existing barriers in order that members of Indigenous communities may visit one another and rekindle relationships with family members separated by the border, and requested access to natural resources necessary for cultural or medicinal purposes and for the construction of houses. Members of the Hia-ced O'odham, Yaqui, Kumiai, Kiliwa, Pa-ipai, Cochimi, Kikapú, Mono, and Cucapá communities signed the declaration.

In 1989, at the Border Tribes Summit, similar issues were raised. Representatives from twenty Indigenous communities from the Sonora/Arizona border and from the Creek, Cree, Cherokee, Ojibwa, Mohawk, and other communities separated by the US/Canada border were present. One of the main topics of discussion was the decla-

ration from the O'odham Nation calling for the restitution of its territory in Mexico, reduced from 4,800 to 20 square kilometers in the span of two centuries due to cattle ranchers' invasions from both the US and Mexico. In July of that same year, the O'odham Nation had asked the United Nations Subcommittee for Indigenous Rights to intervene in this eight-year territorial conflict that is still unresolved. The importance that Vine Deloria bestowed upon the Summit and the declaration from the O'odham Nation is true for all of the Indigenous communities that are separated by national borders: "The fact that the O'odhams present themselves as one nation, forces the governments of both Mexico and the US to resolve the conflict through negotiations among equals and prohibits them from just turning the matter over to the courts."

The O'odham Nation did not actively participate at the Encounter in Tecate, which may help to explain the lack of continuity between this recent Encounter and the 1989 Summit. However, an Indigenous group that is associated with the O'odhams—the Hia-ced O'odhams—was present. The Hia-

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ced O'dhams have been struggling since the beginning of the 1980s to be recognized as a community.

As a result of the Hia-ced O'dhams' rejection of several mining projects, it became increasingly clear that they continued to exist as a group with the necessary strength to rejoin the O'dham Nation. But the Union Congress, at first, rejected an initiative to recognize the Hia-ced as part of the O'dham Nation due to a lack of information regarding the number of people in this group and location of their communities. Marleen Vázquez said that faced with this problem, "a small group of people went out to visit houses in the Hia-ced communities and took down names of people, genealogies, photos, and even visited cemeteries. We sent all of the information we received to the O'dham Nation, and they accepted us. In 1984, 250 of us became members of the tribe.

Since then, 1,200 of us have been inscribed, and there are 300 individuals whose acceptance is pending. The most difficult cases are found in Mexico. The Mexican O'dhams can't be legally inscribed in the tribe, until we have enough resources to complete the investigation as required."

Another group also separated by the US/Mexico border, the Kikapú, presented its list of problems at the Encounter and drafted a series of needs and demands. The Kikapú descended from the Algonquins, and after seven successive migrations, finally settled partly in Oklahoma and partly in Múzquiz, Coahuila. Since 1947, they have enjoyed the right of free movement across the US/Mexico border. During the summers, some Kikapú work on farms in Oklahoma and return to Mexico in the winter. Because they are a migrating culture, they have called for the sim-

plification of customs procedures so that needed resources can reach the Kikapú in Mexico. These resources include *tule acuático*, a basic material used in the construction of homes and in the making of crafts and automobiles. The importation of resources into Mexico requires fiscal registrations and credit cards, both of which they do not have. "The Constitutional Reform, which holds the State responsible for the preservation of Indigenous cultures, is not carried out here," declared José Ovalle, an anthropologist that was invited to the Encounter by the Kikapú. Ovalle spoke at the Encounter about the newly implemented customs procedures at the US/Mexico border that make it nearly impossible for the Kikapú on either side of the border to communicate. ☺

For further information, see *Ojarasca* #38-39, (November-December 1994).