

## **Beyond the Flagship: Tracing MINOM’s Subtle Influence on the Ak-Chin Him Dak Eco-museum Conception**

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*Para Além do Projeto-Referência: a Influência Sutil do MINOM na Conceção do Him Dak Eco-museum na Comunidade Indígena Ak-Chin no Arizona*

The International Movement for a New Museology (MINOM) held its XXI<sup>st</sup> International conference in Catania, Italy, in February 2024. Twenty-one seems to be a relatively small number of events for a 40-year semi-formal association with past and current members in different countries. When considering a study of MINOM, one must go beyond those well-recorded events and evaluate other aspects that might be instrumental in understanding the shifts within the Movement. Ana Mercedes Stoffel Fernandes brought this reality to our attention in her foundational work about MINOM, notably with the remarkable "General Chronology of MINOM" in its annexes (Stoffel Fernandes, 2005a). This chronology describes not only the highly disseminated MINOM International Conferences and Workshops, but also meetings related to other organizations or lesser-known events organized by MINOM. Among the latter, a 1990 International Workshop held in Maricopa, Arizona, in the United States, drew my attention because I had already heard of this meeting from Quebec museologists Paule Renaud and René Rivard, two of the original founding members of MINOM. Within the scope of creating a video to be presented at the aforementioned MINOM International Conference in Italy (Duarte Cândido, Swartz Paredes, 2024), I had the opportunity to have several conversations with Rivard and Renaud, who both mentioned this 1990 meeting and linked it to two significant elements. First, according to them, the meeting was in the framework of a North American MINOM network. Second, the first and only designated ecomuseum within the U.S. territory, the Him Dak Eco-Museum<sup>2</sup>, was created a year after and in the same area as the meeting by a local tribe, the

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<sup>2</sup> Although the spelling "Ecomuseum" is generally more commonly used, I will use "Eco-museum" when I refer to the Ak-Chin Him Dak Eco-museum, as that is how the Ak-Chin Indian Community spells it (Ak-Chin Indian Community, 2025).

Ak-Chin Indian Community.<sup>3</sup> This apparent link between MINOM and the ecomuseum sparked my further interest in pursuing a bibliographic survey on the subject, as I am currently working on a thesis about MINOM. I then quickly deduced that this would constitute a compelling study to understand the development of the MINOM as an association and would consequently advance the research in Sociomuseology. This statement can be supported by the evidence of a lack of academic works or other studies that connect the Ak-Chin Him Dak Eco-Museum with MINOM, or at least it appears to be (I apologize if I have missed anything at the current stage of writing this article). Moreover, although Stoffel Fernandes briefly mentioned the 1990 workshop in Arizona in her General Chronology of MINOM (Stoffel Fernandes, 2005a), she did not link it to the Ak-Chin Him Dak Eco-museum at the time. This leads us to ponder the question that will structure this paper: whether the MINOM was involved in the founding of the only official ecomuseum in the U.S. territory.

The insufficiency of studies on the subject and the lack of primary resources about the 1990 Workshop in Arizona, already deplored by Stoffel Fernandes, brought me to seek archival documents and firsthand accounts from people who participated in developing the Eco-museum's project. Stoffel Fernandes also adopted this methodical approach in her work, which led to the creation of the MINOM Documental Collection Interpretation and Management System (MINOM-SIGNUD) (Stoffel Fernandes, 2005b). Unfortunately, I had to overcome several limitations, including the impossibility of conducting a field study at the Him Dak Eco-museum and its archives. I mainly relied on analyzing a few archaeological and historical references to elaborate on the historical context part of the article. Another significant issue was the inability to gather more recent personal accounts from the Ak-Chin members involved in creating the museum. I made several attempts to reach the Community. Still, without the Tribal Council's authorization to interview the current and former staff of the museum, my exchanges with Ak-Chin members were minimal. To circumvent this setback, I included references from the Him Dak Eco-museum, such as recounts of interviews with Ak-Chin members found in other works. Despite all the constraints, the research reveals interesting details in understanding MINOM as an organization and its degree of involvement in developing this unique Indigenous community's museum.

This paper begins with a first part that presents the Ak-Chin Indian Community and outlines its history. The second part explains how the idea of creating an ecomuseum originated and provides an overview of the Him Dak Eco-museum's genesis, including the extent of MINOM's involvement within it. This part lays the groundwork for the third and fourth parts, which analyze in more detail the MINOM's participation in the Him Dak Museum project and provide key insights for further study of MINOM as a movement.

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<sup>3</sup> On their website, the Ak-Chin identify as part of the "Ak-Chin Indian Community" (Ak-Chin Indian Community, 2025). Throughout this paper, I interchangeably use the terms "Ak-Chin Indian Community," "Ak-Chin Community," "Ak-Chin tribe," "Ak-Chin members," "Ak-Chin people," "Ak-Chin," and "the Community" when I refer to the Ak-Chin Indian Community as a tribe or individuals who identify as members of the tribe. These are not prescribed terms, as each person or community chooses the best terms to identify themselves. Finally, I use the terms Indigenous and tribal as a personal choice unless I am referring to a specific organization or tribe using other words (for example, the Native American Museums Program).

### 1- The Ak-Chin Indian Community and the fight for its land

The Ak-Chin Indian Community is one of the thirteen federally recognized Native American tribes in the Great Bend of Gila area; it is located on the northern edge of the Sonoran Desert in southern Arizona, about 40 miles<sup>4</sup> south of Phoenix (Figures 1 and 2) (Wright & Hopkins, 2016; Fuller, 1992, p. 333).<sup>5</sup> The Ak-Chin Community has over 1,100 tribal members and owns about 22,000 acres of land near Maricopa (Ak-Chin Indian Community, 2025).<sup>6</sup>



Figure 1: Arizona state in the United States. Source: Wikipedia.org.

The term "Ak-Chin" can be translated into the "mouth of the wash" in O'odham<sup>7</sup>, the Ak-Chin's language (Wright & Hopkins, 2016, p. 47).<sup>8</sup> Ak-Chin is also the term used to describe an irrigation system utilizing those washes, and historians believe that Ak-Chin gave themselves this name because they, and their ancestors before them, used this watering technique to grow crops (Fuller, 1992, p. 334). I want to emphasize the word "ancestors" here to clarify that, even though the Ak-Chin Indian Community was established in 1912 by the U.S. Government, its ancestors had inhabited the lands for approximately 15,000 years (Fuller, 1992, p. 334). According to archaeologists, the two Indigenous tribal groups the Ak-Chin descend from, the Akimel O'odham ("People of the River") and the Tohono O'odham

<sup>4</sup> 40 miles is about 64 kilometers.

