

## Written Statement

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Na:nko Ma:s Cewagi/Cloud Song

Ce:daghim 'o 'ab wu:sañhim.

To:tahim 'o 'ab wu:sañhim.

Cuckuhim 'o 'ab him.

Wepeghim 'o 'abai him.

Greenly they emerge.

In colors of blue they emerge

Whitely they emerge.

In colors of black they are coming.

Reddening, they are right here.

— *Ocean Power: Poems from the Desert*. O. Zepeda. University of Arizona Press, 1995

I have observed about speakers of the O'odham language that they are intensely taken by the aesthetics of their own language. I think this is likely the same for other languages as well. The O'odham language, like other southwest languages is rich in much of the various genres of oral tradition. O'odham continue to practice the oral tradition of prayer, storytelling, singing, and some forms of oratory. And certainly, as in other languages, the practitioners of these activities are held in high regard and have widely known reputations.

I think that O'odham speakers are acutely aware not only of mere words, but certainly of the rhythm and ordering of words even in some mundane acts of speech. However, where this acute awareness of language is most noticeable is in the oral aesthetic arts, such as "formal" speaking, prayer, oratory, and certainly, songs. My observations on O'odham song text has led me to believe that singers who dream the song text are gifted with the ability to transfer the most beautiful ideas into song language. The language then itself becomes a thing of beauty meant to please spiritual beings, worldly beings such as animals and of course humans. Following this line of thought, I would like to describe how an O'odham audience responded to what we call "O'odham poetry." The we, being a small group of speakers who attempted to create poetry in O'odham. The event was the first poetry reading of contemporary O'odham and English poetry on the reservation. The reading was for the introduction of the first book of O'odham poetry, *Mat Hekid O Ju:/When It Rains, Pima and Papago Poetry* (University of Arizona Press, 1982). Different writers read and talked about their work to a predominantly O'odham audience. Afterward during a small reception the comments were quite positive. Older speakers commented that they were not sure of what we had done in using the language this way, but that we had clearly taken

time in choosing our words for these poems, and we obviously wanted these words and their presentation to be “pretty,” in other words to be aesthetic for the listener. Some said our poems were a little bit like songs, but they were not sung, only spoken. The poetry reading was a very successful event. The experience was certainly positive for everyone involved. People went away with a new reference for written and oral language aesthetics.

Since then, some adult speakers of O’odham continue to write both in O’odham and English. Others joined us in promoting this aesthetic literature, and most importantly, young writers, primarily in schools, began to take advantage of the genre of poetry, both in English and in O’odham.

Finally, I want to say something about publishing in the native language. Publishers always contend that there is a limited audience who will be consumers of Native language publications, but in the fifteen years that I have been involved with Native language writing and publication I have not found that to be the case. Many people from all fields and language groups are sincerely interested in publications in Native Languages. The books published by the University of Arizona’s Sun Tracks series, of which I am the series editor, have always done very well. In fact, many of the bilingual books we have published have been a mainstay for the Press. One of the most popular is *The South Corner of Time: Hopi, Navajo, Papago, Yaqui Tribal Literatures*, edited by Larry Evers. At Sun Tracks I continue to solicit projects that are bilingual for southwest and other native languages.