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REASONS FOR THE MARGINAL INCORPORATION OF THE COMANCHE BY THE SPANISH

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ABSTRACT—When the Comanches, a Native American community originally from the Great Basin region, migrated to the Southern Plains in the early 1700s, they encountered Spanish colonies, missions, and military and administrative personnel as well as newly introduced trade items. Spain attempted to incorporate the Comanches into the region’s emerging political economy through a variety of means including the use of treaties, coercive force, and economic inducements. Because of the Comanches’ decentralized political organization, their conquest of the Apaches, and Spain’s tenuous control over its northern frontier, the Comanches successfully retained control over their own articulation within the region’s political economy. In order to examine the means by which the Comanches retained their independence, this paper explores the Comanches’ decentralized political organization, relations with the Apaches, and strategic responses to trade agreements and peace accords offered by the Spanish.

KEY WORDS: Ecueracapa, Kotsoteka, division, band, Toro Blanco, incorporation

Introduction

Like many other Native communities residing on the Great Plains during the 1700s, Comanches migrated into the region from elsewhere. According to an oral tradition among the Shoshones, the Comanches separated from the Shoshones in the Great Basin due to an argument over the division of game (Grinnell 1920:260). In 1706 the first written account of the Comanches residing on the Great Plains appeared in a letter sent by a Spanish military commander to the governor of New Mexico (Thomas
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Once in the region, the Comanches rapidly expanded their land base. By the middle of the 18th century, the Comanches ranged from the upper Rio Grande area to central Texas (Hämäläinen 2001:41). Until blocked by the United States in the 1870s, the Comanches' territorial expansion continued southward to the Llano Estacado area and eastward along the Arkansas, Cimmarron, Canadian, and Red Rivers (Thwaites 1908:85-88; Hackett 1941:334-63; Hämäläinen 2001:47). (Fig. 1).

The Comanches' ability to increase and consolidate territory during the 1700s has been attributed to numerous causes. The most salient of these include the Comanches' mobility and population increases (Anderson 1999), their incorporation into Spain's political economy (Hall 1989), an ability to control trade (Hämäläinen 2001), their appeasement by Spain (Kavanagh 1996), their military prowess (Richardson 1933), their defeat of the Apaches (Thomas 1932), and their periodic alliances with both the French and the Spanish (Weber 1992). Each of these ideas explains a definite aspect of the Comanches' political and economic successes in the Southern Plains. As militarily prepared nomads, with periodic alliances with the French and Spanish, the Comanches became a force to be appeased. In addition, the Comanches' ability to extract colonial commodities from traders aided their ability to expand and consolidate territory. Less clear, however, is how the Comanches managed to flourish both economically and politically when so many other Native communities of that era failed to do so.

Through the works of a number of recent scholars (John 1975; Gelo 1987, 2001; Hall 1989; Weber 1992; Kavanagh 1996; Anderson 1999; and Hämäläinen 2000), as well as translated Spanish documents, the Comanches' ability to not only survive but flourish during the 1700s becomes clearer. Like Hall (1989) and Hämäläinen (2001), it is my contention that the most fruitful means for understanding the importance of the Comanches' political economy during the 1700s is by examining Spain's colonial policies in the region. In addition, it is equally necessary to explore the Comanches' decentralized political organization as well as their relations with the Apaches. By focusing on these three factors, the strategies used by the Comanches to resist incorporation into Spain's political economy during the 1700s becomes more transparent.

Incorporation is a key concept in a world-systems approach and refers to the integration of differing political economies (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997:65). Incorporation does not occur among equals, however. Instead, one political and economic system will dominate the relationship. When successful, the end result is referred to as “effective or real incorporation”
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Figure 1. Comanche migrations into the Southern Plains (adapted from Hämäläinen 2001:26).
as this level of integration causes "a situation in which the patterns of production and reproduction typical of external arenas have ceased to be dominant within the region and tend to disintegrate qua systems" (Arrighi 1979:162). As Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997:65) noted, the process occurs along a "continuum, not as a series of stages."

In the case of the Comanches, incorporation failed to occur during Spain's colonial era (1680-1821). The independence of the Comanches can be related to a number of external and internal factors. External variables include Spain's lack of financial commitment to the region (Scholes 1975), a dearth of colonial personnel (Johns 1975), and an ongoing geopolitical rivalry with France (Weber 1992). As will be shown, the most critical internal variable relates to the decentralized political organization of the Comanches. Additionally, a region containing few valuable resources can forestall incorporation into the political economy of a seemingly more powerful government (Chase-Dunn and Hall 1997:72).