<sup>5</sup> There are 22 federally recognized tribes in the state of Arizona (Arizona Memory Project, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> 22,000 acres of land are equivalent to about 89 square kilometers.

<sup>7</sup> The word O'odham means "the people."

<sup>8</sup> A wash, or arroyo, is a natural or constructed dry watercourse that temporarily or seasonally fills and flows after sufficient rain. In agricultural areas in arid or semi-arid regions, farmers traditionally relied on small, constructed arroyos for the distribution of water ("Arroyo, or wash (watercourse)," 2025).

("People of the Desert")<sup>9</sup>, used to be hunters and gatherers and followed a "biseasonal settlement pattern" (Fuller, 1992, p. 334; Wright & Hopkins, 2016, p. 46 and 47). From winter to early spring, they lived in encampments in the mountain foothills, as those areas would have had permanent water sources nearby. It is not until the summer rains begin that the ancestors would then relocate to their summer villages near the "mouths of washes," or "ak-chin" (Wright & Hopkins, 2016, p. 47). This was well before the establishment of the Spanish colonial government in Arizona in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century (Fuller, 1992, p. 334). It breaks with the colonial myths Ned Blackhawk and many other Indigenous scholars have been fighting to debunk, such as the idea that Indigenous people were "hostile and passive objects awaiting discovery and domination" (Blackhawk, 2023, p. 2). Nevertheless, the arrival of the non-Indigenous settlers was to provoke irrevocable changes in the lifestyle of the Ak-chin's ancestors, starting by their biseasonal moving pattern. According to Wright and Hopkins, members of the Ak-Chin believe their ancestors have settled permanently around 1874-1875 into what was before their seasonal home (2016, p. 63). Historians attribute this event to the formation of wagon road networks by white immigrants and the subsequent construction of the Southern Pacific Railroad in 1879 (Wright & Hopkins, 2016, p. 63). The small but steadfast village of Ak-Chin persevered for several decades, farming lands and earning wages from working in other communities or constructing the railroad. Alas, this same railroad would soon be the cause of the U.S. Federal agencies' and white settlers' interest in the Ak-Chin ancestral lands. As Wright and Hopkins explained in their report, many Ak-Chin ancestral lands were situated near the future railroad and were coveted by numerous individuals with greedy intentions (2016, p. 63). In 1911, the government attempted to initiate an allotment process under the General Allotment Act of 1887<sup>10</sup>, intending to establish private farms for each identified Indigenous family living in the Maricopa area (Wright & Hopkins, 2016, p. 63). As for all the other allotment cases that occurred in the U.S., this was a systematized procedure which dispossessed the ancestral tribes and created an opportunity for the U.S. Government to sell to non-Indigenous buyers the remaining land that was not assigned to Indigenous families (Stremlau, 2005, p. 265). The allotment project went poorly, mainly because some land claimed by Indigenous people overlapped with the same land demanded by non-Indigenous individuals and entities, such as the railroad company (Wright & Hopkins, 2016, p. 63). The situation reached an impasse and, as a solution, it was decided to have a "large tract of land set aside for the O'odham living at Ak-Chin" instead (Wright & Hopkins, 2016, p. 63). In May 1912, President William Taft signed the executive order formally recognizing the Ak-Chin Community and its territory.

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<sup>9</sup> The Akimel O'odham are also known as "Pimas," and the Tohono O'odham as "Papagos." Pimas comes from the O'odham word "Pim-maic," which means "I do not know" or "I do not understand." The name "Papago" may come from the O'odham word "bawi o'odham," meaning "tepariy bean eaters." Those names were given by the Spanish colonizers when they first met the members of the tribes (DuVal, p. 181), which is the reason why I will not use these terms in my work.

<sup>10</sup> The General Allotment Act (also known as the Dawes Act of 1887) regulated land rights on tribal territories within the United States. It allowed the President of the U. S. to subdivide Indigenous tribal communal lands into individual land for ownership for each Indigenous family. The idea was that by attracting tribe members to individual ownership, they would then adopt the "American ways" and lose their "Indian-ness" (National Archives, 2022).

The Ak-Chin's fight for their land was far from over: the 47,600 acres<sup>11</sup> of land initially set aside for the Community was quickly reduced by less than half in September 1912, notably to calm the protests of non-Indigenous farmers (Ak-Chin Indian Community, 2025 May). Another deception from the U.S. Government originates from the fact that, at that time, it did not fulfill one of the clauses to supply the Ak-Chin with a "regular and dependable water supply" (Fuller, 1992, p. 335). According to Lorraine Kingdon, only four wells were delivered around the time of the Community's establishment (Kingdon, 1990, p. 14). Without a reliable water source in an arid environment, the Ak-Chin Indian Community's beginnings were difficult and poor. The tribal members lived in mud huts or simply constructed dwellings without access to running water or electricity (Fuller, 1992, p. 335; Kingdon, 1990, pp. 14 and 16). By the 1940s, the U.S. government still had not provided the promised water supply, so the Ak-Chin could not farm much land to sustain themselves. Their primary source of revenue was leasing their land to non-Indigenous people, such as ranchers (Rivard, 2022). Ironically, this leasing system was proposed by a federal agency, the U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), with the idea that the tenants would "improve the land for irrigation and, as a result of the improvements, produce higher yields and pay higher rents to the Ak-Chin" (Kingdon, 1990, p. 15). It turned out to be the opposite: the lessees did not improve the land at all and surely did not pay more than the minimal \$10,000 a year rent set by the BIA (Kingdon, p. 15). In 1961, the Ak-Chin, led by siblings Richard Carlyle, Wilbur "Buddy" Carlyle, and Leona Carlyle-Kakar, decided against the BIA's advice to recover their land by not renewing the leases (Fuller, 1992, p. 335).

