



title:
author:
publisher:
isbn10 | asin:
print isbn13:
ebook isbn13:
language:
subject
publication date:
lcc:
ddc:
subject:

Apaches: A History and Culture Portrait

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Apaches: A History and Culture Portrait

James L. Haley

UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA PRESS
NORMAN

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Haley, James L.

Apaches : a history and culture portrait / James L. Haley.

p. cm.

Originally published: Garden City, N.Y. : Doubleday, 1981. With new pref.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8061-2978-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Apache Indians—History. I. Title

E99.A6A24 1997

973'.04972dc21

97-3283

CIP

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copyright © 1997 by James L. Haley. All rights reserved. Published by the
University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, Publishing Division of the
University. Manufactured in the U.S.A. First edition, 1981. First printing of
the University of Oklahoma Press edition, 1997.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

To my mother, who bore me twice

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Source materials on Apache Indians are found today as readily as they are largely because so many others have already sniffed them out and listed them. A contemporary book about Apaches is remiss if it does not at least momentarily bend the knee before the brilliant scholarship that has gone before, including but not limited to the ethnological inquiries of Grenville Goodwin and Morris Opler, and the historical research of the great Bancroft and the Bandeliers, and more recently, the military analyses of Dan L. Thrapp and the preservation of Apache traditional history by recorders such as A. Kinney Griffith, Wilbur Nye, and Eve Ball. Without their earlier work, there would be precious little to write about now.

The greatest of my personal debts for additional research in this book are owed James C. Martin and Mary Van Zandt of the Special Collections of the University of Texas at Arlington; Tommie Whitely of the Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University; and Lori Davisson of the Arizona Historical Society. Thanks are also due for helps and favors from my friends Bob and Shirley Stigler of Lubbock, Texas; and my much admired mentor (though he may yet disown me), Dr. Elliott West, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Texas at Arlington.

PREFACE

So much has been written about Apache Indians during the past century that new material about them must bear some considerable burden of justification. The histories of the different tribes, and particularly their military defeat at the hand of the United States, have been hashed and served over and over. However, much less has been written of the astonishingly rich and varied Apache culture, and virtually all that has been done is readily accessible only to academic and professional ethnologists. 1 And least of all has been written to relate the tragic Apache history to those of its roots that lie deep in the tribes' own cultural complexes. It is the principal thesis of this book that justification, if you will, that it is not possible to understand meaningfully the Apaches' history, except to view it through the glass of their complicated Life-way, the demands that it made of their actions and daily conduct, and the way it shaped their perception of outsiders.

In writing Apache history it is insufficient, though it seems inevitably done this way, simply to describe a battle with its dust and blood and blazing guns. It makes exciting reading, of course, but it does not guarantee any deeper perception of why it happened or what the Indians were even doing there. As a factual example, it is common enough to find references to a skirmish that took place in late April of 1882, during the flight (or kidnapping) of the Mimbres chief Loco and his following from San Carlos. Descriptions of the firefight assume a richer meaning once it is learned that the warriors had turned and fought to gain time for others in their band to complete an important religious ritual, a Puberty Ceremony for a girl who had come of age. A similar example is seen in the Apache warrior whom the white soldiers nicknamed Peaches, who was indispensable as a scout to General Crook during the 1883 operation in Mexico. It is widely published that Peaches was a deserter from the band of the minor chief Chatto. It is less widely circulated that Peaches did not

quit the war trail until he witnessed the death of his "partner"; and less known still that the other men of Chatto's band, far from labeling him coward or traitor, understood the trauma that losing one's war partner could cause, and even gave him enough food to last until he returned to the agency.

Aside from such specific instances, a general knowledge of Apache culture is also essential to a sensitive understanding of their history. It is one thing to read of General Carleton's order forbidding Mescaleros to leave Bosque Redondo to gather their principal food plant, the agave called mescal. But when one has in the back of his mind how and the scale on which mescal was gathered, and its sociological as well as nutritional aspects, then Carleton's order takes on a significantly different complexion. By the same token, although I have not made it an explicit concern of the historical narrative, it is hoped that after an adequate exposure to Apache culture, when one reads of the death of an Apache Indian or ten, or eighty that it will be regarded in a more human context than simply one more historical statistic.

