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# INDIANS AND EMPIRES

## CULTURAL CHANGE AMONG THE OMAHA AND PAWNEE, FROM CONTACT TO 1808

KURT E. KINBACHER

The Great Plains is in the middle of everywhere. It has been crossed and recrossed for tens of thousands of years. Because of its central location, the region served as a historical laboratory where people were “forever imagining new environments and trying to muscle them into being.”<sup>1</sup> In what is now the state of Nebraska—the very center of the middle—divergent groups of Native Americans claimed

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vast territories and created dynamic cultures. Among these peoples were the Omaha, who settled on the Missouri River, and the Pawnee, who lived in the Platte Valley. Four empires—Spain, France, Great Britain, and the United States—also forced their way into the Great Plains beginning in the sixteenth century. They saw the region as a geopolitical buffer zone and a potential source of wealth. Their worldviews of the region would have been very hard for the Omaha or the Pawnee to understand. While three of the empires claimed to own Nebraska, in reality, before the nineteenth century, it was Indian territory.

The collision of Indian and European cultures created new relationships all across the Great Plains. Native peoples responded to the European presence by redefining their worldviews to include outside ideas and materials. Many tribes not only survived the early impact but also managed to thrive as the result of it. Initially, both the Omaha and Pawnee peoples reimagined their own potentials and expanded their horizons and spheres of influence. As time progressed, however, they encountered fluctuating power structures and wholesale assaults

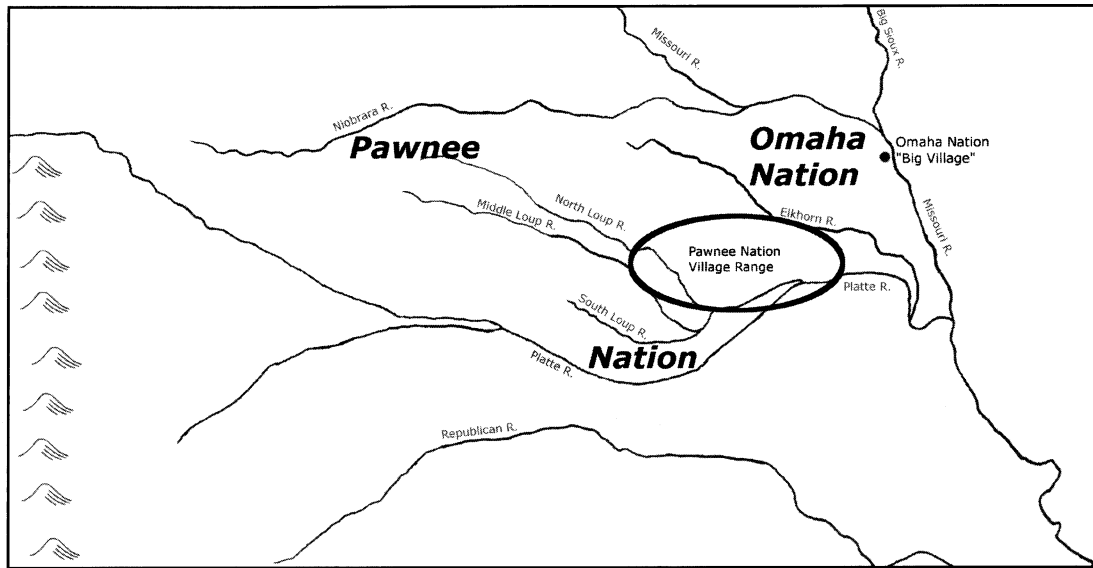


FIG. 1. Omaha Nation and Pawnee Nation, 1715–1808. Map prepared by Brent M. Rogers, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

on the “Indian way.” Ultimately, between first contact and 1808, both cultures experienced profound economic, political, social, and demographic upheavals that irrevocably transformed their traditional customs and ways of living.

Indian Nations were never passive players in their own dispossession; instead, they actively confronted outside pressures and made accommodations to forward their own agendas. The experience of some large Plains Nations—including the Comanche and Lakota—have been well documented, in part, because they created empires of their own to compete with Europeans, Americans, and other Indian peoples. Those with smaller populations and territories—such as the Omaha and Pawnee—were no less proactive in their efforts. Although their economic reaches may not have constituted empires, both Nations became major regional players during the tumultuous eighteenth century. They were only forced to relinquish these newfound roles after the United States gained full title to the region.

#### NATIVE AMERICAN ORIGINS AND TRADITIONS

Indian societies were never static, and both the Omaha and Pawnee migrated to their home territories within the last 600 years. By the time the European empires began historical narratives of the region, the Omaha Nation was defined internally as a territory from the Platte to the Niobrara and from the Missouri to the headwaters of the Elkhorn River. (See Fig. 1.) Tribal members traveled for food and trade as far east as the Mississippi River, as far south as the Kansas River, and as far west as the Rocky Mountains. Prior to claiming this country, the Omaha (*Umó<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>*, meaning “upstream people”) were part of the greater Dhegiha group. United by a common Siouan dialect and shared traditions, they were once joined with the Quapaw (“downstream people”), the Osage, the Kansa, and the Ponca, who remained with the Omaha as late as 1715. These five cognates divided as they spread across present-day Nebraska, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma.<sup>2</sup>