Over the following three decades after the end of the leases, the Ak-Chin community successfully formed a tribal government (the Ak-Chin Indian Community was formally organized in 1961), established its first agricultural company, Ak-Chin Farms, and lifted itself out of poverty. However, the central act of the Community, which would forever change the lives of the Ak-Chin, was to confront the U.S. Government in demanding its honor of a permanent water supply, and this was achieved through legal action. After years of negotiations led by tribal representatives such as Leona Carlyle-Kakar<sup>12</sup> and the help of an expert legal team, the Ak-Chin Community obtained a water settlement signed in 1984 (Kingdon, 1990, p. 17), which was later codified under the name "Public Law 98-530" or "Ak-Chin Indian Water Rights Settlement Act" (Rivard, 2022). In an interview in April 2025, Nancy Fuller, one of the external advisors involved in the ecomuseum's creation process, emphasized that this was then "the first and only water settlement negotiated between an Indigenous tribe, the Department of Interior, and Congress."<sup>13</sup> Besides stipulating the amount of water the U.S. Government was required to provide each year to the Ak-Chin, the agreement granted \$15 million to prepare the land for expanding their farming capacity (Kingdon, 1990, p. 17). This amount did not include the money the U.S. paid to install the canal system that supplies water from the Colorado River, which is estimated at more than

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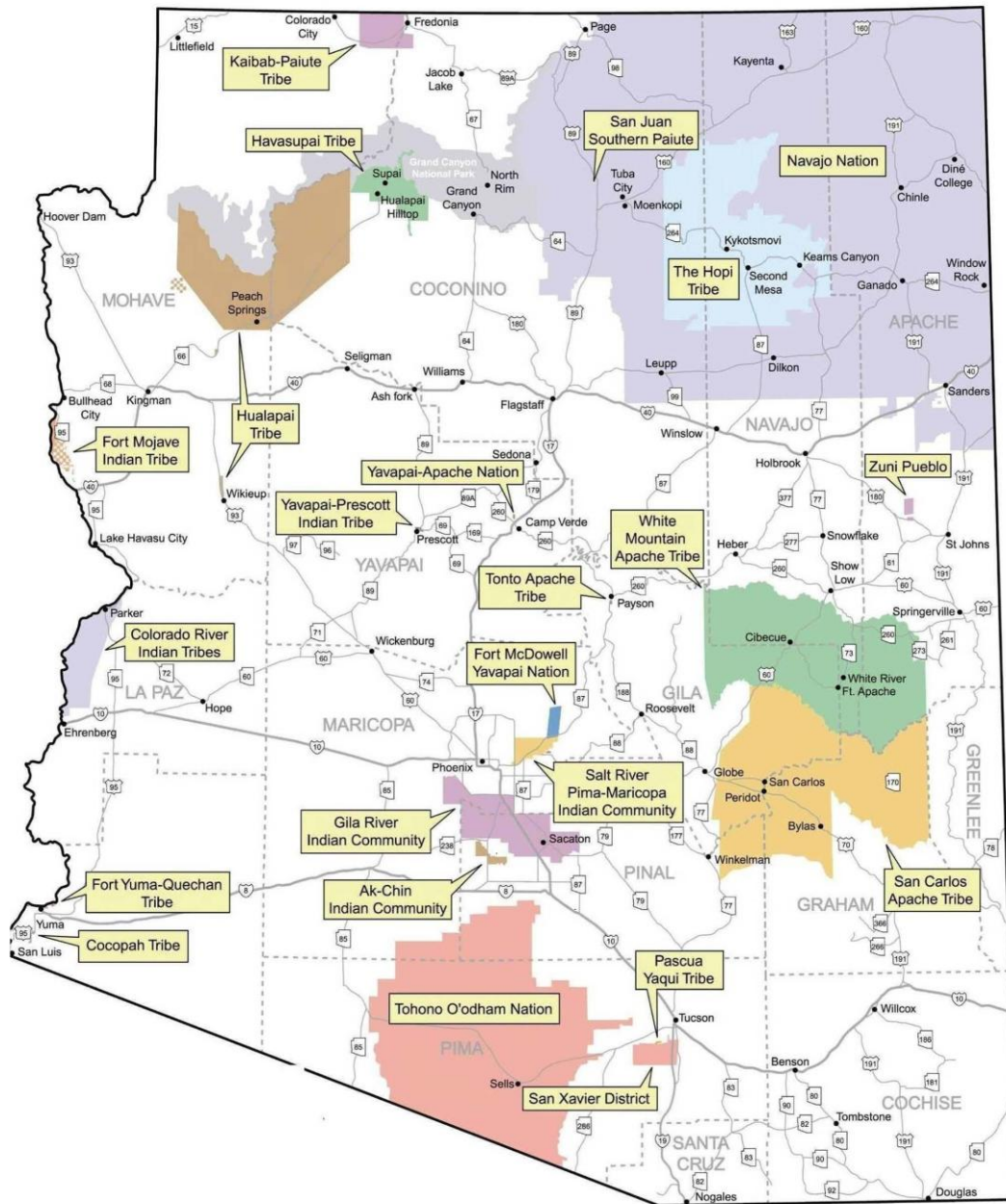
<sup>11</sup> 47,600 acres is about 192 square kilometers.

<sup>12</sup> Sadly, Leona Carlyle-Kakar's brothers passed away before they could witness the 1984 water settlement. Richard Carlyle died of a car accident in 1965 at only 33 years old, and Wilbur Carlyle succumbed in 1981, at age 47, "after a long battle with alcoholism and diabetes" (Kingdon, 1990, pp. 16-17).

<sup>13</sup> While the Ak-Chin Indian Water Rights Settlement is indeed the first, it is no longer the only one. Over the last four decades, the government has addressed several claims through negotiated settlements.

\$1 billion (Rivard, 2022). As with any major construction project, federal laws required an archaeological study of the land to be conducted in 1984, before the commencement of work (Fuller, 1992, p. 338). Previous archaeological campaigns in the Ak-Chin land, conducted in the mid-1970s, confirmed that the Ak-Chin land had been continuously occupied for approximately 15,000 years, as mentioned earlier in this chapter (Fuller, 1992, p. 334). Yet, the findings from the 1985 and 1986 excavations were unparalleled, and they soon became one of the factors that led the Ak-Chin Community to start discussing the construction of a museum.

### ARIZONA TRIBAL LANDS MAP



## **2- The creation of the Him Dak Eco-museum: a learning process guided by the MINOM?**

The excavations of 1985 and 1986 conducted before the canal system installation were the "catalyst for awakening the community's interest in its heritage", recounts Nancy Fuller in her article (1992, p. 345). The archaeological campaigns revealed more than 300 pit houses, over 700 boxes of archaeological items, mainly consisting of daily life utensils, and 21 Indigenous skeletal remains (Fuller, 1992, p. 338). However, as federal laws require for any archaeological findings excavated in public and Indigenous land, the findings had to be sent away and stored in a special archival facility, the Central Arizona Repository in Tucson<sup>14</sup>, since the Ak-Chin had no archival space at that time (Doğan & Timothy, 2020, p. 140; Stokrocki, 1996, p. 41). The moving of the archaeological materials, and especially the human remains, to a distant federal location caused a deep outcry among the Ak-Chin members (Fuller, 1992, p. 338). This dissatisfaction did not arise abruptly. The transfer of the human remains and archaeological artifacts for safekeeping constituted one element within a broader sequence of events and changes that, once again as in the previous century, led the Ak-Chin to perceive renewed threats to their land, culture, and identity (Fuller, 1992, p. 338).

