Plains Indians in New Mexico: The Genízaro Experience

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The colonial period in American history must include not only the English experience on the Atlantic shore but the Spanish story in the Southwest and the approaches to the Great Plains. Part of the New Mexican story is the emergence of a new people who become part of our multicultural experience, the detribalized Indians of the Plains and Mountains who were given the name genizaros and were eventually absorbed into Pueblo-Spanish society. The Spanish had tried to implement their Indian policy on the Great Plains, but frustrated by the environment and the native people, they remained in their New Mexican settlements and watched as Plains Indians involuntarily came to them.

**Indian Slaves and Servants**

The Spanish position on Indian slavery helped determine the character of Indian relations along the New Mexican frontier. From the time of Columbus's return to Spain there had been a debate over enslaving Indians. Between 1503 and 1510 the Spanish crown had authorized the enslavement of Caribbean Indians who practiced cannibalism, engaged in warfare, or rebelled against the Spanish. A royal decree dated 17 November 1526 instructed Spanish explorers to read the Requerimento (Requirement) to Indians they encountered in all new territories. If the Indians did not submit, the resulting warfare was considered just and the Indians could be enslaved. The utopian-minded New Laws of 1542, which prohibited the enslavement of Indians, were all but ignored. Ultimately the "just war" provided the mechanism whereby non-Christian Indians were enslaved. The Spanish carried this concept and practice with them after they left the valley of Mexico and marched northward.

When Spaniards under Francisco de Coronado reached the Great Plains in the 1540s, they found an inhospitable environment. The Plains Apaches dominated the area from the Nebraska Sandhills to the Pecos River in West Texas until the close of the seventeenth century. These nomadic people disappointed the Spanish, who
were seeking stable and cohesive communities of Indians upon whom Spanish institutions could be imposed. Many of the Spanish governors who went to New Mexico after the beginning of Spanish settlement in 1598 were ineffective leaders who regarded their appointments as opportunities for personal gain. As a result the Spanish exploited the Pueblo Indians and often attacked and enslaved the Plains Apaches, whom they perceived as uncivilized. These Indian captives were one of the few profitable commodities that could be sent southward to the labor-starved silver mines of Nueva Vizcaya.

TRADE IN INDIAN CAPTIVES

The relationship between the Spanish and the Indians was further altered with the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and the promulgation of the colonial legal code known as the Recopilación of 1681. The Pueblo Revolt rendered the Spanish reluctant to enslave or exploit the Pueblos. The Recopilación carefully spelled out the Christian obligation to ransom captive Indians enslaved by other Indian tribes, a principle given further royal sanction in 1694, after a group of Navajos killed their Pawnee captives in front of the Spaniards who refused to ransom them.

As these policy changes were being institutionalized in the early eighteenth century, the Comanches appeared, far from their homes in north central Colorado and determined to make the southern Plains their new home. They proceeded to drive the Utes and Plains Apaches from their territory and by midcentury dominated the Plains with French firearms and ammunition readily available through Wichita middlemen. In their encounters with the Plains Apaches and later with the Comanches, the poorly equipped and undermanned Spaniards found that the Indians acted individually and would not enter into peace negotiations as a political entity. As a result both Indian and Spanish settlements of New Mexico came under constant attack.

The Spanish duty to ransom any and all captives who entered New Mexico quickly created a market for Comanche prisoners, including not only Spanish and Pueblo people but Plains Indians who stood in the way of Comanche expansion. The trade in captives took place at traditional Indian fair sites such as Taos, Pecos, and elsewhere. In 1744 Fray Miguel Menchero observed that Taos's importance lay in the fact that non-Christian Indians entered the pueblo to sell captives, who were such an important commodity that Fray Pedro Serrano referred to them as the "gold and silver and richest treasures for the governor" or anyone else who might want to trade. Prices varied according to the sex of the captive. In 1776 a female Indian between twelve and twenty years of age was traded for either two good horses and trifles or a mule and a scarlet cover. Males were worth half as much as females.