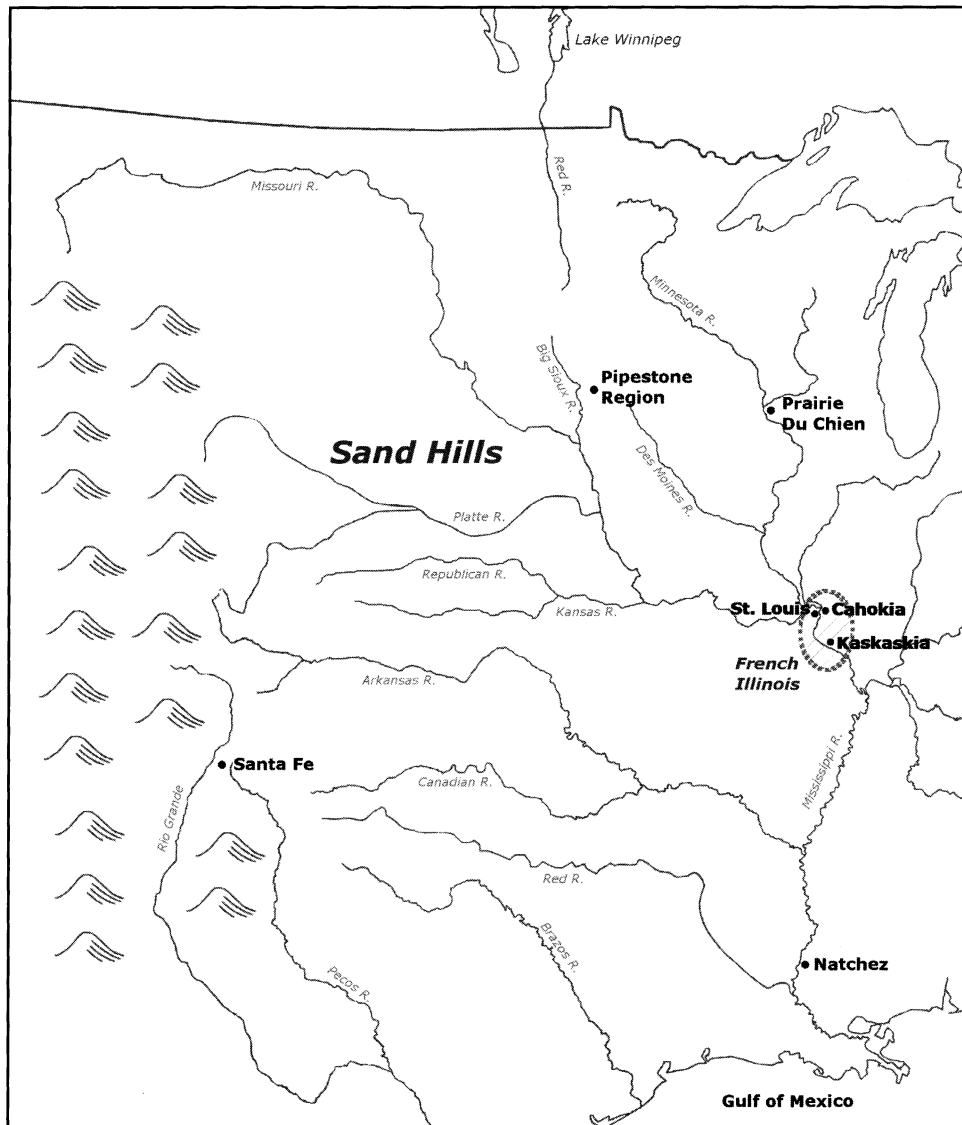


FIG. 2. Greater Louisiana, 1714–1808. Map prepared by Brent M. Rogers, University of Nebraska–Lincoln.

There is some debate about Dhegíha origins. The Omaha creation story states that the “people lived near a large body of water, in a wooded country where there was game.”<sup>3</sup> Material culture—single-ply moccasin soles and bandoleer-style game bags—supports the idea of an eastern woodlands genesis. While some historians suggest that the Virginia Piedmont was their original

home, scholars more frequently argue that the Dhegíha organized in the Great Lakes region and migrated along the Ohio, Mississippi, Des Moines, and Missouri Rivers. (See Fig. 2.) The archaeological record traces seventeenth-century Omaha movement from the Pipestone region of Minnesota to a large village on the Big Sioux River in southeastern South Dakota.<sup>4</sup>

The Omaha and Ponca appear to have arrived in Nebraska just before their split. By 1775 the Omaha alone founded their “Big Village” on Omaha Creek seven miles from the Missouri River while the Ponca retired farther up the main stream. The creek’s floodplain was lined with cottonwoods and willows, a convenient source of fuel and materials for construction of earth and timber lodges. It was also prime horticultural soil, and the Omaha boasted a 483-acre garden. Here the women cultivated “mother” corn, beans, melon, and squash in “grandmother” earth.<sup>5</sup>

This reverence for soil and maize was indicative of a society that was intimately connected to all aspects of the natural world through their belief in a creator called *Wakó<sup>n</sup>da*. This deity represented “the mysterious life power permeating all natural forms and forces and all phases of man’s conscious life.”<sup>6</sup> The cohesion of the Omaha and their communal lifestyle depended on the ceremonial activities designed to keep *Wakó<sup>n</sup>da* favorably inclined toward them.

