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2004

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Joyce Herold

*Denver Museum of Nature & Science*

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Herold, Joyce, "The Jicarilla Apache Woman's Ceremonial Cape The Making and Re-Genesis of a Cultural Icon" (2004). *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 470.

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# **The Jicarilla Apache Woman's Ceremonial Cape The Making and Re-Genesis of a Cultural Icon**

Joyce Herold

Denver Museum of Nature & Science

Denver, Colorado

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## **Prologue: Ponchos in Perspective**

It was early November of 2004, time to begin revising my TSA paper, and the Sunday newspaper magazine *Life* caught my eye with relevant material. To try to satisfy my anthropologist's curse, "Put it in context!" I present the gist to you:

"The poncho is fall's must-have fashion item," writes Alexandra Jacobs in "Poncho Nation" (2004). The illustrations show a rectangle or square of fabric with a celebrity's smiling head emerging from the middle, the wrap loosely covering the upper body, rounded breasts hinted beneath some of them. The historical examples vary from a mere wisp of gauze around the fabulous chest of Jessica Simpson to an enveloping blanket thrown over the good, the bad, and the ugly of Clint Eastwood's shoulder. Embellishment consists of a textured or patterned fabric here and a fringed edge there, capitalizing simply on the flowing lines of the unstructured, shapeless wrap. The writer has little to praise in poncho aesthetics, but gets to her core message of arch de-structuring: following a period when styles increasingly bared youthful bellies and buttocks, the contemporary poncho signifies a major shift toward modesty in dress. "Women are wearing clothing that covers them instead of revealing everything." (Meyerowitz 2004). Not incidentally, poncho floppiness also can cover the increasingly ample waists of American females.

My thoughts flow to another poncho that I observed in mid-July. Here are abridged field notes from the early portion of a Girls' Coming Out Ceremony and Feast held in a Rocky Mountain forest clearing off U.S. 84, six miles southwest of Dulce, New Mexico:

We (the Museum videographer, but no camera allowed, and I) arrive at 6:45 a.m. for the feast hosted by Georgia Venino for her granddaughter. We present a twenty-pound sack of flour to help make fry bread for hundreds of relative and friends over four days and nights. We learn that two such gatherings are taking place on the Jicarilla Apache Reservation that week. The main cook fire has been burning all night and is now heating water for coffee. Foods are being brought from a trailer. Potatoes and coffee appear on tables. Raymond T., a medicine man in jeans, boots and Western hat, arrives. He checks the stack of twelve tipi poles, walks around and decides that about forty feet to the west the rising sun can hit the eastern tipi entrance. He gets his bag of corn pollen and walks in a circle blessing the ground. By 7:50 a.m. the men and boys have raised the canvas tipi. Twenty-eight family members and invited guests (twenty-eight including us) are called inside and blessed with corn pollen. Finally, the fire is blessed and lit, completing the holy place. White Shell Woman, the honored teenager, is sitting at the back with Water's Child, a boy of her age selected to be her "brave." The mothers have dressed them from feet to head as four prayers were said for each garment. The maiden's face is yellow with ochre paint and the boy's white with clay, completing their embodiment of the creative principles of the moon and the sun. I see the shell and bead necklace of White Shell Woman and, underneath, her white skin dress and yellow cape. I am content as Raymond

T. prays and chants for ninety minutes, telling the origin story and encompassing the People and their land within this tipi. At 11 o'clock in the morning he offers smoke twice to all of us. The sacred four days to another dawn have well begun.

Two extreme ways with one kind of clothing: how amazing that our nation holds them both! The article that follows is a beginning of understanding of one of those ways.

