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The colonizing of indigenous people is often described in terms that highlight its exploitative and marginalizing effects. Though doing so paints a true picture in many settings and circumstances, a closer examination of the colonial process reveals that indigenous peoples have made significant contributions toward facilitating settlement of their territories. For the Pima and Maricopa Indians living in the middle Gila River Valley during the mid-nineteenth century, new commercial markets for their agricultural surpluses resulted from the migration of miners, traders, and soldiers through their homeland. Not unlike many indigenous groups, the Gila Pima had cultural and economic structures that proved highly adaptable to the changes resulting from the shifting colonial boundaries that intersected their settlements. The Gila Pima demonstrated proficiency not only in negotiating commercial exchanges but also in leveraging their economic and geographic position to influence the power dynamics between government officials and Natives. The process by which the Gila Pima integrated their communities into the new economic and political environment created by the interventions of the United States in 1845–48 and 1853 demonstrates how indigenous groups used the market to retain communal agency in the face of rapid change.

The case of the Gila Pima raises the question of whether colonial Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. institutions could have taken shape in their historic form or configuration if not for the assistance of indigenous groups that provided much-needed supplies, local knowledge, and active participation in military campaigns with the United States against their mutual enemy, the Apaches. Many of the same dynamics that shaped Pima society before colonization continued to influence the form of capitalist development that occurred in the re-
Market Interactions

Around the mid-century, the Gila Pima proved adept at seizing the opportunities created by new markets and new economic systems, largely because of their experience in trading with other Native and colonial groups. Identifying the continuity in certain elements of Gila Pima society is therefore critical not only to analyzing Native societal and economic adaptation but also to understanding how colonial systems take root in a new territory.

This chapter details the economic and political interactions between the Gila Pima and Euro-American migrants during the initial period of contact and exchange in the mid-nineteenth century. A number of stages are apparent in these interactions. A limited barter trade characterized the initial relationship between the Gila Pima and travelers through the region. As trade increased as a result of the U.S. presence, the Gila Pima modified their productive activities and commercial behaviors to leverage their position as a primary source of food supplies in the region. Military protection provided the necessary conditions for settlers and traders to establish more consistent transportation and exchange networks that connected the Gila Pima communities to larger markets. It took just two decades for the market conditions in the region to change more than in the entire century prior to U.S. colonization. The Gila Pima retained a central role in the economic development of the region by adapting both their productive activities and their political alliances in the changing colonial landscape.

The Structure of Gila Pima Society

The composition of Native settlements along the middle Gila River Valley in the nineteenth century is itself a product of numerous migrations that brought together the Akimel O’odham (Pima) and Piipaash (Maricopa) people into contiguous settlements. Pima Indians occupied the middle Gila River well before the first Spanish contact in the late seventeenth century. During the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth intertribal warfare caused the Maricopa to move from their homes along the Lower Colorado River to an area near the confluence of the Gila and Salt rivers. By the 1820s the Maricopa shifted their area of settlement further east to a location just west of the Pima villages. The previously separate clusters of Maricopa and Pima settlement were unified into contiguous communities by the mid-nineteenth century, occupying a twelve- to fifteen-mile stretch along the Gila River. The migratory patterns of the Maricopa reflect the high degree of mobility that characterized most Native societies in the region.

Gila Pima society was organized around an integrated subsistence strategy dictated by the conditions of their natural environment. The availability of
water was the single greatest determinant of livelihood. The middle Gila River Valley is in the northern portion of the Sonoran Desert, a region characterized by extreme aridity. It receives less than ten inches of precipitation per year on average, nearly half of which falls during July, August, and September. The geographic and ecological orientation of the region is north to south, encompassing a portion of central and southern Arizona and the northern states of Mexico. The landscape consists of long, flat plains covered by the greatest variety of native vegetation found in any desert in North America. Steep mountain ranges interrupt the flat land and river valleys lined with dense alluvial vegetation cut across the desert. Most of the rivers in the Sonoran region are ephemeral, with flows that fluctuate significantly during wet periods of the year. Despite its aridity the ecosystem inhabited by the Pimas was biologically rich and afforded many subsistence opportunities, including the cultivation of crops, harvesting of wild vegetation, fishing, and hunting.  

