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**Indigenous Imperialism: The Logic and Logistics of Comanche Economics in New Mexico**

**Abstract**
Over the past twenty years, scholars have begun to rethink subsistence-driven models of indigenous labor and exchange, instead tracing out dynamic networks of social, economic, and political adaptation among Native peoples, especially in response to Western colonialism. While current research has highlighted indigenous agency, these approaches have largely ignored the cultural and linguistic meanings behind key economic concepts. Through a case study of the Comanche, this article develops a social approach to nomadic economics. The Comanche offer a compelling case for indigenous empire building and a need to develop a revised understanding of imperialism. Drawing on documentary and archaeological evidence, this article traces the logic and logistics of the Comanche imperialism in New Mexico. Specifically, I argue that during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Comanche people created a nomadic empire rooted in decentralized political power, kinship, and inter- and intra-ethnic exchange. This case study provides a glimpse into the priorities and practices of Comanche entrepreneurs and points to the important role of internal social dynamics, in structuring indigenous forms of imperialism.

**Key words**
Comanche, political economy, imperialism, rock art, New Mexico.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, the Comanches transformed from a small-scale hunting and gathering society into an extensive economic empire. Fueling the Comanche's imperial machine was violence in the form of guerilla-style raiding as well as inter- and intra-ethnic exchange. Together, these strategies allowed the Comanche to assert control over the movement of people, both native and non-native, and commodities across an expansive territory. The Comanche case raises several important questions about the nature of nomadic economics and current scholarly definitions of imperialism. Indeed, until the recent work of revisionist historian Pekka Hämäläinen (Hämäläinen, 1998; 2008; 2010), anthropologists and historians had largely framed indigenous actions after 1492 as negotiations of Western colonialism. This is particularly true for highly mobile groups like the Comanche, whose actions have been interpreted as a response to European introduced commodities, particularly horses, or as a check on settler colonial expansion (e.g. Rupert Richardson's (1993) *Comanche Barrier to South Plains Settlement*). Although archaeological studies of this period in the American Southwest have emphasized indigenous resistance and persistence (Wilcox, 2009; Preucel, 2002; Eiselt and

Darling, 2012 ; Blackhawk, 2008; John, 1996; Liebmann, 2012; Seymour, 2013), they have stopped short of arguing for the existence of large-scale indigenous directed political-economic projects. While these studies have made significant strides towards rewriting unidirectional narratives of colonization in the region, in many ways the focus remains on Western political agendas rather than indigenous ones.

Furthermore, hunter-gatherer economic systems continue to be approached through the lens of subsistence (Hämäläinen, 2010; Flores, 1991). For Numic-speaking groups like the Comanche, Shoshone, Ute, and Paiute, Julian Steward's (1938; 1955) cultural ecology approach has fundamentally shaped anthropological approaches to these communities (Albers, 2002: 272). Steward's framework embraces an evolutionary paradigm which frames indigenous economies as adaptations to the material constraints of local environments (Rusco, 1999). While contemporary scholars have largely abandoned the primitivism underpinning Stewards model, they continue to conceptualize hunter-gatherer social practices using techno-environmental models (McNeil, 2008; Hodge, 2019; Bettinger, 1980; Bettinger et al., 2006; Zeanah, 2004; Kelly, 2001).

Similarly, in the American Southwest, archaeologists have tended to explain the historic relationship between Plains hunter-gatherers and sedentary Pueblo agriculturalists through subsistence-focused approaches including buffering theories (Ford, 1972; Dean et al., 1985; Braun and Plog, 1982; Lintz, 1991) and mutualism models (Creel, 1991; Spielmann, 1986; Baugh, 1984; Habicht-Mauche, 1993; Lintz, 1991; Speth, 1991). Within mutualism models in particular, trade serves to redistribute complementary food-based resources across communities occupying unique ecological niches thereby promoting high levels of interdependence and specialization. While these studies have contributed important insights into indigenous

interactions, current approaches to nomadic labor and exchange tend to ignore the cultural and linguistic meanings of important indigenous concepts, like reciprocity, cooperation, and generosity (Albers, 2002).

A more complex understanding of Comanche economics requires rethinking current scholarly approaches to hunter-gatherer social systems and definitions of empire, a rethinking that has important implications for the study of mobile groups more broadly. A social approach to indigenous economics, which situates Comanche practices within their linguistic and cultural context, offers one potentially productive alternative. In order to develop this approach more thoroughly, I first present an alternative theory of imperialism, which highlights the failure of Western vocabularies for understanding indigenous forms of empire (Jacoby, 2013).

