

YAQUI DEER SONGS

MASO BWIKAM



A Native American Poetry

LARRY EVERS and FELIPE S. MOLINA

YAQUI DEER SONGS MASO BVIKAM

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

FELIPE S. MOLINA grew up in the Yaqui settlement near Marana, Arizona, which is now called Yoem Pueblo. He credits his grandmother, Anselma Angwis Tonopuamea, and his grandfather, Rosario Bacaneri Castillo, who was a famous *pahkola*, with educating him in the Yaqui language and ways. He has served as governor of Yoem Pueblo, as a member of the Pascua Yaqui Tribal Council, and is at this writing a member of the Pascua Yaqui Language Policy Commission. He is godfather to many Yaqui children and an active deer singer.

LARRY EVERS has lived in Tucson, Arizona, since 1974, the year he met Felipe Molina. He is a professor of English at the University of Arizona. He edited *The South Corner of Time* (1980) and produced *Words and Place: Native Literature of the American Southwest* (1979), a series of videotapes of performances by American Indian singers, tellers, and authors.

All authors' royalties from this book will be donated in the memory of Jesús Yoilo'i to projects within Yaqui communities that foster the verbal arts and the visual arts.

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This book is dedicated to
Don Jesús Yoilo'i

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YAQUI DEER SONGS MASO BWIKAM

PROLOGUE

✿ On the table there is a pair of antlers I brought in from a walk in the desert. For the area where we found them they are not especially large, a little longer than my forearm and hand, but they are very graceful, mirror reflections of the same sinuous arch. They have weathered to the white-bellied gray of storm clouds in the dusk.

I have come on other things in the desert: tortoise shells, the skull of a javelina, scattered bones of various kinds, and, many times, single antlers. I am told that deer shed their antlers one at a time. When I walk I watch for them.

Often I have found them on the soft benches just above washes. These lay together in the open, high on a desert ridge. Up there they made me think of a nest. When I rock them here among the papers, the tines flicker like tongues of a flame.

A pair of antlers and pages of song words, we sit and talk about these objects on the table: the coincidence of their discovery, the elegance of their symmetries, the new growth they represent. If they are also vestiges, they promise more.

Aa yeweli hiweka
tolo pakuni
tolo pakun hikawi
Yeweli hiweka
tolo pakuni
tolo pakun hikawi

Aa wainavo su
itou weyekai
Wainavo su
itou vuitema
Yeweli hiweka
tolo pakuni
tolo pakun hikawi

Aa look out,
to the light blue outside,
up to the light blue outside.
Look out,
to the light blue outside
up to the light blue outside.

Aa from that side,
to us, as he is walking,
From that side,
to us, as he is running,
Look out,
to the light blue outside,
up to the light blue outside.

Miki Maaso
Vicam Pueblo
May 29, 1983



3. Deer dancer
Luis Cinfuego ..

I

YOPO NOOKI

ENCHANTED TALK

IT IS HARD to go far in the borderlands country of Arizona and Sonora without encountering an image of the Yaqui Indian deer dancer. Fixed in bronze and larger than life, the deer dancer stands as a public monument at the edge of Ciudad Obregón. Travel posters, postcards, promotional brochures, hotel directories, mescal and salsa labels, even the official seal of the State of Sonora, all feature his image.¹ These are public images, and they are fixed, immobile, and silent. What speaks are the political and economic motives that cluster around them. They serve as an aboriginal connection for the politicians, a romantic lure for the admen, the borderlands equivalent, in many ways, to the warbonneted Plains Indian horsemen of the Wild West.

Yaqui Indian people call themselves the *Yoemem*, People.² They know the deer dancer as *saila maso*, little brother deer. And when their little brother comes walking, comes running to dance for the *Yoemem*, he has a voice. The voice speaks to all through the songs to which the deer dancer moves. The songs are the voice of *saila maso*. "All that he should talk about, that is what we sing," one deer singer told us. "He does not talk, but he talks in an enchanted way."

