

**“The One Who Wheezes”: Salvador Palma, the Colorado River, and the
Emerging World Economy**

Natale Zappia, Ph.D.

During the long, hot, summer of 1781, in the midst of the chaotic Yuma revolt against *La Purisima Concepcion del Rio Colorado*, Olleyquotequiebe (“The One Who Wheezes”) triumphantly adorned the *adarga* (shield) of his slain enemy, the Spanish Captain Fernando Rivera y Moncada. The violence at the settlement erupted when Rivera, the commanding officer escorting a party of one hundred colonists and their 961 horses, mules, and cows to Santa Barbara, overstayed his welcome at the recently constructed mission along the strategic Lower Colorado River. His overstay proved disastrous, igniting a brewing conflict between the Quechan Alliance and the Spaniards. The surprise attack by the Quechans caught colonists off guard, thus ensuring a devastating military defeat by Olleyquotequiebe and his army of several hundred warriors. With the successful defeat of the Spanish military garrison and mission, Olleyquotequiebe—who only a decade earlier adopted the Spanish nickname Salvador Palma—regained the leadership position of the Quechan tribe and dramatically altered the course of both the Spanish Empire and Quechan alliance.

After ordering his warriors to round up all of the survivors and booty from the Spanish settlement, Palma assessed his situation. The Quechans, along with their Mojave allies, completely destroyed the Spanish settlement at the Yuma Crossing. During the weeklong revolt (July 18-25), the indigenous alliance killed 105 Spanish settlers (including twenty-one women and children) and rounded up seventy-six captives. They seized 257 livestock, fifteen muskets, and a half-case of pistols. Perhaps more importantly, Palma gathered every last accoutrement of the Catholic mission, including gospels, missals, crosses, and other sacramental items, placed them in a wooden box, and tossed them into the Colorado. In front of his followers and captives, Palma declared the end of Spanish meddling and repudiated the power and legitimacy of Christianity. For the Quechans and neighboring indigenous groups, the dual incursions of the Spaniards’ military and Christian expansion had ended. Within a few decades, the northern interior of the Spanish empire retreated in the face of expanding rival imperial powers, colonial liberation movements, and the growing world market. For the Quechans, victory failed to guarantee peace and survival. Their power in the region also dissipated as unprecedented amounts of non-native goods, animals, and plants flooded their trading network. These goods undermined their long held economic and military power over trade and ultimately unhinged their grip of the Colorado River. For both groups, the Yuma Revolt of 1781 acted as a harbinger of the advancing cultural, political, and economic convulsions unleashed by the modern world economy.

The life of Salvador Palma clearly reflects the impact of these unprecedented changes. During his life, he witnessed the introduction of horses, wheat, cattle and other non-native goods into the borderlands of the Sonoran/Mojave Deserts, saw the rapid spread and demise of Spanish missions along the Colorado, and fought during the momentous wars between the powerful Quechan and Maricopa alliances. During his political life, he both vigorously embraced and fought Spanish settlement. Indeed, his successful leadership rested on his ability to juggle the enticements and dangers of the new realities of the region. Palma’s story is riddled with the contradictions of expanding

empires, precarious alliances, uncertain economic realities, and struggles for survival. Ultimately, Palma's life illustrates one person's desire to bridge two worlds.

Salvador Palma regained his position as the leader, or *kwoxot* (meaning "the good"), during the Yuma Revolt. His Quechan followers forced him to relinquish this role shortly after arriving Spanish settlers disrupted Quechan life. For Quechan society, a *kwoxot's* legitimacy rested on two virtues: military prowess and dream power, or *icama*. Contrary to Spanish leadership, heredity played no role in Quechan society. If an individual's *icama* showed foresight and maintained or even enhanced Quechan power, his position as *kwoxot* would be secured. These conditions facilitated fluidity and competition among potential leaders. It also ensured an intense political battle between Salvador Palma and his younger brother, Ygnacio Palma. For two years, Ygnacio called for the expulsion of Spaniards from Quechan lands. As hostilities between Quechans and Spanish settlers increased, his following grew in opposition to his brother, who urged restraint. As his popularity grew, rumors of an assassination plot against Palma swirled. Fear of death forced Palma to reluctantly change his pro-Spanish position. Just before the revolt, he joined forces with his brother, galvanizing most of the Quechan villages with his newly revised *icamas* calling for the end of Spanish settlement in Quechan territory.