### **The Jicarilla Apache Cape, A Ceremonial Poncho**

No more distinctive poncho tradition exists among contemporary American Indians than that of the Jicarilla Apaches, a sovereign tribe of 3,136 enrolled members living in north-central New Mexico on a reservation straddling the continental divide and centered in the town of Dulce (Tiller 1983). The Apaches link the garment with the time when women come of age and embody the side of the moon, for “as a woman brings forth children, the moon brings forth the fruit.” (Opler 1938: 86; 1942) The cape traveled with the people to their permanent home in 1887 and helped them survive near extinction through disease and poverty. To wear the cape now is to show both personal and tribal pride and status: it signifies attainment of womanhood and Jicarilla vigor through the years.

#### **Design Features that Define the Cape (fig. 1)**

- Deer skin material, colored yellow or golden
- Transverse position on body, i.e., across chest
- Back and front broad triple-scalloped transverse edges, outlined with three to six stripes of black/blue and white
- Neck edges with contrasting narrow beadwork band
- Definition of shoulders by broad beadwork bands, often loomed, creatively patterned
- Long thin skin fringes, often doubled, falling from cape ends down the arms to well below the hands

*Fig. 1. Coming of Age outfit made by Owahee Montoya, Jicarilla Apache, c. 1930, for her daughter Iris Montoya Howe (in photo). Photo by Marie Van Vuren, 1950. Denver Museum of Nature & Science 81-066.*



The bead decorated skin garment has a cut head opening and drapes from the shoulders, filling the definition of a “slip-on garment” of the “poncho” type (Anawalt 1981). Nevertheless, neither on the Reservation nor in the literature is “poncho” used, perhaps because of the garment’s cape-like positioning across the body and upper arms with the fringe extensions below the hands, and its relatively short length, never below the waist. It is always worn over a dress, therefore, sometimes called a “dress yoke” or “shoulderette.” The most common term for it, “cape,” is used here even though technically erroneous, a “cape” being draped material lacking a head opening.

The other Apaches – Mescaleros and Lipans in southern New Mexico and western Texas and San Carlos, White Mountain, Cibecue, and Tonto Apaches in eastern Arizona – also wear ceremonial poncho skin garments, but their versions are unlike the Jicarilla cape and readily taken as “ponchos.” The shirt-like tops are beaded and tin tinkler-

decorated. They are paired with two-piece skin skirts rather than worn over dresses and have the long fringed ends front and back rather than at the sides (Mails 1974: 365-8).

As borne out in culture histories, clothing designers must devise adaptations to climate with available materials, honoring their own life ways, but they also blend in cross-cultural transfers and exchanges. The Jicarilla cape shows women as progenitors and borrowers of ideas and objects. I will briefly trace the evolving unique style, its context, construction, decoration, related dress and equipment, uses and societal roles.

*Fig. 2. Dancers. Acrylic painting. Carl Vicenti, 1976. A dawn-like setting of dance during the girl's puberty rite shows the Jicarilla love of natural and yellow ochre-colored skins with swaying fringes. The Heritage Center, Red Cloud Indian School, Pine Ridge, SD. No. HC-202. This painting shows how wonderfully the capes enhance body movement. Also shown is Jicarilla women's love of broad surfaces of clothing colored with natural pigments in brilliant golds and yellows.*

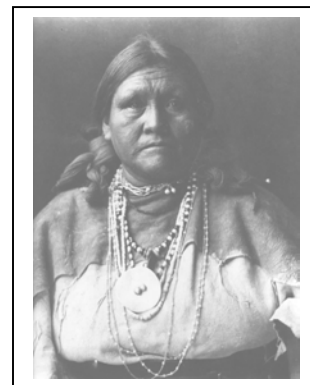


The Jicarilla Apache people trace their first emergence from a mythical underworld, led by Sun and Moon to this Earth. The Sacred Beings gave them seeds, berries, and tubers to gather and animals to hunt: therein lie their resistance to permanent settlement and love of animal hide clothing (fig. 2). As one of six Southern Athapaskan groups they migrated out of the sub-arctic forests of interior northern Canada sometime between A.D. 1300 and 1500. Their early way of life in what was to become northeastern New Mexico depended on migrating buffalo in the plains and deer and other game in mountains and valleys. The Spanish expeditions, arriving slightly later, noted the “Querecho” hunters’ tipis. The years before 1850 were a time of wandering, marauding, and trading in buffalo hides, and always searching for a home in the face of Mexican and American settlement.