Maso bwikam, deer songs, are a traditional kind of Yaqui song usually sung by three men to accompany the performance of the deer dancer. Yaquis regard deer songs as the most ancient of their verbal art forms. Highly conventionalized in their structure, their diction, their themes, and their mode of performance, deer songs describe a double world, both "here" and "over there," a world in which all the actions of the deer dancer have a parallel in that mythic, primeval place called by Yaquis *sea ania*, flower world. Deer songs describe equivalencies between these two real parts of the Yaqui universe. They are verbal equations, developed richly with phonological, syntactic, and rhetorical parallelisms and repetitions. They participate in "an aesthetics of regularity" as they describe vivid single images.³ Readers with a vantage from the Yaquis' ecological homeland will recognize common things from the natural world of the Sonoran desert imaged in the songs: insects and plants, birds and animals; and those rarer ones, more powerful in combination: rain, flowers, the deer.

The poet Kenneth Rexroth admired deer songs as “pure poems of sensibility.”⁴ But heard with Yaqui ears, deer songs are not so much “pure poems of sensibility” as they are narrative poems. Image by image, from the point of view of *saila maso* and the other living things with whom he shares the *sea ania*, Yaqui deer songs tell a continuing story of life and death in the wilderness world of the Sonoran desert.

This is a collection of writing about the enchanted talk of Yaqui deer songs. In it we offer our translations of the words of deer songs which continue to be sung in Yaqui communities in both Sonora and Arizona. These are translations from a living tradition which stretches back past the time the Spanish slave trader Diego de Guzmán first encountered Yaquis in 1533 into time immemorial. The songs are still sung, and those who are interested will not have a hard time finding a place to stand and listen. Those who do will know that deer songs are more than words. Yaquis relish the preparations in smoke and silence, the sermons and speechmaking, gossip, the smell of mesquite fires and stew, as well as the rasp and rattle and rush of the dance. Before the deer singers ever utter a word, the *ramá* is already full of meaning. So along with our representations of the words in transcription and translation, we describe some of the contexts in which they continue to exist, and, because we have each lived around deer songs in different ways, we give our individual appreciations of them, too.

In all, we work for two goals: for the continuation of deer songs as a vital part of life in Yaqui communities and for their appreciation in all communities beyond. Most of the time these goals coincide.

Nau Tekipanoawame: Working Together

You know from the title page that there are two of us responsible for this book. You may have guessed from our names that one is Yaqui and one is not, and, if you have read other collections of this kind, you may have some expectations about the way our collaboration worked.

The two of us decided to work together on this project in 1979. Since then we have spent time together, when we could, listening to deer songs and talking about what we hear. Felipe Molina is a native speaker of Yaqui. He continues to live in Yoem Pueblo, a Yaqui community in Marana, Arizona, the community in which he was raised. He has studied at the University of Arizona, and during much of the time we worked on this project, he taught Yaqui language and culture at the Richey Elementary School in Tucson. Larry Evers is a native speaker of English. He has studied Yaqui language with Molina but does not speak it. He has lived in Tucson since 1974 when he moved here to work in the English Department and the American Indian Studies Program at the University.

Neighbors in an urbanizing Sonoran desert world, we both have ongoing interests in the oral traditions of this place. We traveled together throughout southern Arizona and into the Río Yaquí area in Sonora, Mexico, to visit deer singers and to record their songs and talk about songs. When we returned, Molina transcribed the tapes into written Yaquí, and the two of us sat down together to work out English translations. Then we talked about them, sometimes with the transcriptions and translations in hand at one of our houses or offices, sometimes far from papers on walking trips into the desert northwest of Tucson.