In order to better understand the persistence of the Comanches' independence and their lack of incorporation into Spain's colonial political economy, this paper focuses on the Comanches' internal political organization, their relations with the Apaches, and their ability to negotiate favorable trade accords and peace agreements offered by local Spanish officials.

Results and Discussion

The Comanches' Decentralized Political Organization

Spain faced an insurmountable barrier in their attempts to forge a favorable political and economic linkage with the Comanches. Although colonial officials wanted to work with Comanche leaders (Kavanagh 1996), the decentralized nature of the Comanches' political and economic structure precluded such an arrangement. The Comanches' recognition of numerous leaders rather than one centralizing authority, was critical to this failure (Foster 1991). Consequently, if one leader negotiated an agreement with the Spanish, the other leaders and their followers were not bound by the conditions of the accord.

Like many nomadic Native communities in North America, the Comanches were divided into a series of bands that periodically merged into larger units (Foster 1991). The number of bands recognized by the Comanches varied through time. According to Curtis (1926:187), "At the climax of their existence the Comanches were apparently divided into ten or
more bands, but through tribal disintegration this band organization is almost lost.”

Internal organization of these bands appears to have been kin-based structures led by a charismatic leader who exhibited military prowess and sustained regular access to spiritual forces (Kavanagh 1996:42-43). Presently, no consensus exists concerning the degree of control that leaders of bands maintained over their followers. Using examples from Spanish and ethnohistorical sources, Kavanagh (1996:37-38), concluded that these leaders exhibited “the culturally defined ability to influence the behavior of others.” Alternately, Foster (1991:68), Hoebel (1940:47), and Wallace and Hoebel (1952:124-25) surmised that these leaders could not have exercised coercive force over their followers, nor negotiated unilaterally binding agreements with other related bands. Richardson (1929:65) noted, for example, “the nomadic habits of the Indians and the resultant divisions and subdivisions of the bands into small parties away from responsible leaders made it impossible for the chiefs to control their own men.”

Furthermore, Spanish officials complained continually about the lack of control band leaders wielded over their followers. In 1750 the governor of New Mexico bitterly deplored the behavior of the Comanches trading at pueblos along the upper Rio Grande:

[A]s always, whenever the occasion arises for stealing horses or attacking the pueblos of Pecos of Galisteo, they do not fail to take advantage of it. . . . They excuse themselves by blaming other of their nation, saying that among them are warlike captains who commit outrages and those who are well disposed are unable to prevent them. They always say that they know nothing about it. As there is no organization or authority among these Indians. (Hackett 1941:328)

Predictably, leaders’ practice of publicly eschewing their capacity to control band members frustrated colonial efforts to use these leaders as a means to garner control over the Comanches. For example, the governor of New Mexico continued to complain in 1750 about the Comanches’ lack of strong leadership. According to Hackett’s translation of the governor’s letter (Hackett 1941:323), the administrator described the Comanches as “a very barbarous people, heathen, very disorganized, and obeying no head; but they are well supplied with arms such as arrows, hatchets, lances, swords, and a few muskets”
From the 1750s through the 1780s, Spain funded a number of fact-finding missions to acquire more information about the internal political organization of the Comanches (Kessell 1979:167, 507-12). Hiring past French traders and reliable Spanish officials, the colonial government obtained useful data concerning the Comanches’ political organization, relations with other indigenous communities, population size, and trading alliances (Kavanagh 1996:76). Reports related to these missions determined that the Comanches supported both bands and divisions and that neither one of these organizations maintained centralizing authorities (Kavanagh 1996:76). These accounts also noted that the Comanches were mobile and traded captives and buffalo hides for tobacco, knives, axes, and beads (Bolton 1914:94-95).

According to one of the expedition leaders, by the 1780s the Comanches’ population consisted of at least 20,000 individuals, representing numerous bands and recognizing at least three divisions (Marín del Valle, quoted in Anderson 1999:217). Presumably, Spanish authorities wanted to obtain this type of information in order to more successfully negotiate peace and trade accords with the Comanches. Unfortunately for the Spanish, however, the leadership associated with the divisions maintained no more control over their members than did the leaders of bands (Foster 1991).

