Constituting Indigenous Nations

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GAN is another title for Genizaro Affiliated Nations’ people living in Colorado who recognize their descendancy from Spanish slavery as Indigenous (tribal) people. The nations that are specific to GAN include the Pueblo, Apache, Ute, Navajo and Nahuatl manitos primarily from New Mexico. “Genizaro” means (Chavez, 1979, p. 198-200) “North American Indians of mixed tribal derivation living among the Hispanic population in Spanish fashion; that is having Spanish surnames from their masters, Christian names through baptism, speaking a simple form of Spanish, and living together or sprinkled among the Hispanic towns and ranchos [in New Mexico],” as defined by Fray Angelico Chavez. Harvard professor Blackhawk (2006, p. 45) states, “‘Genizars’ is a term applied generally to exiled Indians, ransomed captives, prisoners of war and their children,” practices applied to wipe out politically an entire group of people.

GAN citizens are unique culturally, historically and politically. Due to their descendancy from the regional, indigenous, and aboriginal nations of Colorado and New Mexico, they have a cultural and historical continuity parallel to the federally recognized nations in the United States. In recent times due to colonization efforts to implement termination, and relocation plans to federally recognized nations, many of those nations have occupied or have lived in transient style to and from their reservations to Denver, Colorado and the surrounding areas.

In Colorado there are only two federally recognized tribes, the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Nations found in the southwestern part of the state. This leaves little opportunity for most people who live in Colorado to engage in the local practices of federal and state native politics, with the exception of the Commission of Indian Affairs, which holds alternating meetings in Denver and either reservation.

In the process of the development and settlement of native communities representing numerous nations in Colorado, there have been a significant number of those who are federally recognized who have engaged in local organizations, colleges/universities, non-profits, centers and programs. These organizations, colleges/universities, non-profits, centers and programs have affected GAN citizens for generations because they have never included them in the decision making and educational processes, which continue to leave GAN citizens marginalized and stereotyped as non-Indigenous peoples.

Among the recognized Indian nations in Colorado and New Mexico (with the exception of the Ute Nations), there continues to be a debate about whether the Indigenous people who were de-tribalized in the early 18th century, such as GAN, are Indigenous. In colonial fashion, Genizaros were forced to the lowest social class found in the territories of New Mexico and Colorado and
represent numerous tribal groups, many of which who have mixed tribal heritage. The history about GAN citizens have recently emerged with more frequency in the last two decades with literature written about them by historians, academics and other interested people and more recently by GAN people themselves. The historical lack of knowledge about GAN has been detrimental to their acceptance by other Indigenous peoples, and presents animosity among some of the federally recognized tribes.

For the most part, being Genizaro designates a social class status, not an Indigenous status, although Genizaros were/are of Indigenous origins. One of the earliest records that recognize Genizaros as a disenfranchised group is that of the Tlaxcala Indians who allied with Fernando Cortes from Spain in his quest for riches and souls in the northern territories of Mexico (today’s New Mexico) approximately in 1590. From that point on, the Tlaxcalans were referred to as Spanish, which is a political designation, not a racial identity. Appropriating a racial identity for one group over another is a systemic propagation of a given doctrine or of allegations reflecting its views and interests.

Whatever the circumstances in which they arrived in New Mexico, the Tlascalans seemed to have gravitated to their own ward or barrio of Analco in Santa Fe soon after the villa was founded. The word “analco” is of Nahuatl origin, meaning “on the other side of the river” referring to the south bank of the Rio de Santa Fe (Soustelle, 1937, p. 451).

After the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, the Spanish and their Tlaxcalan and other allies were forced to leave the province of New Spain and settle in Texas until their return to New Mexico approximately in 1692 to 1693 (Timeline of New Mexico History, taken from The New Mexico Blue Book 1997-2000). The re-settlement of the Tlaxcala’s in Analco/Santa Fe, New Mexico began their designation as Genizaros. The Tlaxcala’s were joined by Pueblo Indians, some who were considered dissidents, and other Indians who fled from slavery, commonly referred to as Genizaro, Hispano, Spanish and Mexican-speaking tribes. Again, we see Tlaxcalans and other Genizaro-Indians being referred to as Spanish and later “Hispano,” a political designation, not a racial classification. The Tlaxcala Indians had a long history of supporting Spanish campaigns during the overthrow of Tenochtitlan in 1521, including assisting in the conquest of the Aztecs, as well as in the reconquest of New Mexico (M. Gonzales, 2014). We will come to understand how this colonial depiction of conquest serves as a detrimental force against any claim the future Genizaros would make as Indigenous people.