As we began to convert our talk into writing, we found we had some things to say together and some things to say as individuals. We decided to try to keep those voices separate when we wrote. The “we” voice you are reading comes out of discussions of what we have read and recorded together. We talked through an outline; Evers wrote a draft; Molina revised. Evers wrote the bibliographic end notes. We each wrote in an “I” voice as well. We think of these voices as our own, of course, but we proofread, commented, and made suggestions on each other’s writing as we went along. The two of us worked together in constructing the sequence of voices which make this publication.

The historically exploitative aspects of the relationships between Euroamericans and native Americans, teachers and students, investigators and informants, employers and employees, all cast long shadows around our effort to make this a fully collaborative project. It would be arrogant for us to suggest that we have avoided them completely. By presenting our collaboration in this way, however, we want to remind you that we have tried. At the same time we want to echo a method of the deer songs themselves in which, as we understand it, there are also many voices in one.⁵

We hope that our collaboration provides perspectives on some central Yaquí expressions which until now have been out of reach of most readers. But more than that we hope that our working together will prompt others to undertake similar collaborations. Kenneth Hale’s contention that “significant advances in the study of American Indian languages can be made...only when a significant portion of the field is in the hands of native speakers of the languages concerned” should be extended to include the study of American Indian literatures as well. Unless efforts to engage native speakers actively in the study of their verbal arts succeed, it is unlikely that the study of American Indian oral literatures will advance significantly.⁶

✱ I began working with Larry in September 1978. I worked as a consultant in the Yaqui language, mainly as a translator. The material I translated concerned deer songs and ceremonial speech. The material consisted of many long hours of song and dance which Larry recorded working with my godfather and some others in 1976. I enjoyed this work because I learned many new things that I didn't know before. This is also the time when I started to use my Yaqui language writing system more. The writing in Yaqui started when I was in junior high in Marana, and I continued it in high school. During that time, I wrote to my girlfriend in Yaqui, and she sometimes also answered in Yaqui.

The deer songs on the video tapes finally turned into a program called *Seyewailo*.⁷ I was the narrator, and I

helped Larry and the others to edit it. Then the project turned into another project which we called the Deer Song Project. Working on the video tape *Seyewailo*, I came to appreciate the deer songs more. I learned a lot, as I mentioned before. During that time I became a deer singer and a deer song teacher myself. I had an interest in deer songs before the projects with Larry, but it intensified while I worked. My grandfather was a *pahkola* dancer, so I witnessed many *pahkom* and much dancing. When we started the second project, I thought that I would go ahead and learn as many songs as possible so that I could teach the younger generation about the ways of the *Yoemem* because I think it is very important for us *Yoemem* to continue our ways.

✱ Felipe was a student in a freshman composition class I taught in the fall of 1974, the first year I worked at the University of Arizona. I remember only that the class was too large, that Felipe said little, and that his weekly essays were meticulously proofread and full of mention of the grandfather with whom he was living in the Yaqui village at Marana, Arizona.

Three years later Felipe turned up again in an upper-division course I was teaching. Outside class, I was at the time trying hard to complete a series of

films and videotapes of American Indian singers, storytellers, and writers for the public television affiliate in Tucson. One of the eight programs in the series focused on Yaqui deer songs. At the suggestion of Professor Edward Spicer, I had planned that program with Yaqui consultants Fern Cupis and Anselmo Valencia. The two of them orchestrated a recording session in October of 1976 during which we recorded parts of a Yaqui *pahko* on videotape. Anselmo Valencia promised translation of the more than five and one-half hours of song and

talk in the Yaqui language, but for over a year after the recording his many civic and religious duties repeatedly took precedence. One day, after I had shown some of the unedited video to my class, Felipe came forward to offer his help. He spoke fluent Yaqui and had developed a system for writing it. Anselmo Valencia was his godfather. I arranged to hire him immediately to translate and to help edit the videotape. We worked together weekly until we completed *Seyewailo/The Flower World: Yaqui Deer Songs* in the fall of 1979.