Researchers currently studying the Comanches continue to grapple with the functional role and structure of the divisions. Foster (1991:70) argued that “Comanche social structure is best understood as the strategic movement and organization of personnel among different social groups, regulated by means of periodic multigroup gatherings.” In his view, leaders of these gatherings were ephemeral in nature and lacked power:

The leaders who from time to time represented divisions or suprabands to Euro-American authorities were intermediaries with limited authority. They dealt with Euro-Americans on specific matters relating to Comanche-Euro-American interactions and were not “paramount” or “principal” leaders in the way that we usually employ the term. (Foster 1991:68)

Kavanagh (1996:53-54) disagreed with Foster’s view of divisions as utilitarian units existing solely to respond to specific events. Instead, he described these entities as “political organizations composed of local residential bands linked by kinship and social ties with a commonality of
interest in group affairs, war, peace, and trade.” Unlike Foster (1991:68), Kavanagh (1996:53-54) perceived these divisions as enduring structures stabilized by permanent leaders. With the exception of Kavanagh, most authorities support the view that not only did the leaders of bands exert minimal authority over their members, but the heads of divisions also lacked monolithic power over their followers.

Divisions did play a more prominent role in trading and raiding ventures than did the bands (Foster 1991). Pragmatically, the divisions’ population size and inclusion of a number of band leaders permitted these entities to secure more commodities than bands working independently (Kavanagh 1996:48). Kavanagh (1996:121) found that

One [division] east of Pecos and Galisteo was particularly hostile toward those pueblos and against any Europeans they met. The other [division], northeast of Taos, maintained trade with that pueblo and peacefully passed along French traders.

Colonial officials noted that the Comanches traded peacefully at Taos but once the trading season ended, the Comanches regularly attacked the Galisteo Pueblo (Simmons 1968:112-14). Lacking easy access to Spanish markets, two of the Comanches’ divisions maintained stable trading relations with non-Spanish Europeans and a lucrative raiding economy against Spanish settlers in Texas (Hämäläinen 1998:505). Miller (1975:172-73) noted that the divisions residing along the Arkansas River traded captives, horses, and hides to the French for firearms, textiles, and metal objects.

By the late 1700s American merchants had extended their trade beyond Texas and into Mexico (Loomis and Nasatir 1967:3). Stock raiding from Spanish ranches provided a major economic opportunity for various divisions and bands of the Comanches (Guy and Sheridan 1998:3). When the Spanish confronted leaders about hostilities committed by the Comanches, these leaders refused to take responsibility. As one division leader noted, he had been ill and unable to control his followers, thus permitting the culprits to flee the region (Kavanagh 1996:151). This decentralized system limited Spain’s ability to sanction offenders. Even if specific culprits were identified, the frequent movements of the Comanches and the permeability of their bands and divisions (Hoebel 1940) hindered the ability of colonial administrators to pursue the matter. A lack of critical manpower, financial support, and any centralizing authority among the Comanches stymied Spain’s attempts to gain control over the Comanches.
Relations between the Comanches, Spanish, and Apaches

Prior to the arrival of the Comanches into the Southern Plains, various Apache groups had a long history of trading with the puebloan communities (Gutiérrez 1991). According to Anderson (1999:117), “the southern Apaches filled a void, exploiting many of the old resources and using many of the exchange routes that been pioneered by previous groups.” Hall (1987) noted that the Comanches and Apaches trading with the pueblos fought against each other over access to puebloan markets and bison herds. A 1749 peace treaty by Spanish administrators with Apaches in the upper Rio Grande area probably escalated competition between the Comanches and the Apaches for control over these resources (Foster 1991). As early as 1748, the Jicarilla Apaches migrated away from their homeland northeast of Santa Fe due to attacks by the Comanches (Thomas 1932:59). After the Jicarillas left, some Comanches gained direct access not only to French traders traveling along the Arkansas River but also to puebloan markets (Bolton 1914:389-407). They received a reliable supply of French firearms from Caddoans farther east, French traders traveling along the Arkansas River, and illegal Spanish traders, referred to as Comancheros, from the puebloan areas (La Vere 1998:64; Simmons 1968). By the 1750s the Comanches had pushed the Apaches south toward El Paso and east toward the Colorado River (Thomas 1932:63-64). In addition, the Comanches exerted enough influence over the region’s political and economic landscape in the 1750s to block a proposed alliance between the Lipan Apaches and the Hasinai (Smith 1995:71-73).