Any book that attempts to depict the cultural and historical progress of the "Apache Indians" *all* of them necessarily pleads guilty to at least some degree of artifice, for during most of the period under examination the different tribes were only marginally aware of the welfare (or even, in some cases, the existence) of the others. To do less, however, would fail to place the history in any meaningful cultural perspective, and would also subvert the attempt to place their cultural development in some historical perspective.

Significant traps lie in the two extremes that must be avoided in trying to distill the broad unifying elements of Apachean culture to give the beginning student an appreciation of them. Too extensive a treatment of tribal variations, however interesting to a specialist, would lose the audience to whom this book is directed. But too much simplifying for the sake of general understanding would also defeat the purpose, by mashing the wonderfully discrete tribal flavors into a tasteless and not even very representative gruel. It is a tricky recipe to follow, and one which I doubt will ever be perfected.

Generally, a usage in this text states a rule to which there may be numerous exceptions on an individual or group basis. One band may relate a traditional myth differently than another, but where it seems to be the case that the exceptions prove the rule, only the major version is used. Where it is written that Apaches used either sotol wood or juniper bark for a given purpose, it should be assumed that sotol was used where it was more conveniently

obtained, and juniper bark where it was more prevalent. Otherwise, so much time could be spent delineating ethnobotanical variations that the broad scheme of Apache use of naturally occurring plants would be lost. Similarly, a detailed coverage of Goodwin's classifica-

tion of the Western Apache clan system, masterful though that is, would be meaningless to the non-specialist. While it is essential for the reader to know that intricate relationships existed among the sixty clans, it is not strictly necessary for him to know that the ndi-nde-zn clan of the White Mountain group could not marry into the duc-do-e or be-iltsohn clans of the Cibicues, or the tcilda-ditl-uge clan of the San Carlos.

The best to which a single-volume culture portrait can aspire is to be cubist, in the sense that it must try to see the subject from different directions at once, giving the viewer as much an overall impression as a detailed reproduction. Although broad cultural divergences that evolved among the Apache tribes are covered sufficiently, I have endeavored to keep the lines straight and general enough to make the material digestible to a first-time reader in Apache culture.

There are at least a couple of things that this book is not. It does not, first of all, claim to be a history from the Apache viewpoint. Only Apaches can do that. During the early years of "revisionist" academic scholarship, the rather pretentious notion that a white would tell an "Indian's version" of American history gained some currency when it was necessary to reverse a long trend of historical sentiment that implied, as a practical matter, that the Indians got what was coming to them. The latter view is now, one hopes, dead beyond raising, but hopefully the former is now discarded too, in favor of a view that Indians can speak well enough for themselves.

Nor does the present volume aim to be a ferreting out of new detail to shed yet more light on an already exhaustively researched subject area. A quick glance at the bibliographies of Dan L. Thrapp and other military scholars makes it pretty convincing that additional inquiry there, while perhaps yielding some few fruits, would prove less than continually rewarding.

Rather, this volume is intended as a different perspective of known factsa blending, I hope, of two fields of scholarship, Apache history and Apache ethnology, that have heretofore been related but, puzzlingly, segregated. I do not know why this should have been so; the theme has been touched on by many different writers but never really carried home. As early as 1886 J. P. Dunn tried to give some cultural background, but at that time very little of the Apache Life-way was even known to whites. Lockwood's *Apache Indians* of 1938, a standard reference work, purviews Apache culture in its early pages, but few ties are made to the historical material that follows. Indeed, it seems

not to have been until 1976, in Angie Debo's admirable biography of Gerónimo, that the sizable body of published ethnological data was seriously examined for its historical import. And since then a few books, such as Donald Worcester's *The Apaches*, have also seemed more interdisciplinary in their approach. My own reading of the cultural treatises, myth cycles, and early-day interviews yielded historical perspectives that were sometimes startling for instance,

the fact that lame old Nana, who electrified the Southwest with a raid that was unparalleled for speed and stamina, was in fact a *di-yin* (shaman) through the power of the Geese, and was credited by his own people with having a supernatural source of those qualities. Why this avenue of investigation has not been more closely pursued before now is a mystery to me.