The ceremonial nature of society was employed in its fullest during the journey of their traditional economy known as the “Omaha round.” The cycle began in May when the corn was planted. After tending the crop until its establishment in June or July, almost the entire village—save the infirm and a handful of guardians—left for the summer buffalo hunt. Living in tipis that could be moved daily, some of the tribe’s most important rituals were performed away from their “permanent” home. They returned to the Big Village in time for a September harvest and rested through October. November and December were spent in small bands hunting deer and fowl in the river bottoms. The tribe reassembled in January and hunted buffalo again through March. In April, they returned to the village to start the cycle again.<sup>7</sup>

Before their arrival in Nebraska, the Omaha and their cognates demonstrated a tendency toward political disintegration. By the time they founded the Big Village, however, the tribe had adopted a more structured form of government. While there were four levels of

chiefs—the lower levels being a sort of meritocracy—real social order was vested in a Council of Seven. The council members came from the seven clans who carried the appropriate pipes. The three remaining clans had duties, such as making war, that made the responsibilities of civil government undesirable. Vacancies in the council—originally hereditary but later competitive—were filled upon death.<sup>8</sup> Peace and order within the tribe were the prime considerations, and slow deliberation and consensus were the norm.

The traditional economy was based on subsistence hunting and horticulture. There is clear evidence of intertribal trade, but in the pre-European era, it revolved less around profit and more around the concept of gift reciprocity. Exchanging offerings created fictive kinship ties among the participants.<sup>9</sup> Production of trade goods was limited by transportation difficulties and a reliance on stone, bone, wood, leather, and pottery as the primary tools. Omaha society was patriarchal, and gender roles were specifically defined. The men were warriors, hunters, and priests. The women raised children in accordance with tribal rituals, tended the crops, and prepared food and clothing. The tribe’s population was never great. Estimates of its numbers prior to 1800 range from 2,500 to 3,200, although figures of the early explorers should not be considered accurate.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast, the Pawnee were a large tribe of perhaps 6,000 to 10,000 souls, although once again these numbers are approximations.<sup>11</sup> They called themselves *Pani*, a word that probably referred to the distinct hornlike scalplock worn by warriors.<sup>12</sup> Members of the Caddoan language family, they were one of the first modern tribes to move into the Plains.

For centuries, the distantly related Caddoan peoples lived in a swath of territory running from modern Texas to South Dakota where they remained relatively isolated from European encroachment. As late as 1834, the Pawnee had “less intercourse with whites than any tribe east of the [Rocky] mountains.”<sup>13</sup> As a result of their geographic circumstances, their

political structure tended to be fairly decentralized. They divided themselves into four separate tribes and settled in as many as forty-five villages. Skiri (Skidi), or Wolf Pawnee, moved into Nebraska between 1400 and 1600, presumably from the south. By historical times, their oral accounts contained no references of having lived elsewhere. The remaining three tribes—Chawi or Grand Pawnee, Kitahahki or Republican Pawnee, and Pitahawirata or Tappage Pawnee—migrated into Nebraska (also from the south) around 1600. Although these groups were cognizant of past migration, their identities were firmly entrenched in the central Great Plains.<sup>14</sup>

In concert, the Pawnee claimed a large territory bounded by the Rocky Mountains in the west, the Missouri River in the east, the Niobrara River in the north, and the Arkansas River in the south. Despite this huge expanse, they generally confined their villages and most of their activities to the Platte, Loup, and Elkhorn river valleys. Here they found ample supplies of timber and water, as well as chokeberries, wild plums, wild grapes, wild potatoes, and turnips—all gathered as foodstuffs.<sup>15</sup>

Always settling close to fertile Loess Plains, the Pawnee were successful and renowned gardeners. The Omaha word for the American robin is *páhthi<sup>n</sup> wazhi<sup>n</sup>ga*, or Pawnee bird. This moniker is sometimes attributed to a shared tendency to dig in the earth. Zebulon Pike noted that the tribe grew “large quantities of corn, beans, and pumpkins,” enough to “afford a little thickening of their soup during the year.”<sup>16</sup> The diet was rounded out by meat supplied by skilled hunters. Game species included beaver, elk, deer, bear, wolves, wildcats, rabbits, opossums, raccoons, squirrels, water fowl, and most importantly, bison.<sup>17</sup>

These food sources fostered an annual cycle of hunting and farming similar to the Omaha round. Also like the Omaha, the Pawnee lived in earth lodges while in their “permanent” villages. These lodges were twelve to fourteen feet long and housed several families. While on the hunt, they lived in the familiar buffalo-skin tipis that could be eighteen feet

in diameter after the horse was introduced as a draft animal.<sup>18</sup> They too relied on material goods produced of bone, stone, clay, wood, and leather.

Gender roles were well defined in Pawnee society. Men were hunters, warriors, healers, and priests; all rituals, except the corn planting ceremony, revolved around men’s work. Women were solely responsible for horticulture, dressing the skins, drying and storing the meat, sewing the tents, and preparing buffalo robes for domestic use and for market. Additionally they did the cooking, cut the wood, and built the fires. Europeans frequently commented on the slavelike condition of these women, but these remarks ignored cultural context. Pawnee women maintained property rights unheard of in the European empires, and they certainly worked hard to maintain their possessions. Women owned the lodges, and upon matrimony the husband joined the wife’s family. Following a matrilineal pattern, the hereditary office of chief devolved not to the headman’s son but to his wife’s nephew.<sup>19</sup>

Pawnee religious beliefs revolved around *Tirawa*, an intangible creator who gave knowledge to all living things. They believed that “mankind was born of celestial gods.” Their creation story explains that the first female was the daughter of the morning star and evening star; the first male, the child of the sun and moon. Consequently, Pawnee people paid close attention to the heavens and their movements. Skiri custom even dictated human sacrifice to the morning star to ensure the well-being of the tribe.<sup>20</sup> All Pawnee celebrated a fifteen-to twenty-day harvest festival in September. Ceremonial concerns addressed fertility and harmony with the cosmos.