Building on this alternative model, I then present evidence for Comanche economic activities, particularly trading, in New Mexico during the eighteenth century. This focus on trade reflects the nature of the iconographic record in the Taos-region and recognizes that exchange is simply one piece of a larger labor system in which raiding, hunting, and gathering all played a role. This discussion draws on archival sources, consultations with the former Comanche Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, and informal conversations with Comanche tribal members. These oral and textual sources are placed in dialogue with archaeological evidence derived from fieldwork conducted between 2009-2017 in collaboration with the Rio Grande Gorge Project directed by Severin Fowles (Fowles et al., 2017; Fowles and Arterberry, 2013; Fowles and Montgomery, 2018).

**A Theory of Indigenous Imperialism**

Anthropologists and historians have broadly conceptualized imperialism as the exertion of political and economic power by one state over other sociopolitical entities (e.g. states,

chiefdoms, or non-stratified societies) across an extensive territory through military conquest or diplomatic means (Sinopoli, 1994: 160; Pijl, 2007: 64). Archaeological applications of this definition engage to varying degrees with Immanuel Wallerstein's (1974) world system perspective, positing the presence of intersocietal networks and the flow of commodities between imperial cores and conquered peripheries. While scholars have emphasized various geographical, political, ideological or economic aspects of empire, most of these discussions assume the presence of imperial centers administered by state-level societies. The notion that empire requires some form of integrated state-level system of power largely reflects lingering elements of social evolutionary thinking—the idea that societies progressed (or did not) from primitive egalitarianism to complex and larger-scale forms of hierarchical governance.

In *Empires in World History*, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper (2010) disentangle empire from the state by pointing out the ways in which contemporary Western notions of sovereignty have been universalized in studies of world history. With an eye towards decentering Europe and modernity, they posit an alternative definition of empire: "large political units, expansionist or with a memory of power extended over space, polities that maintain distinction and hierarchy as they incorporate new people" (Burbank and Cooper, 2010: 8). Within the North American context, polities can be defined as any group of people with a collective identity, shared political structure, and the capacity to mobilize resources. While the term polity leaves room for differing levels of political or economic integration and opportunities for communal autonomy, hegemony is at the crux of any definition of empire. Hegemony requires some form of politico-military or political-economic domination actualized through material and ideological mechanisms of control. Drawing on these definitions, the Comanche can be considered an indigenous empire because they were an internally fluid but externally coherent polity that

exerted political-economic hegemony over peoples and commodity flows across an extensive territory.

Comanche imperialism differs from Western definitions of empire in three ways, (1) a non-binary view of difference that facilitated incorporation and cultural tolerance, (2) indirect rule through violence and exchange, and (3) an expanded understanding of territorial control, which does not require permanent settlement or private property. First, the Comanche took a different approach to the politics of difference—the specific ways in which imperial polities incorporate or differentiate between groups (Burbank and Cooper, 2010: 13). In contrast to Western forms of imperialism (Said, 1994 [1978]), which were informed by a binary approach to alterity, the Comanche perceived cultural difference as natural and useful. The Comanche took an incorporative approach, which emphasized cultural and religious pluralism. Ethno-historical evidence of the formation of inter-ethnic communities in New Mexico and the emergence of new hybrid social practices demonstrates the Comanche's approach to difference (Lamadrid 2003).

In contrast to direct exertions of control, the Comanche employed an indirect repertoires of power (Burbank and Cooper, 2010: 16). The Comanche's 'bureaucratic and military machinery' (Lenin, 1975: 12) took the form of a confederation—a layered form of sovereignty in which constituent political units, comprised of allied family groups, remained economically and politically independent. Instead of an emperor, the largest political unit in the Comanche empire were divisions of territorially close family-based bands (Hämäläinen, 2008: 4).

In addition to the indirect nature of the Comanche's imperial project, territorial expansion through violence and formal exchange were essential repertories of power (Burbank and Cooper, 2010: 98). Rather than military conquest, the Comanche used guerilla-style raiding on horseback

to expand their territorial reach. Rather than taxation or tribute, the Comanche's economic hegemony was maintained through the regularized theft and redistribution of animals, captives, and commodities (Khodarkovsky, 2002: 26). In addition to being economically advantageous, raiding was encouraged by the Comanche's social system in which counting coup was the primary means of exhibiting valor and achieving status. Although raids were generally undertaken by individual actors with the goal of enhancing their wealth and prestige, these activities were not a zero-sum proposition (Smith, 1904: 14-16). Raiding and trading also benefited New Mexico's relatively impoverished markets by supplying Spanish and Pueblo traders with captives, firearms, and metal stolen from outside of the territory (Abrruzi, 2006: 4).