Those aspects must be understood when broaching the genesis of the Him Dak Eco-museum and a possible involvement of the MINOM in its creation. The first part of this chapter sets the context for the conception process of the Him Dak, followed by how the Ak-Chin were introduced to Ecomuseology, and finally, how the MINOM became involved in the process.

### **a. A museum to maintain the Ak-Chin's identity**

A few references describing the creation process of the Him Dak Eco-museum cite the need to house archaeological artifacts on the Ak-Chin homeland as the primary motivation for building a museum (e.g., Doğan & Timothy, 2020, p. 140). This is factually correct, but for the Ak-Chin Community, bringing back those artifacts seems to have held a deeper meaning that surpassed their materiality. On April 9, 2025, I spoke with Shayne Del Cohen, archivist, and education expert involved in the conception of the Eco-museum and its archives. She has been dedicating most of her career to helping Indigenous tribes recover their original documents and creating records management systems for their archival facilities; she explained:

"In working with tribes, what I learned at that time was that most of them were not in possession of their own documents because for years and years, everything was done by the Bureau of Indian Affairs [ed. BIA] [...] The point is, if you do not know and you do not hold your own records, if you do not have the title to your house, if you do not have the title to your car, if you do not have things with your name, you lose a lot of rights."

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<sup>14</sup> Tucson, in Arizona, is about 100 miles (about 160 kilometers) southeast of the Ak-Chin Indian Community.

Thus, the return of their archaeological artifacts and archival documents and the ability to manage them within their own museum were for the Ak-Chin an act of reclaiming their rights and strengthening their Community. Following the recent victory in the water settlement, the Ak-Chin Indian Community paradoxically faced tensions and disagreements among its members, putting the tribe's identity and customs in jeopardy (Fuller, 1992, p. 336). According to Nancy Fuller, this situation was triggered by three "strong forces" (1992, p. 336). The first was the impact of new technologies, mainly related to land farming practices newly available to the Ak-Chin Farms, and their detrimental effects on the native flora. The change in the accessibility of native plants, in turn, endangered specific Ak-Chin traditional practices, such as basket making and the rituals, celebrations, and workshops associated with them. The second force that generated discordances within the tribe was external social and economic changes. With larger and more profitable farms, the Ak-Chin had to become more involved in external matters to run a successful business. Therefore, they were gradually affected by external problems, and they had to reconsider many of their decisions as a community in light of external aspects rather than internal, communal ones. Finally, the third force that threatened the unity among the Ak-Chin members, but also influenced them to voice their concerns, was the emergence of an Indigenous identity movement. Inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a new generation of Ak-Chin raised and advocated for their rights, aligning with older members of the Community to protect their traditions (Fuller, 1992, pp. 336-337). External factors had indeed also endangered the Ak-Chin way of life, and this had even been the case for many decades prior to the 1984 water settlement. The use of the Ak-Chin's language, for example, declined after the 1960s as the adoption of English became prevalent, notably in the farming business sphere (Fuller, 1992, p. 337).

Leona Carlyle-Kakar, inspired by the vision of her late brother Richard Carlyle to have a museum in Ak-Chin land (Interview of Nancy Fuller, April 9, 2025), "thought a museum and archives would be the ideal means" to "defuse these tensions and reweave the community together" (Fuller, 1992, p. 338). Carlyle-Kakar, named "Miss Water Rights" by her friends and tribal members (Chance, 2016) and now Chair of the Tribal Council<sup>15</sup>, believed that "if younger generations knew about the tribe's early struggles and achievements, they would be proud to be Ak-Chin, and the community would survive" (Fuller, p. 338).

#### **b. Nancy Fuller, the mediator between the Ak-Chin and the New Museology**

The U.S. Government had agreed to return the archaeological artifacts to the Ak-Chin on the condition that they build a specialized facility.<sup>16</sup> Another condition, as required by federal law, was that the tribe had to have trained personnel to care for the archaeological artifacts and archival documents. But as Shayne Del Cohen shared with me, this second condition would be more challenging to honor: "In Ak-Chin, at that time [...], most people didn't have college education [...] and they [ed. the museums] only hired PhDs or Masters" (Interview of Shayne Del Cohen, April 11, 2025). This is a harsh reality that Nancy Fuller also

<sup>15</sup> "The Ak-Chin Indian Community is governed by a five-member Tribal Council that oversees the administrative operations and departments that service the community" (Doğan & Timothy, 2020, p. 139).

<sup>16</sup> After the Him Dak Eco-museum and Archives' facilities were completed in 1991, the U.S. gave back all the archaeological findings and human remains, as well as their personal documents kept by the U.S. Government before.

learned in the early 1980s as she started working at the Office of Museum Programs at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C. This office was created with the objective to provide the professional services and knowledge of the Smithsonian to the museum professionals as there was a national effort throughout the U.S. to get the museums professionalized. "In those days, it [ed. a museum] was mainly run by one man and a whole bunch of women volunteers", recalled Fuller (Interview of April 9, 2025; Fuller, 1992, p. 362). Such training programs will never reach Indigenous tribes, warned Dave Warren<sup>17</sup> during his visit at Fuller's office, "They can't even get into them because they don't have any experience" (Interview with Nancy Fuller, April 9, 2025). From there, Warren suggested that the Office of Museum Programs conducts special museum training sessions for Indigenous tribes interested in establishing a museum. This is how the Native American Museums Program was born within the Smithsonian's Office of Museum Programs in 1977, and how Fuller thereafter worked with the Ak-Chin Community.

It was in 1986 that the Ak-Chin contacted the Native American Museums Program. Nancy Fuller, then Coordinator of the program<sup>18</sup>, remembers the succession of events that led her to work with the tribe: from her initial phone conversation with the consultant hired by the Ak-Chin Community during which she first mentioned the ecomuseum model, to her first in-person meeting with the Community to further explain the concept and assess its alignment with the tribe's objectives for a future museum (Interview of Nancy Fuller, April 9, 2025). Another element that Fuller recalls, but which is not mentioned in any of the references consulted, is how she happened to learn about Ecomuseums. This element is the first in a series of events and other elements linked to the conception process of the Him Dak Eco-museum, demonstrating that the MINOM had a presence in the creation of the Eco-museum. Nancy Fuller first heard about ecomuseums during her participation in the Heritage North 85 Symposium in Yellowknife, Canada, from September 11-14, 1985. This event was organized by Robert Janes, then Director of the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Center, and brought together approximately 60 Indigenous and non-Indigenous specialists in Northern Indigenous heritage (Email of René Rivard, May 5, 2025).<sup>19</sup> René Rivard, one of the founding members of MINOM from Canada, was in attendance, having collaborated on several museum projects initiated by Indigenous tribes in Quebec, including the Cree, Innu, Inuit, and Atikamekw (Rivard, 2022). He presented a talk about Ecomuseology, entitled "Museums as Forums, as Development Centers..." (Rivard, 1985). Rivard's presentation inspired Nancy Fuller, as she recalls in the interview of April 9, 2026: "I mean, it was unbelievable. Here was a museum that was not intended for a bunch of tourists. It was intended for the people who created it." She considered applying the ecomuseum model and its principles to her training sessions for Indigenous museums. At that time and since the 1970s, U.S. Indigenous museums were far from the Ecomuseology vision shared in René Rivard's lecture. Those were merely founded as an economic tool for the tribes. This aspect