The Spanish in their attempt to provide a defensible frontier on the fringe of New Spain established several Genizaro settlements to serve as their protector by intercepting the adverse pressures and influences of the increased attacks by nomadic tribes, including Navajo, Ute, Comanche, Apache and Kiowa. These early Genizaro settlements are the foundations of numerous land grants found in Colorado and New Mexico that were recognized and many are operational today. As a result of captivity, land grants served as a way for Genizaros to become a landowner free from the lower rungs of society and a way to escape slavery and indenture status characteristic of the Genizaro class.

About captivity, for example, Comanches had raided other Native societies for captives long before European contact, and they became in the early eighteenth century the dominant slave
traffickers of the lower midcontinent (Hamalainen, 2008, p.250.) “Comanches seemed to have segregated their captives by race, age, and gender, which in turn conditioned their experience of enslavement. In combination with later oral histories, the accounts of [explorers] Ruiz and Berlandier suggest that Comanches held five or six hundred captives from Spanish settlements and perhaps an additional three to four hundred from “enemy” Indian nations” (Brooks, 2002, p. 186). Many women and children from captivity became Comanche, as Indigenous cultures were not confined by the same control over one’s identity that we find today. In the historical past, Indigenous peoples and their landscapes were never defined by foreign governments (United States) and blood quantum, because being Indigenous was universally understood.

The current debate about whether or not the descendants of the de-tribalized Indigenous peoples in the early 18th century are native is easier explained culturally and is understood historically. The tribal nations that held Genizaros as slaves made them part of the tribal infrastructure through the implementation of traditional law. We know today that Federal Indian Law is held to honor traditional law, yet this understanding does not cease, because some Indigenous native people were held captive and later absorbed into the dominant nations, while some remained de-tribalized or outside of federally recognized communities. It is believed (Guitierrez, 2004) that “in 1800 roughly one third of New Mexico’s population were Genizaros, de-tribalized former Indian slaves congregated into autonomous villages along nomadic Indian raiding routes to serve as attack buffers for Spanish towns.”

In the land grants of Colorado and New Mexico we see special land holdings also known as common law. Common law is another form of traditional law because it is the interpretation of the law by the original people/inhabitants who live on the land. In researcher Maria Montoya’s “Translating Property” (2002), the author makes clear that from the onset, there was conflict over how people derived their claims to property. Local inhabitants such as the Jicarilla and Hispano settlers claimed to use the land through local custom and historic practice. Again, being Hispano in this context was a political designation, not a racial classification for the reason that previously, the word “Indian” was to be abolished and not referenced.

Non-Pueblo Indians, therefore, were “gentiles,” “naciones barbasar,” “naciones errantes y sin residencia,” “tribas barbasar del Norte,” “indigenas,” “salvajes,” and “gandes,” words which meant “tramp,” “bum,” or “brave,” depending on how each word was used (New Mexico Historical Review, 1980, v.55.2, p. 106). They were not Mexican citizens as the Liberals had hoped they would become in 1824; they were not equal to creoles, mestizos, and Pueblos; and they needed to be dealt with in such a way that they learned first and foremost to respect the arms of the Mexican nation. This paragraph gives us another example of how identities were constructed by colonial governments regarding Indigenous people who had historical legacies in the U.S. and Mexico (New Mexico Historical Review, 1980, v.55.2, p. 106).

