

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Objects of Change: The Archaeology and History of Ankara Contact with Europeans. By J. Daniel Rogers.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7639j909>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 15(4)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

Meyer, Roy W.

**Publication Date**

1991-09-01

**DOI**

10.17953

**Copyright Information**

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

**Objects of Change: The Archaeology and History of Arikara Contact with Europeans.** By J. Daniel Rogers. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990. 256 pages. \$29.95 cloth.

A popular notion has it that when Euro-American trade goods became available to Indians, they promptly discarded their traditional tools and weapons in favor of the technologically superior equivalents offered by traders. So pervasive is this notion that some people are surprised to learn that the bow and arrow long remained the weapon of choice for hunting among Plains tribes, even after firearms became available. The objects offered by the traders were not always perceived as superior, even in the technological sense, and when they were, cultural reasons sometimes delayed their adoption. Even in cases where artifacts of white manufacture were preferred and eventually adopted, the process of acceptance was not necessarily a steady progression. The natives might begin by accepting a particular artifact, only to reject it later for a time, before finally allowing it to replace the aboriginal equivalent. The reasons for such inconsistent behavior were not always self-evident, either to the traders whose livelihood was affected by it or to modern students of interaction between Indians and Euro-Americans.

J. Daniel Rogers's *Objects of Change* attempts to shed some light on such puzzling behavior. Calling his work an "investigation of the relationship between social and material change" (p. 6), the author compares the ethnohistorical record of a single tribe, the Arikara, with the archeological record, in order to determine whether the successive phases in the relationship of the Arikara to Euro-Americans are reflected in the kinds of artifacts found in the sites occupied by the tribe over time. The Arikara were chosen in part because of the unusually full archeological record available as a result of the salvage archeology carried out in connection with the building of dams on the Missouri River in the 1950s and 1960s. The ethnohistorical record, though not as extensive as for some tribes, is sufficient to provide a basis for comparison. Moreover, because the severely disruptive phase of white contact came rather late in Arikara history, the firsthand observers—mainly traders and explorers—are able to tell us much about the effects of trade goods on Arikara culture before the era of forced acculturation really got underway.

Rogers's attention is focused on the two centuries from 1680, the approximate date of the first direct white contact, to 1862, when

the surviving Arikara joined with the Mandan and Hidatsa at Like-a-Fishhook Village. For closer analysis, he divides this timespan into five periods and adds a sixth, extending from the late 1500s to 1680, in order to have a baseline from which to measure the extent and rate of change in the material culture following the arrival of the first European explorers. Out of the great number of sites excavated in the course of the Missouri River Basin Survey, Rogers has, by the rigorous application of five criteria, reduced the number used in his analysis to twenty-one, unevenly distributed over the six periods.

Three types of sites are analyzed: domestic earthlodges, ceremonial earthlodges, and burials. It develops that ceremonial earthlodges are too few to be of much value in the analysis, and burials are available for only three of the six periods. So the bulk of the evidence to be analyzed comes from domestic earthlodges. It is assumed that they contain the most characteristic artifacts, the ones that give the clearest picture of what people were using in their everyday lives during the various periods.

Rogers sees five processes occurring in the Arikara response to articles of both native and European manufacture: maintenance, replacement, addition, rejection, and transformation. One hundred sixty-four kinds of artifacts are selected for analysis, divided into twenty-five categories based on their presumed use—containing, cutting, digging, decorating, and so on. Besides being subdivided into articles of native and European manufacture, artifact categories are classified as those of “basic production” and those of “non-production”—painting, other personal appearance, worshipping, and so on.

If the stereotypical picture of Indian-white relations were correct, one would expect contact to lead initially to replacement of aboriginal tools, vessels, weapons, and some items used in non-productive activities, and to proceed continuously, without interruption, to transformation of the whole society. To some extent, this is what happened in the case of the Arikara, but only in a very general sense. Initially, the Arikara did adopt some of the trade goods that were offered them; but instead of accepting increasing quantities of such goods, after a time they appear to have rejected what was available to them. The change of behavior does not seem to have been the result of the disappearance of fur-bearing animals from the Arikara range or the decline in the market for furs as a result of changes in European fashions, for those developments occurred later, and by that time the Arikara had resumed accept-

ing trade goods.