Contrary to most conceptions of so-called sedentary agricultural communities, the Gila Pima settlements were highly mobile, expanding and contracting in response to a variety of forces, including population, subsistence methods, and the threat of outside attack. The structure and organization of Gila Pima society proved critical in allowing them to expand their agricultural production in response to a growing market. The annual subsistence cycle of the Gila Pima included the cultivation of two seasonal crops, one in late March or early April and the second in August. Corn, wheat, beans, squash, watermelon, pumpkin, and other crops were grown, in addition to cotton of high quality, which the Pima used to make clothing. Produce grown in family gardens was supplemented by harvesting a diverse array of Native plants, including mesquite beans, saguaro fruits, cholla blooms, and wild greens. Hunting and fishing provided an additional source of food to a diet that was divided almost equally between agricultural produce and wild sources of sustenance. Thus the subsistence cycle of the Gila Pima was closely aligned with the natural environment, but it was also the result of cultivating the land through irrigation.  

Irrigation is essential for any extensive agriculture in the Sonoran Desert, and documentary sources indicate that the Gila Pima began practicing irrigated farming by 1744. Archaeological evidence shows the use of irrigation along the middle Gila River as early as AD 700 by the Huhugam (Hohokam). Canals were communal property, and residents shared responsibility for construction and maintenance. Land was divided into small family plots known as rancherias, which were organized into districts that lined the banks of the Gila River. Each district comprised several family plots, a portion of the irrigation system, and a community meeting place. Districts were sophisticated
organizational units delineated by their own roads, communication networks, language structures, and political hierarchies. Close linkages were maintained between the districts, largely for purposes of defense from Apache raiding. Word of an attack spread rapidly through the districts by way of posted lookouts. The requirements of mutual defense and agricultural production shaped the organization of the Gila Pima communities.\(^5\)

The constant threat of Apache raiding impeded Spanish colonization of the northern regions of New Spain, and as a result the Gila Pima never came under direct colonization. The ability to maintain the viability of their settlements despite the threat of outside attack made their communities physically isolated. However, the Gila Pima did adopt elements of Spanish society, the most significant being the introduction of wheat into their agricultural cycle. It is not known when the Gila Pima started growing wheat; its cultivation is documented as early as 1744. Wheat filled a niche in the Pima subsistence cycle because it was harvested in the summer months, when wild sources of sustenance were less prevalent. By the late eighteenth century it was a major part of the Pima agricultural cycle.\(^6\)

### The Role of Wheat in the Market Economy of the Gila Pima

The production of wheat had a significant impact on Gila Pima society by stimulating regional trade and migration. During harvest time the Tohono O’odham traveled from their settlements in northern Mexico to the Gila Pima villages as seasonal laborers. There are indications that this labor migration was in progress even before Spanish colonization, but its growth was due in large part to the increased cultivation of wheat. The practice was so common that the Gila Pima devoted a portion of their wheat fields (known as a *tiigi*) to feed the Tohono O’odham when they arrived for the harvest, as they were often malnourished from their journey.\(^7\) The Tohono O’odham worked at harvesting and threshed the wheat in exchange for a portion of the total harvest. The harvesting in May and June coincided with the period of greatest scarcity for the Tohono O’odham, who relied more heavily on wild sources of sustenance owing to the scarcity of water in their desert settlements. The availability of a seasonal labor force allowed the Gila Pima to increase wheat production above the levels that their own community could traditionally sustain.\(^8\)

The Tohono O’odham were intermediaries in the regional trade between Native groups and colonial officials. The networks they established were based on centuries of intergroup relationships and provided the basis for the diffusion of crops and manufactured goods. The Tohono O’odham’s northernmost settlements were connected to the Yuman-speaking settlements along
the Colorado River, and the southern settlements engaged in a similar process of exchange during harvest periods along the Altar River Valley in northern Mexico. Castetter and Bell write, based on their field studies in the late 1930s: “At these places they traded numerous articles and labored in return for food, in historic times chiefly wheat, but formerly maize and beans, as well as cotton.”

The seasonal migration of the Tohono O’odham was the foundation for the exchange of agricultural products as well as manufactured goods, and it provided the Gila Pima a link to Mexican and Spanish settlements. The production of agricultural surpluses allowed the Gila Pima to develop trade practices that continued after the United States acquired the region.

**Beginnings of United States Intervention**

The initial period of U.S. intervention began in 1846, when soldiers participating in military reconnaissance first encountered the Pima settlements. The memoirs and accounts left by members of these expeditions provide important details about the Gila Pima and their reaction to visitors. Many of the military observations noted the productive capacity of the Pima settlements, along with the eagerness of the Gila Pima to both engage in trade and render assistance to those in need. The Gila Pima understood the political and economic implications of rendering assistance to military personnel and travelers. From the earliest interactions they used their agricultural bounty to position their settlements as an important production center and a strategic asset for the interests of the United States. The cycle of contact and exchange between the Gila Pima and various migrant groups during this period continued well into the next decade, when more established transportation networks and a heightened military presence allowed for increased commercial activity.

