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THE BIDAI INDIANS OF SOUTHEASTERN TEXAS¹

ANDRÉE F. SJOBERG

OUR FRAGMENTARY KNOWLEDGE of the Bidai,² a small southeastern Texas tribe,³ has led to the conclusion that they are to be classed among the culturally-impooverished groups of the Texas Gulf Coast. Ethnographic materials obtained through intensive research in early documents make it evident, however, that the Bidai belong culturally in the Southeastern area, though they are definitely marginal.

GEOGRAPHIC SETTING

During most of their recorded history the principal habitat of the Bidai Indians was a small area about Bedia Creek, a western branch of the Trinity River, in present-day Madison, Walker, and Grimes Counties, Texas. However, as a semi-migratory group, they moved within a broader area between the Colorado and Sabine rivers and between the Gulf Coast and the Camino Real, an historic road just north of Bedia Creek, connecting San Antonio with Natchitoches in Louisiana. For purposes of trade, they occasionally traveled outside this broader area.

The Bidai were surrounded by a number of Indian groups (see Fig. 1). The Hasinai, to the north, were a confederation of Caddoan tribes. The Bidai were said to be interrelated with these Indians,⁴ and visited them regularly over a path they had made, called the "Bidai Trail."⁵ The Akokisa, an Atakapan tribe on the lower Trinity River, were allied with the Bidai, and the two groups frequently intermarried. The Patiri Indians, just south of the Bidai, were another tribe of

1 The writer wishes to express her appreciation to Professor T. N. Campbell for his many helpful suggestions and criticisms in the preparation of this paper. Sincere thanks are also due Professor Herbert E. Bolton, who kindly permitted the writer to examine his notes on the Bidai.

2 Only two very brief summaries of the Bidai have been published. See Frederick Webb Hodge (ed.), *Handbook of American Indians North of Mexico* (Bulletin, Bureau of American Ethnology, no. 30, pt. 1, 1907), pp. 145-146; John R. Swanton, *The Indians of the Southeastern United States* (Bulletin, Bureau of American Ethnology, no. 137, 1946), p. 96; map 1, facing p. 1.

3 The Bidai were never estimated at more than 500 individuals.

4 The Baron de Ripperdá to the Viceroy, July 6, 1772, *Archivo General y Público de México, Provincias Internas*, vol. 20, folios 24-25.

5 Diligencias practicadas por Dn. Joaquín de Orobio Capn. de la Bahía sobre establecimiento de Franceses, October 1, 1745, *Béxar Archives*, fs. 6-10; Thomas Y. Banks, *The Bedia Trail in Angelina County* (Frontier Times, vol. 13, pp. 529-531, Bandera, Texas, 1936).