These have been the principal guidelines followed in putting this book together, and had they been the only ones the job would have been greatly (and joyfully) simplified. But, if history has a single lesson to teach, I think it is that there are no easy answers to difficult questions. And among all the chapters of history that there are to read, the only consistency is that not one of them is all black or all white; real history is a study in grays. Only rarely does one encounter a real hero or a real villain; mostly history is populated by just plain people, like you, or me. The misfortune is that it seems not to be in our nature to accept this view of the past as fact. We build up our heroes and craft out villains, and space them through the history pages much like and sometimes with a motive similar to a decorator furnishing a difficult room: we use them, somewhat mechanically, to give definition to an empty and awkward space. If we can't comprehend the real story, we'll simplify it to something easier and live with the image, and try not to mind the reality.

Hence it ought to be axiomatic, but does not seem to be, that a historical narrative reveals as much about the point of view and limitations of the narrator, as it does give insight into the subject. This must especially be borne in mind when the subject is one about which opinions are as passionately divergent as with the history of the American Indian.

The writing of Indian history also suffers from the related complication of having become increasingly politicized in our own time. It has evolved from (for lack of better terminology) an Old School into a New School. It is but a slight exaggeration to assert that for generations of literary commentators, the Indians seem to have had it coming to them. They were seen as primitive obstacles to the progress of civilization, violent and unordered, inevitably to be swept from before its approach. There were exceptions to this sentiment, of course, such as the classic *A Century of Dishonor*, but by and large, it is only since the publication not that long ago of a few important watershed books like *Cheyenne Autumn* and *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* that scholarly opinion has swung the other way. Historical thought, like history itself, has swings of its pendulum, and indeed this one has swung so fast that

the meaning of much of the scholarly vacillation has to be questioned. Savaging the morality of American expansion seems to have become all the rage. I do not think it too cynical an observation to make that where in a communist autocracy history is rewritten to suit the ruler in power, in America history sometimes seems

to be re-evaluated to suit the social trends in fashion. Instead of writing by regulation of censors, much recent writing in American Indian history seems regulated by undertowing chants of "Four legs good, two legs better," and if the current writer in American history does not jump on the Poor Little Indians bandwagon he risks, if not his reputation, certainly the favor of the times. This very emphatically does not assert that there is ever a final, definitive "history" of any topic to which nothing can be added. Every new generation of scholars must add its insights and raise its questions. But, in the Old School, white people on the frontier were the heroes and Indians were the villains; in the New School, Indians are the heroes and whites the villains. A historian of any detachment at all has to question whether we have truly rethought the subject or simply switched wardrobes on the characters.

When my first book, *The Buffalo War*, came out a few years ago I found myself fitted with the lapel label (or perhaps beanie cap) of a revisionist historian. This must have been because virtually all the previous written history of the 1874 South Plains War had come from the Old School Colonel Wilbur Nye in particular, fine writer that he was that just did not give a balanced picture of the horrendous problems that the South Plains Indians had to face. Among historians whose minds are comfortably settled about American history, there were inevitably some of the Old School who thought I was trying to be liberal and trendy, and some of the New School who felt I was toeing the Old line. What I found most gratifying were those who accepted the book for what I intended, as I have already termed it, a study in grays. On balance, though, thanks certainly to the magnitude of the leftward leap for so it was perceived of *The Buffalo War* from previous writing, I started the book on Apaches being identified as one of the New School.

Yet there are things about the New School of Indian history that bother me, which for all my desire for this volume to be accepted by the academic community, will not go away.

First, its underlying notion that the "white men" took the land away from "the Indians" strikes me as somewhat simpleminded, for the reason that it creates an image of pre-Columbian North America as an idyll of primitive city-states populated by buckskinned yeomen who knew and respected the lie of boundaries. Across North America, or most of it anyway, nothing could have been further from the truth; a tribe of Indians held their territory as long as they could keep other Indians from taking it, and no longer. The Eastern

Apaches, Lipans, Mescaleros, and Jicarillas wound up in New Mexico because they were driven from the South Plains by the Comanches. The Comanches had to do it because they were driven down from the North Plains by the Sioux. If any analogy can apply, it would likely be to billiard balls banking around a table. One provocative conclusion suggested by this is that, today, when a certain tribe of Indi-