Finally, indigenous forms of imperialism require a more fluid approach to territorial occupation and possession. The Comanche maintained a unique imperial geography based on the control of movement across space and patrolling of access to resources (St. John, 2013: 76). At the core of this more flexible model of territorial control is an expanded understanding of occupation that de-centers the creation of permanent settlements or the demarcation of private property. For the Comanche in particular, territorial occupation was asserted through acts of 'walking the land', naming particular places, and controlling access to important places (burial spots, sacred places, hunting grounds) across the landscape (Pijl, 2007: 46).

Several material consequences follow from this theory of indigenous imperialism. While archaeological studies of empire have typically looked to large scale architecture, road systems, urban centers, and prestige goods as evidence, the absence of one or more of these various indicators does not necessarily demonstrate the absence of imperialism (Sinopoli, 1994: 169). Specifically, the Comanche case points to the need for a complex model of imperial geography that complicates core-periphery ideograms depicting decreasing levels of imperial control as one

moves further away from the core. Instead, the Comanche case suggests that imperial territories need not be continuous and that "core" areas ought to be defined differently based on economic, political, or ideological connections (Sinopoli, 1994: 170). The decentralized and highly mobile nature of the Comanche's economic empire suggests that evidence of an "imperial capital" characterized by administrative facilities, monumental architecture, and high artifact densities, will be largely absent from the archaeological record.

Rather than searching for archaeological evidence of bureaucratic capitals, material evidence of regional settlement patterns provides a more productive lens into the logistics of Comanche hegemony. The over 400 scratched petroglyph panels attributed to the Comanche and recorded within the Rio Grande Gorge offers "material symbolism of political authority"(Sinopoli, 1994: 171) and marks this area as a regional center within the Comanche empire. The Comanche case also draws scholarly attention towards archaeological indicators of economic distribution mechanisms for commodities and the organization of labor. Petroglyph panels and lodge-pole trails documented within New Mexico and Texas provide material evidence for the structure of equestrian activity groups and routes of commodity distribution.

## The Logic and Logistics of Comanche Imperialism

Comanche rock art recorded by Rio Grande Gorge Project offers compelling material evidence for the logistics and logic of Comanche imperial activities in New Mexico (Figure 1) (Fowles and Arterberry, 2013; Fowles et al., 2017; Fowles and Montgomery, 2018; Montgomery, 2015). The majority of this rock art is from a single location comprised of a series of connected basins surrounding the Vista Verde hiking trail.

**[Insert Figure 1]** Figure 1. Map of the Vista Verde site.

Located within a series of interlinking basins with adequate pasturage and running water, Vista Verde resembles other known Comanche sites, such as Palo Duro canyon in Texas, and would have served as an ideal location for a short or medium term encampment of mounted Comanches (Tijerina, 2016, personal communication). Furthermore, the sites location, approximately 20 miles from both Taos and Picuris Pueblos made it well placed for Comanche groups seeking to raid or trade. Finally, the site is located at one of the few easily accessible crossing points within the rocky confines of the Gorge, providing a strategic stopping place for Comanches moving across the Taos Plateau.

The scratched petroglyphs recorded in the Gorge stylistically and technologically resemble Biographic Tradition rock art found on the northern and southern Plains, which employs a narrative style, emphasizing movement and interaction (Keyser, 2004; Keyser and Klassen, 2001; Loendorf, 2008). These scratched images differ both stylistically and technically from petroglyphs culturally affiliated with other equestrian groups in New Mexico, specifically the Ute and Apache. Apache and Ute petroglyphs were typically produced using a pecking technique and depict static icons, such as masks, shield-bearers, quadrupeds, and anthropomorphs (Mitchell, 2002; Schaafsma, 1996; Cole, 1990). In contrast to this pecked iconic style, examples of Comanche rock art from outside of New Mexico were produced using a scratching technique and typically include large complex scenes depicting battles or raids (Mitchell, 2004; Loendorf and Olson, 2003). Although horses, tipis, and bison were common referents for most indigenous groups by the end of the eighteenth century, within the current Gorge rock art sample, these elements are more frequently depicted using the scratched technique. Furthermore, the scratched technique is the only method currently associated with the depiction of Plains material culture, such as parfleches (rawhide containers), tail bags, tipis, and

mounted shields, in the Gorge. A stylistic analysis of the Rio Grande Gorge panels accompanied by consultations with former Tribal Historic Preservation Officer, Jimmy Arterberry as well as other Comanche tribal member's tribal representatives strongly suggests that the authors of these panels were ancestral Comanche people moving through New Mexico on horseback sometime after 1680.