The Plains Indians who were introduced into New Mexico came from tribes throughout the region: the Plains Apache, Comanche, Jumano, Kiowa, Pawnee, and Wichita. The Pawnees were commonly taken as slaves throughout the colonial era and were found in both French and Spanish communities on the eastern and western edges of the Plains. Jumano and Pawnee contact with the Spanish began in the seventeenth century although their baptismal entries begin in 1702-03. The Kiowas begin to show in the records in the late 1720s. The Comanches are first listed in the Spanish records in the early eighteenth century. A final group of Indians who first appear in the Spanish church records in 1742 are the A or Aa Indians. Although scholars have thought they were Skidi Pawnees, Dolores Gunnerson has identified them as Crows.

THE FIRST GENÍZAROS

The captives who remained in New Mexico were divided into two groups: indios sirvientes (Indian servants) and indios genizaros depending on their status. Indian servants were non-Christian Indians who were allotted to the settlers after having been ransomed at the fairs. According to the Recopilación, it was the duty of the Spanish owner to acculturate them and their
duty to work off their ransom payment. The process of hispanic acculturation began immediately and was expected to be thorough enough to place these Indians within the hierarchy of Spanish society. Through baptism they entered the Catholic faith and received Christian names. Being of unknown parentage, these Indians were listed in baptismal records as “of the house of,” “servant of,” or “adopted by.” Their surnames were taken from the households they were attached to, from their godfathers, or, if the Indians were females, occasionally from their godmothers. As part of the indoctrination process these Indians learned a simple form of Spanish. Fray Francisco Atanasio Dominguez noted in 1776 that genízaros were not very fluent in Spanish, and, continuing in a critical tone, that he did not believe that even with practice they would become so. Originating from diverse tribes with varied languages, the genízaros adopted Spanish as their lingua franca. Since any hope of returning to their own people was out of the question, these unfortunate Indians were forced to acculturate into Spanish society. They mixed European values with their own, dressed in Spanish clothes, and followed the customs of the dominant society.

The practice of keeping Indian servants under even these circumstances frequently led to abuses among the Spanish. For instance in 1763 two genízaras appealed directly to Governor Tomás Vélez Cachupin against their masters. The women complained that they had been improperly cared for and not instructed in the Christian faith. Furthermore they were sent out to tend sheep, which was considered a male occupation, and in the process one of them was raped. The governor removed them from their masters and placed them in homes “where they might be instructed in Christian doctrine and customs, and be fed and clothed through household chores appropriate to their sex.” At other times when these servants did not receive the proper satisfaction large numbers fled the settlements, and many lived as “apostates” with the Apaches in the mountains. In an effort to remedy abuses, the provincial government intervened and if mistreatment could be proven removed abused Indians from their masters.

Once these Indian servants had paid their debts they were free to leave the Spanish household and then became known as genízaros. Although over the years a number of meanings have been given to this term, Fray Agustín Morfi, referring to the genízaros of the barrio de Analco in Santa Fe in 1779, gave a precise and correct definition of genízaro: “This name is given to the children of the captives of different [Indian] nations who have married in the province.” This term was used by the local Hispanic people to identify these people through the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth centuries. Known by the New Mexicans as “children of the enemy,” genízaros lacked social status because they were not Spanish, Pueblo Indian, or hostile Indian. Because of this lack of status they could not be admitted into the pueblos and legally obtain land. As Fray Damian Martínez wrote in 1792, they were reduced to living without “land, cattle or other property with which to make a living except their bows and arrows.”

Genízaros in Frontier Outposts

At first the genízaros naturally congregated in the barrio of Analco in the southern section of Santa Fe, while others sought acceptance in Pueblo villages. Their lack of legal status and the increased population pressures on land in the Río Grande valley in the eighteenth century made their settlement difficult. At the same time, however, raids by hostile Indians—Apaches, Comanches, Navajos, and Utes—made it imperative that the frontier regions be settled for defense. As a result many genízaros were relocated in frontier districts to serve as buffers for the settlements.

