

Furthering Their Own Demise: How Kansa Indian Death Customs Accelerated Their Depopulation

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Abstract. This essay examines the survival of the Kansa Indians prior to major contact with Euro-Americans, how Euro-American contact disrupted their survival, and how the Kansa responded to those disruptions. The research presented here focuses on the impact of wildlife depletion and Euro-American diseases leading up to the tribe's massive depopulation in the late nineteenth century. The most striking finding is that the cultural practices and religious customs with which the Kansa responded to these tremendous changes made matters worse for them. Their adherence to death customs, in particular, accelerated their depopulation when they endured back-to-back years of epidemics and starvation. This raises important questions about the specific influence of death customs and other practices used by Amerindian groups in response to depopulation following contact with Euro-Americans.

The Kansa (or Kaw) Indians lived in present northeastern Kansas in the early 1800s.¹ Their population, health, and ecology had been influenced and stressed by foreign contact for two centuries, yet the Kansa remained intact. But during the years that followed, the foreign stresses on their world dramatically increased, disrupting their ecology and shattering their health. By midcentury their population had begun a downward spiral from which it would not recover. The influx of emigrant Indians onto neighboring reservations and the expansion of the fur trade depleted the wildlife they depended on, and missionaries and government employees introduced disease. Euro-American travelers and settlers pushed the bison farther west, destroyed or claimed grass and wood, peddled whiskey, and brought more disease to the tribe. This was the legacy of the Euro-American frontier, and its consequences for the Kaw included starvation, illness, death, warfare,

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alcoholism, and, ultimately, near extinction. This story is familiar to most students of American Indian depopulation, but what follows is not.

Kansa losses from starvation, illness, and other conditions were shaped and, in some cases, even worsened by the Indians' responses to these problems. The Kansa's decisions to add a fall bison hunt when wildlife grew scarce and to continue performing customary death rituals, for instance, had dramatic consequences. Death customs, in particular, contributed to their losses and suffering from wildlife depletion and successive epidemics in the late 1830s, ultimately creating a vicious cycle of increasing starvation, illness, and death that accelerated their population collapse.

The larger context or debate to which I seek to contribute here is twofold. First, my work is intended to promote greater consideration for the argument that American Indian beliefs, customs, and responses to the Euro-American frontier played a significant role in American Indian depopulation.² Indian adherence to native beliefs and customs often rendered their responses to Euro-American ecological disruption at best ineffective and at worst catastrophic. And it took much time and death before many Indians modified their beliefs and customs to encourage or allow for more adaptive strategies of survival. Second, I specifically argue herein that American Indian *death customs* played a potentially critical role in accelerating losses and depopulation from disease and wildlife depletion before these customs were modified to be less detrimental. The case I will illustrate is one of tragic consequences, namely the collaboration of Kansa death customs with deadly illness and wildlife depletion that generated an even deadlier outcome when all three variables emerged simultaneously. Death customs are not prominently discussed in most scholarship about the contributing factors to Amerindian population decline, but they may help to further explain massive and sudden (or nonlinear) demographic collapses among Amerindian tribes.

Ultimately, I intend this study to be a case example of a potentially greater geographic and cultural pattern in Amerindian depopulation and to encourage greater explorative research into this phenomenon. What happened to the Kansa in their environment happened repeatedly to other Indians across the United States as the Euro-American frontier collided with Native American cultural and ecological systems. A pattern developed whereby various tribes responded to severe environmental changes, namely, disease and wildlife depletion, with cultural practices that may have exacerbated their crisis. This study asks scholars to consider that when a tribe with death customs and religious devotion similar to the Kansa's experienced successive years of disease along with starvation from wildlife depletion simultaneously, their adherence to death customs likely accelerated their depopulation. Under other circumstances, death customs

were not deadly. But back-to-back years of both disease and starvation were not unusual among tribes that experienced massive depopulation. In the conclusion, I discuss the relevance and potential application of this case study to other Indian groups.

The Case of the Kansa

The Kansa of the Great Plains stood at a crossroads in the early 1800s. They had been in contact with Europeans for nearly two centuries, mostly through fur trade with the Spanish, French, Canadians, and sometimes British. Since the early 1700s, this contact had occurred annually, and the trade had increased substantially in volume.³ But the exchange of goods brought the Kansa alcohol and disease. It also led to increased hunting by Indians in their region, bringing more competition and war between the Kansa and neighboring tribes over control of bordering hunting grounds. And different traders pressured and traded with different members of the Kansa, modifying the tribe's wealth and power structure and stressing its traditional leadership. But despite these stresses, the Kansa endured. Their population, environs, and means of survival had yet to be disrupted as they would be in the coming years.

It is at this critical juncture that this essay intercepts the Kansa and examines the intimate link between their religious beliefs and their survival strategies, the disruption of that ecology by a new influx of emigrant cultures, and the Kansa response to each disruption. This essay then attempts to show how the cumulative effect of the disruptions and Kansa beliefs and responses created a vicious cycle of increasing depopulation. The concentration on the period 1800–1845 is significant. The historical records of this period are rich in material, considerably greater in amount and quality than such records prior to 1800. In addition, this was a pivotal period. Figure 1 shows the tumultuous history of the Kansa population during those years. The tribe experienced significant losses from 1827 to 1833, and again from 1838 to 1841, before plummeting without recovery after 1845. The study of Kansa responses to Euro-American diseases and wildlife depletion up to and including 1845 reveals the origins of and most critical factors in tribal depopulation, which in turn provides tremendous insight into the tribe's subsequent demise.

Kansa Ecology in the Early 1800s

In July 1804, hunters in Meriwether Lewis and William Clark's expedition returned from an excursion up the Kansas River with a report that the Kansa in that valley lived principally in a single village (Thwaites 1969

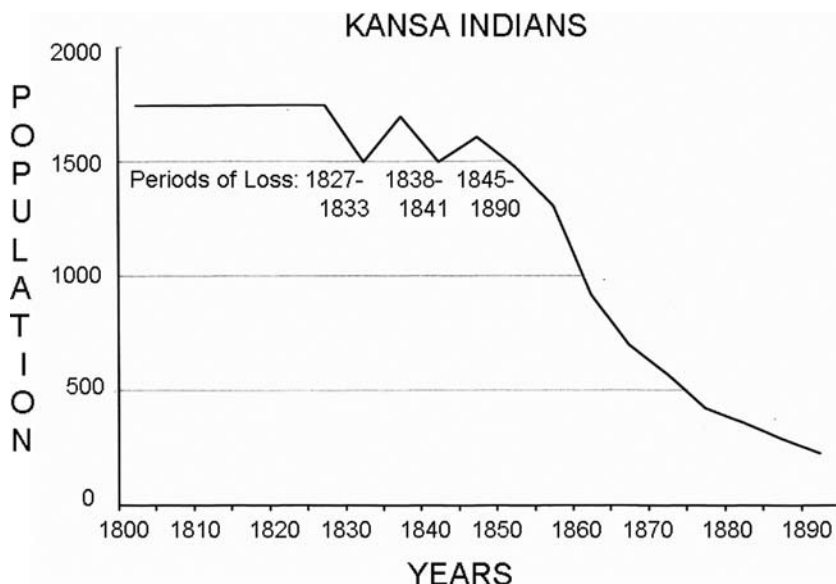


Figure 1. Kansa Indian population, 1800–1890. The Kansa experienced three periods of severe population loss: 1827–33, 1838–41, and from 1845 on. This graph is an approximation of Kansa population size and history. Figures for tribal size, increase, and loss were frequently estimates by various travelers, settlers, missionaries, and Indian agents that often conflicted or were in error and had to be reconciled with descriptions and reports on the Kansa's general condition. Sources: Adams 1904: 425; Barry 1972: 94, 110, 268, 280, 302, 366, 367, 382, 544, 545, 689, 1185; Barry 1973: 480–81; Brackenridge 1962 [1814]: 85; Bradbury 1904 [1819]: 67; Carter 1951: 305; Catlin 1973 [1844]: 23; Chittenden and Richardson 1905: 281; Commissioner of Indian Affairs 1842–73; J. Gregg 1905 [1845]: 341; Jackson 1966: 38; James 1905 [1823]: 17:154; W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 229, 239; McCoy 1840: 565; Meeker 1904: 476–77; Thwaites 1969 [1905]: 84; Unrau 1973: 320; U.S. House of Representatives 1972: 402; U.S. Secretary of War 1972: 417; Wedel 1946: 16.

