

# The Comanche Today: The Use of Crafts as Social Clues

by Tom Kavanagh

Anthropologists tell us that people make and use objects for three important purposes: economic, social and spiritual. In the first group are tools, houses, everyday clothing—all those things we need to cope with the environment. In the second, we find objects which identify individuals within a society—a king's crown, coup sticks, convention badges. In the third are such symbolic articles as altars or icons. The total assemblage of these three types of objects made and used by a particular group can provide particular insight, into the economic, social and spiritual life of that group.

The Comanche Indian community of Oklahoma numbers about 7500 people living on lands spread throughout the southwestern part of the state. Comanche farms and ranches are physically separated from each other by non-Indian land holdings, but it is still possible to talk of a "Comanche community" since there are numerous and frequent social gatherings and meetings.

Comanche homes are relatively old, mostly built in the 1920's. They reflect the growing prosperity of the Comanches, most of them with newer additions added on as families and incomes have grown. The furnishings are typical of rural Oklahoma: TV sets, freezers, air conditioners, etc. Comanche farmers rely on tractors and other non-Indian made equipment; furniture, clothing, photographs, dishes are all purchased from non-Comanches.

In other words, if we look at only the things made for economic purposes, we would see very few differences between the Comanche and their neighbors. However, if we look at the objects made for social or religious purposes, we can see some strong differences.

Many Comanches spend their free time making things generally referred to as "In-

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dian crafts." Exact figures on the number of full-time craftsmen are unavailable; however, almost everyone is a part-time producer of Indian crafts of some kind. These can be divided into four categories:

1. Crafts made for use almost exclusively within the Comanche community, such as Comanche traditional dance clothing or for the Native American Church.

2. Crafts made for sale primarily to the Comanche community identifying the wearer as Indian—such as applique vests, shawls and beaded hair ties.

3. Crafts made for sale primarily to the non-Indian community, based on traditional crafts which have become too expensive for most members of the Indian community to afford, such as silver and turquoise jewelry (a style borrowed from Navajo and Pueblo Indians).

4. Crafts made for sale almost exclusively to the non-Indian community which have little basis in tradition but for which there is a great demand by tourists. Such objects include beaded cigarette lighters, beaded daisy chain necklaces, "Indian bric-a-brac" and the like; their value rests on being "Indian made" rather than on any intrinsic value.

These four categories of objects made by modern Comanches can be further grouped into two: articles made for Comanche use (1 and 2) and for outsiders (3 and 4). There is considerable distinction between these two classes, not only in orientation but in the designs and materials chosen by the craftsmen and the value placed on the items by the craftsmen as well as by their potential customers.

For example, beadwork is made for both internal use and external sale; however the aesthetic values demonstrated in the two types are different. Faceted "cut" beads, size 13/0, are the most popular beads among the Comanche, but they must be imported from Europe and are becoming extremely hard to get. Thus "cut" beads are used only on the most important items while



*Two Gourd Dance rattles. The Comanche sometimes use salt shakers for rattles to avoid using Native American Church gourd rattles in a secular situation.*

beaded goods for general tourist sale are usually made of large, plain beads, size 11/0 or 10/0.

Another case in point are the articles made for the Gourd Dance, a social occasion based on the traditional Warrior's Society dances of the pre-reservation life. Perhaps 50% of the Comanches in Oklahoma are Gourd Dancers organized into one club or another, such as the Little Pony Gourd Clan, reactivated in the 1950's by World War II veterans.

A special "uniform" is worn by Comanche men at a Gourd Dance and on no other occasion. It consists of a gourd rattle held in the right hand, a feather fan in the left. A velveteen sash is worn around the waist and tied on the right side, in addition a "bandolier" of red mescal beans over the left shoulder. A red and blue trade cloth blanket is worn over both shoulders.

The rattle, sash, fan, bandolier and blanket are the marks of a Gourd dancer. In visiting stores that feature Indian crafts in both Oklahoma and Washington, D.C., Gourd Dance items were offered for sale in both areas in good variety. However, a store in the District of Columbia, patronized largely by non-Indians, has had a Gourd

Dance sash and fan for sale for over a year. The average shelf life of the same items in Oklahoma would be a month or less. Thus, it is clear that Gourd Dance equipment falls into class 1—that is, it is essentially made, purchased and used by Comanches. A move into Class 3 is theoretically possible, should non-Indians begin to identify with Gourd Dance paraphernalia and begin to buy it. However, at present one can say that the presence and variety of such Class 1 items indicates the presence of an underlying social and symbolic system among Comanches that is different from that of their non-Indian neighbors.

Despite pressures to become more like non-Indians, Comanches demonstrate in the articles they make for their own use a separate system of strictly Comanche values. Today, Comanche culture is a combination of non-Indian technology with native social and symbolic systems. The articles that the Comanche make for themselves are the dynamic, creative expressions of an active system of social and ideological values.

## The Comanche Today Bibliography

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