In the Río Abajo region (south from La Bajada and Cochiti Pueblo), Belén was settled early by the genízaros and by 1740 they were protesting attempts by the local alcalde mayor to seize their lands. In 1790 the genízaros were living throughout the community but were con-
centrated in Plaza Number Three, called Nuestra Señora de los Dolores de los Genízaros. By the late eighteenth century the settlement contained a large, varied population and was raised to the status of a district. The pueblos of Valencia and Cerro de Tomé, located thirty leagues to the south of Santa Fe, were established by Governor Gáspar Domingo de Mendoza in 1740 after forty families of genízaros applied to be resettled there. They farmed and scouted and defended the frontier with bravery and diligence. By the mid-1770s at the mission of Socorro near El Paso there was a community of Apache genízaros. San Miguel del Vado, east of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and Pecos, was originally settled in 1794 as a frontier outpost against Plains Indians. It was constructed for defense with its plaza surrounded by houses and a church. Genízaro soldier-farmers were its first residents, but after 1799 they were joined by mestizos and other genízaros who were seeking arable land. Eventually a few pacified Comanches and some Pueblo Indians from Nambe joined the population.

In the Río Arriba region to the north of Santa Fe, other genízaro settlements began to appear. Ojo Caliente, in the direct path of raids, was created by order of Governor Joachim Codallos y Rabál in an attempt to halt Comanche and Ute incursions and depredations. Unfortunately even the tenacious genízaros who formed the majority of the population were forced to abandon the settlement. San Tomás de Abiquiú was established in 1748 and by 1752 Governor Vélez Cachupín noted that there were 108 genízaros living there with thirty-nine men bearing arms. Governor Mendinueta sought to use genízaros scattered without fixed residences in the Río Puerco region to assist in the reestablishment of the settlement of San Miguel de Carne in the Sandía Mountains. It had been established in 1763 to help curb Apache raids into the Albuquerque region but was abandoned in 1771. In order to attract genízaros to the enterprise, they were promised an equal footing with the Spanish settlers, but continued Apache raids forced the governor to abandon the resettlement plans.

**Genízaro Population**

Incomplete or missing documentation has rendered accurate data on the genízaro population unavailable, and available data must be augmented to include the servant population as well, since they were in the process of becoming genízaros. The 1750 census of New Mexico shows a genízaro population of 154 and a servant population of 693, for a genízaro-servant population comprising 13.2 percent of the total. Within Albuquerque alone this combination rose to 28.7 percent. In 1758 Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco noted that the population was divided into Spanish and genízaro portions. Of the latter he noted that there were fifty-eight heads of families or 225 individuals. An anonymous report written in 1765 indicated that there were 191 genízaro families or 677 individuals living in New Mexico. By 1776 forty-two genízaro families or 164 individuals, comprising 12.25 percent of the population of Santa Fe, lived in the barrio of Analco, where they had their own church. Genízaros not only resided in their own communities or in barrios like Analco but were scattered in Pueblo villages as well. In 1790 they could be found at Taos, San Juan, Santa Clara, and Nambe pueblos. Although the genízaros came from various, hostile tribes and, according to Spanish observers, would have been enemies in their native state, they lived together in peace in New Mexico.

Throughout colonial Spanish American society there was a great concern for racial classification. In New Mexico the population was classified in the 1790 census according to the following ethnic derivations: Spanish; Indian; mestizo (generally understood to be a mixture of Spanish and Mexican Indian); coyote (a mixture of Spanish and of New Mexican Indian); mulato (sometimes used with its usual connotation and sometimes used by the friars to indicate a mixture of Spanish and Indian); genízaro; color quebrado (literally "broken color"; the exact meaning of this term is disputed, but it denotes a racial mixture, possibly of white, Indian, and black or any combination of the
three); and lobo (racial mixture). The population was “whitened” by upward economic mobility and marriage, as children took the status of the mother. The 1790 census shows that genízaro males were married to women of varied racial origin: mestiza (24), genízara (11), Indian (9), coyote (3), and two each color quebrado, Spanish, and mulatta. Two genízara married Pueblo Indians from Soccoro near El Paso who had moved into their wives’ community at Belén. The genízaros were blending into the local society where racial mixture was tolerated.25