[1905]: 84). This settlement, often referred to as Blue Earth, was situated near present Manhattan, Kansas, on the north bank of the Kansas River just east of the mouth of the Blue River (Isern 1978: 87–88; James 1905 [1823]: 17:154; Notes 1820: 305; Unrau 1971: 37) (fig. 2). When explorers from Major Stephen H. Long's expedition to the Rocky Mountains visited the Blue Earth village in 1819, they observed the Kansa living in 130 earth-covered lodges (James 1905 [1823]: 14:189), each housing an average of "two families [or] ten persons" (Notes 1820: 306). The Kansa inhabited this village from the end of the eighteenth century to the late 1820s. Other

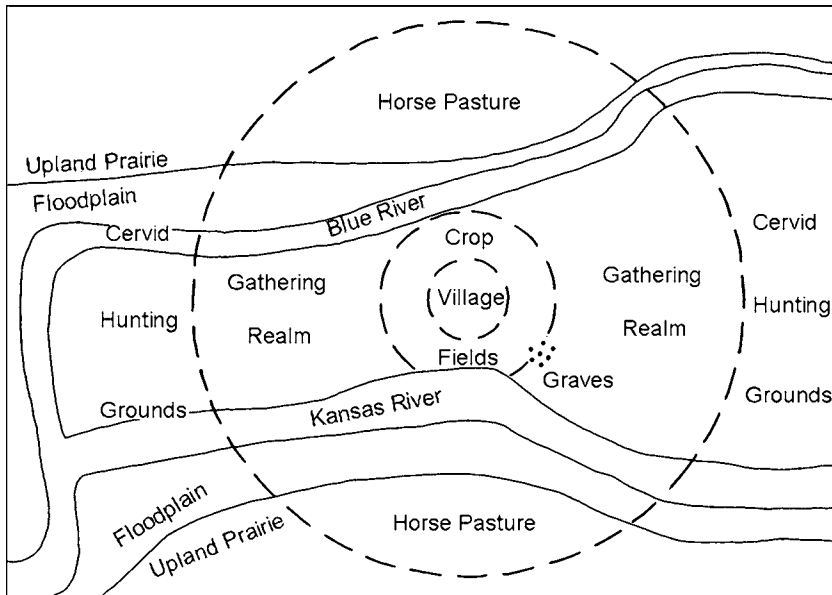


Figure 2. Kansa territorial core. About one hundred acres of crops immediately surrounded the Blue Earth village, beyond which the tribe's gathering realm extended for roughly one mile in either direction along the floodplain corridor. The upland prairie used by the tribe to pasture their horses was the same distance from the fields as the gathering realm. The remainder of the tribe's territorial core extended throughout most of the Kansas River valley, where the Kansa chiefly hunted cervids, such as deer, elk, and antelope. Source: Map by author.

villages were mentioned during this time, but their existence has never been confirmed (Isern 1978: 88; McGee 1897: 193; Unrau 1971: 37).

The Blue Earth was a new village. The Kansa had moved from a village along the Missouri River near present Leavenworth, Kansas, which they had inhabited since the 1750s. Prior to that, they had lived in another village further up the Missouri, but still within present northeastern Kansas. Their population had reportedly fluctuated over the last century, but their village size had remained much the same, consistently around 150 lodges (Long 1881: 288; Wedel 1946: 10, 13). And game in the region around Blue Earth remained in good supply and their ecology remained similar to what it had been at their earlier village sites.

The Kansa occupied a distinct territorial core. Immediately surrounding the Blue Earth village were small fields where Kansa women grew corn, beans, pumpkins, melons, and squash (Brooks 1965: 176). The fields

ranged in size from about one-half to three acres and totaled roughly one hundred acres (Lowie 1982 [1954]: 20). They were tilled in April and the vegetables planted in early May, just prior to a mass exodus for the Kansa's annual summer bison hunt (Brooks 1965: 176; Skinner 1915: 775; Thwaites 1969 [1905]: 85). The Kansa returned to their village in mid-August. Crop harvesting began soon thereafter and generally lasted through early October (Notes 1820: 304).

In the mile-wide belt of riparian forest adjacent to the nearby Kansas and Blue rivers Kansa women gathered wood, water, and the stems of cattails (used in making mats), as well as various nuts, berries, and roots (Brooks 1965: 176; James 1905 [1823]: 14:197-98; Long 1881: 286-94; Notes 1820: 311). Beyond the forest, the upland prairie served as pasture for the Kansa's horses. There Kansa boys watched the horses and kept them herded in sight of the village. Women sometimes scavenged these same grasslands for edible tubers (Brooks 1965: 176).

The remainder of the tribe's territorial core extended throughout most of the Kansas River valley and the lower reaches of its tributaries, from about the present Delaware River in the east to the Solomon and Smoky Hill rivers in the west (fig. 3). In these valleys Kansa males fished and hunted for beaver, deer, elk, bear, antelope, prairie chickens, turkey, and smaller game (Brooks 1965: 176; Jackson 1966: 40-41; James 1905 [1823]: 17:154; Nichols 1969: 39; Thwaites 1969 [1905]: 36, 84). Deer and elk (cervids), especially, were hunted from January through September, with the cessation in October coinciding with the end of the Kansa's crop harvest. Vegetables, together with the dried bison meat left from the summer hunt, probably sustained the Indians through the fall (Molloy 1993: 193-94).

The Kansa generally abandoned their village and embarked on their annual summer buffalo hunt about the end of May, shortly after the women finished planting the fields (Brooks 1965: 176; Thwaites 1969 [1905]: 85). In June, they traveled westward along the upper Kansas and lower Republican, Solomon, and Smoky Hill rivers to the bison grounds of the High Plains. Their hunting range extended from the upper Republican River valley to the saline plains on the present Kansas-Oklahoma border, where they procured rock salt and hunted the bison that gathered at the licks (James 1905 [1823]: 14:190; Notes 1820: 312; Wishart 1979: 384-85). The primary hunting grounds were along the middle Solomon, Smoky Hill, and Arkansas rivers, where vast herds of bison sought water in summer (Thwaites 1969 [1905]: 84; Unrau 1971: 98). Several journal accounts suggest that the Kansa frequented a stretch of the Arkansas River valley from approximately present Sedgwick through Reno and Rice counties (Barry 1972: 67, 110).

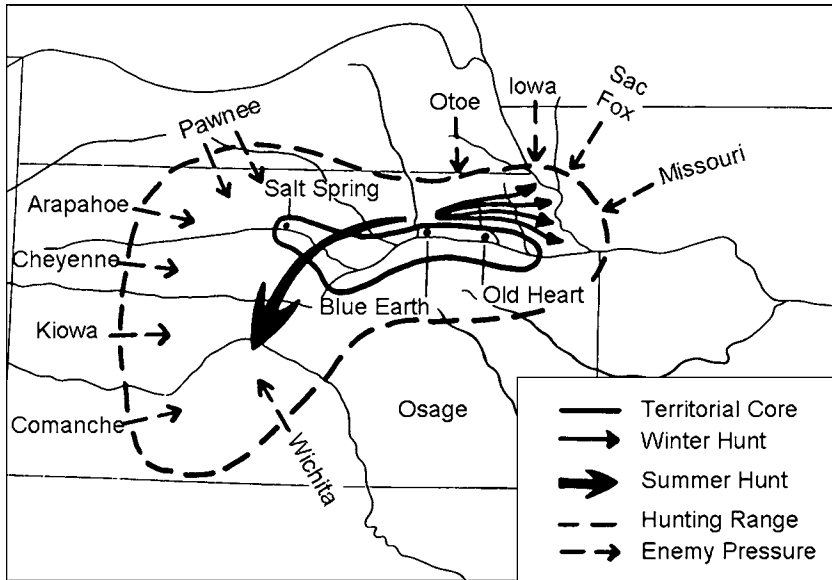


Figure 3. Kansa Territory, ca. 1800–1824. The core of the Kansa centered on the Blue Earth village and included the Sacred Salt Spring and Old Heart village, spiritual sites regularly visited by the tribe. Within this core the Kansa exercised nearly total territorial control. The tribe's sphere diffused outward to the borders of their extensive hunting range. Control over these peripheral grounds often was contested by neighboring peoples. Source: Map by author.