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<sup>17</sup> Dave Warren, from Santa Clara Pueblo, was an Indigenous historian, scholar, professor, and a museum and academic administrator. He helped establish the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington, D.C., and many other Indigenous cultural institutions (Pasatiempo, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Nancy Fuller assumed the role of Coordinator of the Native American Museums Program from 1981 to 1989 (Fuller, 1992, p. 363).

<sup>19</sup> Among the participants of the Heritage North Symposium, specialists from Alaska (U.S.), Yukon (Canada), Greenland (Denmark), and Québec (Canada) (Email of René Rivard, May 5, 2025).

was very much promoted by the U.S. Department of Commerce, which had a program that even helped finance such structures. The idea was that by building a museum in tribal territories, non-Indigenous tourists would come and spend their money at the museum, the motel, and the gift shops (Interview of Nancy Fuller, April 9, 2025). The problem pointed out by Nancy Fuller is that the Department of Commerce's funding never included staff training. Therefore, the tribes often ended up hiring non-Indigenous staff or Indigenous artists with little to no training in museum operations (Interview of Nancy Fuller, April 9, 2025). Regarding the Native American Museums Program, it had the knowledge, but it did not always have the means to provide the training demanded. At the Smithsonian Institution, "the buildings, some staff, and collection care are funded by the U.S. government. Exhibits and programming are not [ed. in that case, the Native American Museums Program]." Staff members had to find the funding sources for each of their programs, explained Nancy Fuller in the interview (April 9, 2025). Thus, when she was invited to meet with the Ak-Chin to discuss their museum project, she felt compelled to share her recent insights into Ecomuseology, and she did so for several reasons. First, in her opinion, the ecomuseum model's principles were compatible with the cultural and educational missions the tribe hoped their museum would accomplish (Fuller, 1992, p. 348). In section 2.a., I indicated that Leona Carlyle-Kakar hoped the museum would foster a sense of pride among Ak-Chin, especially among younger members, thereby supporting the preservation of the Community's identity and unity. This is very much close to the concept of community development in Georges Henri Rivière's original definition of the ecomuseum, which was "essentially linked to maintaining cultural identity by generating pride in their [ed. the community] heritage" (Davis, 2011, p. 265). Another factor that motivated Nancy Fuller to propose the ecomuseum model to the Ak-Chin members was that one of their goals was to remain self-sufficient in museum operations, as they had long done with their agricultural business (Fuller, 1992, p. 348). Lastly, the third reason why Nancy Fuller introduced the ecomuseum model to the Ak-Chin is that they have demonstrated resilience and determination (Fuller, p. 348), as evidenced by the Community's historical overview presented in the first chapter of this work. As a matter of fact, the Community "liked the idea of being first in the nation to attempt the model" (Fuller, p. 348). In an article published in the 2010 special English edition of *Cadernos de Sociomuseologia* on New Museology, Eduardo Giménez-Cassina questions whether the adoption of the ecomuseum model was suitable for the Ak-Chin Indian Community (2010, p. 33). He even goes so far as to wonder if the ecomuseum model was truly needed or wanted by the entire tribe, or if it may have been a means for them to secure more funding (Giménez-Cassina, *ibidem*). Such assumptions simply reveal the author's ignorance of the Ak-Chin Community's history, past struggles, and pioneering spirit, as demonstrated in the preceding part. He also entirely overlooked the Ak-Chin's strong desire to remain auto-sufficient and, more crucially, their financial stability. The Community had indeed the resources to fund its museum project (Interview of Nancy Fuller, May 9, 2025); a fact that undermines Giménez-Cassina's hypothesis that the Ak-Chin adopted the Ecomuseum label as a strategy to secure grants. Finally, by doubting the adaptability of the Ecomuseum to the needs of the tribe, the author of the article minimized the 5-year planning and building phase of the museum. This key period was not only dedicated to building the museum or training the Ak-chin future

museum staff and volunteers, but also "to inform the community about the objectives of the ecomuseum and elicit their interest" (Doğan & Timothy, 2020, p. 140). Besides those scheduled informational meetings throughout the building process, educational courses were also offered to the future staff and all interested members of the Community (Doğan & Timothy, p. 140). This period, spanning from 1986 to 1991, will be the subject of the third part of this chapter and is central to understanding the extent of MINOM's involvement in the Eco-museum's construction process.

**c. The conception phase of the Him Dak Eco-museum and the importance of the study visits in understanding MINOM's presence**

The conception phase of the Him Dak Eco-museum was unique, as it incorporated informational and learning aspects for the entire community (Fuller, 1992, p. 349). The Ak-Chin Tribal Council recognized the importance of this step, particularly in fulfilling its primary objective of strengthening its community. This latter element was so central that, when the Council members sought and organized funds for the museum construction, they specifically requested special resources for the sole purpose of financing educational programs for all the tribe's members. Thus, in 1987-1988, the Council obtained a \$300,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Native Americans (Doğan & Timothy, 2020, p. 140).<sup>20</sup> This grant was also to help the Council to create an "ecomuseum project board" (Fuller, 1992, p. 348), composed of Ak-Chin representatives (such as Leona Carlyle-Kakar) and future museum staff, as well as external experts in different fields related to museums (Fuller, p. 348; Doğan & Timothy, 2020, p. 140). This is in this function that archival and education expert Shayne Del Cohen (mentioned above in part 2.a) was brought into the project. Nancy Fuller, who assisted in recruiting the experts, also asked René Rivard to join the board; they had stayed in contact since their meeting at the Heritage North 85 Symposium. Moreover, Nancy Fuller had maintained contact with Rivard through MINOM, notably by attending several of the organization's international workshops in the 1980s, and even served as its Secretary for a short period in the early 1990s (Interview with Nancy Fuller, April 14, 2025). Among the various training activities organized by the board members of the future Ecomuseum were study visits designed to help the Ak-Chin and prospective staff determine which elements they wished to include into their museum project. What they learned during their visits was then shared with the rest of the community during the scheduled informational meetings mentioned earlier (Fuller, 1992, p. 349). Altogether, Nancy Fuller estimated that "more than thirty Ak-Chin visited a total of over a hundred museums, historical societies, archives, and related cultural organizations [...]" (1992, p. 349).