Drawing on the model of empire outlined above the following, sections discuss the logistics of Comanche imperialism, particularly focusing on evidence of decentralization, kinship, and inter- and intra-ethnic exchange. This discussion is rooted in a social approach to economics, which integrates indigenous vocabularies and conceptions into the interpretation of the material and archival records. Collaboration with descendant community members is a critical aspect of this social approach, which seeks to incorporate the perspectives of indigenous peoples into the interpretation of the archaeological record (Atalay, 2006; Watkins, 2000; Ferguson and Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2006; Adler, 2005; Bernardini, 2005; Nicholas, 2008).

*Evidence of Decentralized Empire*

The Comanche case demonstrates how decentralization can serve as a tool of imperial expansion. Tipi imagery within the Gorge offers one line of material evidence for the decentralized structure of Comanche imperialism. There are currently over 150 tipi panels documented within the Gorge and approximately 50 percent of these panels are located along the Vista Verde trail. Within the Biographic lexicon, tipis, like horse tracks or human figures, conveyed the relative numbers present at a given event (Keyser, 1987: 63-64). The narrative realism of these types of panels, has been noted by anthropologist John Ewers and others, who have referred to the biographic style as "picture writing" because aesthetic considerations were

viewed as secondary to the goal of communicating the key aspects of the events depicted (Ewers, 1957: 4). Interpreted through this lens, tipi images serve as a proxy for the historical presence of Comanche encampments in the Gorge, and provide insights into the scale and nature of their engagements in the region.

Tipi images are depicted either as singular icons or within multi-icon panels. Eighty percent of tipi panels in the current sample depict between one and three tipis and singular tipi icons make up over half (n=57%) of the all tipi imagery within the Gorge. The preponderance of singular tipi icons mirrors the underlying structure of Comanche society, in which kin-based households were the primary socio-economic unit. Isolated horse-and-rider images provide additional evidence for the decentralized nature of Comanche economic activities in the region. There are currently over one hundred horse-and rider images documented in the Gorge and approximately sixty-six percent of these images are isolated icons (Figure 2).

**[Insert Figure 2]** Figure 2. Composite sample of horse-and-rider glyphs within the Rio Grande Gorge.

The majority of horse icons are simple stick figures, resembling mature-style horses identified by Keyser and Klassen (2001: 231) on the northern Plains. Horses in the mature-style have elongated bodies and necks with manes, tails, ears, and hooves occasionally depicted in detail. Riders are typically drawn as expedient stick figures or with square or rounded bodies.

The large numbers of isolated tipi and horse-and-rider images suggests that individual interests and actions were the primary drivers of the Comanche's economic empire. Material evidence for the importance of individualism provides a counter point to current scholarly interpretations of indigenous activities, which tend to over-emphasize the cohesiveness of tribal communities and the internal workings of their political and economic systems (Moore, 1974). In

many ways, this scholarly predisposition reproduces the biases of the archival record, which reflects the perceptions of colonial bureaucrats. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Spanish administrators wrote about the Comanche in homogenizing ways that erased in-group differences perceived as irrelevant to foreign rule. From this perspective, the actions of individuals and activity groups were all part of a monolithic Comanche cultural-entity. This approach to administering colonized populations imposed a false sense of coherent identity and politics onto indigenous actors, an interpretation challenged by the material evidence of individuals and small-family groupings.

The spatial distribution of rock art culturally affiliated with the Comanche offers material evidence for the expansive territorial scale of the Comanche empire. For example, scratched biographic-style petroglyphs likely made by Comanche peoples have been recorded throughout Colorado, southern Wyoming, northern New Mexico, and Texas (Mitchell, 2002; Mitchell, 2004; Loendorf and Olson, 2003; Newcomb and Kirland, 1967). Historic maps documenting the presence of Comanche camps throughout the trans-Pecos region offer additional evidence for the geographic extent of Comanche imperialism (Kenmotsu et al., 1995: 242-243; Pelon, 1993: 86; Kirkland and W.W. Newcomb, 1967: 120).