By that time, I knew I needed to know much more about deer songs if I were going to appreciate them as a part of what we had called the native literature of the American Southwest on the videotape. I suggested to Felipe that we continue to work together at learning more about deer songs and at finding ways of making their poetry more available to both Yaqui and non-Yaqui audiences. He agreed immediately, and we began what we called the Yaqui Deer Song Project in which we set out to review together what had already been recorded and to see what continued to be sung in contemporary Yaqui communities.

The longer I live here in the Sonoran desert, the more I wonder about how it has been imagined by the others who have lived here before. There are those who refuse to accept even the possibility that there might have been imaginative life here and elsewhere in the West before English speakers arrived. Editors of a collection of poetry of the American West recently argued that “the first

stump of verse in what would become the literature of the American West” was Captain William Clark’s utterance in 1803 over what Clark took to be the Pacific but which turned out after a closer look to be a spot along the Columbia River days away from the ocean: “Ocian in view! O! the joy.”⁸

To see the beginnings of western American poetry in that ejaculation is to repeat its error. American Indian peoples knew the shorelines, the waterways, the mountain ranges, the basins, and the valleys of this continent intimately centuries before Lewis and Clark stumbled through, and by all reports almost every native American community maintained rich traditions of story and song about the place they knew. It is a rare mountain in this part of the continent which has not been the subject of story and song in a native community. Never mind springs, rivers, and oceans. When I pointed this out to one of the editors, he replied, “Oh that was all just in the air.”

“Oral literature” is a contradiction in terms. Traditionally, Yaqui deer songs—like the *Illiad*, the *Odyssey*, *Beowulf*, and the *Chanson de Roland*—were not written down. They were “just in the air.” “Yet we live in a time,” as Harry Levin writes, “when literacy itself has become so diluted that it can scarcely be invoked as an esthetic criterion.”⁹ Deer songs have rhythm, are organized into lines and stanzas, employ metaphor, parallelism, and other features we think of as poetic. The way in which they are performed sets them apart from other uses of the Yaqui language, and, most importantly, they are regarded by Yaqui people

themselves as containing some of the most aesthetically pleasing Yaqui language spoken or sung. Yaqui deer singers have survived "cycles of conquest."¹⁰ They continue to work with themes and forms which are easily cen-

turies old. The artistic continuity which they represent in their songs is something those of us who wish to talk about a literature of the American West cannot ignore.



The Yaqui Deer Song Project has had several results. In December 1982, we compiled selections from previously collected sources on deer songs, both published and archival, into a Xeroxed anthology format. We distributed copies of this compilation to ten Yaqui communities in Arizona and Sonora. In June 1983 we duplicated sets of audio cassette tapes from original recordings we had made with deer singers both in Arizona and Sonora for distribution in Yaqui communities. This publication is our attempt to translate and discuss the portions of the tapes which Felipe Molina felt could be appropriately presented to non-Yaqui audiences.¹¹

U Masobwikame: The Deer Singer

The songs and the talk about songs that we translate here were given to us for this purpose by several singers, among them Guadalupe Molina, Marcos Savivae, Tani Masobwikame, Hopom, Miguel Cinfuego, Porfirio Yokiwa, and Miguel Matus Hu'upamea. But our primary source for this publication was Don Jesús Yoilo'i, who was also known by his Mexican name Jesús Álvarez Vasquez. Born in Potam, Sonora, around the turn of the century, Don Jesús grew up during the turbulent times surrounding the Mexican Revolution of 1910.¹² While still a boy, he served the *Yoem Vatayonnimmake*, the Yaqui Battalion, as a soldier and was wounded. When the fighting stopped, he came north across the border to work on the railroad along borderlands tracks from Yuma into Texas. For a time he lived in one of the Yaqui camps near Scottsdale, Arizona, and worked in the cotton fields there. Very early in his life, Don Jesús lived with hardship, suffering, war and death. These early experiences left him with a tragic sense throughout his life. "That is how man is," he told us on several occasions. "He is born to die."

