

**UCLA**

**American Indian Culture and Research Journal**

**Title**

Comanche Political History: An Ethnohistorical Perspective 1706-1875.  
By Thomas W. Kavanagh.

**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/83n1p1f2>

**Journal**

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 21(2)

**ISSN**

0161-6463

**Author**

McCollough, Martha

**Publication Date**

1997-03-01

**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/>

tions. Kersey provides here a first-rate account of one of these very important stories. Woven together with hundreds of similar stories, there is a whole new way of looking at Indian history. A substantial part of this history is a new legal history because law and legal struggles have helped to define so many of these modern sovereignty stories.

*Sidney L. Haring*

City University of New York Law School

**Comanche Political History: An Ethnohistorical Perspective 1706-1875.** By Thomas W. Kavanagh. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996. 586 pages. \$45.00 cloth.

Thomas Kavanagh's book provides an excellent descriptive account of the Comanches' political history from 1706 to 1875. He increases the value of this work by compiling extracts from many colonial documents relating to the Spanish and early American period in the Southern Plains, and including numerous English translations of Spanish accounts concerning the Comanches' political organization. Though many of these translated excerpts are currently available elsewhere, they have never been thematically organized around a topic as specific as a particular community's political organization. Kavanagh strengthens this research further by including some translations of his own. The accuracy of this endeavor increases the book's usefulness for other scholars.

This book's historical content begins with the first Spanish accounts of Comanches in New Mexico in 1706 and ends with the Comanches' ill-fated retaliation against bison hide hunters at Adobe Walls, Texas in 1875. As the author amply demonstrates, this time span was one of rapid political and economic change, characterized by the increasing importance of horses, cattle, and manufactured Euro-American commodities as items of exchange.

In the book's introductory chapter, Kavanagh discusses his disdain for anthropological studies that interpret the Comanches' political history as a static trajectory. Instead, he attempts to provide an alternate history that illustrates "the varying social, temporal, and spatial dimensions" of the Comanches' political process (p. 20). Consequently, the author chooses to focus his research on historic documents that illustrate spatial and temporal changes in the Comanches' political organization.

Initially, as the earliest Spanish documents show, colonial officials knew little beyond the fact that Comanches existed. By 1836, however, after Spain and later Mexico's colonial efforts in the region ended, the Spanish had amassed a tremendous amount of information concerning the Comanches' political organization. Most of this data is descriptive in content and difficult to assess and synthesize without utilizing a theoretical framework. Unfortunately, the author fails to provide such a device.

This lack of theory also weakens the presentation of the Comanches' political organization during the early American era. Consequently, events in the Comanches' history appear severed from larger regional processes. For example, Kavanagh offers few details concerning the role that competitive colonial powers and Native communities played in the distribution of livestock and other commodities. Predictably, this lacuna diminishes Kavanagh's ability to correlate the relationship between the Comanches' access to trade items and shifts in their political structure.

Notwithstanding this problem, the introductory chapter includes an excellent summary of other anthropological research centering on the Comanches' patterns of leadership and membership recruitment. Kavanagh suggests that a lack of information and theoretical rigor limited these earlier anthropological explanations. He argues that many of these analyses provide "only a particularistic solution, and each presents particularistic problems" (p. 7). Consequently, many researchers mistakenly interpret the Comanches' political structure as ephemeral and lacking permanent leaders (p. 15).

Like other specialists focusing on the Comanches, Kavanagh proposes that this community exhibited four levels of political organization. These included the "nuclear family, the extended family, the residential local band, and the political division" (p. 41). To explain the function of each of these levels, Kavanagh adopts Morris Foster's concept of "focused activities" (*Being Comanche: A Social History of an American Indian Community* 1991: 25). Events that structured the emergence of a specific organizational level served as focused activities. Examples include warfare, trade, hunting, and the distribution of Euro-American goods (pp. 22-23).