The Kansa returned from the bison hunt about mid-August (James 1905 [1823]: 14:187; Notes 1820: 304; Thwaites 1969 [1905]: 85). They abandoned their village again in the winter and traveled to the larger forests adjacent to the Missouri River in present northeastern Kansas and northwestern Missouri. There they scattered into small parties between the Kansas River and the Nodaway to hunt deer, elk, and smaller game (Notes 1820: 307). The furs from these animals could be exchanged immediately for goods from the traders who regularly traveled up and down the Missouri River. Although the dispersed nature of such game hindered communal hunting, numerous explorers traveling throughout the region confirmed the abundance there of beaver, deer, elk, antelope, bear, and turkey (Bek 1938: 305; Isern 1978: 89; Jackson 1964: 184; Luttig 1920: 32–51). The small Kansa parties reconvened at the Blue Earth village in mid-March (Thwaites 1969 [1905]: 85).

Semiannual abandonment of the Blue Earth site helped to prevent the exhaustion of local resources, and it allowed the general filth that accu-

mulated in the village to dissipate. Although horses enabled the Kansa to extend their hunting excursions, they also necessitated them. Every night the Kansa tied their horses to the lodges to secure them from possible enemy raids. Horse droppings constituted much of the village litter. In addition, horses often consumed much of the local pasturage during the relatively short periods of village residence. The pasture of the plains was the main form of sustenance for Kansa horses in summer, and in winter (when the tall grass prairie had lost most of its nutritive value) the herd survived chiefly on the bark of cottonwood trees from the riparian forests along the Missouri and Kansas rivers (Notes 1820: 310–11, 347–48; Wishart 1994: 25).

Trading and raiding were integral to tribal ecology. The Kansa occasionally visited the government trading post that had been established at Fort Osage in 1808, but they more often traded the bulk of their furs for goods from independent French-Canadian and American traders operating out of St. Louis who visited them every fall (K. L. Gregg 1940: 445–60; Jackson 1966: 40–41). Waldo Wedel (1959: 193) argued that by the early nineteenth century the Kansa “had given up most of their native material culture and were relying largely on traders . . . for tools, weapons, and utensils.” Raiding enabled warriors to attain honor and rank in the tribe and to acquire valuable horses (Long 1881: 294–96; Notes 1820: 309–10; Skinner 1915: 752–53). The practice also was important for maintaining control of chief hunting grounds (Dorsey 1885: 678; 1894: 376). Raids often were conducted during the principal hunting excursions. In the winter, Kansa parties raided the Iowa, Otoe, Sac, Fox, and Missouri Indians who competed with them for control of the valuable Missouri River hunting grounds (Barry 1972: 87). In the summer, small warrior parties often broke away from the communal bison hunt to raid the Pawnee who contested the bison grounds (Jackson 1964: 184; Nasatir 1990 [1957]: 615). The Comanche, Wichita, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Kiowa also vied for control of the bison grounds, but the Kansa rarely raided these larger and more powerful tribes (Isern 1978: 88).

Ecological Disruptions and Kansa Adjustments, 1825–1840

Territorial Loss, Factionalism, and Village Relocation

After Missouri was officially admitted into the Union in 1821, a congressional plan unfolded to extinguish all Kansa land claims in the new state (Barry 1972: 96; Unrau 1971: 105). Four years later, Kansa leaders ceded all tribal land claims in western Missouri and more than half of present

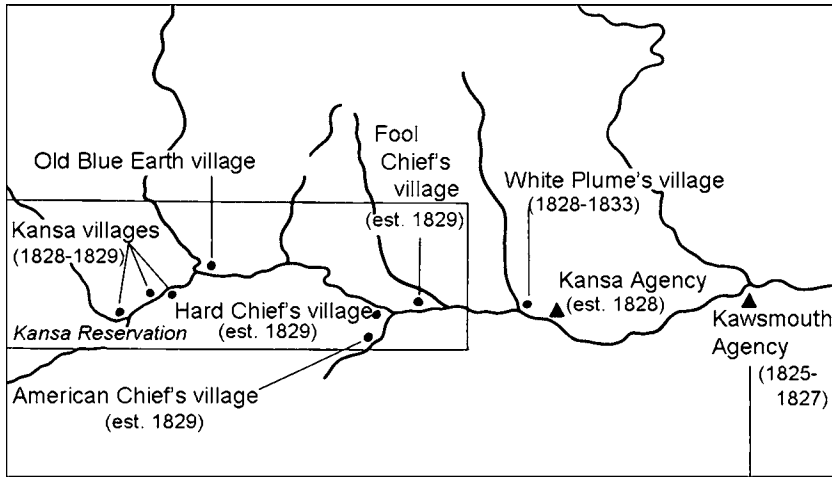


Figure 4. Kansa villages and agencies, 1825–1833. Source: Map by author.

Kansas, and they agreed to live on a reservation just thirty miles wide that began sixty miles west of the mouth of the Kansas River and extended westward to approximately thirty-five miles east of the present western boundary of Kansas (Kappler 1904: 222; Unrau 1971: 107) (fig. 4). In exchange for living on this narrow remnant of their territory, the treaty they signed with the government promised an annuity of \$3,500 each year for twenty years, three hundred cattle, three hundred hogs, five hundred domestic fowl, a school to educate the Kansa's children, tools, an agent to supervise the operation of the reservation, a blacksmith, a farmer to instruct the Kansa in crop and livestock raising, and an agency building to house the government employees and serve as a base of operations (Kappler 1904: 222–25). John Dougherty's farm at the mouth of the Kaw served as a temporary agency until a new one was built in 1828 (Unrau 1971: 114, 141).

Over the four years that followed the treaty the Blue Earth village was abandoned in piecemeal fashion, and the Kansa splintered into several factions. White Plume, the senior chief of the Kansa, complained to Superintendent William Clark in the spring of 1827 that the interference of government officials and the corrupt manner in which annuities were distributed had led to this factionalism (*ibid.*: 119).⁴ Apparently those Kansa chiefs and warriors who gained recognition from various government officials were given the annuities to distribute among their people. Since gift

giving was a major vehicle for improving one's status within the tribe, those who distributed annuity goods rose in prominence, challenging the traditional power structure headed by White Plume and other established leaders. White Plume and sixteen Kansa families left the Blue Earth village to form their own community two miles northwest of the new agency in 1828 (Barry 1972: 150; Lutz 1906: 195). Other Kansa, too, left the Blue Earth village around that time and established three small villages several miles to the west along the Kaw (Barnes 1936a: 254-57; Rothensteiner 1920: 80; Wilmeth 1958: 156-57).

The Blue Earth village and the small villages to the west of it were abandoned by 1829 as three new tribal leaders emerged: Fool Chief, Hard Chief, and American Chief (U.S. Senate 1830: 10). Encouraged by recent Pawnee pressure and the government's annuity distribution, each leader established a new village considerably closer to the agency (Unrau 1971: 113). Fool Chief's village, the largest, with seven to eight hundred residents, was situated between the Kansas River and Soldier Creek near present Topeka. Hard Chief's village of five to six hundred Indians occupied a spot on the south side of the Kansas River just west of its confluence with Mission Creek. About two miles up Mission Creek was American Chief's village of one hundred persons (Adams 1904: 425).

Wildlife Depletion

In the late summer and early fall of 1828, a small party of men and Indians led by Isaac McCoy explored the Kansas River valley. McCoy noted that his party was "delighted with the abundance of game" in the region, having "found Elk, Deer & Bear plenty, and [even] a few antelopes" (McDermott 1945: 411). This abundance rapidly disappeared over the next few years. Indian agent John Dougherty, for example, reported from Fort Leavenworth in January 1830 that the Kansa were facing starvation because of "the diminution and scarcity of game in this country" (U.S. Senate 1830: 10). Two years later, John B. Wyeth (1905 [1833]: 49) wrote in his journal that "we found here little game" as he and his Oregon-bound party crossed over the Kansas River and visited Fool Chief's village.⁵ By mid-decade, game appeared to be virtually annihilated. Reverend Thomas Johnson, upon returning from his travels among the Kansa villages in June 1835, wrote that "the deer have entirely disappeared" (quoted in W. Johnson et al. 1923-25: 238).