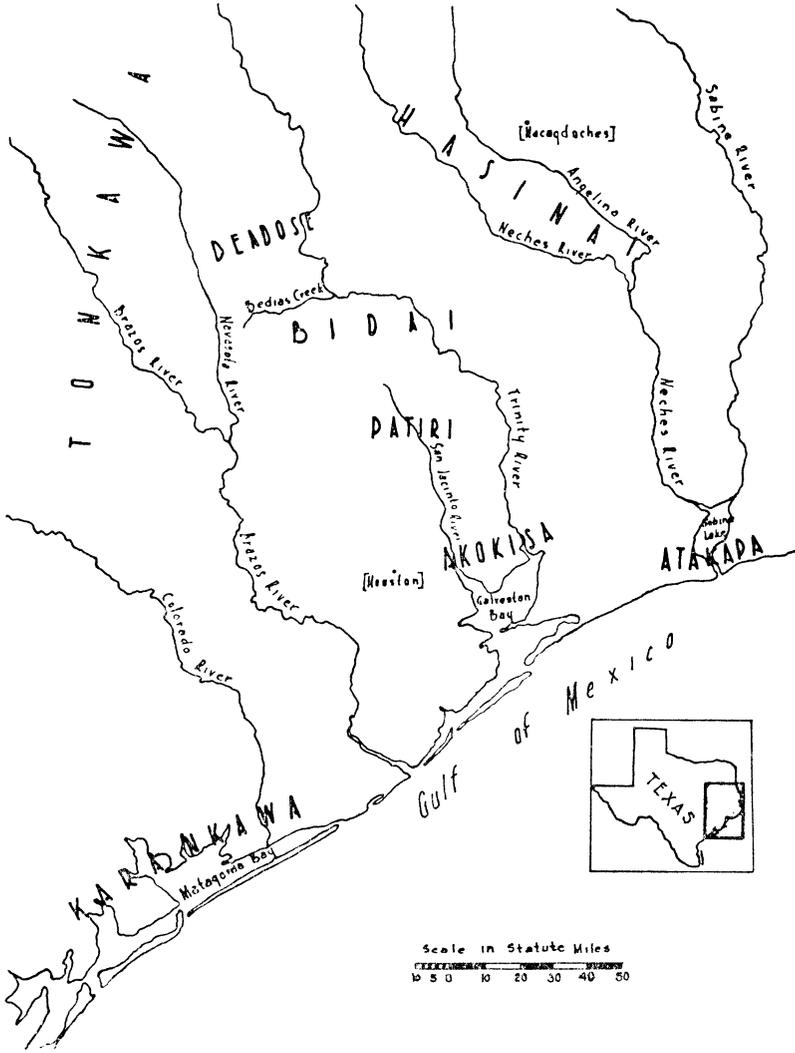


FIG. 1. The Bidai Indians and neighboring tribes during the eighteenth century.

Atakapan affiliation. The Tonkawa Indians ranged north and west, as did the Deadose, a branch of the Bidai which became separated some time in the early 1700's. The Karankawa Indians, who lived along the Gulf Coast to the southwest, were allies of the Bidai during the late eighteenth century.⁶ Occasionally the Bidai were closely associated with Kickapoo and Koasati Indians who had moved into Texas during the early nineteenth century.⁷

TRIBAL SYNONYMY AND LINGUISTIC AFFILIATION

The name of the Bidai Indians is derived from a Caddo word, *bidai*, signifying "brushwood."⁸ This possibly refers to the Trinity River, which contains much brushwood in its bottomlands, or to the Big Thicket, an area of unusually dense vegetation east of the Trinity, where the Bidai also lived.⁹ According to Ker, in their own language they were the "Quasmigdo" tribe.¹⁰ Occasionally the Bidai are called "Spring Creek" or "Shrub" Indians.¹¹ Most of the names given the Bidai in the literature are, however, variations of the original Caddo word, e.g., Badies, Bedias, Beadeyes, Bedins, Vidays, Vidaizes, Vivais, and Redais.

Until recently, little was known of the linguistic affiliations of the Bidai, for only a few doubtful words in their language have been recorded.¹² Because they

6 Herbert E. Bolton, *The Founding of the Missions on the San Gabriel River, 1745-1749* (Southwestern Historical Quarterly, vol. 17, pp. 323-378, 1914), pp. 333, 374; Herbert E. Bolton (ed.), *Athanase de Mézières and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1768-1780* (2 vols., Cleveland, 1914), vol. 1, p. 261.

7 E. L. Blair, *Early History of Grimes County* ([Austin, Texas], 1930), p. 36; *The Texas Almanac for 1858* (Galveston, 1857), p. 174.

8 Swanton, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

9 *Ibid.*; Rex W. Strickland, *Moscoso's Journey Through Texas* (Southwestern Historical Quarterly, vol. 46, pp. 109-137, 1942), p. 133.

10 Henry Ker, *Travels through the Western Interior of the United States, from the year 1808 up to the year 1816* (Elizabethtown, N. J., 1816), p. 122.

11 Henry Stuart Foote, *Texas and the Texans* (2 vols., Philadelphia, 1841), vol. 1, p. 299; J. O. Dyer, "The Pioneer Texas Farmer" (*The Galveston Daily News*, June 3, 1923, p. 22). Much of Dyer's material on the Bidai is undocumented. When checked against other records, however, it has proved to be reliable. Dyer was a physician who apparently obtained his information on Indians from old settlers, one of whom was his uncle, who had personal contact with the East Texas tribes.

12 One of these is "Quasmigdo," the Bidai's own name for themselves. Rufus Grimes, of Grimes County, Texas, set down from memory in 1887, thirty-three years after the removal of the Indians from that county, the first six numerals in the Bidai language. These are: 1. namah, 2. nahonde, 3. naheestah, 4. nashirimah, 5. nahot nahonde, 6. nashees nahonde. The numerals from 7 to 10 reportedly began with the letter *n*. Gatschet classified these words as Caddo because, like certain Caddo adjectives, they began in *na*. It should be noted, however, that numerals beginning in these letters appear also in Karankawa, another Indian language of Texas. (Vide Albert S. Gatschet, *The Karankawa Indians, the Coast People of Texas*, Archaeological and Ethnological Papers of the Peabody Museum, vol. 1, pp. 1-103, 1891), pp. 39, 84-85.

sometimes spoke Caddo—a *lingua franca* throughout much of eastern Texas in the eighteenth century—a number of writers classed them as Caddo.¹³ Sibley¹⁴ was an exception: in 1807 he wrote that, although the Bidai spoke Caddo, they had a language of their own which “differed from all others.”

