

**COMPARATIVE FRONTIERS:
DOMINATION AND CHANGING
ETHNIC BOUNDARIES IN NORTHERN MEXICO,
1750-1850.**

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Introduction

Northern New Spain constituted an area of multiple frontiers marked by fluid and changing boundaries. These extended provinces, Spain's northernmost possessions in the Americas, comprised diverse geographic, demographic, cultural, and political frontiers created by successive stages of conquest and colonization. The ecological bonds between the physical environment and the peoples who inhabited it transformed the landscape over time through changing, destructive, and regenerative processes in nature and human society. Regional formation and the historical recognition of frontiers in New Spain's vast *septentrión* emerged from the exercise of power and from the social structures through which different ethnic communities recreated their cultures. Migrations, conquest, and imperial economics created distinct zones of production which, in turn, established changing and often conflictive frontiers through the countervailing forces of population dispersal and concentration¹.

This paper examines the concept of *frontier* through the ethnohistory of Northwest Mexico during the century of transition from the Bourbon empire to the Mexican Republic (1750-1850). Focused on the processual quality of *ethnicity*, concerning the relationship between ethnic frontiers and changing structures of power, it addresses the following questions: How are different ethnic spaces defined and defended by the peoples who inhabit them? How can we discern distinct, but overlapping frontiers, created through warfare and territorial conquest, redistributive systems of resource allocation, religious and ceremonial designations of space, and the seasonal migrations of particular groups to different microenvironments? Its central argument posits that colonialism, which created separate layers of domination with long-term and wide-ranging affects on the conquered peoples of northern Mexico, radically altered the historical formation of ethnic frontiers. Changing ethnic boundaries evolved through alternative strategies of confrontation and adaptation between the colonial powers and regional elites and the subject peoples whom they professed to control and exploit. *Frontier*, in this context, signifies zones of interethnic confrontation and exchange among different Indian peoples and between Amerindians and Europeans².

On the Limits of Empire

Our discussion is centered on the provinces of Sonora and Sinaloa, with some comparative references to Nuevo México and Chihuahua. Located northwest of the Kingdoms of Nueva Galicia and Nueva Vizcaya -which included the richest and most productive mining areas of colonial Mexico- Sonora and Sinaloa were peripheral to Spain's empire in North America. Nevertheless, these provinces remained within the Hispanic sphere of the colonial economy. From the mid-seventeenth century onward, Sonora developed a mining and ranching economy which attracted European settlement and held the attention of the Spanish Crown as a frontier worthy to defend and keep³.

The Sinaloan and Sonoran provinces were brought effectively into the orbit of the Spanish Empire through institutions of conquest directed to native peasant communities. The serrano village peoples of the western foothills of the Sierra Madre Occidental comprised a sedentary population of agriculturalists, hunters, and gatherers who had settled the area for several millennia before the arrival of European conquerors. Organized in rival chieftaincies, serrano peoples had fought among themselves for territory, scarce agricultural resources, and control of trade routes⁴. The relative aridity of their environment meant that foraging as well as horticulture was essential to their survival and, for this reason, cyclical migratory patterns within the region marked their way of life. Nevertheless, highland Sonorans lived in settled villages, and their culture distinguished them from the bands of nomadic hunters, gatherers, and traders of the North American Great Plains and the central cordilleras of the northern Mexican plateau⁵. Serrano peoples traded and fought with the nomads, but their culture and languages placed them in the northern frontier of Mesoamérica. Serrano villagers cultivated maize, built homes of adobe and stone, and participated in long-distance trade networks which linked them to Chihuahua, New Mexico, and the Mexican Occident⁶. Sonora and Sinaloa remained in the periphery of New Spain, and highland peasants tested the limits of alien dominion, but they did so within the confines of the empire, not beyond its borders.

At mid-eighteenth century, these northwestern provinces comprised mature colonies, in which a significant minority of Hispanic settlers vied with native communities for control over productive land and available labor. Conflicting demands made on serrano pueblos by missionaries, miners, and military authorities forced changes in the ethnic configuration of these provinces, as indigenous peasants formed new strategies to assure subsistence and recreate their cultures.

Changing ethnic boundaries among peasant communities

The Jesuit mission system was established among the serrano peoples of Sinaloa and Sonora over nearly a century, from 1591 to 1687. Their *reducciones* consolidated agricultural villages of the piedmont, but added a new dimension to traditional rivalries over scarce resources. To the Indians' economic base, contributing to the recovery and stabilization of their populations after the demographic crises of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries⁷. Nevertheless, the missions both altered and accentuated interethnic territorial conflicts, as is illustrated by the relations between the Oyata and Joba peoples of the Sonoran piedmont.

