

# Seri Indians

## 1. Description

- 1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family: Seri, Comcaac, Hokan Stock, but it is also distinct enough to be considered as its own language group. (1,8)
- 1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):639-3
- 1.3 Location (Latitude/Longitude): (28.98,-112.37)
- 1.4 Brief history: The Seri Indians are a highly independent, nonconforming people that are quick to adjust for convenience. They live in a harsh, highly-variable environment; the coastal desert region of Sonora, Mexico, the large Tiburon Island, and San Esteban Island just off the coast. They are an aggressive, outgoing people which indeed had something to do with the warfare between their people. While their numbers were once in the few thousands, they dwindled to just around 200 by the 1930s and back up to about 500 in 1982. They have always been semi-nomadic staying in one camp for only up to about three months or as long as they have a source of food and most importantly water.(1,3-10)
- 1.5 Influence of Missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: The Seri people would often trade salt and hides for their neighbor's agricultural produce. Most early Spanish explorers did not encounter the Seri Indians but were told that they lived on the coast. In 1962, groups of Seri Indians began petty raids of livestock in which the Spaniards that new inhabited the lands east of the Seri responded by killing several hundred Seri. This caused much friction and hate between the Seri and Spaniards. Eventually in the early 1700s Jesuit missionaries began trying to convert the Seri. Most Seri would drift in and out of the missions only to steal food or material goods. (1,14)
- 1.6 Ecology (Natural Environment): The Seri have always lived in the Sonora and Baja California desert and coast. These regions are very inhospitable and had only a few sources of fresh water such as springs and beach wells, hence why the Seri people never stayed in one place very long. Food was usually abundant, but water was not. (1,80)(2,42)
- 1.7 Population size, mean village size, home size, pop. density: Population is slightly below 1000 as of 2002. Small group consisting of usually a few different families. Small huts. With only a small number of Seri Indians, the population density is very small. (1,3-7)

## 2. Economy

- 2.1 Main Carbohydrate sources: Basic Staples were obtained from the four large-fruited columnar cacti, eelgrass, mesquite, century plants (agave) and various types of seeds. (1,88)
- 2.2 Main Protein Lipid source: Seafood is the main protein source for most Seri that live on the coast. This includes mollusks, fish, and sea turtles. Sea turtles are the most prized animal that is hunted by the Seri. They use harpoons to hunt the turtles, and nets to fish. (1,86)
- 2.3 Weapons: Harpoon, bow and arrow, clubs, eventually guns. (1,86)
- 2.4 Food Storage: Drying methods used to keep fish and meat are very important. Food such as grains and seeds are kept in large, sealed pottery vessels or "ollas" that are made by the women.(1,87)

- 2.5 Sexual Division of production: Large animals, sea turtles, and most fish were obtained by men because of the use of boats and weapons being in their domain. The hunting of small animals which did not require that kind of equipment might involve men, women, or both. Women would gather plants and mollusks and hunted various small animals with clubs and hunting dogs. (1,86)
- 2.6 Land Tenure: It is part of the Municipality of Hermosillo in Sonora. (3)
- 2.7 Ceramics: "Ollas" used mainly for food storage. (1,87)
- 2.8 Specified sharing pattern: Every person had an obligation to share one of two classes of goods, those being material or food. When available, these were to be shared with specific members of the extended family, who in turn were obliged to share the opposite class of goods when available. Most of this was done between two families that are known as the *Hamac* to each other. A *Hamac*'s responsibility to another family was this kind of sharing, funeral ceremonies, and sometimes wedding the members of each family. (1,6)
- 2.9 Food Taboos: There are not many food taboos with the Seri. However, the coyote is considered to have supernatural powers and are revered in a way by the Seri people and the shamans. The Seri people do not kill or hunt coyotes because of this and the belief that they may have been people once. (1,65)
- 2.10 Canoes/Watercraft: Balsa, similar to a reed boat. Today, they use wooden boats with outboard motors. (4)

### **3. Anthropometry**

- 3.1 Mean adult height (male and female): Male=6ft3in Female=5ft9in (5)

### **4. Life History, Marriage, Mating**

- 4.1 Age at Menarche:
- 4.2 Age at first birth (Male and Female): 16-20 (1,7)
- 4.3 Completed Family Size:
- 4.4 Inter-birth interval:
- 4.5 Age first marriage: When the puberty ceremony took place for the girl, then she was ready to be married. The puberty ceremony occurred when the other women in her community believed that she was ready. They would bring the girl from her home, down to the ocean to lay her in the water and allow the salt water to wash her hair. (1,6)
- 4.6 Portion of marriages ending in divorce: Divorce was rare. (1,6)
- 4.7 Percent marriages polygamous, percent males married polygamous: May have once practiced polygamy but not in the recent past. (1,7)
- 4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: The Seri would always negotiate a bride price before a the female's family would accept the marriage proposition. These gifts that were given, could include a boat, iron-wood carvings, money, food, or even a truck. (1,7)
- 4.9 Inheritance Patterns: The home and boat of the deceased would always be burned, and the possessions were divided between family members. (1,80)
- 4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: The husband and his father-in-law were forbidden from interacting or speaking with each other. Would have to communicate through the people around them. (1,6)