#### CONFRONTATIONS WITH EUROPEAN AND AMERICAN EMPIRES

For decades after contact, both the Omaha and Pawnee incorporated aspects of European material culture into their own traditions. As a result, they became stronger, at least for a time. Persistent cultural change and gradual

territorial encroachment were the ultimate consequences of contact. In the interim, Spain, France, Britain, and the United States wrangled over who would control the region. Although the Great Plains intrigued them, these empires seldom had enough resources to spend on its vast expanses. Still, greater Louisiana—an ill-defined swath of territory between the Rocky Mountains in the west, the Mississippi River in the east, the Gulf of Mexico in the south, and the forty-ninth parallel in the north—quietly changed hands among the Spanish, French, and finally, the Americans.

For 150 years, Spain's activities in the region were exemplified by glory-seeking adventurers—men like Coronado and Oñate. By the end of the seventeenth century, Spanish forays into the Plains had a new mission, to buffer New Mexico from the perceived threats of colonial rivals. Both the Apache and Comanche had other plans and generally kept the Spanish empire's forces close to the Rio Grande. In 1720 the ill-fated Villasur expedition was sent to dislodge a French, Pawnee, and Otoe confederation perceived as hostile to the colonial government in Santa Fe. While the French force was nonexistent, an overwhelming Pawnee victory kept the Spanish off the central Plains for another half century.<sup>21</sup>

The French claimed all territory between the Appalachians and the Rocky Mountains prior to 1762 and briefly regained the tract west of the Mississippi at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The French agenda was twofold: keep rival empires out of Louisiana and get rich on the fur trade. French traders trickled into the Plains by the 1680s and were welcomed by many Pawnee.<sup>22</sup> Despite a Spanish presence, the French were preferred trading partners throughout the Plains because they “followed their usual policy of bartering guns, lead, and powder to the Indians for pelts.”<sup>23</sup> As a matter of security, the Spanish outlawed the gun trade.<sup>24</sup>

In 1714 Natchez became the focus of the peltry trade, and the Mississippi and Missouri watersheds were opened for business. (See Fig. 2.) The French policy was to keep all Indian

tribes at peace in order to promote trade. By the 1740s the Illinois governor granted a fur-trading monopoly, stipulating that a string of forts be built to carry out fair commerce with the Indians. By 1763 the traders had penetrated as far as the Platte River.<sup>25</sup> Although the French empire soon withdrew, Frenchmen remained important in carrying out commerce in Spanish Louisiana.

Spain once again made efforts to incorporate the central Plains into its empire, but it was ultimately unsuccessful. World war changed the geopolitical map of colonial North America, and the Treaty of Fontainebleau gave Spain control of Louisiana west of the Mississippi in 1762. A year later France abandoned nearly all the rest of its claims via the Treaty of Paris that settled the Seven Years' War.<sup>26</sup> It took almost thirty years to regain the initiative, but the Spanish empire slowly entered the burgeoning fur trade, hoping to create Indian alliances and to stop the advancement of the British and Americans.<sup>27</sup> To this end, the Missouri Company was founded in 1792. With imperial orders in hand, agent J. B. Truteau began a journey intended to take Spain from St. Louis to the Pacific via the Missouri River. He was instructed to “establish peace everywhere” and to make a thorough list of all the nations he encountered. Ordered to “fix a high price on everything,” Truteau was foiled by the efforts of Omaha and Ponca agents who walked off with most of his trade goods and supplies.<sup>28</sup> Scotsman John MacKay tried again in 1796 and met a similar fate. With their interest in the region waning, the Spanish then offered a bounty of \$3,000 for the discovery of a Pacific route, but the reward went unclaimed. Even after ceding Louisiana back to France with the Treaty of San Ildefonso in 1800, Spain—from its outpost in New Mexico—defended the Plains against American encroachment and continued sending missionaries and traders among the Pawnee as late as 1810.<sup>29</sup>

While the British never held a solid claim to territory on the central Great Plains, they maintained distinct commercial interests in the region. They wandered into the prairies

as early as 1749 as a “conspiracy against the French,”<sup>30</sup> and in the process deliberately undercut their commercial rivals and armed tribes hostile to the Spanish. Unlike the other European empires, they granted no monopolies and allowed their agents to operate freely. Using the Big Sioux and Des Moines Rivers as transportation routes, traders connected their posts on the Minnesota River and at Prairie du Chien to the hinterland.<sup>31</sup> The British goods were generally of superior quality, and many Missouri River Indians, including the Omaha, became their staunch allies. Spanish traders in the 1790s bemoaned that “they have already indoctrinated the savages so well that one can no longer go to the Mahas [Omahas], Hotos [Otoes], and Poncas.”<sup>32</sup> By 1796 the British trade reached into the Platte River valley.<sup>33</sup>

While the Spanish, French, and British greatly altered the lives of the Plains tribes, it was the young United States that eventually detached them from many of their traditional ways. At the turn of the nineteenth century, only the most astute Indian could have suspected this. It took a generation after its independence for the young republic to even reach the Plains. The Spanish were concerned about American encroachment as early as 1796 when they reluctantly allowed American boatmen to navigate the Mississippi. To halt any movement farther west, the crown’s forts and the entire Missouri River were closed to foreigners. Despite the ban, American mills were noted near Omaha territory by 1798.<sup>34</sup>

The ban on Americans prompted Thomas Jefferson in 1803 to purchase from France a still ill-defined Louisiana Territory, which was slowly incorporated into the American realm in a manner no other empire had truly considered. The harbingers of this movement were Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, who in 1804 were dispatched to the territory to prepare Native Americans to increase their commerce with the United States and to accept American sovereignty.<sup>35</sup> Zebulon Pike continued this work in 1806, traveling overland to Pawnee territory just south of the Platte River. The Spanish sent troops to intercept both expedi-

tions, but they had no legal claim to the region, and they lacked the military ability to halt American expansion. After the War of 1812, all European claims to the Great Plains had been extinguished, and the indigenous nations’ claims would soon be quashed as well.