Based on a substantial array of colonial documents, Kavanagh proposes that the Comanches developed more stable political communities between 1706 and 1875. His explanation for this stability follows those offered in Thurman's research ("A New Interpretation of Comanche Social Organization," *Current Anthropology* 1987: 578-579), in particular, the adoption of the

idea that certain social groups functioned as centralizing structures. These include communitywide formations such as sodalities and small-scale military societies (p. 41). Existing among many Comanche communities, these structures managed to create stable links between the separate residential bands. From these enduring linkages the larger and more permanent political divisions emerged (p. 41).

According to Kavanagh, the development of these divisions paralleled the emergence of increasingly powerful leaders. Two useful tables in the introductory chapter serve as evidence for this viewpoint (pp. 4–5). These tables denote various Comanche ethnonyms and leaders mentioned by colonial officials before 1875. Based on this data, the author proposes that the temporal duration of a specific ethnonym reflect that community's degree of political centralization. The fact that colonialists identified some individuals as communitywide leaders served as evidence for greater centralization among the Comanches.

His explanation of this process concentrates on the functional role of these individuals. In Kavanagh's scenario, the main purpose of leaders did not concern their ability "...to organize a disparate population, but how to prevent the democratizing effects of the horse from dissolving preexisting organizations" (p. 490). Implicit in this viewpoint is the propensity to represent the Comanches as a dual society.

Inevitably, Kavanagh interprets the function of leaders as a local phenomenon concerning the maintenance of "preexisting organizations." Thus, these individuals are perceived as homeostatic regulators of the status quo. Consequently, the only room for innovative change occurs in response to the creative forces of external conditions. Predictably, interactions between the colonizers and the colonized transcend their historical roots and become an event rather than a process.

Failing to recognize this artificial division between local and regional processes, the author conceives these leaders as maintainers of the Comanches' "true essence" and accommodators of colonial actions. It seems more probable that these individuals functioned as intersocietal brokers, who stabilized the interstitial space between the local and colonial communities. More than likely, the Comanches standardized their interactions with colonial officials through these individuals.

Adding credence to this interpretation is the fact that beyond information relating to the reservation period, little evidence for the emergence of large Comanche political groups is offered (p. 48).

The large gatherings of Comanches noted by colonial administrators and traders prior to the reservation era appear to be episodic and strategic events focused on a specific activity rather than a self-replicating system of power dispersement.

Although this book lacks a strong theoretical basis and has a number of interpretative weaknesses, it is an outstanding source of information on the endeavors of Spanish, Texan, and American colonial officials. Kavanagh provides excellent accounts of the region's changing colonial policies. In addition, the author's reliance on a variety of colonial documents facilitates his discussion concerning the Comanches' political structure. For example, his decipherment of the various uses that Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo Texans gave to terms such as *capitan*, *capitancillo*, *jefe*, *general*, *principal*, and *chief* will be helpful to future research (p. 3). Adding to the book's importance is the use of numerous historic documents. Kavanagh's own meticulous translations of Spanish sources offers new insights into Spain's colonial occupancy of the Southern Plains. The large number of historic sources included in this book clearly contribute to our knowledge of the Southern Plains during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

*Martha McCollough*  
University of Nebraska

**Coyote's Council Fire: Contemporary Shamans on Race, Gender, and Community.** By Loren Cruden. Rochester, Vermont: Destiny Books, 1995. 164 pages. \$14.95 paper.

Loren Cruden has completed a work that was somewhat difficult to review academically; however, she raises some significant issues for the study of American Indian religious traditions and the larger academic study of religion as a whole. Since there are uncited references made to scholars such as Eliade and Jung, terms and concepts from various tribal groups with generalized definitions, and no bibliography, readers in the academic community might be tempted to dismiss the reading as unfounded, unclear, unprofessional, and unimportant. I must admit that I almost stopped reading several times due to the above concerns, but I think that Cruden does provide some preliminary ideas for future scholarship dealing with such concepts (as the title denotes) as race, gender, and community. In other words, I would characterize this book as "meant to be not an academic