Two U.S. military reconnaissance missions, carried out through the northern states of Mexico in 1846, passed through the Gila settlements. The U.S. military’s exploration served a dual purpose: to collect geographical information that could facilitate future settlement of the region, and to provide information for future military operations against Mexico. The first mission to reach the Gila Pima settlements was led by Stephen Watts Kearny, who commanded the “Army of the West.” President Polk ordered Kearny to proceed to California in August 1846 after he had captured the Mexican town of Santa Fe. The Army of the West passed through the Pima settlements in November 1846, making them the first group of U.S. soldiers to come into contact with the Gila Pima.

William H. Emory, a member of the Topographical Corps and an experienced explorer, was the official recorder for the mission. On November 10,
1846, he recorded his first encounter: “The [Gila Pima] town was nine miles distant, yet, in three hours, our camp was filled with Pimos [sic] loaded with corn, beans, honey and zandia (water melons). A brisk trade was at once opened.”12 The Gila Pima demonstrated an eagerness to trade with the travelers, and a few days later the soldiers “procured a sufficiency of corn, wheat and beans from the Pimos [sic].”13 This initial trade established a precedent that continued in subsequent years, as the U.S. military presence in the region increased. In recognition of the favorable reception that the Gila Pima offered the expedition, General Kearny provided the Pima chief Juan Antonio Llunas with a letter “directing all United States troops that might pass in his rear to respect his excellency, his people, and their property.”14 Kearny’s assurances proved important for the Gila Pima in asserting their economic utility and territorial autonomy in subsequent interactions with representatives of the United States.

Leaving Santa Fe a month after Kearny’s expedition and taking an alternative route to the Gila Pima villages was the Mormon Battalion under the command of Philip St. George Cooke. They arrived at the Gila Pima settlements along the Southern Route by way of Tucson, where they drove out the Mexican soldiers stationed there. Arriving in December 1846, the Mormon Battalion immediately engaged in similar trade with the Pima. Cooke noted: “The camp is full of the Indians, and a great many have some eatables, including watermelons to trade; and they seem only to want clothing or cotton cloth and beads.”15 He continued: “The Indians brought to camp lots of corn, beans, meal and pumpkins to trade for clothes, buttons, beans, needles and thread, money they refused, saying it was no good and no use to them.”16 The early pattern of Pima trade with Euro-Americans followed along much the same lines as the barter system that the Pima engaged in with their indigenous and Mexican neighbors. The refusal of the Pima to accept money shows that a commercial market with fixed prices had not been formed.

Increased Migration and Settlement

The discovery of gold in 1848 at Sutter’s Mill stimulated a westward migration of Euro-Americans to the mining regions of California. The location of the Gila Pima villages along a major westward route provided ample opportunities for contact with migrants. In their interactions with soldiers, traders, and travelers, the Gila Pima displayed a commercial prowess, along with a political astuteness about the impact that shifting national boundaries could have on the protection of their rights. No exact figures exist on how many migrants passed through the Gila Pima settlements, but a conservative estimate places
the total in the tens of thousands during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Travelers followed one of two trails through New Mexico and Arizona, most using the Southern Route by way of Tucson and some the Gila Trail along the Gila River through Arizona, which had been the Kearny expedition’s route. Most migrants, lacking sufficient knowledge of the territory, relied on the written reports of military reconnaissance missions or popular accounts to guide their journey. Newspapers in the eastern United States catered to these westward travelers, such as the *New York Tribune*, which in December 1848 called the overland route via Santa Fe and the Gila River the best route to California.17

Most of the migrants were unprepared for the extreme conditions of the Sonoran Desert. Little water and animal feed was available along the ninety-mile stretch of road between the Tucson and the Pima villages. As a result, many travelers were in desperate need of supplies by the time they arrived at the Gila River. The precarious condition of these travelers might have motivated the Pima to demand more in return for their produce. The account of John Durivage, a reporter for the *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, who came by way of the Southern Route in June 1849, attests to this: “They brought corn, pinole, beans and little bread into camp for sale, and the greatest trade was soon driven. Their prices were enormously high, a shirt being demanded for a very small quantity of any of the articles mentioned.”18 Other accounts provide a different perspective. C. C. Cox, who visited the Pima settlements shortly after Durivage in September 1849, wrote: “The Indians seem to have no established price for their produce, but were reasonable in their charges, and any kind of clothes or ornaments is a better currency with them than gold or silver.”19 Rather than exaggerate the value of their goods, it is likely that the Pima based their trade on the supply of surplus produce and their immediate need for the items that travelers were willing to trade. Before the establishment of fixed prices and the use of currency, commerce with the Gila Pima was carried on without a high level of consistency.