What could account for such a massive loss of wildlife over this short period? Tree ring data and other climatic evidence do not indicate that drought or flooding occurred during this period (Chappell 1908: 544-49; Lawson 1971: 112-13; Lawson and Stockton 1981: 531; Muhs and Holli-

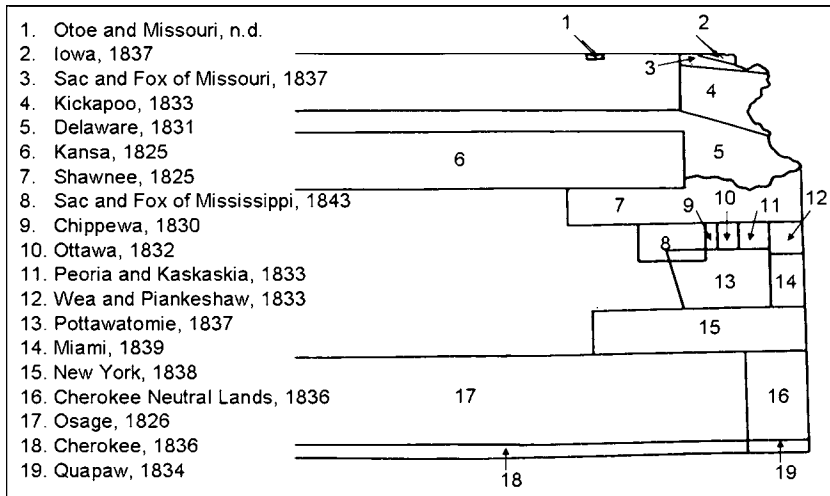


Figure 5. Indian reservations in territory included in Kansas, 1846. Each reservation listed above is followed by the year it was officially established by the U.S. Congress. In 1846, the native Kansa and Osage peoples numbered roughly 5,800. Emigrant Indians were more than twice as numerous. Source: Barry 1972: 544; *Indian Reservations 1846*.

day 1995: 203). The strongest evidence suggests overhunting caused by a tremendous influx of new Indians into the region. The treaty signed in 1825 was one of several that government officials made with eastern Kansas Indians during this period. All were aimed at making room in the area for several thousand eastern U.S. Indians whom the government wanted to relocate (Miner and Unrau 1990: 6) (fig. 5). The Shawnee were the first of these emigrant Indians in Kansas, having arrived in 1828, followed thereafter by Peoria, Piankeshaw, Wea, Delaware, Kaskaskia, Ottawa, Kickapoo, and Pottawatomie Indians over the next several years (Barnes 1936b: 376; Barry 1972: 183, 155–56, 223, 234). According to the commissioner of Indian affairs, these newly arrived tribes amounted to 3,492 emigrant Indians in northeast Kansas by May 1834 (Barry 1972: 234, 268). This was twice the number of Kansa, thereby tripling the region's Indian population.

As it had with the Kansa, the government tried to curb the dependency of the emigrant Indians on wild game by making treaty guarantees for provisions, stock animals, farm equipment, and agricultural instruction. Indian removal, however, usually preceded congressional approval of

the treaties, which meant that most emigrant Indians went without provisions or foodstuffs for at least several months after their arrival (Unrau 1971: 56). When Isaac McCoy visited the newly arrived Delaware in the late fall of 1830, for example, he observed that the “Govt. has not furnished provisions, except to a very small amount, and nothing will be done . . . [until] an appropriation be made by Congress for expenses of that concern” (quoted in Barnes 1936b: 376). The tribe was forced to hunt for game immediately. Even after congressional appropriations were made, the Delaware continued to be inadequately provisioned. The Kansa, too, had been inadequately supplied from the start. As the incoming Ottawa, Kickapoo, and other emigrant Indians met with fates similar to the Delaware’s, the decimation of wildlife in northeast Kansas was simply a matter of time. But how much time it took is an important question. Was the virtual annihilation of game in northeast Kansas achieved by the mid-1830s simply because of the rise in subsistence hunting that accompanied the influx of ill-provisioned emigrant Indians? An examination of the fur trade helps to provide an answer.

Prior to the arrival of emigrant Indians, the Kansa had maintained a vigorous annual trade in pelts and skins of deer and other small game. In 1806, explorer Zebulon Pike observed that the Kansa provided “annually 250 bundles of deerskin, 15 of beaver, and 100 of otter” to visiting traders (quoted in Wedel 1946: 13). This was a quite an increase from fifty years earlier when the Kansa supplied the French with one hundred bundles of furs annually, consisting “mainly of beaver, with some deer, bear, and others” (10). The proportional abundance of beaver, deer, and other cervids fluctuated over the years, but total game supply permitted the overall increase in hunting and trade in the area. In fact, up until the late 1820s, the numerous travelers and visitors observing the hunting and trading patterns of the Kansa, or simply passing through the Kaw region, did not report any scarcity of wildlife (see, e.g., Barry 1972: 53–146; James 1905 [1823]: 14:184–99; and Luttig 1920: 36–41). A visitor to the Kansa in 1819 observed that the Kansas River region “is a country more abounding in valuable furs” (Notes 1820: 307). Instead, most observations of game scarcity coincided with the rapid arrival of emigrant Indians and new trading posts.

Beginning in 1821, the Chouteau family operated the only trading post in Kansas for the French Fur Company (which became part of the American Fur Company of St. Louis in 1826). After 1828, they built five new American Fur Company trading posts in northeast Kansas over the next five years (Barry 1972: 102, 153–54, 165, 212, 248; KSHS 1906: 570–74). Most interesting about this rapid growth in trading posts is its indication

that tribes in northeast Kansas may have hunted beyond subsistence levels during this time. After all, the government's relocation policy had tripled the local Indian population by the mid-1830s, while the number of trading posts had risen at nearly twice that rate. In addition, one of the new posts was on the Kansa reserve, demonstrating that the expansion of the trade was not confined to the emigrant tribes. Also, independent traders continued to frequent all tribes in northeast Kansas even after the American Fur Company posts were well established (Barry 1972: 246-49).

Not all of the expansion of the fur trade can be attributed to fur. Posts also served as general stores and so often were built near agencies or missions to provide goods for the missionaries, agency employees, and their family members who came to work on the reservations (Barry 1972: 134, 153-54; KSHS 1906: 568, 574; Unrau 1971: 143-44). Indians also traded at these sites using dollars from their government annuities (Unrau 1971: 143). These factors, however, were relatively minor. The white population at any agency or mission usually did not exceed ten to fifteen people, and the government annuities, if delivered at all, were meager and poorly distributed among each tribe (W. Johnson et al. 1923-25: 231-32; Unrau 1971: 144, 147). Frederick Chouteau's account of his years trading among the Kansa (ca. 1829-45) attests to a flourishing fur supply, rather than white money or government annuities, as the major reason for his trade's success. Leaving his post every spring on a boat "loaded with peltries," he traveled to the "mouth of the Kaw [where he and his family] shipped [their pelts] on steamboats to St. Louis" (Adams 1904: 428).

If it is clear, then, that the fur trade prospered in northeast Kansas chiefly because of the growing volume of animal pelts supplied by the Indians, the question becomes what drove the Indians to hunt with increasing intensity. There were several probable causes.⁶ First, the emigrant Indians had become as dependent as the Kansa on European tools, weapons, and goods, a condition that put them at the mercy of the Chouteau family, who set high prices for their trade goods. Items that cost ten cents in St. Louis, for example, sold for six dollars on the frontier (Unrau 1971: 115). The Chouteaus intended their high prices to garner much of the tribal annuities promised by the government, but the sporadic delivery and distribution of these dollars must have compelled many Indians to hunt and trap for more pelts if they were to buy. Second, as competition over hunting grounds in northeast Kansas increased with the influx of emigrant Indians, the demand for guns presumably soared as the tribes vied with one another for control of these grounds. Since guns commanded the highest exchange rates of all trade goods, such an arms race was severely detrimental to animal populations (as Indians killed more game to keep obtaining arms). Trading posts

also encouraged an arms race by providing European weapons year-round, as opposed to the cycle of independent traders who had tended to visit the Indians only in the fall. Many of the Indians, therefore, may have increased hunting throughout the year to further amass weapons because of their fear that their enemies were accumulating guns year-round as well. And third, disease may have compelled tribes to hunt more by scaring them away from the sicknesses in their villages. In December 1831 the missionary Thomas Johnson observed that “the smallpox has subsided [at the Kansa villages] and the Indians are now returning home” (quoted in W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 237).