A manuscript discovered by Bolton¹⁵ at the beginning of the present century in the archives of the Colegio de la Santa Cruz de Querétaro has clarified the linguistic position of the Bidai. This document indicates that their language was much like that of the Akokisa. Inasmuch as Akokisa belongs to the Atakapa division of the Tunican (?)¹⁶ linguistic stock, which in turn forms part of the Hokan-Siouan family,¹⁷ the Bidai language has been given this classification.

HISTORY

The accounts of the earliest explorers in southeastern Texas—Cabeza de Vaca, Moscoso, and La Salle—do not mention the Bidai Indians. It was not until 1691 that their name first appeared in written records.¹⁸ By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, epidemics had reduced them greatly in numbers, and the few survivors were absorbed by other tribes. Thus their recorded history covers little more than a century and a half.

During most of this period southeastern Texas was under Spanish control. Nevertheless, until 1746, when the Spanish government began its first extensive explorations in the area, the Bidai were little known, except to French traders who illegally visited them for the purpose of obtaining the skins of bison and deer.¹⁹ After this time, Bidai-Spanish contacts were common. Despite the existing Spanish laws against barter with the Indians, the governor of the province and others began to trade extensively with the Bidai.²⁰

13 For example, see *idem.*, p. 39; Hodge, *op. cit.*, pp. 145, 182-183; Dudley G. Wooten (ed.), *A Comprehensive History of Texas, 1685 to 1897* (2 vols., Dallas, 1898), vol. 1, pp. 27, 722.

14 John Sibley, *Travels in the Interior Parts of America* (London, 1807), p. 43.

15 Bolton, *Missions on the San Gabriel River*, p. 374.

16 Swanton uses a question mark to indicate that the stock is a tentative one. Swanton, *op. cit.*, table 1, facing p. 10; John R. Swanton, *Indian Tribes of the Lower Mississippi Valley and Adjacent Coast of the Gulf of Mexico* (Bulletin, Bureau of American Ethnology, no. 43, 1911), p. 36.

17 David G. Mandelbaum (ed.), *Selected Writings of Edward Sapir* (Berkeley, 1949), pp. 169-178.

18 Fray Francisco Casañas de Jesus María, Informe de Fray Francisco de Jesus María al Virrey Conde de Galvez sobre las Misiones de Tejas, August 15, 1691.

19 Diligencias practicadas, fs. 11-12.

20 Testimonio practicado sobre si Dn. Jasinto de Barrios tuvo comercio con Municiones de Guerra con los Yndios Barbaros de Esta Prova., January-March, 1760, *Béxar Archives*.

In 1749 a portion of the Bidai were settled with other Atakapan-speaking groups at San Ildefonso, one of the three San Xavier missions established on the San Gabriel River, in present-day Milam County.²¹ The Bidai remained here only a few years, and efforts to place them in missions during the following decade proved unsuccessful.

Although the Bidai had always been friendly to the Spaniards, by 1770 they began to engage in intrigue. The Spaniards had for some time been making alliances with the Comanche, Wichita, Hasinai, and other large tribes in preparation for extensive campaigns against the Lipan Apache to the west, who were considered the common enemy of most of the Texas tribes. It was discovered that the Bidai had for several years been supplying the Lipan with firearms and ammunition of French origin. In addition, they were instrumental in effecting an alliance between the Lipan and the Hasinai. Still other reports indicated that the Bidai were communicating with the English, who at that time were making trouble for the Spaniards. As soon as the governor learned of these facts, agents were sent among the Bidai to break their secret agreements.²²

After this episode, the Bidai diminished in importance. They seem to have broken up into a number of small bands which wandered over much of south-eastern Texas. Many of them were wiped out in epidemics during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.²³ Early in the nineteenth century some groups merged with Akokisa Indians,²⁴ who eventually joined the Atakapa in Louisiana or died out in the region of the lower Trinity River. Other Bidai intermarried with the Koasati,²⁵ whose descendants are found today on the Alabama and Coushatta Reservation in Polk County, Texas. Finally, in the year 1854, the remaining Bidai, probably numbering a little more than a hundred persons, were moved with the Caddo to the Brazos Reserve in north central

21 Bolton, *Missions on the San Gabriel River*, pp. 373-374.

22 Bolton, *Athanase de Mézières*, pp. 65-66, 93-99; Expediente sobre proposiciones, July 4, 6, 1772, *Archivo General y Público de México, Historia*, vol. 51, fs. 23, 40-41.