Situated within this larger network of sites, isolated tipi and horse-and-rider images mark the Gorge as part of *Comanchería*, and provide material evidence for the small-scale, decentralized, and geographically dispersed nature of Comanche imperialism. The simplistic form of these images suggest that they were used as a relatively expedient means of marking presence within the Comanche lexicon. This iconographic vocabulary references an alternative understanding of territorial control based on continuous use rather than through the creation of

private property. As permanent displays of use, these isolated icons were a way for Comanche individuals or relatively small family based units to assert "occupation" in the region.

*The Economics of Kinship*

Maintaining social relationships is a core value of the Comanche (Tijerina, 2016, personal communication). For example, during the early eighteenth century, the Comanche formed an alliance with the Ute through inter-marriage and trade thereby affording them access to Spanish horses and entrance into New Mexico's trade markets (Betty, 2005: 107). Kinship and kinship-like relationships also structured Comanche interactions with Hispano settlers. Over the course of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Comanche women and children entered into Spanish households as captives. Comanche's were also on the other end of this captive-taking system, engaging in raids among a variety of indigenous groups, particularly Navajos and Apaches. For the Comanche, captive taking had a dual purpose, feeding market demand for inexpensive labor and serving as a form of imperial population redistribution. The forced resettlement of populations through raiding created new kinds of sites with distinct ethnic make-ups and cultural practices (Sinopoli, 1994: 172). *Genizaro*—Native peoples captured by indigenous raiders and sold to Hispano settlers— settlements are one such type of site.

Genizaros acted as cultural intermediaries within the Comanche empire, facilitating trade relationships between their fictive and actual relatives. By the turn of the nineteenth century, genizaro settlements such as San Miguel del Bado, Ranchos de Taos, and Abiquiù were key Comanche trading centers (Betty, 2005: 107). In a letter to Governor Real Alencaster, Alejandro Marin— a captured Spaniard who lived among the Comanche—noted the increasing importance of genizaro trade centers to Comanche economic relations in the region. In his report Marin

states that the *Yamparika* band had established lucrative trade relations "with residents of the Río Arriba and jurisdiction of La Cañada, who continually, in spite of restriction, live among them [the Comanche] and are the ones of worst conduct in all the province…" (SANM, 1806). Marin's description documents the intimate relationship that emerged between Hispano settlers and Comanche peoples, and the increasing integration of New Mexico into Comanche economic and social networks.

The Comanche's approach to economics radically differed from the pre-industrial capitalist thinking of Spanish colonial administrators who viewed the rational exchange of commodities as dictating market behavior, rather than the social relationship between buyers and sellers (Hämäläinen, 2008: 41). This ontological disconnect created tense scenarios which often erupted in violence over perceived slights or unfavorable exchange terms. In order to limit potential opportunities for social discord, officials continuously issued bans on exchange outside of sanctioned fairs (e.g. SANM , 1754, 1712, 1746). Official efforts to monitor Hispano-Comanche interactions were largely ineffectual due to the increasing dependency of New Mexico's economy on Comanche trade networks. Governor Joaquín Codallos commented on the colony's growing dependence on the Comanche during a *juanta* convened in 1748. According to Codallos, all participants at the meeting "admitted the unreliable and treacherous character of the tribe; but a majority favored a continuance of trade because the skins, meats, and horses they brought for sale were much needed in the province…"(Bancroft, 1889: 249-250).

The Gorge petroglyphs corroborate archival and ethnographic evidence documenting the importance of social relations in structuring Comanche interactions in the region. Multi-component tipi panels, in particular, offer insights into the kinship relations underpinning Comanche economic practices. Multi-component tipi compositions depict between two and

twenty-four tipis on a single panel (Figure 3). The most common multi-component arrangement includes only two tipis with representativeness decreasing as the number of tipis per panel increases. These panels depict bilaterally extended residential groups called *nʉmʉnahkahnis*. Geographically close nʉmʉnahkahnis formed bands whose members were allied under the direction of a popular leader called a *paraibo* (Kavanagh, 1999: 36; Kavanagh, 1986). These bands ranged in size from one large extended family, in which each nuclear family occupied a single tipi, up to three or four extended families (Kavanagh, 1989: 100-101).