After these travels, Don Jesús returned to Potam in 1918 or 1919 and "went to work for the elders." Antonio Potakovanao, one of the most remembered deer singers in the Río Yaqui area, became his teacher, and Don Jesús learned all of the arts of the *pahko* from him. He played the water drum, he danced the *pahkola* dances, he learned the flute and drum songs of the *tampaleo*, and he was a deer dancer to Antonio Potakovanao's singing. When Don Antonio died, Don Jesús "sat down to these rasps and stayed with them." Later in his life, Don Jesús himself became a teacher of the deer songs and of the other arts of the *pahko*, directing sessions that became so formalized he called them *ehkwelam*, schools.

By the time we came to Don Jesús early in 1980, he had retired from deer singing and was living with his sons in his house on the edge of the plaza at Potam. It was one of Don Jesús' students who urged us to approach Don Jesús if we wanted to know about deer songs. When we did, it turned out that Don Jesús was an old friend of

Felipe's grandfather. Probably because of this connection, Don Jesús was from the beginning enthusiastic about our proposal to record some of his songs. Later we were told he was not always so open to such proposals and that he had on several occasions gone away from his house into the desert to avoid teaching songs to some other Yaqui singers who sought him out. When we asked him about this, he said that his songs were for everyone but that he must feel right in *hiapsi*, heart, before he could sing for someone.

Over two years and more than a dozen trips to Potam, we sat down to work with Don Jesús. Most were weekend trips, sandwiched between long night drives back and forth to our jobs in Tucson. In May of 1981, we brought Don Jesús across the border to stay in Tucson. During that time we talked with him and his son Aleho intensively for a week. It was during that week that we recorded most of the songs that we translate here.

Bright, witty, and quick to smile, Don Jesús was partially deaf all during the time we knew him and racked by tuberculosis and other respiratory problems from at least the mid-1960s on. When last we visited him in the morning of April 13, 1982, he was very weak, but he talked about all the songs which he would like to sing and record. By that evening, Don Jesús had fallen into a coma. He died four days later.

For at least the last century it has been common for collections like this one to begin with a lament, mourning the passing of a last tradition-bearer and his stories and songs, and a prediction, describing the day soon to come when those stories and songs will be found only in the printed pages of the collection itself. That is not the way we see this work. We have mourned Don Jesús and we miss him now, but his songs did not die with him. They continue. The most vital way in which they continue is in the repertoires of the many singers he taught in Sonora. But they continue, too, on the audio tapes we made with him and in the translations we offer here. We hope that other singers will take the songs up and work with them. This is the reason that Don Jesús gave them to us.

To some extent this is already happening. The young deer singers Felipe works with at Yoem Pueblo were learning and singing Don Jesús' songs even as we sat transcribing them into print. And these young singers now use the songs when they perform for ceremonies in their own community and elsewhere.

There is a view that print spells the end of oral traditions, that stories and songs are fast-vanishing relics performed only for anthropologists and folklorists, that in order for them to survive they must be captured between the covers of books. Our experience suggests that Yaqui deer songs and the traditions which surround them are very much alive and that more than sixty years of recording and printing versions of them has complemented and reinforced more traditional oral modes of continuance, rather than contributing to their disappearance.

✠ I saw Don Jesús for the first time in June 1978 during the Santísima Trinidad *pahko* in Potam. But before then I knew about him. My grandfather always talked about Don Jesús because my grandfather danced with him when Don Jesús came up from Potam to dance in *pahkom* in the Arizona Yaqui villages. My grandfather told me that Don Jesús could do everything. He was a *tampaleo*, *pahkola*, *maaso*, and a *maso bwikame*. He seemed to be a very bright person. I was aware of my grandfather's desire to see Don Jesús again, because everywhere he went in Potam he asked for Don Jesús. Finally on the blue side, my grandfather asked this middle-aged man if he knew Don Jesús. The man told us that Don Jesús was on the red side. My grandfather thanked the man and we went over to the red side of the plaza to ask for Don Jesús.¹³

Juan Cruz from Vicam Pueblo was the deer dancer there. Juan Cruz recognized my grandfather right away, and he came over to greet my grandfather where we stood on the side of the ramada. Juan Cruz went to find Don Jesús.