Although Palma survived his brother's challenged assault, why was he initially so out of step with his Quechan following? Why did he urge restraint—even embrace—of Spaniards even as they threatened Quechan power? Equally as important, what prompted Spanish colonial officials to stretch their "rim of Christendom" into a volatile, harsh desert region? Sketching the tensions of the California/Arizona borderlands, imperial rivalries in the Pacific, and Salvador Palma's life illuminates the new realities of the region and the Early Modern World.

The indigenous trading network of the desert borderlands thrived along several key ecological borders. Loosely defined along these ecological crossings, an equally dizzying array of indigenous groups took part and contributed local materials to the interregional economy. The region's players and a few of their traded goods clearly illustrate this diverse "marketplace." In the southeastern portion of region (Lower Colorado River-Central Arizona), Quechans, Maricopas, Yavapais, O'odhams, and Halchidomas supplied many "desert goods," including yucca, pine nuts, mescal, mesquite beans, gourd rattles, rabbit skins, and martynia pods for plateau and coastal consumers. In the southwestern corridor (southern California), Mojaves, Kumeyaays, Cahuillas, Chemehuevis, and Yokuts moved acorns, tobacco, eagle feathers, shell beads, salt, carrying nets, wooden dishes, and sea otter furs east from the coast to the desert and plateau interior. Along the northeastern border (Great Basin), Paiutes and Utes supplied arrowheads, red paint, buckskins, moccasins, blankets, obsidian, and mountain sheep/buffalo skins to both their western and southern neighbors. Very importantly, these plateau groups also served as a link to the borderlands economy of the Plains/Pueblo world.

Throughout centuries of contact, these groups tailored their products accordingly from region to region. For example, a Ute trader meeting at an annual trade fair in the

San Joaquin Valley would be prepared to trade obsidian with coastal Miwoks, as well as grasshoppers to Chumash. These annual trade fairs represented a cornucopia of materials, peoples, and ideas spanning several ecological regions. By 900 A.D., these trading centers and routes clearly served economic and ideological conduits linking “sedentary” (agriculturally-based groups with a few established villages) and “nomadic” (primarily gatherer-hunter groups with many seasonal villages) communities. As varying degrees of agricultural practices sprinkled throughout the region, increasingly localized products moved fluidly along diversified boundaries. Connecting these far-flung centers, myriad trails forged and maintained consistent links. A few groups—particularly the Mojaves, Utes, and Quechans—came to dominate the economic flow within these corridors.

Out of all of these groups, the Mojaves proved central to the interregional trade network. While many of their primary villages were situated at the confluence of the Colorado and Bill Williams River, their influence spread throughout the region. Unlike other indigenous communities, they identified themselves primarily as consummate traders and travelers. Their ability to quickly move and navigate back-and-forth between the formidable San Bernardino/San Jacinto Mountains and parched Death Valley proved unparalleled. Indeed, of all the groups trading in the borderlands economy, Mojaves undertook the longest trips and transferred the greatest amount of goods. Perhaps more than their central location, the Mojaves’ physical environment dictated their ability to travel and trade efficiently. For over four hundred years (1400-1800), a steady decline in rainfall over southeastern California made big-game hunting more and more difficult and limited agriculture to the Colorado River. As the landscape grew increasingly arid, Mojave, Cahuilla, and other communities employed more efficient storage techniques that preserved food for longer periods of time. These techniques allowed for greater mobility and facilitated trade far beyond their immediate neighbors. By the sixteenth century, Mojaves engaged in a regular, east-west trade circuit. Along their route, traders regularly encountered Chumash villages on the Pacific Coast, Yokuts in the San Joaquin Valley, southern Paiutes in the Chemehuevi Valley, and Quechans and Yavapais in the Colorado River Valley. This central position facilitated the Mojaves’ role as the supplier of “southwestern” goods to the California coast and Central Valley.