**[Insert Figure 3]** Figure 3. Proportion of the Gorge rock art comprised of multi-tipi rock art panels.

Various stylistic conventions— partially or fully abrading the interior of the tipi or using vertical or diagonal lines— demarcate extended family groupings within multi-component panels. These iconographic techniques are part of a larger cultural logic in which "style" served as a means of signaling membership in particular bands and societies. For example, Comanche women in the *Penanʉʉ* and *Penatʉhka* bands in southeast Texas decorated the sleeves and shoulders of their dresses with small bands of red paint (Kavangah, 2008: 458). As with clothing, rock art served as a medium for documenting the presence of particular people or groups. According to Comanche tribal member Howard White Wolf, petroglyphs and pictographs were pictures, "drawn [on rocks] to tell who had been at a certain spot…" (Kavangah, 2008: 290). Rather than expedient marks of presence, as argued for isolated icons, White Wolf's comments suggests that the various patterns used to decorate tipi icons in multi-component panels likely served the express purpose of identifying the presence and participation of particular residential groups in an event. As part of a broader cultural complex of self-aggrandizement among Plains communities, the detailed documentation of group affiliation within Comanche rock art likely

played an important role in individual quests to accrue social capital (McGinnis, 1990; Brownstone, 2015; Smith, 1938; Keyser, 2004; Keyser and Klassen, 2003; Keyser, 1996).

The comparatively small number of petroglyph panels depicting large-scale aggregations of five or more tipis in the Gorge may reflect several factors. First, while aggregation continued in the post-horse era, large scale gatherings became less frequent as bands dispersed across greater distances in order to accommodate the grazing needs of their growing horse herds (Weber 2005:72). Accordingly, the preponderance of rock art panels depicting between one and three tipis may simply reflect a post-horse encampment pattern. This pattern may also reflect the fact that the Comanche used the northern Rio Grande as a regional center for the distribution and acquisition of commodities instead of as a central gathering place. Indeed, archival evidence indicates that Comanche nʉmʉnahkahnis would typically congregate in large groups in the sheltered valleys of the upper Arkansas River during the winter months, rather than in New Mexico (Hämäläinen, 2008: 24-25).

While rare, the depiction of large numbers of tipis within the Gorge rock repertoire may mark the use of the area for occasional multi-band gatherings associated large-scale political-economic activities such as war. In the multi-component panels that depict large-scale gatherings, tipi icons appear as part of linear groupings, circular alignments, or “clusters” comprised of spatially discrete arrangements (Figure 4). These images parallel other forms of archaeological and photographic evidence which indicate that during times of aggregation nʉmʉnahkahnis occupied spatially contiguous areas within the larger encampment (Oetelaar, 2004: 126; Moore, 1987; McClintok, 1910).

**[Insert Figure 4]** Figure 4. Representative images of multi-component tipi panel compositions.

The field notes of E. Adamson Hoebel among the Comanche offers some additional insight into the formation of circular encampments in particular. Hoebel recorded White Wolf as saying, "When the whole tribe gathered, as for the Sun Dance, they formed a circle. First one band move up; the next went beyond, etc., forming a circle. In an ordinary encampment, no circle was formed" (Kavangah, 2008: 345). White Wolf's statements suggest that band level kinship affiliations played an important role in the arrangement of tipis during large-scale gatherings.

*A Social Approach to Inter and Intra-ethnic Exchange*

Undergirding the Comanche's economic empire was a structured system of inter- and intra-cultural exchange. The Comanche's exchange system can be considered imperialistic for several reasons. First, the Comanche established a monopoly on trade in New Mexico. Over the course of the eighteenth century, the Comanche became regular participants in the established cross-cultural exchange networks previously formed between Pueblo and semi-nomadic Apache groups living on the Plains, eventually displacing the Apache as primary economic intermediaries (Eiselt, 2012; Spielmann, 1991; Leonard, 2006; Habicht-Mauche, 1987; Creel, 1991; Wiseman, 1992). Furthermore, Comanche exchange networks were extensive in scale, stretching from the Arkansas River Valley in the north to Mexico City in the south (Hämäläinen, 1998). Finally, Comanche economic imperialism is demonstrated by their hegemonic control over the movement of particularly valuable commodities, particularly horses, mules, and European weaponry (Hämäläinen, 2010).

The Comanche employed a social approach to exchange that differs in many ways from Western notions of market-driven trade. For the Comanche exchange produced ties of actual and fictive kinship. These relationships were entangled with the value practices of reciprocity,

redistribution, and responsibility (Tijerina, 2016, personal communication). The principles of reciprocity and redistribution informing Comanche trade relations formed a stable safety net that could sustain individuals, bands, and the larger Comanche community in times of scarcity or hardship. The principles of reciprocity and redistribution informed Comanche dealings both externally, with trade partners, and internally, across bands (Harris and Wasilewski, 2004).