#### OMAHA NATION REIMAGINED

The Omaha remained sovereign over their own territory throughout the French and Spanish eras. Their history holds that the first encounter with Europeans culminated when the tribe “befriended” the strangers. Found “in a starving condition,” they were allowed to trade iron implements for corn. Although the date of first contact can only be approximated, French records indicate they traded with the tribe on the Missouri in 1724 and at Lake Winnipeg in 1737.<sup>36</sup>

The Omaha recognized the four empires as distinct entities. They called the French *wáxe ukéthi<sup>n</sup>* (“white men who are not strange”) because of the fur traders’ practice of marrying Indian women and living in Native fashion. The Spanish were known as *hespayuna*—a bastardization of what they called themselves. Despite Spanish “ownership” of Omaha territory, the tribe became familiar with the British, who they called *mo<sup>n</sup>hi<sup>n</sup> tó<sup>n</sup>ga*, or “big knives.” This name was probably borrowed from the Winnebago and was later applied to the Americans as well. The Omaha generally maintained good relations with the *mo<sup>n</sup>hi<sup>n</sup> tó<sup>n</sup>ga* and largely rejected the Spanish agenda.<sup>37</sup>

While the Omaha were changed remarkably by direct contact with the empires, European influence may have been felt indirectly long before the two peoples ever came face to face. The move from the eastern woodlands to the Plains could easily have been the result of a power shift east of their ancestral home. Furthermore, the entire Dhegíha group may have been put in motion as other tribes made contact and acquired new technologies. It is reasonable to speculate that the most isolated nations were forced out of familiar environs by other Indians.<sup>38</sup>



Once in the Plains, the Omaha demonstrated their propensity to borrow from other cultures. While they forced the Caddoan-speaking Arikara Nation north and west, they included this nation's earth lodge in their own culture. Oral history indicates that they received corn from these people as well. Although known to the European empires as a river people, the Omaha Nation took advantage of an indigenous equestrian tradition. Plains tribes were generally unaware that the horse originated in New Spain. Omaha history vaguely suggests that the animal came to them from the Southwest, but the tribe probably obtained their ponies from their cognate and neighbor, the Ponca. Ponca tradition suggests the horse came from Comanche traders. Whatever the origin, the Omaha were involved in a brisk horse trade with the Pawnee by 1775. Access to these animals allowed both nations to increase their effective buffalo-hunting range. Never owned by Omaha hunters in abundance, most horses were trained specifically for this purpose. Fewer than 300 were kept as beasts of burden.<sup>39</sup>

Although additions to Omaha material culture trickled in slowly from indirect sources, direct contact with the empires had the greatest social and political impacts. Indeed, the Omaha Nation rose to its apogee between 1775 and 1800 as a result of its relationships with European powers. Strategically located on a major waterway, the tribe served as brokers in the Missouri River fur trade. Ultimately, Omaha power, wealth, and prestige in the region increased dramatically during this era.<sup>40</sup>

The fur trade's power to change traditional mechanisms was demonstrated by developments in the Omaha political system. Interaction with the European empires left the nation with two categories of chiefs—those who ruled according to tribal custom and those who obtained their office as a result of influence with Europeans. Firmly in the latter category, Chief Blackbird gained almost despotic control over his people while becoming “the dominant personality on the Missouri in the final years of the eighteenth century.” He gained his wealth

through shrewd commerce, and the influence of his riches heightened his status within the tribe. His ambition and willingness to maintain power by all means, including poisoning opponents, cemented this position.<sup>41</sup>

Blackbird interacted with Europeans from a position of commercial power and often played one empire off another regardless of strained relationships. He made frequent trips to Prairie du Chien in the 1780s to conduct business with the *mo<sup>n</sup>hi<sup>n</sup> tó<sup>n</sup>ga*. (See Fig. 2.) When the Spanish returned to the region in 1793 Blackbird was eager to play their “interests against the British.” To the Spanish, Blackbird and his people represented 20,000 livres (roughly \$80,000 today) of trade and a possible ally against the British.<sup>42</sup> To Blackbird, “White men are like dogs.”<sup>43</sup> This philosophy guided his relations with the Spanish as they attempted to navigate the river. Truteau described Blackbird as the “greatest rascal of all the nations who inhabit the Missouri” and warned traders to avoid the Omaha at all costs.<sup>44</sup> Knowing that the river-bound traders could not evade him, Blackbird demanded a six-inch medal—a symbol of power—and took one-third of all Truteau's trade goods. Other members of the tribe followed suit as they “robbed, maltreated, and ridiculed” the Spanish party.<sup>45</sup>

Blackbird's behaviors were indicative of great changes in Omaha society. Before contact with Europeans, commercial bartering for personal profit was unknown in their world. Trade had spiritual significance and carried great responsibilities. The Spanish would not have received such rough treatment in earlier times. Additionally, the acceptance of trade for material gain greatly increased the authority of hunters and traders while it detracted from the traditional power structure.<sup>46</sup>