Kansa Response to Small-Game Depletion

The year 1830 was pivotal for Kansa survival. Game on their reserve had become scarce and their winter hunting grounds along the Missouri were inhabited by the Delaware (Barnes 1936b: 355–75). Journal accounts indicate that around this time the Kansa made considerable changes in their ecology. Some Kansa, presumably those most destitute, such as the old, sick, and lame, turned to neighboring emigrant tribes and Euro-American settlers for food and goods. In July 1830, for example, William Clark received a revealing letter from the leaders of the Piankeshaw, Wea, and Peoria. It stated, “Our neighbors, the Kanzas, infest us constantly; they beg everything from us, and, what we do not give them, they steal from us” (Barry 1972: 174).

The number of Kansa participating in these incidents remained relatively low throughout the early 1830s. Most of the Indians persisted in hunting for their livelihood. But hunting, too, changed significantly during this period. Instead of competing with the emigrant Indians for the small game in northeast Kansas during the fall and winter, the Kansa began conducting a second major bison hunt each year from early September through December (Adams 1904: 426).⁷ The bison quickly became the Kansa’s chief source of food, clothing, and trading commodities. In 1834 Hard Chief and his followers moved their village from Mission Creek some thirty miles west to a spot near the junction of the Kansas River and Red Vermillion Creek so they could “be nearer the buffalo” (Barry 1972: 281).

The Kansa’s decision to intensify their bison hunting worked well for several years. The bison remained plentiful, as did the small game found in the river valleys on the way to and from the plains. The Kansa continued to bring good numbers of beaver, otter, elk, deer, and buffalo pelts to Frederick Chouteau’s post for the remainder of the decade (Adams 1904: 426). Bison robes in particular (which were thicker in the fall and more

valuable) enabled them to trade for weapons, tools, and other goods. In addition, the recent construction of trading posts allowed the Kansa to leave their villages during the fall instead of waiting for the visits of independent traders as they had done. Furthermore, increased bison hunting helped many Kansa to escape disease. Their contact with Euro-Americans and other Indians lessened, and the bounty of fresh bison meat nourished the hungry and weak, who were most vulnerable to illness.

The new fall bison hunt, however, did have negative consequences for the horses. Compared with the Missouri River hunting grounds, the plains offered less forage and less protection from the weather. One of the chief problems was that, during the fall, grass on the prairie was often burned. Pawnees and other Indians who followed similar routes as the Kansa to the bison grounds set these fires in the fall to produce earlier grass growth for their horses come spring, when they began hunting bison (White 1983: 184–86; Wishart 1994: 24–25). Isaac McCoy, for example, noted that “the whole country around us has burned over” while touring the western half of the Kansa’s reservation in October 1830 (Barnes 1936b: 364). By the next month, his party’s horses were suffering terribly from the lack of grass (364–70). No doubt the Kansa were well aware of the scarcity of grass when they turned to the plains in the fall. Still they went, perhaps hoping the cottonwood along the river valleys would be sufficient. Cottonwood bark, not grass, had been the chief winter forage for their horses when they frequented the Missouri, but it, too, was considerably scarcer on the plains—having been reduced further by competition from other Indians and by prairie fires (White 1983: 186).

During the fall hunt, the lack of cottonwood and grass drove the Kansa to move more often than they would have liked (*ibid.*: 184). Crossing the vast open stretches between river breaks on the plains meant greater exposure to the autumn cold fronts sweeping down from Canada. This weakened the horses, especially those hungering for cottonwood bark or grass, and as the winter months approached they faced a cold, difficult journey back to the villages. In addition to the tepees, tools, and weapons, the horses were forced to carry enough dried bison meat on the return trip to help the Kansa last through winter.

No journal account indicates how many horses died during the course of a fall bison hunt, but even if most of the herd survived, they returned in a weakened and malnourished state and thus were prone to die from hypothermia as winter set in. In April 1831, Kansa agent Marston Clark reported that “the severity [*sic*] of the winter . . . destroyed [*sic*] nearly all their Horses” (Barry 1972: 183). Perhaps the winter of 1830–31 was harsher than normal, but this does not negate the impact of the fall bison hunt on

the Kansa's horses. Raids for horses in ensuing years helped to restore some of their herd (183), but eyewitness accounts from the mid-1830s reveal that the Kansa horse population never fully recovered (W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 229, 238–39). Kansa horses continued to die in large numbers during each subsequent winter—winters that were probably normal but still deadly for horses that had endured the grueling conditions of the fall hunt.

Over a few years, the declining population of horses took its toll on the Kansa. In 1835 missionary Thomas Johnson wrote that bringing meat back from the buffalo hunt was difficult for the people because “many of them have no horses” (quoted in W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 238). Other contemporary journal records show that many Kansa families returned from the fall hunt with little meat to supplement their garden harvest and faced food shortages by late winter (W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 239; Lee 1916: 117–19). These families often spent the spring seeking food and goods from Euro-American settlers (Lutz 1906: 199; Townsend 1905 [1839]: 145). Hunger was clearly widespread among the Kansa during the late winters and springs of the mid-1830s, but only a few families reached “a state of starvation” during this period (Lee 1916: 119).

Disease

In September 1827, about seventy Kansa died of illness, and the following month William Clark reported that two-thirds of the tribe were sick (Barry 1972: 146; Unrau 1971: 41). Not since the 1750s had a large-scale epidemic been reported among the Kaw (Unrau 1971: 41, 149). Unfortunately, the epidemic of 1827 was the first in a series for the tribe. A year later the Reverend J. J. Lutz noted that the total number of deaths from illness had risen to 180 and that many Kansa were still sick (Rothensteiner 1920: 79). Evidence suggests that the disease was smallpox (Unrau 1984: 5). In the fall of 1831 smallpox afflicted some Kansa, and the following autumn both smallpox and cholera struck more members of the tribe (Catlin 1973 [1844]: 25; Irving 1955: 36; W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 237).⁸ The circumstances surrounding these periods of illness showed a distinct pattern. Sickness generally originated from either the Kansa Agency or Cantonment Leavenworth in the fall and then spread to White Plume's village. From this village it diffused to the rest of the Kansa (fig. 6).

Frederick Chouteau's trading posts, the Kansa Agency, and Cantonment Leavenworth all would seem to be potential centers from which illness spread to the Kansa because these were the places where the tribe met most often with Euro-Americans. Evidence for the trading posts, somewhat surprisingly, was weak. The main outsiders with whom the Kansa

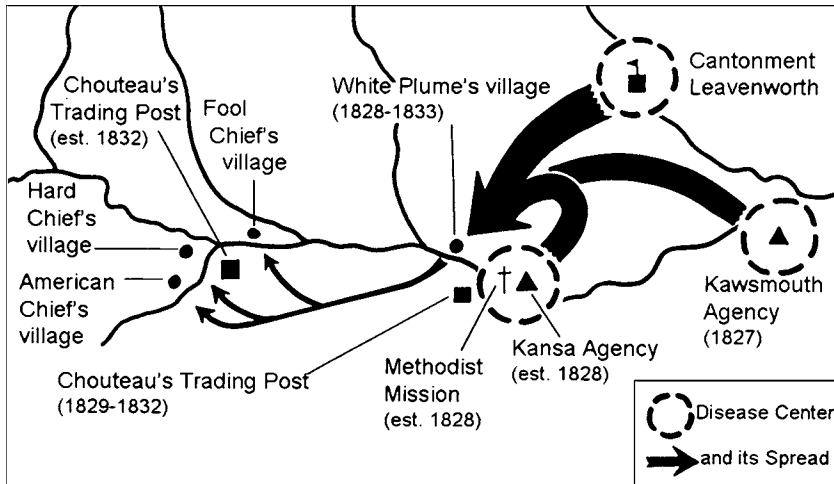


Figure 6. Spread of disease among the Kansa, 1827–1833. Cholera or smallpox often originated from either the Kansa agency or Cantonment Leavenworth and then spread to the Kansa via visiting missionaries and government employees. White Plume's people bore the brunt of tribal epidemics during this period because they were close to the agency and mission, and because missionaries, agents, and other government officials frequently visited White Plume, whom they regarded as the tribe's chief spokesperson. Reports of illness among the tribe ceased for several years after White Plume's people abandoned their village in 1833, which indicates that White Plume's settlement was the major contact point for carrying disease to the other villages. The widths of the arrows in the diagram represent the relative amounts of disease spread among the Kansa. Source: Map by author.

were in contact at these places were Frederick Chouteau and his brothers, and I found no reports of sick or dying Kansa near the posts.