Externally, public demonstrations of good will, like smoking and gift giving, were prerequisites for negotiating favorable trade terms and establishing peaceful relations. Social displays of good will were part of a risk-management strategy intended to minimize potential economic losses associated with expanding trade relations into foreign territories and with communities whom they had no previous kinship ties (Betty, 2005: 118). Comanche trading activities are materially documented indirectly through multi-component tipi panels with either two (n=25) or three tipis (n=13), representing allied families undertaking small-scale activities in the region (Laubin and Laubin, 1977: 299; Brumley, 1983; Oetelaar, 2004).

Colonial administrators eventually recognized the importance of reciprocity to continued Comanche trade with New Mexico. Tomàs Vélez Cachupin was the first governor to adopt such a social approach. Instructing administrators on how to act with Comanche traders, Cachupin stated that

> exterior acts and circumstances of one's looks influence considerably the idea that they "[Comanche's] ought to form…you should introduce yourself with skill and with expressive words, maintain in your looks a mien, grave and serene, which they may observe and thus continue the faithful friendship (SANM, 1754b: 134-135).

Upon leaving office in 1754, Cachupin advised the incoming governor, Francisco Antonio Marin del Valle to treat the Comanche "with every kindness and affection" (SANM, 1754b: 134).

Cachupin's directives highlight the importance of performative social gestures in maintaining trade relationships with the Comanche and mark a clear shift in Spanish colonial policy, a shift which recognized the legitimacy, if only perfunctorily, of the Comanche's approach to economics.

Kinship relations and notions of redistribution also structured exchange relationships between Comanche families, bands, and divisions. Intra-ethnic exchange was structured in-part around specialized access to different resources, such as honey or antelope , access which was demarcated through band names describing different animal and plant resources located within the territorial range of each residential group (Table 1) (Tijerina, 2016, personal communication). A Comanche man named Teneverka described one such resource-oriented band and their territorial range, "The *Kuhtsutʉhka* were Meat-eaters. They always had plenty of buffalo meat. They were from the Red River up from Burkburnett, Texas" (Kavangah, 2008: 454).

**[Insert Table 1]** Table 1. Comanche Band Names.

Subsistence-based resources were exchanged across nʉmʉnahkahni through trade and gift giving. Economically successful community members were expected to be liberal in their redistribution of resources (Arterberry, 2016, personal communication). Redistribution across families and bands was an economic strategy intended to maintain a "flat" society and ensure the overall well-being of the community—a core value that continues to inform Comanche community dynamics today (Tijerina, 2016, personal communication).

Band names reflecting specialized subsistence resources are also present among other Numic-speaking communities. For example, Shoshone groups inhabiting the greater

Yellowstone region use a similar set of resource specific band names linked to territorial delineations, including the *Tukudika* (sheep eaters), *Agaidika* (salmon eaters), and *Kukundika* (buffalo eaters) (Nabokov and Loendorf, 2004: 128). Shared naming-practices across Shoshone and Comanche peoples suggests that resource specialization and redistribution may play a role in structuring a variety of socio-economic practices across mobile groups.

Intra-ethnic exchange also occurred at the divisional level. The flow of commodities between Eastern and Western divisions directly facilitated the Comanche's imperial expansion. While the Western division composed of *YampatɄhka* (root eaters), *HupenɄɄ* (timber people), and *KuhtsutɄHkas* (buffalo eaters) acted as specialized traders in agricultural products and guns, the eastern Comanches– comprised primarily of *KuhtsutɄhka* bands– acted as the primary suppliers of horses and mules (Hämäläinen, 1998). Acquired through raids on Hispano ranches and missions in Texas and Northern Mexico, these equines were then exported north to the Western Comanche's trade center in the Arkansas River valley, where they were exchanged for the valuable garden products and manufactured goods supplied by French, Pawnee, Kansas, Kiowa, and Iowa traders (Hämäläinen, 1998: 494). Furthermore, within the logic of reciprocity, theft in the form of raiding was conceptualized as a form of resource redistribution (Hämäläinen, 2008: 16). The exchange of mares, studs, and mules for manufactured goods between divisions allowed the Comanche to extend their economic reach to the north and south while shoring up power in New Mexico (Weber, 1992: 174-177).

Due to its advantageous location on the precipice of the Plains, the Taos region became a central node within this north-south exchange network and by the 1750s, the Taos trade fair had become the primary outlet for Eastern and Western Comanche goods (Works, 1992: 273). In a

report to the Viceroy Antonio Maria Bucareli y Ursa, Governor Pedro Fermin de Mendinueta described one such fair

> July 28 and September 18, the Comanche came to Taos to trade 11 captive Indians, Christian boy and girl from Coahuila, 14 muskets and some horses and skins. September, the Comanches then attacked Taos and Picuris and in October they attacked Pecos (Mendinueta, 1773).