The Apaches blended in Rio Grande Pueblo ways, such as limited horticulture, religion, basketry, and pottery, but adopted neither their loom nor Spanish sheep, as Navajos did.

The models for Apache clothing remained the skin shirts, dresses, leggings, boots and moccasins. Early warriors and women wore clothes of whole skins (fig. 3).

*Fig. 3. Jicarilla Matron. Jicarilla Apache. Sepia photograph. Edward S. Curtis, 1904. The “deer tail dress” style of the pre-Reservation era has a turned-down yoke formed by the rump of a deer, whose tail barely shows under the neckline. From Edward S. Curtis. The North American Indian, pl. 23. Denver Museum of Nature & Science 88-003.*



The two-part (binary) construction of dresses, golden coloring with ochre, and sparse early beading style were influences from styles seen on hunting and trading trips in the southern and central Plains (Ewers 1980). A hide of mule deer (especially black-tailed deer), mountain sheep, or antelope was brain-tanned and de-haired, scraped and worked to suppleness, and trimmed at the edges. One complete hide formed the front and one the back, flesh side out, and the head end down. The natural shape of the front legs was perfectly formed for room at the lower skirt and the back legs for loose sleeves.

The shoulder seam on each side of a neck opening was sewn with sinew several inches *below* the margin of the rump skin, which leaving a turndown across the front chest and upper back that resembles a scalloped yoke. This important style marker laid a foundation for the line later followed by the cape. Because the tail was sometimes left at the center, as documented by Curtis in figure 3, the style is commonly called a “deer tail dress.” The Jicarilla dress was probably shared with Taos Pueblo and closely resembled the Ute dress of the period. Douglas (1969) published a detailed study of a Jicarilla Apache deer tail dress and Conn (1974) and Taylor (1997) placed it in context.

Bates (2000: 154-8) clarified the related history of the Southern Ute dress. He documented the strong influences spreading south on trade routes along the western side of the Rockies from northern Plains people like the Blackfoot and the Plateau Tribes of Idaho. The northern two-skin dresses, usually of mountain sheep skin, sometimes had tails left in place as well as beadwork outlining the tail’s centered outline and nearby yoke scalloping. The multicolored beadwork yoke designs of many Blackfoot and Nez Perce dresses of the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century in effect preserved vestigial animal tails from an earlier era. The similarity to Jicarilla and Ute cape edge patterns is striking.

### **The Separate Cape**

The Jicarillas and the Southern Utes probably in the mid-1800s modified the garment concept radically by separating the yoke section from the dress and using it like a poncho. Bates points out that Utes were much influenced by separate dress yokes of the Sioux. The Jicarillas could have accepted the poncho idea even more wholeheartedly because they knew well the garments of their Mescalero relatives, whose ponchos were worn vertically on the body. Jicarillas failed to copy the other Apache women, however, for the Jicarilla poncho is worn transversely (fig. 4).

*Fig. 4. Girl's ceremonial cape. Jicarilla Apache or Southern Ute. 1920s. Yellow ochre color, red and white beaded edge, and loom beadwork shoulder band. From the Fred Harvey Company Collection. Denver Museum of Nature & Science, Crane American Indian Collection AC.2547.*



The separated cape (fig. 4) was made from a single deer hide, the center was cut into the cape body and the remaining edges of the hide provided thinly cut fringes, which were left adhering to a skin strip at the top end. Doubled fringe strips sewn to the ends of the poncho often gave more fullness. Ochre mineral paint was generally applied to the

cape body to produce golden tones. A classic ca. 1883 beaded cape at the Denver Art Museum, described by Douglas (1939), measures 43 inches long, 23 inches wide at middle and 19 inches wide at ends, and has fringes 10 ¼ to 11 inches long. Changes in the cut through time are shown in an equally traditional cape dating about 1940 (examined by the author): though slightly smaller in the body (33 inches long, 19 inches wide at center and 18 inches at ends), it has fringes twice as long (22 inches).