The combination of two forces, increased migration and shifting territorial boundaries, complicated the political and economic position of the Gila Pima within the region. With the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Mexico ceded much of its northern territory to the United States. In 1849 the international boundary was established along the Gila River, again positioning the Pima villages strategically between two nations. On August 4, 1854, Congress authorized the Gadsden Purchase, which moved the U.S.-Mexico boundary from the Gila River to its present location further south. Part of the motivation behind the U.S. acquisition was to use the emigrant roads as a possible route for a Pacific railroad line.20 Between January and March 1854
John G. Parke carried out a reconnaissance mission along the thirty-second parallel from the Pima villages to the Rio Grande. Further survey expeditions in 1856 were made to determine the best route for an overland road to California. In that year the United States sent four companies of soldiers to Tucson to take formal possession of the lands acquired in the Gadsden Purchase.

Several important developments in 1857 and 1858 influenced the commercial and political fortunes of the Gila Pima. During this period U.S. military and government officials debated with more frequency the issue of protecting Gila Pima lands. Sylvester Mowry, a soldier and mining promoter, wrote in his report to the commissioner of Indian affairs in 1857: “The Pima and Maricopa Indians should be allowed to retain their present locations. They are in all respects reservations, and have the advantage of being their homes by title of law and preference.”21 Earlier that year the U.S. Congress had authorized the postmaster general to establish a contract for the transport of mail to California. The contract was awarded to John Butterfield in June 1857, who preferred the southern route to San Diego by way of El Paso. The route positioned the Pima villages as an important rest stop for wagons and stagecoaches on the section between Tucson and Fort Yuma. The first stagecoach arrived at the Pima villages in October 1858, and from that point the Gila Pima became an essential part of the supply network for this important transportation route.22

In February 1859 Mowry addressed the American Geographical and Statistical Society in New York: “Much as we value our superior government, no measures have been taken to continue our friendly relations with the Pimos [sic]; and to our shame be it said, it is only to the forbearance of these Indians that we owe the safety of the life of a single American citizen in Central or Western Arizona, or the carriage of the mails overland to the Pacific.”23 Only a few weeks later, on February 28, 1859, President James Buchanan signed the Indian Appropriations Act, which included a provision for establishing a reservation for the Gila Pima. Congress also appropriated $10,000 for the purpose of “making suitable presents to the Pimas and Maricopas, in acknowledgment of their loyalty to this government and the many kindness heretofore rendered by them to our citizens.” In 1859 Mowry was put in charge of distributing the supplies from the appropriation, which included axes, shovels, plow, and knives in addition to a variety of other tools.24 The difficulty in carrying heavy objects along the transportation routes in the region made such implements very costly. Mowry’s delivery of agricultural tools added greatly to the productive capacity of the Gila Pima, expanding on the already established practices of irrigation and canal construction. The U.S. government made these gifts for the express purpose of increasing the production capacity of the Gila Pima and fostering their friendly relationship with the U.S. military.
Soon after the inception of mail service, agents and traders started to act as middlemen between the Gila Pima and potential buyers of their grain. Their involvement had the effect of stimulating greater agricultural production by the Pima. However, the Gila Pima were no longer completely in control of who purchased their crops. Shortly after the passage of the Indian Appropriations Act in 1859 the Bureau of Indian Affairs appointed Silas St. John as special Indian agent to the Pima and Maricopa. The extent to which political and economic priorities intertwined with the Gila Pima is evident from the selection of St. John, a paid employee of the Butterfield Overland Mail Company. In his report to the commissioner of Indian affairs, St. John puts the total wheat sold to Butterfield in 1859 at 300,000 pounds. This precipitous increase in output was partially facilitated by the donation of agricultural implements. The Butterfield Company became a major purchaser of Pima produce, as indicated by the figures given by J. R. Brown. “In 1858, the first year of the Overland Mail Line, the surplus crop of wheat was 100,000 pounds, which was purchased by the Company . . . In 1859 . . . they sold 250,000 pounds of wheat and . . . in 1860 they sold 400,000 pounds of wheat—all the Mail Company could purchase.”