Throughout the 1750s and 1760s the Comanches continued to assault the settlements of the Apaches. This led to the abandonment of a number of missions established by the Spanish for the Apaches (Anderson 1999:141). For example, in 1758 the Comanches, along with various Caddoan groups, attacked the San Saba mission (La Vere 1998:57). In 1766 the Comanches along with many of their Native allies violently ejected the Apaches from the San Lorenzo mission (Tunnell and Newcomb 1969:171-72). Aiding the Comanches and their allies in these battles were the French. Through French traders, these Native groups gained access to firearms with which to fight not only the Apaches but also the Spanish if necessary (La Vere 1998:56-57).

A report submitted by a colonial official in 1768 contained the observation that the Comanches attacked the Apaches but ignored the Spanish in pacified areas (Slatta 1998:87). Consequently, a number of Spanish officials suggested that the Spanish should ally with the Comanches against the
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Apaches (Thomas 1940:61). This placed the Spanish government in an awkward predicament, since the Spanish had already negotiated a peace accord with the Apaches in 1749. Recognizing the delicacy of the situation, it was proposed that the Apaches be given “defective firearms, strong liquor, and such other commodities as would render them militarily and economically dependent on the Spaniards” (Officer 1987:62).

Before this policy could be instituted, the Comanches continued not only to attack the Apaches but also to pillage markets held at puebloan towns (Thomas 1932:136). Due to the boldness and frequency of these attacks, Juan Anza, while governor of New Mexico, organized a campaign against the Comanches in 1779. During this battle, Anza’s troops managed to kill Cuerno Verde, a major division leader (Thomas 1932:136, 142). After this defeat, Anza offered peace terms to the Comanches but only some members of one division accepted the arrangement (Kavanagh 1996:93).

By 1787 the Spanish changed their policies toward the Comanches. At that time, the colonial government decided to aid the Comanches in their efforts to vanquish the Apaches (Slatta 1998:88). A provision in Spain’s agreement with the Comanches promised the tribe horses and weaponry to aid in their struggle against the Apaches (Thomas 1932:318). In return, the Comanches agreed to continue to not only fight the Apaches independently but also to participate in joint military campaigns with the Spanish against the Apaches. Adoption of this policy probably resulted from Spain’s recognition that the Comanches had already displaced the Apaches from the eastern margins of the puebloan region. In 1787 the Spanish organized various Native tribes, including the Comanches, to fight the Apaches (Slatta 1998:88). With this military help, the Comanches outmaneuvered the remaining Apaches by removing them from their homeland and by controlling their alliances (Smith 1995; Slatta 1998). According to one Spanish official, at the hands of the Comanches, “All the [Apache] adults of both sexes may be excluded from this mercy [sold into slavery], notwithstanding that it appears to us that everyone captured will be destined to suffer death” (Thomas 1932:336).

Spanish Efforts to Negotiate an Alliance with the Comanches

Until the 1763 Treaty of Paris, in which France gave its territory in the southern United States to the Spanish, Spain’s policies toward the Comanches revolved around combatting the influence French administrators sought to gain over the Comanches. Until France’s loss of its territory
to Spain, French policy continually expanded its sphere of influence through trade alliances (La Vere 1998:57). This colonial rivalry served the Comanches well. According to one Spanish governor (Thomas 1940:36), "the province could not afford an extended war and might, in the meantime, drive the Comanches to a dependence upon the French." In addition, warfare against nomadic populations is exceedingly difficult. As Ferguson and Whitehead (1992:19) noted, "Protracted campaigns against people without any central authority, living in small mobile settlements are very costly, if not logistically impossible."

Invariably, peace treaties offered to the Comanches by the Spanish lacked enough inducements for the Comanches to accept peace, which led each accord to rapidly collapse (Thomas 1932, 1940). And as mentioned earlier, Spain's unwillingness to commit more resources to the empire's northern frontier prevented local officials from weaning the Comanches from the trade goods offered by the French (Thomas 1940:129-43). Colonial administrators negotiating with the Comanches more often than not were responding to extortion rather than seducing the Comanches into Spain's regional economy (Hall 1989:153). On a regular basis, groups of Comanches, probably divisions, repeatedly attacked trading fairs sponsored by the Spanish (Kavanagh 1996:48; Hackett 1941:328).

Ultimately, the Comanches were a greater threat to Spain's continual occupation of the region than vice versa. Since the Spanish controlled the technology for producing critical resources, it was to the advantage of the Comanches to allow Spain's colonial settlements to remain in the northern frontier and to permit the continual operation of trade centers. In addition, it did not serve the Spanish well to completely alienate the Comanches because of the proximity of the French (Thomas 1940:129-43).