In addition to their central role in the exchange of material goods, Mojave traders also took part in an extensive slave/captive-raiding economy. As in the New Mexican borderlands economy to the east, numerous indigenous communities took part in a similar, although more limited, exchange. Moving extensively throughout the region, Mojaves also engaged in occasional slave-raiding trips. Mojaves exchanged Tongva or Chumash captives (almost always women and children) with Quechan and Ute neighbors to the east. In particular, a close Mojave-Quechan partnership emerged through which Mojaves provided slaves to the Quechans. As European livestock and horses increasingly entered the region during the eighteenth century, this slave-raiding partnership intensified as Quechans increasingly traded slaves for horses with O’odham middlemen to the east. Mojave raiding also increased dramatically.

As close allies, Mojaves and Quechans fostered strong trading relationships, military endeavors, and extensive intermarriage. The Quechans, though, occupied a much different role in the region. Located southeast from the Mojaves, the Quechans (the Spanish called them the Yuma) world primarily faced east and south towards Arizona and Mexico. While the Quechans did not disperse themselves as widely as the Mojave, they wielded more economic and military power than their northern neighbors. Situated at the confluence of the Gila and Colorado Rivers, the Quechans controlled all trade that headed back-and-forth through California. A natural bottleneck in the Colorado River served as a “checkpoint” through which all goods, ideas, and people flowed. To the east in the Sonoran Desert, indigenous groups like the Papago, Pima, and Maricopas traveled along paths paralleling the Gila River to trade with the Quechans. These groups received goods moving up from southern Sonoran trails. While the Mojaves controlled trade within the California borderlands, the Quechans played a huge role in maintaining the east-west flow of goods from Mexico. This strategic position also held some of most fertile soil. The combination of farmland, access to major trade routes from the east and west, and control of a major waterway all made the Quechan territory a highly coveted—and contested—location. Indeed, indigenous groups engaged in violent warfare almost as much as trade. Endemic wars unfolded for centuries before—and after—the Euro-American arrival.

While the Mojaves held a reputation for being skillful traders, the Quechans were feared for their military prowess. This military dominance emerged during a massive resettlement of many borderlands groups between the fourteenth-fifteenth centuries. During this time, the Colorado River diverted its course away from the 100-mile long Lake Cahuilla (now occupied by the Salton Sea). Due to increasing desiccation, Lake Cahuilla evaporated, thus dramatically altering the ecology of the region. Cahuillas, Quechans, Mojaves, Kumeyaays, and Halchidomas migrated and reestablished themselves along the Colorado River and the desert mountains of California. Among the groups resettling along the Lower Colorado River, the Quechans asserted their military dominance after a series of battles that drove the Kaveltcadoms, Halchidomas, Kohuanas, Halyikwanis, and the Akimel O’odham (Pimas) to the harsher—yet more peaceful—eastern part of Arizona. By the early 1500s, boundary lines had been drawn. Yet warfare continued as trade grew increasingly important and the borderland expanded with the arrival of Euro-Americans.

Ultimately, military alliances based on economic interests emerged. The Quechan league consisted of the Mojave, Yavapai, Kumeyaay, Chemehuevi, and western Tohono O’odham. The Maricopa League included the Cocopah, Halchidoma, Hualapai, Havasupai, Kavelchadom, Akimel O’odham, and eastern Tohono O’odham. While the Quechan league thrived on the indigenous trade network moving through California, the Maricopas depended on goods from Mexico and New Mexico. During conflicts, the Quechans could depend upon the Cahuillas, who shared mutual economic interests, to fight alongside their closer neighbors. The Maricopa, on the other hand, had to contend with increasingly dangerous presence of Apache raiders to the east. Sandwiched between two superior military powers, the Maricopa alliance initially welcomed the establishment of Spanish military outposts and missions in Tucson and Tubac. In addition to protection

from Apache raiders, communities within the Maricopa alliance used their proximity to Spanish goods—especially horses—in an attempt to gain an economic upper hand on Quechan dominance.