23 De Mézières to Croix, March 18, 1778, *Archivo General y Público de México, Provincias Internas*, vol. 182, fs. 21, 112; Anna L. Davis, "Old Montgomery" (*Dallas Morning News*, December 3, 1925, p. 15); J. O. Dyer, "The Pioneer Texas Farmer" (*Galveston Daily News*, April 1, 1923, p. 29; September 2, 1923, p. 18).

24 J. O. Dyer, "History and Lessons of Texas and of Galveston" (*Galveston Daily News*, May 12, 1923, p. 5); Noticias de las naciones Yndias de la Prova. de Texas que me dio Samuel Davenport en Nacogdoches desde cuyo punto se han de considerar sus situaciones y distancias, April 24, 1809, *Nacogdoches Archives*, vol. 11.

25 Annie Heloise Abel (ed.), *A Report from Natchitoches in 1807, by Dr. John Sibley* (Indian Notes and Monographs, Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, vol. 25, 1922), p. 96.

Texas.²⁶ Five years later, the "Caddo and their allies" were permanently removed from the state and given lands on the Wichita Reserve in the Chickasaw Nation, Indian Territory.²⁷

Swanton gives us our last shred of information on these Indians. In 1912, he found one individual of probable Bidai descent living in eastern Texas. This person, however, had been brought up in a White family and had learned nothing of the Bidai language or culture.²⁸

ECONOMIC LIFE

The Bidai Indians were an agricultural group during much of their recorded history. Maize was cultivated, sometimes in sufficient amounts to serve as an article of trade.²⁹ No other information on their agricultural practices has been century.³⁰

The Bidai subsisted primarily on the products of the hunt. Meat and skins were obtained principally from the deer. Apparently the Bidai had a surplus of these items, for they were frequently traded to Europeans.³¹ Some of the deer-skins were so finely prepared that they were said to resemble "chamois."³² Bison were important until the middle eighteenth century, when these animals began to disappear from southeastern Texas. Although the Bidai owned a number of horses,³³ it is not known whether they were used in bison hunting. Bison meat was sometimes preserved by drying, and the skins were bartered with Europeans.³⁴ The bear became increasingly important after the middle eighteenth century. Bearskins were employed in making "tents" for winter use; the teeth and claws served as articles of trade. Although bear fat was a common source of oil, the

26 Fannie McAlpine Clarke, *A Chapter in the History of Young Territory* (Texas State Historical Association Quarterly, vol. 9, pp. 51-62, 1905), p. 53; T. C. Richardson, *East Texas: its History and its Makers* (4 vols., New York, 1940), vol. 3, p. 951.

27 *The Texas Almanac for 1869* (Galveston, 1868), p. 157.

28 Swanton, *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*, p. 96.

29 Noticias de las naciones Yndias; Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 121; Juan Antonio Padilla, Memoria sobre los Yndios infieles de la Provincia de Texas, December 27, 1819, *The Austin Papers*; Testimonio practicado; Sibley, *op. cit.*, p. 43; William Bollaert, *Observations on the Indian Tribes in Texas* (Journal, Ethnological Society of London, vol. 2, pp. 262-283, 1850), p. 278.

found, except that they seem to have raised gourds during the early nineteenth

30 J. O. Dyer, "The Pioneer Texas Farmer" (*Galveston Daily News*, June 3, 1923, p. 22).

31 Testimonio practicado; Diario qe. hizo el Padre Fr. Gaspar Jose de Solis en la Visita que fué a hacer de las Misiones de la Provincia de Texas, 1767, *Archivo General y Público de México, Historia*, vol. 27, pt. 2, f. 292.

32 August 19, 1744, *Béxar Archives*, f. 2; Diligencias practicadas, f. 13.

33 Bolton, *Athanase de Mézières*, p. 347.

34 *Journal of Stephen F. Austin on his First Trip to Texas, 1821* (Texas State Historical Association Quarterly, vol. 7, pp. 286-307, 1904), p. 304; Diligencias practicadas, f. 13.