Regarding policies for Mexican and Indian identities, and although the Constitution of 1824 did not mention Indians directly, the Plan of Mexico of January 27, 1827, made clear that Indians were to enjoy the rights and privileges conceded to them, and in subsequent legislative acts defining Mexican citizenship. Indians were officially considered Mexicans with the same rights and responsibilities as any other race, according to The Treaty of Cordova, August 21, 1821, which created Mexico as a sovereign state. These legislative acts defining citizens did not
appropriate Indigenous peoples into racial groups or otherwise. Even today among the federally recognized tribes we find that citizenship classification [tribal membership] identifies what citizens/members may or may not be eligible for and not racial identification. Racial classification became standard during the Indian Reorganization era in 1924 in order to determine United State citizenship. In Colorado and New Mexico, citizenship/racial identity occurred via statehood serving yet another purpose: “Statehood would be achieved when the count of settlers [Anglo] outnumbered the indigenous population, which in most cases required forced removal of the Indian people (Dunbar-Ortiz, 1980, p. 2). The significant Genizaro population played a role in the removal first by being denied their rights to their own identity, and secondly not being privileged to be part of the political discussion that would guarantee their rights as Indigenous people.

In fact, racial categories of Anglo and Hispano are relatively recent phenomena that were imposed on the people of this region during the latter part of the nineteenth century. As outsiders moved onto land grants and pushed Native Americans and Mexican Americans aside, Anglos eventually came to equate landlessness with ethnicity, and particularly with being Indian or Mexican. Indeed, it was important to conflate ethnicity with landlessness as Americans fulfilled their Manifest Destiny to occupy, liberalize, and democratize the open spaces of the American West (Montoya, 2002, p. 13). Finally, the story of the Maxwell Land Grant [Colorado] provides a unique glimpse into a world where outsiders sought ways to divide the inhabitants by race (Indian, Mexican, and White, to use their terms) and by class (landowners and landless) (ibid, 2002, p.18).

Even the word “Indian” was supposed to be abolished on public and private documents (New Mexico Historical Review, 1980, v.55, p.104). Congressional deputies proposed in 1824 that “indio in common acceptance as a term of opprobrium for a large portion of our citizens be abolished from public usage” (Charles A. Hale, Mexican Liberalism in the age of Moro, 1821-1853 New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968, p. 218).

Liberals wanted to eliminate the Indian problem by denying their political existence. They blamed the Spaniards for causing Indian poverty, and they believed that by converting the Indians into free citizens by abolishing ideas of “racial, caste, and class distinctions,” they would rectify the harmfulness of Spain’s paternalism (Hale, Mexican Liberalism, pp. 217, 222, 246).

Indian allies (Pueblos and genizaros) participated in military campaigns as scouts, soldiers, and interpreters. Although divided on the muster rolls by race, “they proved formidable soldiers in battle… since they held little fear of the savage plains tribes” (Thomas, Forgotten Frontiers, p. 83). Many Genizaros as we have learned were/are Pueblos and other tribal people. Their designation as separate racial groups [Genizaro and Indians] has profoundly affected the Genizaro identity where little to no interception of their past histories (told by others) have been questioned.

To be sure, some U.S. policymakers had their doubts about absorbing even the more sparsely settled portions of the Mexican Republic (Montoya, M., 2002, p. 81). The New York Evening Post declared that “the Mexicans are Aboriginal Indians, and they must share the destiny of their race,” which was presumably to be removed, killed, and pushed aside by American Society (New York Evening Post, 1848).
York Evening Post, December 24, 1847; quoted in Merk, Manifest Destiny, p. 158). John C. Calhoun, before the Senate, made the point quite explicit:

I know further, sir that we have never dreamt of incorporating into our Union any but the Caucasian race---- the free white race. To incorporate Mexico, would be the very first instance of the kind of incorporating an Indian race; for more than half of the Mexicans are Indians, and the other is composed chiefly of mixed tribes. I protest against such a union as that! Ours, sir, is the government of the white race (Congressional Globe, 30th Congress, 1st session, p.98).

The work regarding the Indigenous sovereign rights of Genizaros needs to be part of a broader discussion, especially among other Indigenous peoples and recognized nations. If nothing else, there should be an effort to protect, restore and revitalize the culture and history of an invisible people. American history is not complete without the history and voice of all people Indigenous to this country. When the political agendas regarding the genocidal disappearance of a group of people by colonial governments become known, their rightful identity including the rights that are guaranteed with being Indigenous will assure Genizaros of their native inheritance in Colorado and New Mexico.

Congress regards sovereignty as, “The tribes need to use it or lose it.”
(Oral communication, National Indian Justice Center, 2015)
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