The two capes are styled similarly overall but illustrate individuality and temporal changes. The Denver Art Museum (DAM) buckskin cape body is colored a light golden brown yet the end sections and doubled fringes contrast in pale buff doeskin. Beadwork on the DAM cape consists of about 100,000 seed beads sewn with animal sinew. The edge beadwork in lane stitch (2 ¾ inches wide) contains four black stripes alternating with three white stripes. The beadwork along the shoulders (3 inches wide) incorporates light blue, dark blue, red and white in a box like motif spaced along the white strip. The neck opening is outlined by a beaded line of light blue arrows and defined at the ends by checkerboard extensions. Comparing the later cape, its body color is more golden but it also has lighter doubled fringing. The same scalloped margin is outlined more simply with only four stripes. At the shoulders similarly wide beadwork still features boxes but uses more colors (black, orange, light blue, and red) and adds design detailing. Thus, each maker became more individualistic within the most respected design traditions.

### **Cloth Dresses**

Another major influence entered Jicarilla lives as American settlement and political control ended the wandering hunting Apache life in the Santa Fe and Taos areas. In 1887 the Jicarillas were ceded their long-delayed reservation located in mountainous isolation near the New Mexico-Colorado border. They still lived in tipis and wall tents but from the 1880s families traveled monthly by wagon to the agency at Dulce for food and equipment, including cloth and thread imported from eastern cotton and woolen mills. The era of cloth dresses arrived (fig. 5).

*Fig. 5. Donacha Vigil Quintana and child, Jicarilla Apache. Photograph by Hendrina Hospers, 1925. She wears an "old-style" dress with wide yoke and open outer cape sleeves with inner pinned-on sleeves. Denver Museum of Nature & Science, Van Roekel Collection 83-027.*

*A loose cape-like rectangular flap sewn at the shoulder extending down the arm – which in effect was a cape. Women usually added a shawl when away from home.*



Everyday fabric dresses were sewn by hand at first and later with sewing machines, as taught at the Reformed Church mission school. They were cloth versions of the old hide style. The dressmaker ripped sections from lengths of usually 36-inch-wide cotton cloth in solid colors, plaids, or small patterns – never wool or stripes or large prints at this time. She measured and ripped from selvage to selvage a short strip for the yoke and long equal

sections for the front and the back. Two rectangles formed flaps, like kimono sleeves or cape sleeves. She placed the yoke crosswise and sewed the flaps to the yoke ends so that they extended into loose covers for the arms (fig. 5), similar to the back leg extensions in a hide dress or the ends of the cape. In the yoke center she cut an oval head hole with a straight opening at the front, to close at the neck with a safety pin. She sewed the lower yoke, back and front, to the top edges of dress front and back sections, taking some gathers as she went. To give ease of movement in the lower skirt, she added a triangular gusset of matching fabric at each side before seaming the sides. The fit was loose and the basic pattern could be sized large or small for a girl (fig. 6).

*Fig. 6. Child's dress. Jicarilla-style made by Gertrude Van Roekel, ca.1930. Red, white, and blue cotton print, violet yoke, rickrack, bias tape, and ribbon. Separate pinned-in sleeves. Denver Museum of Nature & Science, Van Roekel Collection A719.3*



Sometimes the upper bodice sides of women's cloth dresses were left open for access for nursing. For modesty, separate tubular long sleeves were pinned underneath the shoulders. Often bias tape edging or change of fabric color marked out the yoke, another reminder of the yoke on the original hide dress. The women wore leggings and moccasins or boots, as before, or store shoes. Pueblo or Navajo woven sashes could be wrapped around the dress fullness, or a distinctive Jicarilla accessory – the extra-wide leather belt. It functioned as a place to tuck in small possessions and also as a brassiere since the belt was tightly secured below the breasts.