The Omaha experienced an increase in aggressive warfare as a byproduct of the new hierarchy. While they were always a society of warriors, under the guidance of the Council of Seven they tended to fight defensively. Blackbird's skill at negotiating guns from the British and the increased importance of maintaining personal wealth changed the Omaha

warriors' intentions—war now meant profit. Ultimately, contact with the empires altered the power structure all across the Great Plains. Omaha warriors frequently raided Pawnee villages and other tribes for horses, and in turn the Omaha were raided in revenge. They were even powerful enough to wage war on the Comanche and pursue them all the way to the Sandhills of Nebraska in the 1780s.<sup>47</sup>

Peace was not the only victim of the new economy. Ultimately, the profit motive was “not consonant with the old religious ideas or customs.”<sup>48</sup> Even the need for labor to dress pelts and robes for market became culturally disruptive. As more hands were needed, the Omaha turned increasingly to polygamy and even to slavery.<sup>49</sup> The labor focused on increasing production of pelts, and whole segments of the traditional economy and entire occupations fell into disuse. While traditional manufacturing was sanctified by ritual and legend, trade goods were not.

Trade goods revolutionized the economy of the Omaha, and Native artifacts gradually disappeared. Change in material culture was noted as early as the tribe's sojourn on the Big Sioux. Archaeologists have unearthed glass beads, brass kettles, gun parts, traps, and iron axes from this time. There were some traditional pottery items, but this skill was already on the wane. By the time the Omaha reached the Big Village site, their material culture was already permanently altered.<sup>50</sup> Despite tradition, activities like creating “stone implements yielded to those of iron and the chipping of stone became a lost art.”<sup>51</sup> Changes also appeared in apparel. Cotton and woolen cloth was introduced to the Omaha in the latter part of the eighteenth century, and it revolutionized their clothing choices, especially in the summer. Glass beads replaced quills for decoration. Vivid red, blue, and yellow paints became available. Traditional decorations and patterns took on a whole new vibrancy.<sup>52</sup>

Along with the colors, tools, and political power, the Omaha also acquired items from the European empires that proved immediately disruptive. For instance, many members

of the tribe became “excessively attached to this destructive liquor.”<sup>53</sup> Disease was even more devastating and uncontrollable; the main culprit was smallpox. Having no natural immunity, tribes across the continent were wasted. For the Omaha Nation, the most serious outbreak occurred in 1801. It may have been Blackbird himself who brought the virus to the Big Village after trading horses with the Pawnee. In any event, it cost the chief his life and perhaps one-third of his tribe as well.

This outbreak greatly reduced Omaha population and power. In 1804 Lewis and Clark noted, “The ravages of the Small Pox (which Swept off [about four years ago] 400 men & women & children in perpoportion) has reduced this nation not exceeding 300 men and left them to the insults of their weaker neighbours, which before was glad to be on friendly terms with them.”<sup>54</sup> When the expedition came to the Omaha village they found Blackbird's grave and the nation “not home.” The “terror of their neighbors,” the Omaha were abandoned by the traders around this time, although “they are well disposed towards whites, and are good hunters.”<sup>55</sup> For the next several years, conditions continued to deteriorate as the Omaha were in danger of being exterminated by Lakota forces.<sup>56</sup> Their period of greatness had passed, but the changes in their culture remained as a tribute to contact with the European empires.

#### PAWNEE NATION REIMAGINED

Unlike the Omaha, the Pawnee were isolated from the main arteries of European expansion into the Great Plains. Their villages were at least 150 miles from the Missouri River, and the Platte River was rarely navigable. They were also a hard twelve to twenty-five days on a little-used overland route to the Spanish in Santa Fe. (See Fig. 2.) As a result, European contact with this nation came late. Pawnee archaeological sites are distinctly lacking in trade goods from before 1750.<sup>57</sup> Contact, however, was noticeable long before the foreign empires stumbled into the Platte River valley.

The first agents of change were other Native Americans put into motion by Europeans. Demands for labor made the Pawnee, who lived in decentralized villages and relied on stone and bone weaponry, vulnerable to attack and enslavement. By the seventeenth century, Plains Apaches—already in possession of guns and horses—made frequent raids on the tribe. As a result, Pawnee slaves became a common feature in New Mexico. Although Caddoan speakers were probably confused with each other, it may have been a few Pawnee that told the Spanish those strange tales of the wealth in the northeast.<sup>58</sup>

The Pawnee were also known to the French long before their traders and missionaries “discovered” the Platte. Early explorers—including Marquette in 1673, LaSalle in 1682, and Hennepin in 1687—commented that enslaved members of the tribe were common along the Mississippi. A thriving flesh trade controlled by the powerful Osage Nation provided cheap labor for French agricultural ventures at Kaskaskia and Cahokia in the 1720s. The Pawnee were among the preferred victims of the trade and the “very word ‘Pani’ came to mean a slave taken from the plains.”<sup>59</sup> As late as 1749, a French priest described “miserable” Pawnee slaves in the Great Lakes region and bemoaned that they were “to all appearances influenced by the English.”<sup>60</sup>