- 4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes toward homosexuals:
- 4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): endogamy (1,7)
- 4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception: is it paternity partible? Are these “other fathers” recognized?:
- 4.14 What is the belief of the mother’s role in procreation exactly?: The woman would do household chores, take care of child through infancy while the father would provide for them. (1,7)
- 4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (semen builds up over time):
- 4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape:
- 4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g. cross cousin): It is taboo to marry anyone that you are related to. (1,7)
- 4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?:
- 4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring:
- 4.20 If mother dies, who raises children?: Family (1,6)
- 4.21 Adult sex ration: number of adult males divided by number of reproductive females:
- 4.22 Evidence for couvade:
- 4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g. lesser/younger vs. major/older): Marriages between men and women of around the same age. (1,7)
- 4.24 Kin avoidance and respect: Father does not interact with son in law and visa versa. (1,6)
- 4.25 Joking relationships:
- 4.26 Patterns of decent for certain rights, names or associations: They have a system of anarchy (1,81)
- 4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony?: Since about the 1960s the ceremony usually takes place in the local Apostolic church and has included formal vows. (1,6)
- 4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, obtain a different name?: Parents (1,5)
- 4.29 Is marriage usually within community or outside community? (m/f difference):
- 4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?: They are arranged by the parents of the two children sometimes with the help of a local shaman. After the proposal of marriage has been accepted by the female’s parents, a period of 6 months follows in which the male’s family gives gifts to the female’s family. (1,6)
- 4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:

## **Warfare/homicide**

- 4.32 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:
- 4.33 Out-group vs in-group cause of violent death: The Seri Indians had violent conflicts with the Spanish that settled in Mexico. These conflicts started because the opportunistic Seri people would raid local missions the Spanish set up to try to convert and civilize the Seri, for food and material goods. Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century the Spanish frequently scuffled with the Seri and even sent troops to fight the Seri on Tiburon Island. Though they did not completely wipe the Seri out, warfare and disease brought by the Spaniards caused the Seri population to fall to just around 200 by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. (1,10)
- 4.34 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: The
- 4.35 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): Between the early 1700s and the late 1800s the Seri people were constantly engaged in

conflict with the Spanish that established themselves in Mexico. They did not want to conform to the Spanish (1,10-15)

4.36 Cannibalism?:

## 5. Socio-Political Organization and Interaction

- 5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: 2-3 Families, ~20-30 people. (1,3)
- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): Often moved around building temporary camps (1,4)
- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc., wealth or status classes): Anarchy (1,13)
- 5.4 Post marital residence: “The young couple usually began married life in a house built near the home of the boy’s parents” (1,6)
- 5.5 Territoriality? (Defined boundaries, active defense): Tiburon and San Esteban Islands yet they did not have set boundaries, since they were the only people inhabiting the island. (1)(3)
- 5.6 Social interaction divisions? (age and sex):
- 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:
- 5.8 Village and house organization:
- 5.9 Specialized village structures (men’s houses):
- 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?: Recently have acquired beds to sleep on(4)
- 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc.: Small bands made up of a few families. (1,7)
- 5.12 Trade: Traded mostly fish and other seafood with nearby agricultural neighbors in exchange for produce and tools/material items. Now a days they still mainly export fish to markets in the United States and Mexico. (1,12)(4)
- 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?

## 6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

- 6.0 Time allocation to RCR:
- 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): Shamans abilities could be used for good and evil. Men and women could become shamans. Many adult males practiced shamanism and their duties involved helping the sick, acting as a distributor of a deceased possessions. Most Seri medicines were prepared from plants. By the 1960s commercial pharmaceuticals had largely replaced traditional, native medicines, and the people often sought treatment from medical doctors at clinics and hospitals. (1,112)
- 6.2 Stimulants: Five native plants were smoked: canyon ragweed, creosotebush, rama parda, and two wild tobaccos (*Nicotiana clevelandii* and *N. trigonophylla*). The tobacco leaves were dried, while the flower and leaves of the creosotebush and *rama parda* were smoked. The tobacco plants were much preferred. (1,165)
- 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): Duties of the *Hamac*, which is a family that exchange goods and works closely with one other family, sponsor the puberty fiestas and burials of the other family. (1,7)
- 6.4 Other rituals: Vision quests were common among the young, unmarried Seri. Their purpose was to find a power through the vision. These quests were done alone, in isolation and fasting. (1,103)