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<sup>20</sup> It is important here to add that this \$300,000 Federal grant for the Community's education process was the first time that the tribe ever received Federal funds (Interview with Nancy Fuller, April 14, 2025), which confirm the ongoing concern of the Ak-Chin to be as self-sufficient as possible and undermines the hypothesis of Eduardo Giménez-Cassina about a possible marketing use of the ecomuseum label. The bulk of the financing of the whole museum project, staff training, and exhibitions design came from funds of the Ak-Chin Indian Community (Doğan & Timothy, 2020, p. 140).

### The first visit of the Ak-Chin in Quebec, May 23-28, 1988

The visits of the Ak-Chin Museum board began in 1987 and were initially focused on Indigenous museums. From local day trips in Arizona, such as an excursion to the Museum of the Colorado River Tribes, the visits then evolved into longer study trips to geographically farther-away areas (Fuller, 1992, p. 349).<sup>21</sup> From May 23 to 28, 1988, the Ak-Chin's museum board traveled to Quebec for the first time<sup>22</sup> and visited museums in places such as Montreal, Trois-Rivières, La Tuque, and Mashteuiatsh (Personal archives of René Rivard). The highlights of the trip were a visit at the Musée de la Civilisation in Quebec City (figure 3), which was to be inaugurated later that year; divided group visits in four villages of the Écomusée de la Haute-Beauce; and several meetings with Indigenous tribes such as the Atikamekw, the Inuit, and the Mohawk (Personal Archives of René Rivard). During this time, the presence of Michel Noël, an early member of MINOM, was vital, as he was then working at the Quebec Ministry of Culture, particularly with Indigenous peoples in Canada. Thanks to his professional credentials, Noël, of Indigenous descent himself, was able to obtain subsidies to enable the different Indigenous delegations from Quebec to come to join the Ak-Chin group in one of the stages of the Ak-Chin trip (Interview of René Rivard, May 19, 2025; Personal archives of René Rivard). A meeting worth mentioning during the study trip is a dinner at Le Concorde hotel in Quebec City where Ak-Chin members had their first official contact with MINOM (Figure 4). Although this visit by the Ak-Chin museum board in Quebec was not identified as a MINOM meeting, it appears to have cemented an informal MINOM itinerant group that will meet again in at least two other occurrences involving the Ak-Chin community.



*Figure 4: Michel Noël (MINOM; Quebec Cultural Ministry) addressing the people present at the meeting dinner at Le Concorde hotel in Quebec City, in September 1988. We can identify, from left to right, seated in the 2nd row, Charles Carlyle (first director of the Him Dak Eco-museum) and Paule Renaud (MINOM; Cultura Bureau d'Études). Photo credits: René Rivard, Personal Archives.*

<sup>21</sup> From Nancy Fuller's article (1992) and interviews of Nancy Fuller et René Rivard, we know that the Ak-Chin visited museums and other cultural institutions in Washington state, Wisconsin, Washington D.C. (Anacostia Community Museum), and other countries in the continent: Canada (Québec...) and Mexico (in the states of Chihuahua, Sinaloa and Sonora).

<sup>22</sup> In his personal archives, René Rivard indicated that there were two other visits of the Ak-Chin in Quebec.



*Figure 5: Members of the Ak-Chin museum board during their visit to Quebec, in September 1988. Several representatives from Indigenous organizations or other museum institutions were also present. Left to right: 1st row: Johanne Robertson (member of SAMMA, a Canadian Indigenous education and museology society), Leona Carlyle-Kakar (Ak-Chin Community and instigator of the Eco-museum), Nancy Fuller (Smithsonian Institution), Serge Goriatchkine (archaeologist, Quebec Cultural Ministry), Elina Helander (Director of the Sami Museum in Utsjoki, Finland), unidentified Ak-Chin museum board member. 2nd row: René Rivard (MINOM; Cultura Bureau d'Études), Joanne Blanchet (Cultura Bureau d'Études), Charles Carlyle (first director of the Him Dak Eco-museum), Henri Dorion (Musée de la Civilisation), unidentified Ak-Chin museum board member, Delia Carlyle (Ak-Chin Community Council), Johnny Lopez? (Ak-Chin museum board member). 3rd row: Michel Noël (MINOM; Quebec Cultural Ministry), unidentified person, unidentified person, Terry Enos? (Ak-Chin Community Council). Photo credits from Nancy Fuller, 1992.*

### **The ATLATL and WMA Heritage and Empowerment Conference, October 25 and 26, 1989**

The event that reunited again MINOM members and the Ak-Chin museum board members was a Conference on the theme of Heritage and Empowerment in October 1989, in Phoenix, Arizona. This event, according to René Rivard, was co-organized by the ATLATL, an Indigenous arts organization based in Phoenix, and the Western Museums Association (WMA) (Interview of René Rivard, May 19, 2025; Personal archives of René Rivard). A work document, also shared by René Rivard, indicates that a MINOM delegation from Quebec, led by Rivard himself, was present and took part in a session entitled "Empowerment of Underrepresented Communities." The session was facilitated by Nancy Fuller, with speakers from different institutions from the U.S. and Canada, such as Michel Noël (MINOM), and Canadian and U.S. Museum Directors and other museum professionals such as Weldon Johnson, from the Colorado River Tribes Museum in Parker, Arizona, and Leona Carlyle-Kakar, Ak-Chin leader and instigator of the Him Dak Eco-museum. According to Nancy Fuller's article, we also know that members of the Ak-Chin museum board attended the conference and participated in one of the panel presentations (1992, p. 355). This event constituted another valuable experience in their learning process and the creation of the

Eco-museum (Figure 6). Nancy Fuller wrote about this conference as a way for the Ak-Chin members to share their knowledge and learning experience with other local Indigenous tribes in Arizona, "to let them know about new museum models and to introduce the Canadians to a wider array of Arizona Indians" (1992, p. 353).



