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Review of *Comanche Society; Before the Reservation* By Gerald Betty

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Comanche Society: Before the Reservation. By Gerald Betty. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002. xi + 239 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography, index. \$39.95.

While the merging of historical and anthropological outlooks has been a productive trend in Plains Indian studies, there are pitfalls. For one, the authority inherent in an accurate chronology or lively narrative can mask basic errors in social analysis. Sometimes historians have difficulty in properly employing the terms and principles of social organization so carefully wrought in the neighbor discipline. Readers get an epic infused with mistaken ethnology, resulting in a setback rather than advance in understanding.

So it is with Gerald Betty's *Comanche Society*. The work attempts to recast the history of Comanche expansion via chapters on kinship, migration, pastoralism, economics, and violence. Each chapter hinges on an ornate retelling of an episode such as the 1786 Comanche-Spanish peace or the 1821 interception of American trader Thomas James. One appreciates Betty's eye for nuances until the author assembles them to support untenable suppositions, driven by the concept that kinship was the determinative force in all matters Comanche. The imperative was sociobiological, with altruism as well as territoriality and brutality playing a part, notions derived from the largely unpublished corpus of anthropologist Lyle Steadman and other sources.

Trouble really starts when the author decides that the Comanches had lineages and clans that shaped organization and outreach. Such units never existed for the Comanches, and the only Native names for them supplied in the text actually refer to political divisions formed from bilateral bands. Elaboration of this false premise coincides with numerous other errors (on page 100, for instance, cultural specialization in regional trade is called a "division of labor," in a departure from the term's meaning fixed since Durkheim), unsupported generalizations (such as the claim

on page 119 that "Interpretations of Comanche economics have tended to assume a zero-sum situation in which the Indians lose"), and conclusions of dubious value (for example, the statement on page 120 that "Trade is social, whereas hostile behavior is fundamentally antisocial"). Prior writers are criticized for missing these points, and many a straw man is sent for a tumble, too.

A sophisticated review of Comanche kinship is indeed needed to complement other recent work on Plains populations involving cladistics and ethnogenesis. Such issues as the adaptive value of fictive kinship, the emergence of unilineal tendencies, and Southern Comanche-Caddoan admixture deserve further exploration. But the misappropriation of descent theory and adaptationism is devastating to the present effort. An odd appendix—ironically, a stand for empiricism—begins with the observation that "[T]he central thesis of this study could be wrong" (p. 145). It is, for at least one fundamental reason. How could this flaw get past the press? Publishing dissertations eagerly and without improvement also has its pitfalls.

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