When Don Jesús came to greet my grandfather, he was very happy and surprised to see my grandfather once again. All the *pahkolam* came to greet my grandfather even though they didn't know him. All the people at the *pahko* were fascinated by the two old men. Later the *pahkolam* were making jokes about how the old men found each other. People were smiling and happy. Since that day I had always wanted to talk with Don Jesús about his past and about deer songs.

I met with Don Jesús again in February 1980 on the first Friday of Lent on the

outskirts of Tahimaroa. Tahimaroa is a small village which is part of *Ko'oko'im* Pueblo. I knew Don Jesús lived in Potam and asked for him there. But his sons told me that that day he was visiting his nephews in Tahimaroa.

When my cousin Josephine and I arrived in Tahimaroa that Friday, we asked for Don Jesús at one house and a man there knew him. He said that Don Jesús was staying at his nephews' house on a small hill about a mile away.

When we got to the house, a man and his wife came out and greeted us. We told them we wanted to see Don Jesús. We explained we wanted to talk with him about deer songs. The man's name was Chico, and he invited us into the ramada. We sat down on some chairs and coffee was brought to us.

Chico was out looking for Don Jesús. He was out in the back working on a drum rim. Chico came walking back with Don Jesús at his side. Don Jesús had the drum rim in his hand. He came up to us and greeted us, "*Dios em chaniavu, kechem allea.*"

We answered, "*Dios enchiokoe, kette allea.*"

After some conversation about the weather and Yaqui people in Arizona, I told Don Jesús that I wanted him to talk about deer songs. He told me there was a lot to talk about, but he didn't have time to talk now. He was going to the *Konti*, Procession, in *Ko'oko'im* because it was the first Friday of Lent.

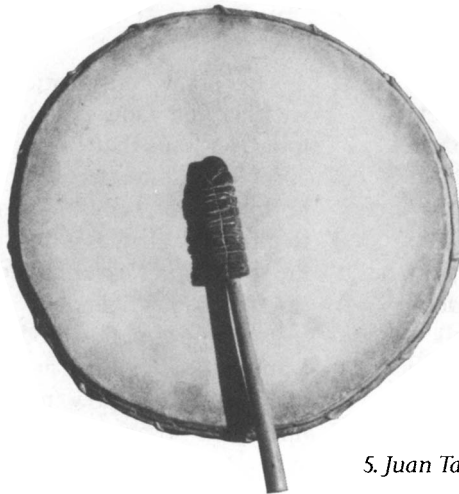
I told him I understood, but still I wanted to talk a little at least. He said okay. He didn't know me until I told him I was Rosario Castillo's grandson. When I said that, right away he asked for

my grandfather. I told him my grandfather had died a year and a month before. Don Jesús was unhappy, but he said: "That is the way we people are; we are made to die."

Then he began to talk about the beginnings of the deer songs. He talked about the first real Yaquis who were called *Surem*. After this, he began to talk about his days as a railroad worker in Arizona. Finally he sang some songs. He sang the beginning songs for a *pahko* and the songs for the Gloria on Holy Saturday. He also

sang one badger song and a buzzard song. I was very happy that he sang the songs. I thanked him for taking the time to talk with me, and I gave him some money. He was very happy.

Then Don Jesús wanted to know if we could give them a ride to *Ko'oko'im* Pueblo. It was about three miles away. I told him I would be glad to, and all of them got in. Chico's wife got in the truck, too, and also the man who brought us to Don Jesús.



S. Juan Tampaleo's drum ...