Like the French, British, and later the Americans, the Spanish were not averse to using intra- or inter-Indian conflict to their own advantage (Moorhead 1975:58-61). Tensions between differing groups of Comanches resulting from their alternative strategies for negotiating with the Spanish might have weakened the bargaining power of the Comanches had the community not supported a decentralized system of government. Consensual decisions concerning the most strategic response to a more powerful nation's offers are not often easily formed. All too frequently, factions may form in which "some leaders advocate attack, others conciliation; some take followers closer to the frontier, others lead into the wilderness, some assimilate, while other valorize local tradition" (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992:17).
In the Comanches' case, tensions erupted between the leadership of their three divisions. In 1786 the Spanish attempted to centralize these three divisions under the leadership of Ecueracapa, a powerful individual from the Kotsoteka organization. Unlike earlier peace attempts, this newest one offered military aid and regular gifts, and promised to sponsor regularly scheduled markets in the pueblan region. Additionally, Spanish merchants agreed to regulate the prices charged for commodities sold at these events (Thomas 1932:304). One year after the peace agreement, eight fairs had been held in the region (Concha [1794] 1951:241).

Salaries were also a part of Spanish diplomacy. Along with monies paid in pesos, leaders were given cloth, blankets, combs, weaponry, and numerous other items to distribute among their followers (Thomas 1932:318, 384). The leaders of the western Kotsotekas, however, received more goods and a larger salary than did other divisional leaders. Like other expanding colonial governments, the Spanish attempted to elevate a friendly leader, giving this person "titles, emblems, and active political and military support" (Ferguson and Whitehead 1992:13). According to New Mexico's governor, the elevation of one leader over all other Comanches will result in this individual supporting Spanish policies over the demands of the Comanches (Thomas 1932:302).

Predictably, the western Kotsotekas provided the most enthusiastic support for Spain's newest attempt at peace. Immediately, representatives of this division met with leaders of the eastern Kotsotekas and the other two divisions in order to gain their support for the Spanish initiative (Kavanagh 1996). Two major roadblocks emerged which prevented the entire nation of Comanches from accepting this peace accord. First, the western Kotsotekas derived resources from different sources than did the other divisions. The western Kotsotekas received enough commodities from the Spanish that it was not necessary for them to seek alternative sources. The other divisions relied more closely on foreign nationals as well as raiding activities to meet their needs. Second, the governor of New Mexico demanded that the Comanches elect one leader, specifically Ecueracapa, a leader of the western Kotsotekas (Thomas 1932:318).

Toro Blanco, a leader associated with the other two divisions, resisted this turn of events. Refusing to enter into any agreement, he became an enemy of the Kotsotekas (Thomas 1932:307). During the spring of 1786, followers of Ecueracapa assassinated Toro Blanco and a number of his followers (Thomas 1932:229). Although Toro Blanco died, individuals sympathetic to his cause survived. Throughout Ecueracapa's reign, members of
the two divisions once led by Toro Blanco continued to raid Spanish settlements (Thomas 1969:299; Kavanagh 1996:116). After Ecueraacapa’s reign ended with his death in 1793, various Comanches from the western Kotsotekas briefly filled the office (Kavanagh 1996:143; Simmons 1967:31). By 1801, however, the Comanches had rid themselves of this office created by the Spanish.

**Conclusion**

Spain’s centralization of the Comanches’ political organization proved to be a dismal failure. Had Ecueraacapa and his successors had real power, they could have kept their brethren from raiding the Spanish and trading with foreigners. As Spain learned more about the Comanches, they began to tailor their peace accords to the needs of the Comanches. Consequently, officials offered to ally with the Comanches against the Apaches and to hold regularly scheduled markets with fixed prices. In return, these administrators wanted to reconcile the decentralized political organization of the Comanches with the more centralized colonial government. Spain’s failure in this regard stemmed from their lack of understanding about the inherent autonomy of the Comanches’ bands and divisions. Although Spain came close to incorporating the western Kotsotekas into Spain’s colonial milieu, they could not gain control over the other divisions and bands.

Unable to sustain Ecueraacapa’s control over the other divisions, the Comanches maintained control over their involvement in the region’s political economy. In addition, because of the presence of multiple leaders, all of whom denied the ability to control their followers, the Comanches managed to retain their independence from policies emanating from Spain’s colonial government. Ultimately, in the case of the Comanches, political decentralization proved to be an adaptive system for forestalling annihilation or incorporation into Spain’s colonial political economy.

**References**


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