Bidai seem to have had a taboo against using the meat.³⁵ The beaver was sometimes hunted. In addition, other small animals were caught in traps made of intertwined canes.³⁶

Fishing was also part of the Bidai economy, at least during the first half of the nineteenth century. They apparently moved toward the Gulf Coast during the summers for this purpose.³⁷

The Bidai frequently gathered wild fruits and honey. The *Nelumbo lutea*, or water chinquapin, was obtained from the shallow ponds and marshy areas where it grew. The seeds of this plant and the fleshy rhizomes were commonly eaten. Acorns were an important food. Through what appears to be a leaching process, in which the nuts were buried in pits filled with ashes and damp earth, the Bidai prepared a kind of acorn meal which sometimes served as an item of trade.³⁸

ARTS AND CRAFTS

Beyond the fact that bearskin tents were used during the winter, nothing is known of Bidai habitations. Data on their clothing are lacking, except for references to a few items of European clothing secured from the French. Some information on weapons and tools, however, was recorded. The bow and arrow was the most important. Although projectile points of flint were most commonly employed, copper-tipped points have been noted.³⁹ Ker reported that the Bidai also had spears which were ten feet long and tipped with deer antler.⁴⁰ During the middle eighteenth century, they received a plentiful supply of firearms and ammunition from the French in Louisiana.⁴¹ Flint knives and scrapers served as tools for dressing skins or for carving wooden articles.⁴²

35 Diligencias practicadas, fs. 11-13; J. O. Dyer, "The Pioneer Texas Farmer" (*Galveston Daily News*, June 3, 1923, p. 22); J. O. Dyer, *Historical Sketch. Comparisons of Customs of Wild Tribes near Galveston a Century Ago with Ancient Semitic Customs* (Galveston, 1916), p. 6; August 19, 1744, *Béxar Archives*, f. 2.

36 Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

37 George W. Bonnell, *Topographical Description of Texas. To which is added an Account of the Indian Tribes* (Austin, 1840), p. 139; Noticias de las naciones Yndias; Julia Kathryn Garrett, *Letters and Documents. Dr. John Sibley and the Louisiana-Texas Frontier, 1803-1814* (Southwestern Historical Quarterly, vol. 47, pp. 319-324, 1944), p. 324.

38 J. O. Dyer, "The Pioneer Texas Farmer" (*Galveston Daily News*, June 3, 1923, p. 22; August 19, 1923, p. 24); Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

39 A. J. Sowell, *History of Fort Bend County* (Houston, 1904), p. 105; Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

40 Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

41 Ynforme del the. Galván sobre Sn. Xavier y carta escrita al dho el año de 1750, *Archivo del Colegio de la Santa Cruz de Querétaro*, K, legajo 19, no. 90; The Baron de Ripperdá to the Viceroy, August 25, 1772, *Archivo General y Público de México, Provincias Internas*, vol. 20, fs. 46-49.

42 Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 15; J. O. Dyer, "The Pioneer Texas Farmer" (*Galveston Daily News*, June 3, 1923, p. 22); Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

The Bidai made unusual clay vessels. These were fashioned by first weaving strong rushes into bags, which were either circular or square in shape. These were coated inside and out with a thick layer of clay. Then the vessels were either sun-dried or baked in pits filled with hot ashes. These "daub" pots, as they were called by early Anglo-American settlers, probably could not stand water, and so must have been used primarily for storage purposes.⁴³

Other containers were also used by the Bidai. Food was sometimes cooked in skin vessels through a stone-boiling process.⁴⁴ Occasionally, however, they obtained iron pots through trade and these must have been used in cooking.⁴⁵ Bowls, dippers, and spoons of pecan wood, as well as polished gourds, frequently served as utensils.⁴⁶

Bidai women made cane baskets, which are described only as "of curious design and great variety."⁴⁷ Some of these Indians are reported to have carried baskets when they went to trade. They would fill these with the articles they desired and then offer to exchange the baskets for their contents. During the early nineteenth century, chairs were fashioned of rattan and hickory and were frequently traded to White settlers.⁴⁸

According to Ker, the Bidai employed "bark canoes" in river transportation. However, it is doubtful that these were anything more than dugouts with the bark left on.⁴⁹

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND CUSTOMS

The Bidai comprised a number of small bands. Each was led by a chief. Although only three such bands were noted in 1750, these became proliferated into many more small groups by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Apparently the Bidai were politically united on a tribal basis only briefly—in the 1770's—when the Spaniards appointed Gorgoritos chief of all the Bidai and also head of the so-called Bidai-Akokisa Confederacy.⁵⁰