*Figure 6: Photo of the public during the joint conference of the ATLATL and the WMA. The two people standing on the far right are Michel Noël (MINOM; Quebec Cultural Ministry) and Nancy Fuller (Smithsonian Institution). The two women seated near them are two of the original Ak-Chin staff members of the Him Dak Eco-museum, Victoria Smith and Teresa Valisto. Photo credits: René Rivard, Personal Archives.*

### **The visit of the Ak-Chin in Mexico, November 19-23, 1990**

The third and last other event that shows the presence of MINOM members during the visits and learning process of the Ak-Chin Community was in 1990. It occurred shortly after the Groundbreaking Ceremony of the Eco-museum on November 17, as shown in René Rivard's archival documents. Rivard had traveled to Arizona just for the occasion, along with Paule Renaud (already present at the Ak-Chin visit in Quebec mentioned earlier). Just two days after, on the 19th, the Ak-Chin museum board was back on the road for another program of visits, this time in Mexico, specifically in the northern states of Chihuahua, Sonora, and Sinaloa (Personal archives of René Rivard). A few other Quebecois joined the group. Thus, René Rivard mentioned the participation of Michel Noël (present at both the earlier events mentioned) and other Indigenous or non-Indigenous professionals related to tribal cultural organizations in Quebec (Personal archives of René Rivard). Another founding member of MINOM joined the group: Miriam Arroyo, a Mexican founding member of MINOM and one of the instigators of the Casa del Museo (see Figure 7). Unfortunately, I did not have the opportunity to interview Arroyo about her participation in the Ak-Chin visit to Mexico. Still, it is assumed that she was instrumental in organizing the trip, notably in connecting beforehand with the different Museos Comunitarios visited by the group and assisting with translation and interpretation. Circling back to the beginning of this work, a hypothesis can be formed that the Groundbreaking Ceremony of the Him Dak and the visit of the Ak-Chin in Mexico correspond to the MINOM event from 1990 that Ana Mercedes

Stoffel Fernandes reported in her MINOM General Chronology. We can assume that Stoffel Fernandes obtained this information directly from Miriam Arroyo, as she is listed in the acknowledgements of Stoffel Fernandes' master's thesis as one of the MINOM members who contributed information.<sup>23</sup> The information could not have come from René Rivard, as no MINOM members from Quebec are indicated as contributors for Stoffel Fernandes' work (Stoffel Fernandes, 2005a, p. 5). Thus, René Rivard's perspective was valuable to this present work, as it contributed important insights into a lesser-known part of MINOM's chronology.



*Figure 7: A picture taken by René Rivard (MINOM; Cultura Bureau d'Études) during the visit to the Museos Comunitarios in the North of Mexico. Several MINOM members were identified, including Michel Noël, Paule Renaud, Miriam Arroyo, and possibly Raul Mendez Lugo (to confirm). Nancy Fuller is also present in the center. Photo credits: René Rivard, Personal Archives.*

With regards to the MINOM's involvement in the foundation of the Ak-Chin Eco-museum, having examining above three instances in which its members were present during the museum's conception process does indicate a form of participation, though one that I would characterize as indirect. However, without the much anticipated perspective of the Ak-Chin Indian Community, it is difficult to define the contributions that the MINOM, as a professional organization, made to the discussions, visits, and training of the future Ak-Chin museum staff. Nonetheless, it is possible to trace some contributions of MINOM's individuals. Nancy Fuller had, for example, noted the important role of René Rivard in the development of the Ak-Chin Him-Dak Eco-Museum's main building (Email of Nancy Fuller, August 10, 2025). Together with Jim Mahoney<sup>24</sup>, also a member of the ecomuseum project

<sup>23</sup> Another possibility could be that Raul Mendez Lugo, another MINOM member from Mexico, shared the information with Stoffel Fernandes. He might have been present during the visit himself, but his identification in the photo shared in this work (figure 7) will have to be confirmed by him.

<sup>24</sup> After a 27-year career as an Exhibition Designer at the Smithsonian Institution, James (Jim) Mahoney remained active as an independent consultant after retiring in 1986. The Ak-Chin Him-Dak Eco-museum is one of the projects he helped develop in this role (Town of Somerset, 2020, p. 4).

board, Rivard designed the conceptual form of the museum, including an elevator to the roof so the Ak-Chin's elders could see the Community's land.<sup>25</sup>

An aspect that can be highlighted and constitutes another interesting study is the remarkable ability of MINOM members to connect, at a time when the use of the Internet was only a remote possibility. For example, René Rivard explained that he knew Miriam Arroyo from past workshops of the MINOM, but he had also collaborated with her on other projects outside of the MINOM later (Interview of René Rivard, May 19, 2025). The idea that the MINOM and its members facilitated the emergence of new networks and generated new projects is very much viable. This chain of three sets of events, constituting a part of the Ak-Chin Him-Dak Eco-museum conception, corroborates this statement. During a discussion I had with him (Interview of May 19, 2025), René Rivard also linked those event –particularly the 1988 visit of the Ak-Chin to Quebec–, to the early efforts of the Québécois members to establish a MINOM North America. These initiatives predated the MINOM board's official decision to grant autonomy to regional MINOM networks, which was adopted at MINOM's 1989 Annual Meeting in The Hague, Netherlands (Mayrand, 1989). Another point that merits further development is the possibility that, like the 1988 visit to Québec, the Ak-Chin's visit to Mexico in 1990 may also have represented an early attempt to create a MINOM network in the Americas. However, participation appears to have been limited to Canada, the United States, and Mexico. In any case, this hypothesis constitutes a promising avenue for further research.

### **3- The Him Dak Eco-museum, a testimony of the "underground results" of the MINOM?**

The story of the Ak-Chin Community and its remarkable journey of learning and building its museum is, like that of other museum creations, one of a kind. If we were to compare it with another experience associated with the MINOM, the *Écomusée de la Haute-Beauce* would be the closest match.<sup>26</sup> First, both ecomuseums were built in disadvantaged contexts, which can have many forms. One shared dimension of disadvantage for both the Ak-Chin and *Beaucerons* people was their limited access to training prior to their ecomuseum's conception. As René Rivard noted, community members from the *Écomusée de la Haute-Beauce* also benefited from museum studies and museum operation classes for three winters, in the early years of the ecomuseum (Interview of René Rivard, May 19, 2025). Another similarity between the two ecomuseums is, of course, the involvement of MINOM members. Although I characterized MINOM's involvement in the creation of the Him Dak Eco-museum as indirect, this does not diminish the value of learning from this case or the insights it offers for reflecting on MINOM as a movement. In his introduction to

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<sup>25</sup> Due to costs, the installation of the elevator was installed about ten years after the opening of the museum (Email of Nancy Fuller, August 10, 2025).

<sup>26</sup> In her article, Nancy Fuller cites the *Écomusée de la Haute-Beauce* as one of the models that « served as the foundation for planning and organizing » the Eco-museum. She also indicates *La Maison des Cultures Frontières* in Freyming-Merlebach, France, as another important inspiration (1992, p. 333). This last institution was one of the participating institutions at the MINOM International Workshop of 1989, in Freyming-Merlebach, France. From my second interview with Nancy Fuller, I learned that she participated to that 1989 workshop, as well as at least two other MINOM Workshops in 1986 (Toten, Norway) and 1987 (Molinos, Spain) (Interview from April 14, 2025).