The hide dress and the separate skin cape were also retained as heirlooms or newly made, for traditional Indian outfits were always needed for photographs and for the girl's adolescent rite. The cape was seen most often over a cloth dress (fig. 7).

*Fig. 7. Sisters Jennie and Minnie Chino, Jicarilla Apache. Photograph by Hendrina Hospers, 1943. Cotton dresses and buckskin "shouderettes." Their mother beaded the capes for their coming out feasts. Jennie has a wide Pueblo sash and Minnie wears a wide silver-studded leather belt. Denver Museum of Nature & Science, Gertrude Van Roekel Collection Photo 82-062.*





Photographs of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century show continuation of a camp way of life. In their remote high-altitude home at the upper limits for farming, the Jicarilla Tribe was reduced to 616 people living in tents and rough log houses under threat from poverty, tuberculosis, poor nutrition, and lack of schools. A vigorous people with a tremendous enthusiasm for life, the Jicarillas endured as sheep herding, schools, a hospital, and tribal government were introduced. The tribe gradually overcame disease and developed prosperity as sheepherders, cattle ranchers, and forest and wildlife managers. Trucks replace horses and most of the tribe moved to wooden housing in the center at Dulce.

Along the way, increasing in the 1930s and 1940s, everyday homemade dresses acquired closed set-in sleeves (fig. 6) and ready-made clothing became acceptable.

### **Late 20<sup>th</sup> century clothing trends**

At mid-century the Jicarillas finally caught up with rural and small town Western America: electricity, piped water, paved roads, a supermarket, and state schools became available to all. Moreover they developed a major natural resource, natural gas, and wisely managed it for tribal advances as well as individual incomes. The Jicarilla Nation turned itself into a role model for American Indian tribes.

The tribal council directed attention in the 1960s to the language and traditional arts, which were slipping away rapidly. Cultural subjects and language were taught in the schools and a tribal arts and crafts center collected, exhibited, taught, and marketed basketry and beadwork. At the revitalized annual Jicarilla ceremonial gathering called Go-jii-ya and at tribal parades, rodeo, and powwows, the wearing of the traditional cape and dress – whether of deerskin or cloth – became a marker of Jicarilla identity.

The cloth dress became fuller, brighter, and ornamented without losing its essential pattern and look (fig. 8). The grandmothers, however, still preferred longer skirts and sleeves in print fabrics.

*Fig. 8. Ella Mae Vigil modeling a cloth dress with cape sleeves. Photo by Gertrude Van Roekel, Dulce, New Mexico, 1973. Note the longer, more decorative sleeve flaps. Either a handwoven Navajo or Pueblo sash, as shown, or a wide leather belt is worn with a traditional cloth dress. Denver Museum of Nature & Science.*



Moreover, the classic beaded and fringed skin cape took on the aura of essential individual and cultural heritage. As before, girls needed the ceremonial cape for the symbolic four-day passage through the Jicarilla Emergence into womanhood so that



when a prominent family took on the costly feast and rite, a relative made an outfit or, increasingly, one was commissioned or borrowed. By no means, however, were all pubescent girls so honored. Any cape and dress that have danced in the sacred tipi become heirlooms worn at important times of “Indian dress” throughout a woman’s lifetime and are often loaned to close friends and relatives.

The most recent fashionable dresses and capes show influences from intertribal styles seen on the powwow circuit across the country as well as near home at the July powwow sponsored by the Tribe. New traits include pure white skin, extra-long fringes, wider bands of multi-colored beadwork in complex geometric patterns, synthetic fabrics, and sewn appliqué in imitation of beadwork. All designs match, including the necklace with its seashell. The annually selected Princesses simply need to add beaded, feathered crowns to their traditional outfits (fig. 9).