Concerning their ceremonial life, they were said to be fond of music and

43 J. O. Dyer, "The Pioneer Texas Farmer" (*Galveston Daily News*, July 15, 1923, p. 24).

44 *Ibid.*

45 August 8, 1817, *Béxar Archives*.

46 J. O. Dyer, "The Pioneer Texas Farmer" (*Galveston Daily News*, June 3, 1923, p. 22); Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

47 Bollaert, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-279.

48 Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

49 Ker, *op. cit.*, pp. 124-125.

50 Herbert E. Bolton, *Texas in the Middle Eighteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1915), p. 232; Bolton, *Athanase de Mézières*, pp. 74, 260.

dancing.⁵¹ That the Bidai had shamans can be inferred from Espinosa's⁵² account of the Hasinai Indians. He wrote that the Hasinai medicine men attributed illness to witchcraft practiced by the Bidai. To counteract this, the Hasinai performed special songs and dances calling on the Bidai medicine men, who supposedly appeared in the form of owls.

Head-flattening was reported, as well as tattooing of the face and the body.⁵³ The Bidai had an unusual treatment for illness. Patients were placed on high scaffolds, under which a smudge fire was built, so that dense smoke would rise toward them. During an epidemic of typhoid fever in the nineteenth century, as many as thirty of these scaffolds were seen at a Bidai village.⁵⁴ In treating dysentery, the Bidai sometimes used the boiled roots and berries of the sparkle-berry, or *Vaccinium arboreum*.⁵⁵

CONCLUSIONS

The assignment of the Bidai Indians to their proper culture area presents some difficulties. Their territory lay between that of the Hasinai, Indians of the agricultural Southeast, and a region inhabited by many small groups of Atakapan, Karankawan, Tonkawan, and Coahuiltecan affiliation exhibiting a rather low level of culture. This area of low development has been termed by Swanton an ethnological "sink" because of its position between the high cultures of Mexico and the southeastern United States. Swanton has included the Bidai among the tribes inhabiting the sink, and has therefore drawn the line of demarcation between this region and the Southeast just east of the Bidai.⁵⁶

Although the Bidai were related linguistically to the Atakapan Indians and resembled all the sink tribes in their semi-migratory life and simple social organization, important cultural differences can be noted. Unlike most of these Indians, the Bidai were never described as an anthropophagous group. What is

51 Ynforme del the. Galván; Ker, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

52 Fray Isidro Félix de Espinosa, *Crónica apostólica y seráfica de todos los Colegios de Propaganda Fide de esta Nueva España* (Mexico, 1746), pp. 427-428.

53 Dyer, *Historical Sketch*, p. 3; J. O. Dyer, "Indian Names Confusing" (*Galveston Daily News*, December 24, 1922, p. 22). No other information on the personal appearance of the Bidai is available, except that they were said to resemble the Akokisa and the Atakapa, who were dark-skinned Indians with large features, coarse black hair, and short, stocky bodies (J. O. Dyer, *The Lake Charles Atakapas (Cannibals). Period of 1817 to 1820*, Galveston, 1917, pp. 2-3).

54 Davis, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

55 J. O. Dyer, "The Pioneer Texas Farmer" (*Galveston Daily News*, September 2, 1923, p. 18).

56 John R. Swanton, *Southern Contacts of the Indians North of the Gulf of Mexico* (Annaes do XX Congresso Internacional de Americanistas, pp. 53-59, Rio de Janeiro, 1924); Swanton, *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*, map 1, facing p. 1; pp. 820-821.

more important, the Bidai were agricultural during much of their recorded history; the tribes in the sink engaged in agriculture rarely or not at all. Many of the latter subsisted primarily on fish and shellfish, items of food which were relatively unimportant in the Bidai economy.

Although knowledge of the details of their culture is limited, it is clear that the Bidai shared certain traits with the Indians of the Southeast. The presence of agriculture is the most significant. For the Bidai, like the Indians of the Southeast, the deer was the most important source of meat and skins; the bear was used next most frequently, but was valued principally for its oil. When available, the bison and the beaver were hunted. Such Bidai items as cane baskets and scaffolds were also present in the Southeast. It is probably significant that the customs of the Bidai were said to resemble those of the Caddo, a Southeastern group.⁵⁷ They were often considered as Caddo, and during the middle nineteenth century were placed with them on the reservations in Texas and Oklahoma.

From the foregoing data, it is evident that the Bidai were more closely affiliated with the Indians of the Southeast, and are most accurately described as a marginal Southeastern group.

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⁵⁷ Padilla, *op. cit.*