By the early seventeenth century, the Maricopa alliance served as middlemen of their own between the Spanish and Quechans. Quickly, the demand for horses among the Quechan alliance increased. Proportionally, Spanish demand of captive indigenous slaves for cheap labor also increased. While this stimulated trade, it also greatly increased warfare through which both alliances raided slaves, livestock, and weapons, ultimately once again reshaping the populations living in the region. These interethnic trade wars and military campaigns—all interdependent upon economic interests and geographic territory—reached a fevered pitch by the 1770s as Quechans and other groups fully incorporated horses into their economic, political, and military lives. For the Mojaves, Quechans, and other regional groups, the event marked a new period of unprecedented economic competition and military bloodshed, irrevocably altering the California borderlands.

It is during this period that Salvador Palma emerged to seal the fate of both Quechans and Spaniards. His rise to prominence began during a chance desert encounter in 1771 with Father Francisco Garcés, a Spanish missionary with dreams of linking Mexico City to the California coast. Garcés, disoriented by the desert terrain and far from any European settlement, relied on Palma as a guide. This encounter forged a friendship between the two, thus facilitating the construction of the Yuma settlement eight years later. With Palma's reassurances, Garcés felt that the Quechans would be valuable allies in their attempt to create a supply line from Mexico City to Los Angeles and Monterrey. For Palma, this serendipitous encounter gave him a political card helping him rise to power. Quickly after his return to Quechan territory, he lobbied for the establishment of a Spanish settlement, arguing that a Quechan-Spanish alliance would allow the Quechans to further dominate regional trade. With a Spanish outpost on Quechan land, the Quechans could directly trade with Mexico rather than Maricopa middlemen. For decades, the Maricopa League controlled the flow of Spanish goods from Tucson and Mexico. After several years of Palma's cajoling and forecasting of *icamas*, combined with Quechan hatred of the Maricopas and a strong desire for Spanish horses and material goods, Palma emerged as the Quechan leader and welcomed the explorer Juan Bautista de Anza into Quechan territory in 1774. Initially, Palma's gamble on the Spanish paid off, as traders like Juan Bautista de Anza supplied gifts during each trip back-and-forth to California. Indeed, as the following account by Pedro Font (a chaplain accompanying one of Anza's expeditions) indicates, any Quechan misgivings about the Spanish already dissipated by 1775:

November 28 – We...halted on the Rio Colorado...The Yumas lodged us in a shelter of boughs that the chief Palma had ordered to be made here as soon as he knew of our coming. Many Indians of both sexes came to visit us, very festive and elated.

Within six years of Anza's first visit, a group of one hundred Spanish settlers (and hundreds of horses, cattle, and pack mules) under the leadership of Santiago Yslas established themselves next to the Quechan stronghold. For now, Salvador's *icamas* of Quechan military and economic dominance of the California/Arizona borderlands rang true—Quechan power seemed complete.

Just as the Spanish settlement at the Yuma Crossing played a crucial role in Salvador Palma's vision of Quechan dominance, so too did the settlement loom as a vital link in the Spanish Empire. Paralleling the tensions among indigenous powers in the borderlands, Spain was locked in a struggle with Russia and Great Britain over control of California and the Pacific. As in many other parts of the world, the conclusion of the Seven Years War in 1763 convulsed both colonies and metropolises. England humiliated both France and Spain on the eastern seaboard of the Americas, thus prompting Spain to engage in substantial fiscal/military reforms. These changes, emanating from Europe, rippled their way to the California borderlands. In the wake of 1763, Charles III issued a series of reforms completely overhauling New Spain. His first order expelled the Jesuits from Spanish colonies. Their rein in the Americas had ended. From then on, the military would dictate the tone of colonial policy and its endeavors. The less meddling, more secular Catholic order of Franciscans replaced the Jesuits. Unlike their predecessors, Franciscans like Father Garces more vigorously set out to expand the empire.