The agency, on the other hand, was a likely center of illness. Here many Kansa became sick and died while gathering for their annuity in 1827, and White Plume's people endured several cholera outbreaks after they relocated near the new agency in 1828 (Townsend 1905 [1839]: 145; Unrau 1973: 318). Moreover, cholera and other ills (perhaps malaria) are known to have attacked Euro-Americans at the site as well. Reverend Lutz wrote from the agency in 1828 that “every newcomer is attacked by fevers, headaches and pains of the stomach” (Rothensteiner 1920: 83). Certainly the high turnover rate among the government employees living at the agency kept such illnesses extant (Barry 1972: 203, 318).

Cantonment Leavenworth was perhaps the most potent hub of disease. It had the largest population of Euro-Americans in territorial Kansas,

and it was where the Kansa went to collect their annuity every fall beginning in 1828. When Reverend Lutz and 108 Kansa arrived at the fort for the annuity distribution in late September 1828, he noted that “the air at Camp Leavenworth is even worse [than at the agency because] there are at least one hundred persons [here] on the sick list” (Rothensteiner 1920: 82–83).

The sickness at Cantonment Leavenworth was startling, but even more so was what Lutz did while he was there. “At first I felt very well [at the fort],” he wrote, “[but] on the third day I myself and Mr. McNair had to fight against an attack of chills and fever for the space of four days [during which] I baptized six infants and comforted the sick” (ibid.: 83). Since Euro-American women did not reside at frontier outposts like Cantonment Leavenworth, the infants Lutz touched after comforting sick soldiers must have been Indian. Lutz said he intended to visit the four Kansa villages next and then return to the fort in November. He also mentioned that he had visited the Shawnee and that he had an invitation to visit the Iowa. Although Lutz left territorial Kansas in late November that year, never to return, other missionaries followed, and they, as Lutz demonstrated, could become prime carriers of disease as they made their rounds among the agency, the fort, and the Kansa villages.

As disease spread among the Indians, it concentrated at White Plume’s village. White Plume lost a “wife, two sons and many other members of his family” during the 1827 epidemic, and he and other members of his village were reported to be ailing the following fall (ibid.: 79). Again in the fall of 1832 White Plume lost children to cholera, and a year later he and his people abandoned their village, “having been frightened away by the cholera” that had stricken all “but two at the agency” that fall (Irving 1955: 36; Lee 1916: 119; Townsend 1905 [1839]: 145; Unrau 1973: 318). No other chief, family, or village was specifically mentioned by the journalists who documented sickness in the tribe. This, together with the fact that White Plume’s village was the only settlement abandoned because of disease, indicates that his people bore the brunt of the tribal epidemics.

Evidence suggests disease spread from White Plume’s village to the other Kansa villages. For one thing, White Plume’s people numbered roughly one hundred, too few to have endured all the tribal illnesses reported over the next several years (Rothensteiner 1920: 78). Moreover, when White Plume’s people refused to live near any white settlement following the agency’s cholera outbreak in 1833, they moved to a location near Fool Chief’s village and the spread of disease appeared to halt. Thereafter, reports of illness among the Kansa ceased for several years, which further suggests White Plume’s village near the agency had been the major

contact point for carrying disease to the other Kaw villages (Adams 1904: 432; Barry 1972: 298; Irving 1955: 237; Lee 1916: 119; McCoy 1835: 30; Townsend 1905 [1839]: 145). Whether disease principally spread through contact with the infected among White Plume's people or through direct contact with the missionaries, agents, and other government officials who frequently met with tribal leaders at White Plume's village is unknown.

The Kansa experienced several more epidemics in the latter half of the 1830s (in the late summer and fall of 1838, 1839, and 1840), but this time the pattern of disease appeared considerably different. All villages suffered losses, and illness broke out among more Kansa each year. The illness was probably smallpox.⁹ Even more intriguing, a closer look at the journal accounts and agent reports from the late 1830s reveals that these epidemics were more lethal than previous outbreaks (Barry 1972: 382; W. Johnson et al. 1923-25: 230-32; Waugh 1885: 126). Reverend Johnson, Lorenzo Waugh, and Kansa Agent Richard Cummins were shocked by the high proportion of the ill who died. Such high fatality rates were never noted during the epidemics of 1827 to 1832. Johnson's and Waugh's activities may have contributed to the increasing spread of disease from 1838 to 1840, but they do not explain the higher death rate.

The higher death rate, as well as the increasing spread of disease, is best explained by evidence that the Kansa were weaker and more vulnerable to illness than ever before. Starvation among the tribe had risen dramatically during the latter half of the 1830s, and Johnson and Cummins claimed it was the major cause for the higher than normal fatality rate that characterized the fall epidemics of 1838 to 1840 (W. Johnson et al. 1923-25: 231-32, 239; Lee 1916: 119; Lee 1935: 150; Lutz 1906: 199; Unrau 1973: 318; Wislizenus 1912: 34). Further investigation of this explanation, however, presented a conundrum. All travelers who noted starving Kansa made their observations in the late winter or spring, rather than in the fall, when disease struck (W. Johnson et al. 1923-25: 239; Lee 1916: 119; Lee 1935: 150; Wislizenus 1912: 34). It is logical that starvation occurred during the winter and spring seasons: the loss of horses from the fall bison hunt allowed little meat to be brought back, local game proved scarce, and no evidence indicated that the Kansa had strong trade alliances with other tribes from whom they could obtain provisions. It also stands to reason that famine did not erupt in the fall when disease struck because the Kansa spent only a few weeks at home between the summer and fall bison hunts, not long enough to generate widespread starvation. How, then, could starvation among the Kansa in the spring heighten the impact of disease in the late summer and fall?

Another look at the travelers' accounts helps to answer this question.

The accounts show that many of those who starved in the spring were too weak to make the summer bison hunt. These starving Kansa turned to digging for roots and tubers, raiding neighboring Indians, and, most often, begging from and trading with Euro-American settlers (Farnham 1906 [1843]: 138; Lutz 1906: 199; Townsend 1905 [1839]: 145; Wislizenus 1912: 34). The latter practice, of course, increased their likelihood of contracting disease. In addition, these Kansa were still malnourished by late summer and early fall and thus more apt to succumb to disease than those who returned from the summer bison hunt having recently eaten fresh meat.

The evidence collectively points to a progressive annual cycle of starvation and disease, but this cycle remained incomplete. Starvation indeed rose dramatically among the Kansa during the latter 1830s, causing the progressive severity of epidemics. As the number of starving Kansa increased with each passing spring, so did the number of malnourished Kansa by late summer, which, in turn, led to more ill and dead Kansa when the fall epidemic struck. But one key element was still missing from this annual cycle: What force was driving up the number of starving Kansa each spring? I checked to see if the tribe's already low horse population of the mid-1830s had continued to decrease, resulting in an ever lessening supply of meat brought back from fall hunts, but I found no evidence of this during the latter half of the 1830s (Barry 1972: 354; Farnham 1906 [1843]: 138; W. Johnson et al. 1923-25: 232-33). The missing element appears to be Kansa death customs.

Kansa Death Customs

Kansa families customarily performed several rituals when a relative died, three of which dramatically worsened the impact of fall epidemics in the late 1830s: (1) the sacrificing of horses and food, (2) fasting, and (3) raiding. A horse, for example, was sacrificed when its male owner died. If the dead Kansa owned several horses, then only his best horse was killed (Skinner 1915: 773). The horse usually was strangled and either left lying over the grave of its dead owner or its tail was cut off and set sticking up from the grave. When Lorenzo Waugh (1885: 127) visited American Chief's village in October 1839, he observed that "a number of ponies' tails [had been] fastened on poles and stuck up by certain graves . . . in the burying place of the Kaws." The practice was done to ensure that the Indian's spirit could ride the spirit of his horse to the "great hunting grounds on the other side of the moon" (127). Also, food was placed at the head of his grave for three nights so his spirit could feed along the journey to its eternal home (Skinner 1915: 773).