Genízaro Occupations

The genízaros’ occupations changed with their status. The first genízaros were referred to in the Spanish records as the “servants” but never as the “slaves” of the Spaniards who had ransomed them. Those who were released from their debt were usually forced into menial tasks and were considered the poorest residents of the community. Later others became skilled and ingenious craftsmen, making baskets, pottery, and shields.26 In 1776 Fray Francisco Dominguez critically evaluated the role of the genízaros that he encountered on his tour of New Mexico. He did not note the occupations of those he met in Santa Fe but recorded finding many servants in other Spanish communities and ranches. Some genízaros at Abiquiú were starving in the midst of good farm land, but to the south, at Los Jarales, some were farming small plots of arable land.27 By 1790 most genízaros were farmers (28.6 percent) and day laborers (25 percent), occupations characteristic of the local economy. Weaving woolen blankets, a “very ordinary cloth,” and cloth for coats, serge, serapes, baize, sackcloth, carpeting, and stockings was a common cottage industry throughout the province, where sheep were plentiful and cloth was considered a medium of exchange. As a result, 15.3 percent of the genízaro work force found employment as carders, spinners, and weavers. The remainder were occupied as muleteers, carpenters, shoemakers, builders, sweepers, and shepherds.28

Located in frontier settlements, many genízaros became traders with Plains and Mountain Indians during periods of peace. At Abiquiú Ute Indians arrived in late October or early November to trade deerskins for horses and broad knives (belduques) and jerked deer and buffalo meat for corn flour at the annual trade fair. There was also a small trade in captive children.29 After the Anza-Ecueracapa treaty of 1786 between the Spanish and Comanches, the Indians and Spaniards of New Mexico, especially the “indigent and rude classes of the frontier villages” known as comancheros, could venture onto the Plains and trade with the Comanches. Many of the genízaros knew Plains Indian languages, and with a very small investment in “a few trinkets and trumperies of all kinds, and perhaps a bag of bread and maybe another of pinole,” they could become involved in trade that might net them a mule or two.30 Spanish and Mexican officials promoted such trade to maintain knowledge of the territory, the Indians, and foreign intrusion.

The Spanish governments had inadequate military forces and finances for guarding the New Mexican frontier and relied on Indian auxiliaries, both Pueblos and genízaros, who went on expeditions with their own resources. Genízaro military equipment was basic because the Spanish did not supply them with arms. In the late 1750s sixty-three genízaros in the province were armed with the traditional bow and arrow and eleven lances, but only three had muskets.31 The Spanish hoped that the genízaro farmers-soldiers settled where the Apache, Comanche, and Ute raiders entered the province would stop these raids, and in many cases they acted with bravery and zeal. The government utilized genízaro troops for offensive operations as well. They could bring the struggle to their traditional enemies—the people who had seized them—and halt, at least temporarily, the constant raids against New Mexican settlements. Although pay was non-existent, the genízaros took such booty as captives, horses, livestock, and foodstuffs.32

The genízaros were effective frontier fighters. During the summer of 1777, fifty-five genízaros successfully fought the White Mountain Apaches. Their reputation grew with their suc-
cesses and at times local commanders specifically requested their presence on a military mission. The genizaro fighting force was officially recognized and formally organized in 1808 when the governor created the *tropa de Genízaro*, commanded by a corporal from their own ranks. Unfortunately the history of this unit has been lost.33

Genizaros’ fluency in Plains Indian languages made them excellent scouts and interpreters. In 1776 at Ranchos de Taos the Indians spoke Spanish, the Taos language, and “to a considerable extent the Comanche, Ute and Apache languages.”34 In the summer of 1800 when Josef Miguel led an expedition from New Mexico to the Missouri River he took along four genizaro interpreters.35 Although individual genizaros were trusted as scouts or interpreters, as a group they were regarded as potentially traitorous and on a number of occasions some of them were tried for sedition.36