Oyata villagers, at the time of contact, sustained the highest population densities and exhibited levels of community organization which surpassed those of neighboring ethnicities. Not surprisingly, the Oyatás accommodated to the mission regime, which assured them possession of the best-watered alluvial valleys and provided religious and socio-political structures through which they could rebuild their communities. In contrast, the Jobas were semi-nomadic foragers and horticulturalists described disdainfully by the Jesuits as "gypseys and wanderers." They camped seasonally around the established missions and had requested a missionary to serve them, only to flee from the villages to which the Jesuits had tried to settle them. Ephemeral Joba *rancherías* formed scattered ethnic pockets on the fringes of more substantial Oyata, Eudeve, and Pima towns. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Jobas were rarely mentioned as a separate ethnicity in Spanish sources⁸.

In general, colonial policies of *reducción*, or amalgamation of villages in concentrated towns, collided with centrifugal forces of population dispersal. Notwithstanding their agricultural tradition, highland peoples periodically reversed *reducción* and formed separate *rancherías*, or hamlets, in the desert or in the serranías surrounding the mission towns situated in the riverine valleys of Sonora. Such was the case of diverse groups of Piman speakers who split off from the main villages, electing to visit their kinsmen from time to time. Spaniards eventually recognized them under distinct ethnic designations; the "pápago" (*tohono o'odham*) of the Altar Desert and the "sibubapas" of the central mountainous region of the province⁹.

Nomadic frontiers

Warfare played a pivotal role the changing configuration of ethnic frontiers in Northwest Mexico. Numerous ethnic groups of the Sierra Madre and the northernmost territories of the Pimería Alta remained

beyond the effective limits of Spanish dominion. Hunters by tradition, displaced from their accustomed territories by European ranching and mining operations, they turned to raiding and war, bringing European livestock and stores of crops into their range of subsistence resources. Cattle, horses, and metal tools radically transformed the economy of nomadic peoples, altering their trade patterns and standards of wealth. Warfare also meant the taking of human captives—a practice of pre-Hispanic origins which intensified to meet the demands of Spanish settlers for domestic servants.

The nomadic frontier gave rise to new ethnic designations, created through migrations and the biological and cultural mixing of different peoples. In northern Sonora, for example, the nijoras, appeared in the Pima mission registers as children and youths captured from the Hoka-speaking groups of the Colorado and lower Gila rivers and “ransomed” in exchange for trade goods—by settlers and missionaries¹⁰. Similarly, in Nuevo Mexico, the genízaros were captive Apaches or Indians and persons of mixed racial origins expelled from the Pueblos, who labored as servants and slaves in Hispanic households¹¹. In the arid plains west of the Río Grande, encampments of pastoralists and foragers who would be known as Navajos grew in size and number through the amalgamation of different nomadic bands and Pueblo Indians who fled the burdens of tribute payment and forced labor in their home communities under Spanish rule¹².

Changing Frontiers in the Colonial Economy

The demands of the colonial economy, more than any other single factor, transformed ethnic relations in Northwest Mexico. Mercantilism, transposed to New Spain’s northernmost frontier, placed multiple demands on the labor and productive capacities of serrano communities, and altered their conceptualization of territorial boundaries through new forms of land use and tenure. Unlike New Mexico and the central provinces of New Spain, encomienda was never systematically imposed in Sonora, nor in Sinaloa north of Culiacán; furthermore, mission Indians of Sonora and Sinaloa were not subject to the payment of tribute. Nevertheless, the colonial regime exacted labor drafts under the terms of repartimiento during the seventeenth century and, later, developed systems of wage labor and “paid servitude”. Likewise, Spanish land grants, composiciones, and denuncias eroded the productive resources of ethnic communities. By the second half of the eighteenth century, the privatization of landholding with fixed property boundaries had seriously undermined communally controlled redistributive systems which allotted plots of watered lands among village households,

taking into account the changing configuration of alluvial streams due to seasonal flooding and periods of drought. Taken together, the labor and land tenure regimes of the Bourbon and early republican administrations led to varied patterns of migration to Spanish mines, haciendas, and towns, with divergent outcomes in Nueva Viscaya, Nuevo Mexico, Sonora, and Sinaloa¹³.