Fasting was another custom Waugh observed in 1839. He noted that

amid the death and illness that fall many Kansa refused to take any food (Waugh 1885: 126). When a Kansa died, his or her immediate family mourned by fasting from sunrise till sunset every day for a month and often longer (Dorsey 1885: 679–80; Skinner 1915: 772; Waugh 1885: 127). Family members were allowed to eat come nightfall (Dorsey 1885: 680), but they did not eat well because they intended to keep their bodies in a state of suffering. Many also slashed their arms, legs, and faces with knives (Skinner 1915: 772). Relatives conducted such ritual scarification in the hope that the Great Spirit would recognize their sacrifice and help them in their time of loss (Adams 1904: 429; Waugh 1885: 127).

Raiding was done to avenge the death of a Kansa member (Waugh 1885: 128). Several male relatives of the deceased would form a war party and set out to kill a member of an enemy tribe (Adams 1904: 429; Dorsey 1885: 670, 678). When four Kansa braves died of fever in the early fall of 1838, Reverend William Johnson observed that war parties formed immediately and headed for the Pawnee. He wrote that the Kansa “must shed blood or commit depredations upon some other tribe, as a satisfaction for the loss which the Great Spirit has caused them to sustain” (W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 230). Success in raiding terminated the period of mourning and was “taken as fullproof [*sic*] the Great Spirit accepted the penance” given through fasting (Adams 1904: 429; Skinner 1915: 752).

These death customs helped to create a vicious annual cycle in the late 1830s (fig. 7). Following the widespread death resulting from a fall epidemic, such as the one in 1838, these rituals significantly increased the number of ill, dead, and starving among the Kansa. Relatives who fasted in response to the death of loved ones easily became sick in their weakened state. Others died during raids on enemy tribes that were meant to compensate for recent Kansa losses. Given that each loss was to be avenged by a war party, this ritual was particularly bloody, and on a scale that may have contributed as much to Kansa death as disease. Starvation among the Indians in late winter and spring increased most of all because it was enhanced by each of their customs. The sacrifice of horses, the loss of Kansa from raids, and the number of fasting Kansa too weak or ill to travel greatly lessened the amount of meat brought back from the fall hunt. In addition, fasting Kansa added to the number of starving come spring, and food placed on graves quickened the exhaustion of the winter food supply.

Come spring, severe starvation resulted in more deaths, but not nearly as many as the previous fall (W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 230, 239). Still, the Kansa’s performance of death customs increased the number of starving members, which meant that more Kansa went to the white settlements to

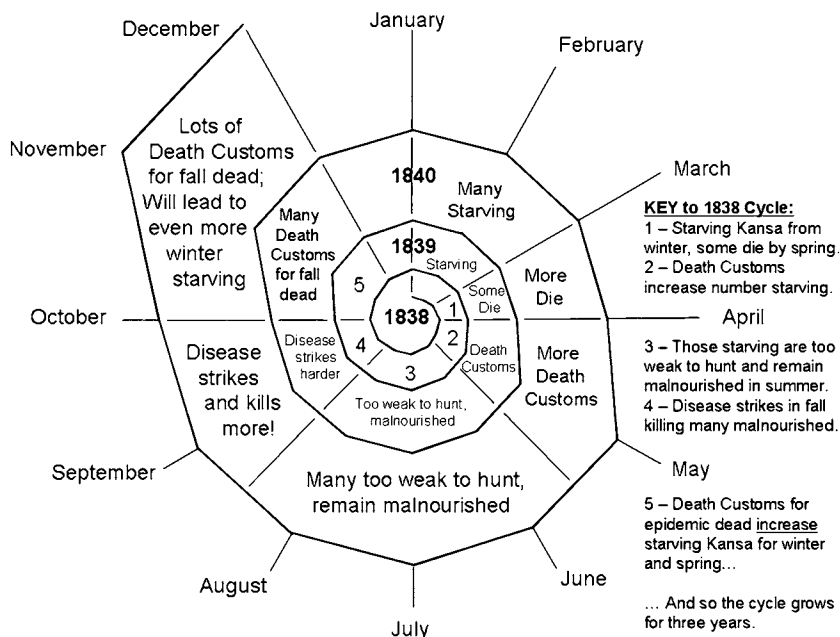


Figure 7. The progressive cycle of suffering among the Kansa, 1838–1840. The increasing width of the coiling band on the diagram represents generally the volume of ill, starving, or dead Kansa, which increased from 1838 to 1840. Kansa death customs performed each spring in response to deaths from starvation increased the number of starving Kansa. These people subsequently were too weak to go on the summer hunt and remained malnourished. When disease struck in the fall, many more died because of their malnourishment, and the increased performance of death customs further heightened the number of ill and starving Kansa for the winter, which worsened the cycle for the next year. This progressive cycle of suffering continued until disease ceased to erupt in 1841, thereby disrupting the cycle. Source: Diagram by author.

beg and trade, rather than going on the summer bison hunt. More Kansa were malnourished by late summer, and this, of course, heightened the impact of the fall epidemic, which, in turn, increased the performance of death customs. So the cycle progressed.

Kansa death customs were clearly in place during the tribe's earlier bout with recurrent fall illnesses between 1827 and 1832, but they did not then generate a cycle of progressive mortality. Horses and regional game were not yet sufficiently depleted to create a significant group of starving

Kansa in the spring who could heighten the impact of the following fall epidemic and thus initiate the cycle. As I interpret the evidence, the cycle began in the spring of 1834 when Jason Lee (1916: 117, 119) first observed the few Kansa families “in a state of starvation.” Deaths from spring starvation soon ensued, and the death customs—specifically the fasting ritual that made more members too weak to go on the summer hunt—slowly drove up the numbers of starving and of deaths from starvation. By February 1837, Reverend Thomas Johnson reported that “many of [the Kansa] die every year for the want of something” (quoted in W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 239), and, three months later, Thomas Johnson was on his way to the Methodist Mission when he encountered “some 400 or 500 [starving] Kansa going to the white settlements to beg provisions” (quoted in Lutz 1906: 199). Once the epidemics began, the cycle became ever more vicious.

Although Kansa death customs in conjunction with disease are adequate to explain the cycle of death in the late 1830s, another factor helped to perpetuate it. When the epidemics struck, the Indians intensified their bison hunting to escape illness. Reverend William Johnson wrote in December 1840 that “for the last two years [the Kansa] have not been home a third of the time, in consequence of fleeing from sickness twice” (W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 232). As buffalo hunting intensified to this level, horticulture necessarily declined (U.S. House of Representatives 1972: 1:551; Hafen and Hafen 1956: 144). When the Kansa returned to the villages after the summer hunt, the desire to get away again to escape the sickness meant that they did not remain long to harvest their crops completely or to gather enough seedlings for next year’s planting. This decision further lessened the winter food supply.

The idea of a progressive cycle of death among the Kansa is well supported by the evidence, but it is important to realize that we are looking at a very brief period (1838–40). Population estimates from 1838 to 1841 suggest that about 250 Kansa perished during this short time (McCoy 1840: 565; Chittenden and Richardson 1905: 281). Imagine the potential effects of the cycle if bouts of starvation and illness occurred annually over longer periods of successive years. It is clear that once the Kansa began losing members to starvation, the tribe’s performance of death customs increased their depopulation, especially when disease struck. The question that remains is whether the Kansa continued performing these death customs in the decades to come as death from starvation and illness worsened. Answering it requires us to examine the Kansa’s subsequent decline.