With the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the U.S. military became a more sustained presence in the Southwest, mainly for the purpose of protecting the overland mail line. The heightened military occupation increased the demand for the supplies produced by the Gila Pima. Before, the military had procured most of its supplies from either Fort Leavenworth or San Francisco, but the high costs of overland and sea transportation made supplies acquired locally an attractive proposition. The Civil War had a significant impact for the troops in the region. In December 1861 General James H. Carleton, commander of the California Column of the Union Army, ordered the establishment of a sub-depot at the Pima villages. As part of his order Carleton requested that ten thousand yards of *manta* (Spanish for cloth) be brought along to acquire wheat for the soldiers stationed at the Pima settlements. In February 1862 Sherrod Hunter, commander of the region’s Confederate troops, moved his troops to the Pima villages and captured Ammi White, a trader who had constructed a flour mill in the community a year earlier, along with a small unit of Union soldiers. Hunter’s men destroyed portions of White’s mill and returned to the Pima fifteen hundred sacks of wheat purchased previously by White. The Confederate company left the Pima villages shortly after, and in April new Union troops under Colonel Joseph R. West reached the Gila Pima and began making preparations for the subdepot ordered by Carleton. The Pima traded back to the soldiers the flour from White’s mill that had been given them by Hunter’s troops.
In May 1862 Colonel West detailed the trouble he had had in acquiring wheat from the Pima: “I have as yet only succeeded in eking out daily a supply of forage for the command. I can neither get any stock of forage in advance, nor have the Indians yet produced their flour in any but trifling quantities.” West was having difficulty acquiring supplies because the ten thousand yards of manta ordered by Carleton had not yet arrived. Based on previous experiences in trading with the military, the Pima were savvy about withholding their produce until payment in cloth could be made. West commented: “A brief observation of these people and their habits shows me that they are disinclined to sell their produce or any other property unless the article offered in exchange is such as they habitually at the moment need.” The extent of the trade is clear from West’s next letter, in which he noted that the Pima had already provided wheat on credit for a total obligation of three thousand yards of manta. The Pima’s price of flour, at one-half pound of wheat for every yard of manta, meant that they had supplied approximately 13,500 pounds of wheat. When the requested supplies of manta did arrive in mid-May, West reported that 30,000 pounds of wheat had been taken in, but he warned that “there is no guarantee how long the flow of grain will continue, as there are no means of ascertaining how much they have in reserve.” This statement demonstrates that the Pima had developed strategies for controlling the market for their products through the use of credit. West’s comments also show the extent to which the U.S. military relied on the Gila Pima to supply their activities in the region. In total, the Pima sold the army 1,000,000 pounds of wheat in 1862 and 600,000 pounds the following year. The creation of a commercial market had clearly become the basis for the relationship between the Gila Pima and the federal government.

Conclusion

In analyzing the effects of colonization on Native societies it is important to recognize elements of change and continuity. Existing systems and lifeways influenced the indigenous responses to colonial agents, and these responses in turn influenced the formation of colonial institutions. The case of the Gila Pima demonstrates the extent to which the United States relied on indigenous resources and production to facilitate the settlement and development of a region. The U.S. government’s response to the Gila Pima was shaped by perceptions of utility and productivity, with the Pima seen as industrious, useful Indians in the minds of the colonizers, in opposition to the Apache, who were portrayed as hostile savages. Despite their contribution to early settlement, the Gila Pima saw their land and water rights subverted by later settlers along
the Gila River in the 1870s. The government failed to adequately protect the natural resources that the Pima required to cultivate their reservation. The increased settlement, which the Pima supported through their agricultural production and trade, ultimately contributed to the loss of their ability to continue their livelihood.

Native societies and people are often portrayed as victims of the market forces instituted by colonial agents. This perspective diminishes the capacity of most indigenous societies before colonization to establish and maintain commercial networks that relied on complex relationships between producers, laborers, and traders. Rather than victims of the market, Native societies in most cases were victims of colonial institutions, which imposed new political and legal structures over the land and other natural resources that supported colonial interests at the expense of existing patterns of production and exchange. The initial period of contact between the Gila Pima and Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. interests shows a high level of cooperation and even interdependence. These relationships were the basis for how the Gila Pima negotiated the effects of colonization on their community.

Notes


7 Tiigi is derived from the Spanish word tequio, meaning tax or charge.


9 Castetter and Bell, Pima and Papago Indian Agriculture, 46.

10 Spier, Yuman Tribes, 102.


12 William Emory, Lieutenant Emory Reports: A Reprint of Lieutenant W. H. Emory’s Notes of a Military Reconnaissance, introduction and notes by Ross Calvin (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1951), 131. Emory’s original report was published in 1848.

13 Ibid, 134.

14 Ibid.


16 Ibid.


25 J. Ross Browne, Adventures in Apache Country: A Tour through Arizona and Sonora


28 West to Cutler, 5 May 1862, Official Records, 1052.


30 Browne, Adventures, 111.