De Mendinueta's report indicates that the fall and summer were particularly busy times for Comanche raiders and traders, suggesting that multi-component tipi panels in the Gorge were likely made during these months. In addition to providing insights into the seasonality of Comanche exchange, this report offers evidence for the vast scope of the Comanche's territorial reach. Specifically, de Mendinueta' account indicates that some of the captives sold at the Taos trade fairs were from Coahuila, a region straddling the modern Texas-Mexico border and located over 800 miles south of Taos.

Nineteenth century maps of the trans-Pecos region document a vast network of north-south lodge pole trails system, materially marking the movement of Comanche people and commodities across the empire (Young, 1853; Echols, 1859; Emory, 1853; Livermore, 1881; Mitchell, 1860; Pressler, 1867). Comanche trails are characterized by a series of unevenly spaced parallel ruts which "diverged and converged at intervals to form a braid like band" (Campbell, 1968: 131). The Comanche's trail system moved along north-south axes following established passageways through mountain ranges, the location of important river crossing, and access to sheltered campgrounds with adequate pasturage.

One such encampment and trail is documented on the 1841 *New Map of Texas* which depicts a Comanche encampment north of Medicine Mounds on the bank of the Red River along with a north-south "Comanche trail" heading towards the Guadalupe River (Kenmotsu et al.,

1995: 243). The Chiso and San Carlos trails are two other examples of well-documented north-south trails used by the Comanche in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These trails began at Horsehead Crossing along the Pecos River, a rare source of fresh water in the Trans-Pecos region, and diverged at Comanche Springs, near present day Marathon, Texas (Campbell, 1968: 134; Pelon, 1993: 86).

As a major geographical feature with an ample supply of water and pasturage for large horse herds, the Rio Grande Gorge would have been an important thoroughfare in this north-south trail system. Within the Gorge, there is evidence of a constructed trail composed of parallel ruts created by the use of horse drawn travois, similar to Comanche trails identified in Texas, which descends from the west rim into the grassy basin below and is oriented along north-south axes. The directionality, form, and location of the Vista Verde lodge-pole trail suggests that it was likely used in the exchange of horses and mules between Western and Eastern Comanche divisions. Further supporting this interpretation of the Gorge as a thoroughfare for the north-south transport of horses and mules, are the over hundred horse-and-rider glyphs documented on the boulders surrounding the travois trail (Figure 2). These glyphs are a form of administrative record keeping which point to the use of the Vista Verde site as a debriefing area and publically document the movement of horses through the region.

**Conclusion**

Material and documentary evidence of Comanche activities in New Mexico offers compelling evidence for an alternative definition of empire, structured around decentralized indirect control and inter- and intra-ethnic exchange. This model of imperialism turns scholarly attention away from large-scale imperial capitals and towards material indicators of regional

centers and commodity flows. The large numbers of horse-and-rider rock art within the Gorge indicates that the Taos-area was a key node in the north-south movement of horses between Comanche divisions. Evidence of Comanche lodge pole trails at Vista Verde and in the Trans-Pecos region provide additional material evidence for a north-south system of intra-ethnic exchange stretching from the Arkansas River Valley in the north to the Balcones Escarpment in Texas.

The archaeological record also provides material evidence for the structure of Comanche labor regimes and the logistics of Comanche economic activities in the region. The preponderance of rock art panels depicting nuclear households and nʉmʉnahkahnis within the Rio Grande Gorge indicates that small-scale activity groups were the primary economic unit of empire. Comanche activity groups were not formally organized military fraternities but rather "informal organizations compounded of mutual friendship and interest, and they were not continuous or permanent" (Wallace and Hoebel, 1952: 272).

The Comanche's system of decentralized resource specialists facilitated the exploitation of a large diversified territory and provided the surplus capital necessary to raise the standard of living across all Comanche bands. This labor regime also facilitated the formation of a vast long-distance trade network that challenged the regulatory power of the Spanish state. The highly effective nature of Comanche micro-scale economics confounds the argument that economic monopolies require centralized bureaucracy or hierarchical systems of taxation and tribute. Even if one disagrees with this alternative interpretation of empire, the Comanche case provides an important opportunity to move scholarly discussions of indigenous economics away from subsistence driven models. Finally, the Comanche case points to how the incorporation of

culturally grounded conceptions of economics can enhance studies of empire among non-Western communities.

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