As mentioned above, Spain saw California as vital to their empire. For more than two centuries, their hegemony over the Pacific proved unparalleled. As the buffer of French colonies in the American East, Southeast Asia, and India evaporated, though, the British menace proved frightening. The increasing technological prowess of the British army and Navy, as well as their creeping settler expansion towards the Rockies, shocked Spain into action. Additionally, another rising imperial power, the Russian empire, threatened New Spain to the North along the Pacific coast. All of these precipitating factors led Spanish colonial leaders to reach out the Quechans. The well maintained, highly traveled indigenous trails moving through the desert towards the coast proved too enticing to ignore. With Spanish control of these corridors, safe passage of trading goods, arms, and people would hand Spain a firm grasp of California. Equally as important, like Russia and England, Spain saw the California coast as a crucial plug into the Asian market. Alongside the Jesuits, the Lower Colorado served as one of the first strategic target of Spain's fiscal/military reforms. In 1781, imperial and borderland tensions met at the Yuma Crossing.

The Yuma Revolt: A World-Historical Conjuncture

The rosy relationship that both Garces and Palma promised their constituencies never materialized on the Lower Colorado. By 1780, relationships between the two groups quickly strained as livestock devoured Quechan farmland and Quechans, in return, killed and ate the intruding animals. By the spring of 1781, most Quechans broke with Palma and began to prepare for an attack on the Spanish mission and settlement. A Halykawamai (traditional enemy of the Quechans) slave owned by a local Spanish settler circulated rumors that Spanish authorities had sent for military troops to enslave all of the

Quechans. Fueled by this and other rumors, the Quechans completely reversed their support of the Spanish presence. As mentioned above, Palma, fearing for his life, joined the chorus of anti-Spanish Quechans. For his part, Garces attempted to mitigate the belligerence of Spanish soldiers who harassed Quechan women and allowed their livestock to destroy highly prized agricultural fields. Within a year, both men seemed resigned to violent conflict. It appeared only a matter of time stood in its way.

On July 17, 1781, Quechans mobilized their allies, including the Mojaves, and even some enemies, like the Halchidomas, attacking and destroying the Spanish Mission of La Concepcion. Within a couple of days, they wiped out almost the entire settlement. Palma's reversal was complete. His warriors clubbed Garces to death next to the mission he fought so hard to establish. The Quechan revolt didn't go unchallenged. Indeed, the Yuma Revolt kick-started a series of bloody stalemates between Quechans and waves of Spaniards periodically sent from Mexico. Over the next two years, a series of pitched battles occurred near the old mission. Each battle taxed both the Spanish and Quechan military. Ultimately, the Quechan remained steadfast under Palma's leadership. The Spanish military would never settle in Quechan territory. Watching the deteriorating situation closely from Spain in 1783, Charles III finally ordered the abandonment of any attempts to settle along the Colorado. The Yuma project served as a disastrous waste of revenue, political energy, and lives. Additionally, revolutionary stirrings of colonial elites averred Spain's direction away from the borderlands. The tiny chain of Spanish missions along the river would never develop. The sun had set on the imperial dreams of a Spanish Pacific.

While Palma emerged victorious, the Spanish battles killed more than one-fifth of the Quechans. In order to counter-balance these losses, Palma waged an extensive offensive on his surrounding enemies to absorb more warriors, goods, and territory. In 1796, he last appeared in the Spanish records still leading the Quechans into battle along the Lower Colorado. From this perspective, the Yuma Revolt appeared as a blip on the screen within the region's inter-ethnic conflicts. Yet, the global impacts of the Seven Years War and Spain's attempt at fiscal/ military reforms gripped the indigenous borderlands. Indeed, this first "world war" ushered in a new age of technology and trade. While the Yuma Revolt allowed Palma and the Quechans some more time to use non-native goods on their own terms, Palma's gamble failed to mitigate the future impacts of the world market. Indeed, by 1857, when the last major battle between the Quechan and Maricopa alliance occurred along the Gila River (ending in Quechan defeat), the American military outpost of Fort Yuma was already five-years-old. Like the Spanish, the American military saw the strategic importance of the Colorado River. Unlike the Spanish, though, the Americans had steamship technology, allowing their military to more deeply penetrate Quechan land. In less than one hundred years, the *icamas* of both Salvador Palma and Francisco Garces faded away.

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