"Haute-Beauce: Psychosociologie d'un Écomusée", Pierre Mayrand discusses the contributions of the MINOM and how they can sometimes be invisible or difficult to define (2004, p. 19). Far from being a limitation, the difficulty of fully grasping MINOM's overall impact as an organization may be partly attributable to its comparatively loose structure in relation to other international professional associations, namely, its existence as a more abstract form of institution. A brochure for membership appeal from the early years of MINOM presents the association as "a tool that members must constantly recreate on their own initiative, through activities that encourage their participation" (MINOM, ca. 1992). Thus, the idea seemed to be that by loosening its institutional structure and boundaries, MINOM members and allies could more effectively disseminate the New Museology by collaborating globally with diverse individuals and institutions, thereby recreating experiences from elsewhere while still respecting the unique particularities of each place. This point relates to two of the association's stated activities in Article 6 of its Statutes, adopted at its first General Meeting during the MINOM International Conference held in Lisbon in 1985. These activities include "to encourage the creation of new museology associations in regions of the world" (illustrated here by the strong yet short-lived MINOM North America) and "to provide, among others, services in training, expertise, distribution, and documentation" (MINOM, 1985). Many MINOM members, such as René Rivard, followed that guideline to the letter, getting involved in other organizations through their participation in conferences, consultations, or training projects that extended beyond MINOM's blurred boundaries. During the May 19 interview, he explained: "For us, the fervent supporters of the MINOM, any opportunity was good enough to say we are moving towards social museology." *In fine*, the three sets of events involving the Ak-Chin Community presented in the second part of this study should be understood as constitutive of MINOM's activities, in much the same way as its International Workshops (MINOM, 1985). This interpretation does not diminish the role of the Ak-Chin Community; rather, it underscores the fact that MINOM's activities may at times in its history be informal, unnamed, and consequently multifaceted in nature. For instance, these three occurrences described above can simultaneously be understood as part of the conceptual development of the Him Dak Eco-museum, or a part of the history of an Indigenous community who fought to keep their heritage and identity prospering, or an opportunity to share experience with other tribal nations, in the case of the Ak-Chin delegation meetings with Indigenous people from Canada in 1988.

#### **4- What makes a meeting or a museum, MINOM's? Between value systems and final considerations**

Through this study, I came to realize that certain MINOM meetings and other activities, such as the conception phase of the Him Dak Eco-museum examined here, can be difficult to identify and delineate, either because of their informal nature or because they simultaneously pursue multiple objectives and involve different actors. From a methodological standpoint, this study reinforces the importance of relying on primary sources, including archival documents and interviews. It also calls for sustained critical

analysis, particularly with regards to writings about MINOM and the New Museology that are too often treated as authoritative references. There is a need to demystify these “state-of-the-art” sources and to explore external and primary materials beyond the MINOM circle. However, this remains challenging, as illustrated by the absence of testimonies from members of the Ak-Chin Community in the present work. This last thought is closely connected to a recurring question that emerged throughout this investigation: why is there so little recognition or mention of the Him Dak Eco-museum, or of the three sets of activities analyzed here, in sources about MINOM? The writings of Pierre Mayrand, described by Hugues de Varine and others as “the main disseminator of the New Museology and Ecomuseology ideas in the whole wide world” (2017, p. 63), do not appear to have considered the Him Dak Eco-museum as an initiative supported by MINOM. In “Haute-Beauce: Psychosociologie d'un Écomusée”, previously referenced, Mayrand highlights the Écomusée de la Haute-Beauce as well as the Geoparque del Maestrazgo in Spain and the Ecomusée Creusot-Montceau in France as “flagships” (or *phares*, in French) or, in other words, places of convergence and reference intended to serve as models for other initiatives (2004, p. 19). One may therefore question whether this emphasis on exemplary models may have eclipsed lesser-known projects such as the Him Dak Eco-museum. Interestingly, in the same work, Mayrand briefly mentions a “training session” he gave in August 1989 “for Ak-Chin Amerindians in Arizona” to illustrate the participatory aspects in ecomuseums (2004, pp. 74 and 180). Yet, he provides no indication of the purpose of this training, nor does he mention its connection to the conception process of the Ak-Chin's Eco-museum or to MINOM activities. While this warrants further research, it raises the question of whether MINOM and some of its key figures, including Mayrand, operated with set criteria or value systems that involuntarily or voluntarily obscured certain actors and projects, such as the Him Dak Eco-museum, thereby complicating any effort at a fully inclusive study of MINOM. Was the Him Dak Eco-museum excluded because it was not associated with a MINOM International Workshop in the same way as the Geoparque Maestrazgo? Was this omission influenced by the fact that the ecomuseum facilitator, Nancy Fuller, and the Ak-Chin Community were no longer active within MINOM after the early 1990s? Or was it simply because the Ak-Chin themselves did not wish for their project to be presented as a “MINOM flagship”? Should the community, or any other group, not ultimately have the authority to decide whether their museum ought to be considered part of MINOM? It is also possible that the Ak-Chin chose, or were unable, to remain involved in the organization following the completion of the museum conception process. Financial constraints may have played a decisive role: as shown in the second part of this study, the conception and training phases were funded through a U.S. federal program, just as the participation of Indigenous communities from Canada in the Ak-Chin's study trips of 1988 and 1990 was made possible by support from the Quebec Cultural Ministry. This final reflection on the impact of funding stands in tension with the characterization of the New Museology as the “Museology of the Poor”, a term used by Stoffel Fernandes in an interview (Interview of January 15, 2024). This contradiction will constitute a central line of inquiry in my broader research on MINOM, as it may reveal underlying value systems, power dynamics, and inequalities operating both within and beyond the organization.

To offer a provisional conclusion (given the regrettable absence of the Ak-Chin's perspective in this work), it can nevertheless be stated with some confidence that MINOM members were present during the early stages of the conception of the Him Dak Eco-museum and provided valuable, albeit difficult to quantify, inspiration. The museum would likely have taken a very different form had Nancy Fuller not attended René Rivard's presentation on Ecomuseology at the Heritage North Conference in 1985; the same can be said had Rivard not subsequently been appointed to the Him Dak Eco-museum's board. That said, I concur with René Rivard's view that, even in the absence of both MINOM and his own involvement, the Ak-Chin would still have created their museum (Interview of May 19, 2025). After all, "Him Dak" means "our way of life" in O'odham (Ak-Chin Indian Community, 2025). Ultimately, the Ak-Chin Community developed an ecomuseum in its own way, drawing selectively on the resources that MINOM made available to initiatives aligned with the principles of the New Museology (MINOM, 1985).

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