While the Indian slave trade was eventually outlawed by the Spanish, the Pawnee themselves aggressively reduced their odds of capture and sale by acquiring European weapons and horses. The gradual inclusion of the horse into Pawnee culture was so empowering that it allowed the tribe to reimagine their status in the Plains. The Spanish reported seeing mounted Pawnee warriors by 1700, but the tribe maintained only small herds as late as 1724 because they relied on trade with the Comanche to obtain the animals. At first, the horse fit into the Pawnee worldview as a super dog that slowly replaced canines for hauling. Rituals associated with the dog culture began to decline by 1750, which indicates that massive change must have occurred before that date. By

the early 1800s, Pawnee herds numbered 6,000 to 8,000 ponies; some families owned twenty or more horses. By the time of American contact, Pawnee horsemanship and animal husbandry skills were renowned. They kept special ponies for the hunt, and Pike observed their practice of keeping breeding mares that bore no burdens for the tribe other than reproducing.<sup>61</sup>

While the horse did not change the traditional hunting and farming economy, it did allow the Pawnee a greater range to pursue the buffalo. The tribe not only took full advantage of greater mobility but also improved their hunting techniques. Formerly forced to drive the bison into surrounds and kill them almost indiscriminately, Pawnee on horseback became more efficient and selective in their slaughter. As male buffalo were only palatable two months out of the year, they would target young or female animals and cull them out of the herd with their specially trained horses. Hunters rode right next to the bison and dispatched them with bow and arrow. Pawnee hunters preferred traditional weapons for hunting, as more shots could be fired with greater accuracy in close quarters.<sup>62</sup> Pike observed Pawnee hunting elk on horseback and recalled, “I saw animals slaughtered by the true savages, with their original weapons, bows and arrow; they buried the arrow up to the plume in the animal.”<sup>63</sup>

Despite the impressive benefits that horses provided the tribe, these animals also created new stresses. As successful hunters and warriors amassed large personal herds, divisions in wealth became more apparent. Environmentally, the ever increasing number of grass-fed animals competed for the limited forage in the village’s range. Forage issues were exacerbated because the Pawnee lived north of the Arkansas River’s “ecological and institutional fault line.”<sup>64</sup> Livestock survival was often problematic in the Platte basin as cold, long winters could hamper the pony herds’ health. As a result, the Pawnee learned to manage prairie fires in order to help regenerate necessary fodder. Additionally, raiding of neighboring tribes increased to maintain enough

valuable animals for gift exchange and hunting. Increased raiding caused more frequent intertribal war, and although the Pawnee in concert were disorganized, they were still fairly successful. They eventually pushed the Apache off the Plains and by 1785 incorporated their territory.<sup>65</sup> They became so famous for their raids that some anthropologists contend that the Omaha's *páhthi<sup>n</sup> wazhi<sup>n</sup>ga* referred to the simultaneous spring arrival of the robin and Pawnee raiding parties.<sup>66</sup>

Augmenting the power of the horse, the Pawnee began trading pelts for French guns and powder in the mid-1700s. By 1771 they became even more formidable as they turned to the British, who were anxious to arm all possible enemies of Spain. Still, the gun and the horse were generally used in separate spheres. Most Pawnee hunted on horseback with traditional weapons and fought on foot with guns—when they could obtain them.<sup>67</sup> Zebulon Pike noted that by the nineteenth century, “The Pawnees have much advantage of their enemies in the point of arms, having at least one half fire arms, whilst their opponents have only bows, arrows, lances, shields, and slings.”<sup>68</sup> With their weapons and ponies, the Pawnee became a dominant force in the Plains.<sup>69</sup>

The Pawnee traded their furs to the four European empires for more than just guns and horses. In fact, a marked change in material culture occurred. European trade goods—almost absent in 1750—became commonplace. An archaeological excavation of a Pawnee village abandoned in 1810 contained glass beads, iron and copper hoes, gun parts, axes, chisels, bridles, stirrups, and knives. With the increase in trade goods, there was a marked decline in traditional pottery, stonework, and woodcraft. Eventually, traditional occupations were lost as copper kettles replaced pottery, for instance, and stoneworking became unnecessary. Brass and copper trade goods were refashioned by Pawnee craftsman to make more efficient weapons. Ultimately, “filing, cutting, and cold hammering” replaced the earlier skills, and some Pawnee men became refashioners rather than neolithic creators.<sup>70</sup> As traditional manu-

facturing declined, these Pawnee spent more and more time hunting to produce the furs and buffalo robes that were increasingly necessary to fuel the new economy.

Competitive trade with the four empires decreased the region's isolation and brought other social and political changes to the Pawnee. Diplomatic efforts among tribes were increasingly motivated by profit. Spanish officials noted in 1795 that the Pawnee had made peace with the Comanche in order to carry on this lucrative trade.<sup>71</sup> Ironically, competition for dwindling resources would increase warfare in the near future. Additionally, a new Creole population emerged as French fur traders married Pawnee women. Their bicultural offspring would become elite denizens of the region in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

As successful hunters, the Pawnee were courted by the four European empires to bring their “resources, land, and labor into the market.”<sup>72</sup> In turn, the tribe skillfully played the suitors off one another to create the greatest economic advantage. This was best illustrated by the competition between Spanish and Americans. Although the Spanish viewed Pawnee as “cowards and poor hunters,” they adopted the habit of giving them monetary gifts to grease the wheels of trade in the 1790s.<sup>73</sup> They also gave medals depicting the Spanish monarch to any Pawnee of status to encourage loyalty. Distributing medals with American presidents' likenesses, Lewis and Clark employed similar tactics to gain favor. These explorers called the Pawnee “Mild and Well disposed” and encouraged profitable interaction. They even suggested that the United States “pay great respect and deference to their traders, with whom they are punctual in payment of their debts.”<sup>74</sup>