- 6.5 Myths (Creation): There were many different versions of the origin myth. The most common is as follows. In the beginning there was no land and there was no life. Then *Hant Caai* or “land maker” created a number of land and sea animals and placed them on a huge reedgrass boat on the sea. *Hant Caai* caused a male green turtle *Chelonia* to assist in making the land. Then *Hant Caai* created the first tree, a man, a woman, and a horse and placed them under the first tree. The first man and woman were giants. The man was tested to see if he could hunt. The woman had to prepare food and do household chores. She attempted to do the work, but did a poor job. The first woman had children and eventually a number of giants inhabited the land. But the land was flat and floods and fire devastated the people. *Hant Caai* then decided to sing a song to create mountains, and later he created plants. The Seri deity is said to be male. (1,102)
- 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): Songs, games, and dances were performed almost exclusively at fiestas. About a dozen games were played, almost all involved gambling. Men bet larger stakes than women. A game called *xtapacaj caahit* or “he who feeds the tower shell” was played with a section of reedgrass and a tower shell. Two people played at a time and the winner challenged the next contestant. Some said it was played only by men, while others said that both men and women played it. It was probably primarily a men’s gambling game played at fiestas. Some men were experts at this game. (1,160)
- 6.7 Sex differences in RCR: Men were involved in the games more than women due to the gambling and size of the bets. (1,161)
- 6.8 Missionary effect: The late 1960s, some Seri people had taken up mission life. Many Seri groups proved more intractable. In the late 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries the Jesuits established missions for the Seri along the San Miguel River. These missions, on a permanent stream, attracted a minority of the Seri, who temporarily adopted agricultural mission life. Jesuit missionaries often complained about the “wild” Seri, who drifted in and out of the missions and stole food and material goods. The involvement of the opportunistic Seri with mission populations probably included kinship sharing, as well as outright raiding. While a few Seri did become farmers, most did not capitulate to Spanish customs or authority but remained as hunter-gatherers. (1,12)
- 6.9 RCR revival:
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: Home and Boat of deceased had to be burned so there would be no evil spirits. Dogs and coyotes were treated with a kind of respect in that they were once people. (1,105)
- 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?:
- 6.12 Is there teknonymy?:
- 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.): Shamans supposedly possess powers, the ability of shamans depends on their experience. Shamans used the spirit and power of plants, called the “*Icor*”. (1,105)

## 7. Adornment

- 7.1 Body paint: Face painting was applied as protection from the sun, for purely aesthetic or decorative purposes, for curative and supernatural protective purposes, and to influence nature. People of all ages wore face paintings, often with a fresh design put on each day. The custom continued as common practice among the women and some men on Tiburon Island until the mid-twentieth century. The men discontinued the practice earlier than

- women. Face paint was often applied with brushes made from a twig. The colors available included blue, white, red, pink, yellow, brown, and black. (1,157)
- 7.2 Piercings: None
- 7.3 Haircut: Both men and women usually wore their hair long, past the shoulders. (1,155)
- 7.4 Scarification: None
- 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): Headpieces woven from leafy stems were worn for protection against the sun by men and women. Two kinds of decorative crowns were worn by men in dances and combat, and later, around the camps. Many necklaces pendants, and rings were worn. Necklaces could have been made by snake and fish vertebrae, sea shells, lobster antennae, seeds, stems, roots, flowers, fruits, seaweed and many other things. (1,146)
- 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: The men's crowns were said to give them supernatural powers and intimidated their enemies during combat. (1,146)
- 7.7 Sex differences in adornment: Women wore more necklaces than men, while men wore more headgear and usually didn't wear face paint. (1,147)
- 7.8 Missionary effect:
- 7.9 Types of clothing: Indigenous clothing included breechclouts, aprons, skirts, and robes or blankets made from the tent and skins of the brown pelican and mule deer. Old men and young children usually wore very little clothing. Sandals were made of leather from the green turtle, mule deer, sea lion, or cattle. (1,78)

## 8. Kinship systems

- 8.1 Sibling classification system:
- 8.2 Sororate, levirate: Any kind of sexual relationship or marriage with a relative is considered a big taboo. (1,7)
- 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

## 9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

It was customary for each man to put his identifying mark on the bottom of his sandal so that people could identify the footprints. (1,105)

### Works Cited:

- (1) Bowen, Thomas. *The Record of Native People on Gulf of California Islands*. Tucson, AZ: Arizona State Museum, U of Arizona, 2009. Print.
- (2) Felger, Richard Stephen., and Mary Beck. Moser. *People of the Desert and Sea: Ethnobotany of the Seri Indians*. Tucson, AZ: U of Arizona, 1985. Print.
- (3) "San Estéban Island | Online References | Cyclopaedia.net." *San Estéban Island | Online References | Cyclopaedia.net*. N.p., n.d. Web. 03 Oct. 2014.
- (4) Johnston, Bernice. *The Seri Indians of Sonora, Mexico*. Tucson, AZ: U of Arizona, 1980. Print.
- (5) McGee, W. J., and J. N. B. Hewitt. *The Seri Indians*. Washington: G.P.O., 1898. Print.