**GENÍZARO LEADERS AND OUTCASTS**

Through intermarriage with mestizos and economic mobility, genizaros were able to enter Spanish society and some individuals played leadership roles. At El Paso in 1765 ten genizaro families had acquired the status of citizens, a sign of upward mobility among Indians. When the genizaro-dominated barrio of Analco at Santa Fe was threatened with destruction, Ventura Bustamente, a genizaro, traveled to Arizpe in 1780 to protest this action.37 Other genizaros played important roles in the religious life of the communities. In 1812 José Cristobal Guerro, a San Miguel del Vado genizaro of Comanche extraction, led a drive for a resident priest. His petition to the bishop of Durango was so persuasive that the bishop thought that the town would become one of the most populous in New Mexico. The lack of secular priests in the late eighteenth century caused many Spanish and genizaro communities to turn to penitential confraternities (*cofradías*) to administer religious affairs. This movement continues with certain modifications into the present century.38

Although many genizaros found occupations and status within Hispanic society, many others stayed at the bottom of the social ladder. Numerous court records show that genizaros were common thieves, stole horses and livestock, and cheated Indians at trade fairs. Some were picked up as vagabonds as far south as Chihuahua and returned to New Mexico. Others spent their time gambling and engaging in petty theft. In one instance a genizaro and his wife allegedly killed Fray Ordoinez y Machado, the parish priest at Abiquiú, by witchcraft.39

**AMERICANS AND ASSIMILATION**

In the nineteenth century Mexican independence and the arrival of Americans down the Santa Fe trail gradually erased the distinction between genizaro and Spaniard. The Plan of Iguala, which preceded Mexican independence in 1821, stated that the government was no longer concerned with the racial origins of its citizens. After independence there was little influence from Mexico and the genizaros coexisted with their Spanish and Pueblo neighbors but continued to be viewed as a different element within provincial society. When Americans first went to New Mexico they were unfamiliar with the local social traditions and in many instances were unable to make a clear distinction between Spaniards, Pueblo Indians, and genizaros. Thus in 1821 when the American trader Thomas James left San Miguel del Vado, primarily a genizaro community, he wrote that he was joined by “the alcalde and a company of Spaniards [emphasis added] bound for Santa Fe.” On these and other occasions James used the terms “Spaniards,” “Spanish Indians,” and “Mexican Indians” when he was probably referring to genizaros. More than a decade later Josiah Gregg noted that the population consisted of white creoles, “mestizos or mixed creoles,” and Pueblo Indians. In his estimation of the population (70,000) of New Mexico, “mestizos or mixed creoles” accounted for 84.2 percent of the total population. It was in this class the genizaros would have fallen.40

The genizaro population continued to follow earlier settlement patterns. They had already
settled San Miguel del Vado and early in the century they continued the process down the Pecos valley and settled San Jose del Vado, La Cuesta and, around 1822, Antón Chico, which remained the eastern gateway to New Mexico until the 1860s.\(^4\)

In these frontier locations the genfzaros continued to play an active role with the Indians and the commerce of the Plains. Their employment as comancheros, interpreters, and hunters (ciboleros) continued until the 1870s. The frontier settlements of the genfzaros also attracted some Comanche and Kiowa settlers who provided an important link with the Comanche and possibly spared New Mexico the disastrous raids that befell Durango and Chihuahua to the south. With the development of the Santa Fe trade, genfzaros joined the caravans and traveled to St. Louis and back as guides and interpreters. The Missouri demand for New Mexican-made blankets created opportunities for others in the weaving industry.\(^4\)