The European empires' intended goals of commercial monopoly were rarely realized, as Pawnee traders had their own agendas—control of the land and control of the fur trade. In 1805 the tribe was still receiving Spanish gifts while trading directly with the Americans.<sup>75</sup> The Pike expedition encountered the Pawnee in September 1806 and found chiefs wearing

medals of George Washington and the Spanish king at the same time. Pike believed they favored Spain over America despite equal distance between the nations.<sup>76</sup> Seemingly oblivious to favoritism, Pawnee warriors raided expeditions regardless of nationality. In 1797 a beleaguered Spanish agent bemoaned, "I'm sorry to find that the horses are fallen into the hands of the Pawnee—they could not have gone to a worse place."<sup>77</sup> True to form, the Pawnee also harassed Pike by stealing horses, earning themselves the labels "lawless banditi" and "rascals."<sup>78</sup>

Increased contact with the Europeans forced increased social cohesion. To the Spanish in the 1790s, the Pawnee were one unit, not four nations.<sup>79</sup> This is partly due to the commercial dominance of the Chawi, who controlled the trade of the cognates by their geographic position. Because they were closest to the Missouri River, the other bands were compelled to trade through their main village. Additionally, increased Spanish and American traffic coupled with the migration of the powerful Cheyenne and Lakota Nations made the Plains a "dangerous place to live."<sup>80</sup> The pattern of living in decentralized villages ceased. In 1804 there were four villages; in 1806, just three.<sup>81</sup>

As the people centralized, so did their government. A nineteenth-century botanist and geologist noted that the Pawnee "live in great harmony amongst themselves, owing probably to their having but two chiefs."<sup>82</sup> Pike encountered just two chiefs—Sharitarish (White Wolf) and Iskatappe (Rich Man)—among the Kitahahki in 1806, who reportedly spoke for the entire nation.<sup>83</sup> Certainly, this was a far cry from the forty odd villages and multiple headmen of 1750.

Another major player in the centralization process was European disease, again mainly smallpox. The death of perhaps 50 percent of the aggregate population forced survivors to abandon many villages. Lewis and Clark found the Chawi living in one village with 1,600 citizens, the Skiri in one village of 1,000 souls, and the Kitahahki in another with 1,200 residents.<sup>84</sup> Other estimates range from 3,500

to 4,800 total Pawnee. In any event, the nation was swept by waves of epidemics, leaving behind only a fraction of the population first encountered by European agents.<sup>85</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Direct and indirect Indian contact with the European empires allowed the Omaha and Pawnee to reimagine their societies. The resulting changes to their economic, political, and social structures had long-lasting ramifications for both nations. Contact brought some important benefits. Material culture allowed the Indians greater ease and leisure in their work. Iron axes and hoes, for instance, were more efficient than their stone and bone counterparts. Additionally, personal decoration and ritual practice took on a new vibrancy, as beads, paint, metal ornaments, and cloth were introduced and accepted.

Contact also brought power. As the Omaha and Pawnee employed new materials—horses, guns, and metal implements—they greatly expanded their ranges of influence. No longer victims of stronger Native neighbors, they became respected and even feared by other peoples and the European empires alike. The new commercial economy that brought them their trade goods tended to centralize authority and population, and this in turn helped the nations' political expansion.

Changes in the economy and political structure brought important modifications to their social systems as well. As a subsistence economy gave way to a commercial one, conventional occupations—potter and stoneworker, for example—disappeared. Because these work patterns were endowed by both *Wakó<sup>n</sup>da* and *Tirawa*, the very spirituality of the people living in the new economy was threatened. As traditional norms and mores changed, the practice of decision making by consensus was threatened by a new individualistic and commercial spirit. Additionally, the common life force given to all living things was ignored, as fur-bearing species and even the buffalo began to be hunted to near extinction.

In 1808 the land around the Missouri still belonged to the Omaha and the territory around the Platte to the Pawnee. Generally, both nations maintained the ceremonial structures of their communities. The fabric of society, however, was stretched taut as their cultures had already been substantially altered. Both nations deviated from the "Indian way." According to the Omaha, this mysterious path was "like walking on the edge of a knife." Individuals—and even entire nations—went straight and true or fell and hurt themselves.<sup>86</sup> While disease and social change brought by contact exacerbated the demise of traditional Pawnee and Omaha societies, their own actions were imagined to be responsible as well.

## NOTES

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12. George Bird Grinnell, *Pawnee Hero Stories and Folk-Tales* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1961), 239.
13. John B. Dunbar, "Journal of Mission to Pawnee," *Missionary Herald for 1835*, vol. 31 (Boston: American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions, 1835), 419.
14. Martha Royce Blaine, "Mythology and Folklore: Their Possible Use in the Study of Plains Caddoan Origins," *Nebraska History* 60 (Summer 1979): 245; Ludwickson, "Historic Indian Tribes," 140; Robert T. Grange Jr., "An Archeological View of Pawnee Origins," *Nebraska History* 60 (Summer 1979): 147.
15. Robert T. Grange Jr., *Pawnee and Lower Loup Pottery* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 6–8.
16. Hyde, *Pawnee Indians*, 14; Pike, in Jackson, *Journals of Zebulon Montgomery Pike*, 2:34–35. Pike favorably compares Pawnee agricultural productivity to that of the powerful Osage Nation.
17. Grange, *Pawnee and Lower Loup Pottery*, 6–8.
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