The Limits of Hegemony in a Mobile Frontier

Serrano peoples resisted the full impact of the colonial project through every strategy at their disposal: negotiation, flight, and open rebellion. Particularly well documented are the Pueblo Revolt of 1680, which drove all Spaniards out of New Mexico for over a decade; the Tarahumara and Pima rebellions of the 1690s; and three major uprisings by Yaquis, Seris, and Pimas in Sonora during the mid-eighteenth century. Each of these revolts was sparked by different sets of grievances and circumstances; uppermost among them were harsh disciplinary actions imposed by missionaries and military commanders, territorial claims to lands usurped by miners and ranchers, and food shortages occasioned by drought and crop failure¹⁴. Indigenous leaders turned to violence as an extreme measure of negotiation, when they felt their traditional polities and their very survival hung in the balance. While each of these movements proved unable to sustain a long-term rebellion, the combined resistance of sedentary peoples, added to the ongoing wars of the Apache frontier, conditioned colonial dominion in Sonora. Spaniards never saw their ambitions for mining wealth fully developed, nor brought to fruition their imperial project to hold a unified northern frontier¹⁵.

After Mexican Independence and the establishment of republican constitutions which converted the colonial intendencies into federated states, rebellion flared anew¹⁶. Provincial legislatures accelerated the privatization of land and undermined traditional authorities in the ethnic communities, in accord with their objectives of converting Indians into citizens and expanding the market economy for labor and land. The slow and uneven stabilization of the Mexican state was due, in large measure, to recurring peasant movements throughout the nation, including the Northwest, which sought to recover productive resources and redraw the lines of community autonomy.

Comparative Frontiers in Hispanic America

In contrast to the nineteenth-century Andean republics of Ecuador, Perú, and Bolivia¹⁷, Indian tribute was not re-instated in Mexico after Independence. Furthermore, as noted above, the Indian peoples of Sonora

by virtue of their status as mission neophytes (“hijos de misión”) had never paid tribute under the colonial regime. Notwithstanding attempts to impose tribute payment, as proposed by Visitor-General José de Gálvez, following the expulsion of the Jesuits (1767), these were unsuccessful¹⁸. Although late eighteenth-century matrículas de tributarios listed some indios naborías and mulattoes in Sinaloan and Sonoran mining towns, in general, the Bourbon administration did not relate to the ethnic peoples of the northern frontier as tribute-paying communities. Rather, colonial authorities valued them as paid laborers in the reales de minas and as auxiliary soldiers on the Apache frontier. The fledgling state governments of the nascent Mexican Republic on the northern frontier had even less reason to preserve Indian communities as fiscal corporations, and proceeded to absorb these native polities into the municipal structures which their constitutions had created for local governance. Conversely, in northwestern Mexico, where the tributary regime was weak and the market economy had developed gradually over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the principal points of conflict between Indian communities and criollo society centered on opposing claims to land, water, and labor.

These conflicts, in turn, set new ethnic boundaries in the frontier regions of Hispanic America. Colonialism, and the neocolonial economic and political structures forged by the criollo elites who took control of the republics which emerged from Spain’s empire in the Americas, created conditions which demanded new ethnic and cultural responses from the subaltern peoples who both sustained rural communities and migrated to the cities and centers of production -most notably the reales de minas- linked to the European market. Ancient Amerindian polities, converted into peasant communities, developed widely diverse symbolic and material links to the dominant society in different areas. These included coined money, tribute payment, cloth, religious processions, horses, cattle, weaponry, salt, and both gathered and cultivated foodstuffs¹⁹. Ethnic frontiers changed over time, reflecting both the physical movement of different peoples across geographic territories and the changing social status of “Indians”, “Castas”, and “Cholos”, as subjects of the colonial order, then citizens of nation-states which evolved through crisis and conflict during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

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⁸ Gerhard refers to the Jobas as Tobas, see The North Frontier of New Spain, p. 284-285. For an analysis of Opata-Joba relations; see Cynthia Radding, Ethnicity and the Emerging Peasant Class of Northwestern New Spain, 1760-1840, Ph.D. diss., University of California, San Diego (1990) p. 238-243. Based on the following documentary sources: P. Joseph Roldán, Informe sobre la misión de Arivechi, 1744, Bancroft Library; Archivo General de la Nación [AGN] México, Archivo Histórico de Hacienda leg. 278, exp. 20; AGN Jesuitas II-29, exp. 19.

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