*Fig. 9. Reservation landscape with Jicarilla Princesses. Nossman Vigil, ca. 1965. Acrylic on wooden bookends. Note the doubled capes, matching beadwork, and face paint. Denver Museum of Nature & Science AN-1977-131.4.*



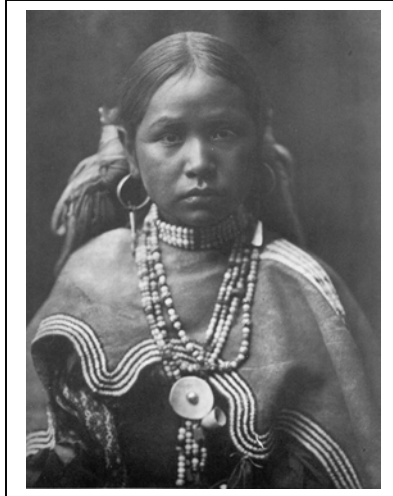
## Conclusion

Jicarilla women’s dress is a style uniquely their own, distinct from the other Apaches and from the Ute people. The basic garment is strongly based in the two-skin dress of pre-1850 Buffalo Days, in the style of the Plains Indian “deer tail” dress. From the dress yoke, probably influenced by Northern Plains and Plateau beaded dresses, the Jicarillas and the Utes developed a separate cape. After the 1850s the cape became the most visible garment of the “Jicarilla look.” The Ceremonial Cape of deerskin, a poncho style worn over the shoulders, is colored golden, outlined with bold stripes on its scalloped edges, and deeply fringed down the arms. A girl wearing it in the Jicarilla puberty ceremony takes on the knowledge and attributes of White Shell Woman for the continued fruitfulness of the people.

Life on a Reservation beginning in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century brought scarcity of hides and prevalence of factory-loomed cloth so that the women designed their own adaptation of the “pioneer dress.” The cotton fabric dress after the pattern of the skin garment emphasizes the yoke, shoulder flaps, and full skirt. The flexibility of the cape became clear in its widespread formal use layered over cloth dresses.

Since the 1930s Jicarilla women have worn factory-made mainline American styles introduced by missionaries and teachers. Except for the old-style, more enveloping dresses of the elders, contemporary fashions on the Jicarilla Reservation look no different from those in any western U.S. area. However, when tribal knowledge and pride are at stake in ceremonies, parades, powwow, and official events, the glory of the old-style dresses and capes comes out of storage or is newly created in updated versions.

*Fig. 10. Jicarilla Maiden. Sepia photograph. Edward S. Curtis, 1904. This image is eternal in capturing the surpassing beauty and mystery of a girl poised, in ceremonial cape and white shell necklace, to become a woman. From Edward S. Curtis. The North American Indian, pl. 22.*



A handful of talented hide and beadwork artists continue the creative tradition. With today's accelerated heritage preservation and education on the reservation, the iconic role of this very special poncho speaks anew to ideals of Jicarilla women and the vigor of their culture. Re-genesis of the Jicarilla Apache ceremonial cape as fashion and as symbol appears to be secure.

### **Acknowledgments**

*My observations and interviews over thirty years on the Jicarilla Apache Reservation were initially made possible by the Tribe's Vice Chairman Hubert Velarde and teacher and author Gertrude Van Roekel, whose collection at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science supports this article. Access to photographs in Dolores Gunnerson's collection has been invaluable, also. I thank particularly the following friends for knowledge shared: Iris Montoya Howe, Brenda Julian, Lydia Pesata, Melbourne Pesata, Louise Pesata, Hubert Velarde, Ella Mae Vigil, and Nossman Vigil. Returning studies in 2003 and 2004 depended on the unconditional support of Jicarilla heritage by former Tribal Chair Claudia Vigil-Muniz, Cultural Center Director Lorraine Willis, and many members of the Jicarilla Apache Senior Citizens Program and the Cultural Center.*

*The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research supported early field and collections research through the Denver Art Museum, Norman Feder, Curator. A grant from The Redd Foundation for Western Studies has allowed recent fieldwork, and support from the Denver Museum of Nature & Science is the pre-condition for virtually all my Jicarilla experiences.*

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