Rogers attributes the rejection in the late eighteenth century to a disenchantment with Europeans and Euro-Americans, after an early period when they regarded the traders as supernatural beings, and to a desire to maintain their native culture when they sensed that it was being eroded by increasing dependence on trade goods. Paradoxically, the Arikara returned to a dependence on trade goods in the early nineteenth century, when these were more difficult to obtain and when relations with the Euro-Americans were at their worst.

Interesting and useful though Rogers's study is, it is not without flaws. The criticism has been made that some sociological studies accomplish no more than to demonstrate the obvious. Although it would be unfair to stigmatize *Objects of Change* in this manner, the conclusions reached after the elaborate analyses are less than astonishing. Rogers tells us, by way of summing up, that the "results of the analyses indicate that there is, in fact, a clear and definable relationship between historical change and alterations in the composition of the material record, at least among the Arikaras" (p. 213). In a few minor respects, these results fail to conform to expectations, but on the whole they merely substantiate the historical record. And when one realizes that the Arikara were not a typical Plains tribe, the general applicability of the conclusions comes into question.

The book has a more serious fault, however, at least for the general reader. Back in the early 1960s, we heard much about C. P. Snow's "two cultures"—the scientific and the humanistic—and their inability to communicate with each other. Snow hoped that the social sciences would eventually bridge the gap between the natural sciences and the humanities. To a degree, his hopes have been fulfilled, but too often anthropologists and other social scientists seem to be writing solely for their peers. In their attempt to establish or validate their professional credentials in the eyes of those peers, they forgo any effort to communicate with the general, educated reading public.

*Objects of Change*, although assuredly far from the worst example of this tendency, makes for unnecessarily hard reading. Perhaps anticipating this objection, Rogers provides an epigraph from Albert C. Spaulding for chapter 8, "Analysis and Results": "The analysis is complicated because the situation to be analyzed is complex. There is no escape from this problem" (p. 153). Maybe so, but there are degrees of complexity, and there are ways to make

even the complex less so. Certainly readers without training in statistics are advised to proceed cautiously, lest they sink in a quagmire of standard deviations, correlation coefficients, slicing parameters, and polyhedral eccentricities.

If the author's technical vocabulary constitutes a barrier to comprehension for the nonspecialist, his style presents another kind of obstacle, or at least an annoyance. Among the more conspicuous examples of this fault are the occasional failures of agreement between subject and verb ("This constant variation . . . form the basis for archaeological studies of culture change" [p. 102]), the inconsistent use of "criteria" as both singular and plural (both illustrated on p. 123), and the tendency to run sentences together with only commas to separate them, or with commas plus connectives like "however," "therefore," or "in fact." If the message is of value, then it deserves better packaging.

Despite its limitations, the message contained in *Objects of Change* is valuable. Even allowing for the atypicality of the Arikara tribe, its response to white contact is worth close examination, as is that of any group undergoing a similar experience. And even though the historical record alone provides a reasonably accurate picture of that response, substantiation from the archeological record is welcome. Perhaps an accumulation of such studies will lead to a synthesis directed toward a wider audience than this book is likely to reach.

Roy W. Meyer  
Mankato, Minnesota

**Five Years a Dragoon ('49 to '54): And Other Adventures on the Great Plains.** By Percival G. Lowe, with an introduction and notes by Don Russell and a new foreword by Jerome A. Greene. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. 384 pages. \$14.95 paper.

This combination reminiscence/diary by Percival G. Lowe has been a classic since its first appearance in 1906, a status solidified by its republication by the University of Oklahoma Press in 1965 as a hardcover book. The present paperback printing by the same press most assuredly preserves the book's reputation, and its lower price will, one hopes, enable it to reach a greatly expanded readership.