The disputed identity of José Angel Gonzáles highlights the possible depth of the assimilative process in New Mexico and the incomplete historical record. In August 1837 the Hispanics and Pueblo Indians in Río Arriba rose in revolt and acclaimed Gonzáles governor. Was Gonzáles, the buffalo hunter from Taos, actually the son of a Pueblo mother and genfzaro father, with close ties to the people who revolted? Or was he a Pueblo Indian from Taos or a vecino from Ranchos de Taos, as some sources indicate? When the insurrection was crushed after the battle of Pojoaque, Gonzáles and others were captured and executed. Although Governor Manuel Armijo called him a “genfzaro” when he asked Padre Antonio Martinez to hear his final confession, the controversy over Gonzáles’ origins—Hispanic, Pueblo, or genfzaro—cannot be settled by the existing primary source describing his death and origins. If he was a genfzaro he was the first and only person of his class to be governor of New Mexico.\(^4\)

The genfzaro people are unique in the history of Native Americans in the United States. By the time Anglo-Americans reached New Mexico, the genfzaro people had been amalgamated into Pueblo Indian life or into the lower social and economic strata of Hispanic society. The term “genfzaro” fell into disuse and remains only in colonial documentation. Yet it has been estimated that by the late eighteenth century genfzaros constituted one-third of the population of New Mexico.\(^4\) They were an enduring human legacy of the cultural conflict on the Plains between the Spaniards and the Indians—Indians who became an integral part of Hispanic society in New Mexico and part of the American experience.

NOTES


2. The term genfzaro had its origins in Spain where it designated a Spaniard of mixed European parentage. The contemporary spelling is jenizaro meaning “one begotten by parents of different nations or composed of different species” or merely mixed, hybrid. The word is of Turkish origin, yeni cerci new troops. In English, jenizary refers to Christian boys, primarily from Albania, Bulgaria, and Bosnia, who were seized as annual tribute, instructed in the Muslim faith, and trained and enrolled as salaried infantry in the sultan’s personal guard and in the main part of the army. Their discipline and loyalty made them one of the most formidable fighting forces in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. They were eliminated in a series of reforms in 1826. (Fray Angélico Chávez, “Genízaros,” Handbook of North American Indians, Southwest 9 [Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 1979]: 198).


5. France V. Scholes, Church and State in New Mexico, 1610-1650 (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1937), p. 70.


11. Recopilacion de leyes . . . (Madrid, 1681), libro VII, titulo VII, leyes III, XVII.


13. Adams and Chávez, Missions of New Mexico, p. 42.


24. For a definitive study on racial classification, see Magnus Morner, Race Mixture in the History of Latin America (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967).

25. Olmsted, Spanish and Mexican Colonial Censuses, p. i; Olmsted, Censuses of New Mexico, 1790, 1823, 1845; SANM, 1790 census, reel 12.


27. Adams and Chávez, Missions of New Mexico, p. 42.


33. Report of Caballero de Croix. Mexico, 2 July 1777; SANM, reel 10, frame 925; [Chacon], “Extracto de las novedades ocurridas en la Provincia del Nuevo Mexico desde 4 de octubre haron 29 de noviembre . . . 1800,” Santa Fe, 24 November 1800, SANM, reel 14 frame 652. Santa Fe, 24 November 1800, SANM, reel 14, frame 652; Joseph Manuel de Ochoa, Ojo de Anaya, 30 November 1800, SANM, reel 14, frames 658-59; Comandante General Salcedo to Governor Maynez, Chihuahua, 12 August 1808; Governor Maynez/Montrrique to Comandante General Salcedo, Santa Fe, 20 June 1809, SANM, reel 16, frames 596, 907-9.

34. Adams and Chávez, The Missions of New Mexico, p. 113.

35. [Chacon to Pedro de Naval, Santa Fe, 10 June 1800, SANM, reel 14, frames 548-49.


40. Thomas James, Three Years among the Indians and Mexicans (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), pp. 80, 58, 71, 108, 68; Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies, p. 142.


42. Kenner, A History of New Mexico-Plains In-
43. The controversy over Gonzales' origins is best traced in Janet Lecompte, *Rebellion in Río Arriba, 1837* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1985), pp. 36-75; Fray Angelico Chavez, "José Gonzales, Genízaro Governor," *New Mexico Historical Review* 30 (1955): 190-94, takes the position that Gonzales was a genízaro. He states that Gonzales escaped after the battle Pojoaque and died several months later.