Kansa Depopulation and the Role of Death Customs, 1841–1890

After the fall epidemic of 1840, disease did not erupt again for five years and the population rebounded slightly. Still, during this period, the Kansa's annual cycle of subsistence activities remained as it had during the epidemics of 1838 to 1840. The Kansa continued to hunt bison in the summer and fall as intensely as ever, they grew only a few crops, and war parties raided neighboring Indians every spring for goods they could trade for provisions and for horses to replenish those that had died from the fall hunt. Widespread hunger still occurred in the late winter and early spring, and those starving either roamed in search of the scarce local game, roots, and tubers, or, more often, begged and stole from Euro-American settlers. Those too old, lame, or weakened by starvation to make the hunts continued the latter activities throughout the year. This annual cycle was neither pleasant nor self-sustaining, and it gradually became more difficult for the Kansa to endure.¹⁰

When disease struck in the fall of 1845, killing more than two hundred Kansa, it devastated a people already weakened physically and spiritually (see *Fatal Malady at the Kaw Village 1845*). The following spring, when Edwin Bryant (1985 [1848]: 56) passed through their reserve on his way to Oregon, he saw a broken society: “[The Kansa] roam in quest of such small game as now remains, to keep themselves from absolute famine. . . . All the vast herds of deer, elk, and buffalo which once subsisted here . . . [have been] destroyed or driven farther west . . . [the Kansa] are now starving, and have turned pensioners of the United States, and beggars of the emigrants passing west, for clothing and food.” Unfortunately, the scene that Bryant described became the rule for the next half century. Kansa numbers dwindled rapidly.

Scholars argue that periodic illness and chronic, severe malnutrition explain the major demographic collapse after 1845 (Chapman 1947: 338; Unrau 1973: 322–23). As for the causes of illness and malnutrition, they cite such factors as government negligence, bison depopulation, and increased contact and competition with more Indians (forcibly removed to Kansas by the government), illegal squatters, and later, settlers (Unrau 1971, 1973). No doubt, these factors led to much death among the tribe, but Kansa death customs also appear to have played an important role in this collapse.

As their decline continued, the Kansa still practiced their death customs. From the 1840s to the 1870s, several observers noted the tribe's death rituals. George Morehouse (1904: 208) recalled that Kansa graves

“were often covered with . . . the bones of the pony that was sacrificed at the burial.” In the 1860s Thomas Huffaker and Joab Spencer reported that Kansa mourners fasted for a month in response to the loss of a relative, placed food on the graves for several nights following the death, and strangled horses to death over the graves of Kansa braves (Spencer 1908: 378). William Nicholson (1934: 296) and Frederick Chouteau (cited in Adams 1904: 429) also noted the sacrifice of horses and food, fasting, and Kansa parties raiding enemy tribes to avenge the death of relatives.

Kansa adherence to such practices certainly worsened starvation and made more members susceptible to disease, thereby contributing to the tribe’s depopulation. Especially in episodes of heavy or continual death, the practice of these rituals increased and so did the number of ill, dead, and starving among the tribe. Relatives who fasted in response to the death of loved ones easily became sick in their weakened state. Raids on enemy tribes (meant to compensate for Kansa losses) cost the lives of Kansa warriors and increased warfare. Starvation among the Kansa was worsened by each of their customs. The sacrifice of horses, the loss of tribe members in raids, and the number of fasting Kansa too weak or ill to travel altogether greatly lessened the amount of meat brought back from the hunt. Sacrificing a horse was also costly because a horse could otherwise be traded for food and clothing. Fasting Kansa added to the number of starving, and food placed on graves did not help food supplies. Food, horses, and available manpower were precious resources for a declining population, and since customs that sacrificed these resources were practiced by the Kansa as their tribe slowly died off, some of the Kansa’s suffering and depopulation must be attributed to such death customs.

Some evidence suggests the Kansa modified their death customs by the 1880s. Reports by ethnologists James Dorsey (1885) and Alanson Skinner (1915) indicate that the custom of sacrificing horses and food ceased. Horses still remained part of the ritual, however. When a male Kansa died, his relatives gave a horse (instead of sacrificing it) to the leader of the raiding party that was to set out and avenge his death. Raiding, too, was modified. It became a hunt. Whereas previous war parties set out to kill a member of an enemy tribe (especially a Pawnee), Dorsey (1885: 677–78) noted that killing wild game became sufficient to avenge the death of a tribal member. Skinner (1915: 749) later reported “that blood (formerly of an enemy, now of *any* living thing) must be shed to make up for the loss” of a Kansa. These adjustments were truly adaptive: horses left alive were horses that could be traded for food and clothing, and success in raiding not only ended the period of mourning, it focused manpower on bringing in food. Interestingly, the tribe seems to have reinstated the custom of sac-

rificing food by the 1920s. In 1997, the last Kansa pureblood, Jesse Mehojah, reminiscing about his childhood, explained how members of his tribe “would always place food in the casket of the deceased” during interment ceremonies (Henry and Bellard 1997: 9). As for the Kansa’s custom of fasting (and ritual scarification), it appears to have persisted with little change (Adams 1904: 429; Dorsey 1885: 673; Henry and Bellard 1997: 9; Skinner 1915: 772).

The Kansa’s apparent decision to not modify their death customs until decades after their population had begun to decline may seem a mystery. Did they know the consequences of their funerary rituals? There is no documentation that addresses this question, but some evidence suggests that the answer is both yes and no. The fact that the Kansa abandoned villages to escape death from disease (W. Johnson et al. 1923–25: 232) is evidence that they were aware of the risk mourners took by staying behind to perform death customs. Despite the risk, the centuries-old tradition of practicing such customs, backed by strong cultural beliefs, likely reinforced their continued performance, even for several decades after illness and starvation became a problem. After all, these customs had fundamental religious significance and were believed to aid in the tribe’s well-being: food and horses were thought to help the dead make their journey to their eternal home, fasting was intended to offer penance to and elicit help from the Great Spirit, and success in raiding was a measure of the Great Spirit’s approval. The deep value of these customs explains the Kansa’s continued adherence to them. Since epidemics and animal scarcity were not consistent from year to year (as evidenced by the *Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1841–70*), the Kansa mourners’ devotion to their rituals was not suicidal. At most, they knew they risked death (from disease) and starvation (from scarce game) by remaining in the village, but accepting risk is a far cry from suicide. And Kansa mourners were not aware that certain death customs directly increased their chances of death (aside from raiding). For example, the connection between fasting-induced malnutrition and the susceptibility to pathogens was not understood in America until the 1880s, when the germ theory gained widespread acceptance (Richmond 1954: 442). Prior to that decade, infection was widely believed to stem from filth rather than an invisible, living microorganism (Temkin 1977: 463–64).

Conclusion

Euro-American frontier advancement tremendously changed the world of the Kansa. When the influx of emigrant Indians and the expansion of the

fur trade depleted wildlife in northeast Kansas, the Kansa responded by adding a fall bison hunt. No doubt, they were aware that the new hunt would be harder on their horse herd, and it was. The loss of horses lessened the meat brought back from the hunt, which then led to widespread hunger among the tribe in the spring. But what of the alternative? Had they remained on the lower Kansas River during the falls after 1830, starvation was certain given the lack of local game. They knew they would have faced warfare with neighboring Indians over the precious local hunting grounds as well. In addition, disease plagued the area. The Kansa chose the lesser of two evils. In this sense, their decision prolonged their survival.

But the Kansa's decision to continue their death customs in the face of rising death tolls from epidemics and starvation had just the opposite effect. Kansa losses from successive illnesses increased as death rituals worsened starvation among the tribe in the late 1830s, and their raiding custom, in particular, increased warfare with the Pawnee. And yet, even if they understood some of the potential consequences of this decision, they persisted, believing in the virtue of their practices. These customs were an integral part of Kansa life and we must understand that these rituals were not self-destructive in and of themselves. The death customs had long been practiced prior to the arrival of Euro-Americans without major consequences. Not until European epidemics and the depletion of wild game did these customs begin to play a crucial role in the depopulation of the Kansa.

I prefer to liken the factors of illness, starvation, and death customs among the Kansa to the synergy of a flaming match meeting a powder keg. The powder keg of death customs was fine by itself. Disease and game depletion created a flame that burned plenty of those it touched. When these elements combined (as they did from 1838 to 1840), Kansa losses exploded.

These findings raise important questions about the depopulation experienced by other Indians. As they too faced widespread death from illness and starvation, to what extent did they consciously (or unconsciously) shape the nature of their depopulation? Did they intensify bison hunting at the expense of horses and hunger? Did they perform death customs that magnified their losses in times of successive epidemics? And why? These concerns are not without evidence. Similar death customs, for instance, have been documented among other Plains Indians. The Karankawan, Caddo, and Comanche practiced infanticide and wife-sacrifice (Ewers 1973: 111). So, too, did the Mandan and Pawnee (Dollar 1977: 24, 29). The Hidatsa and Crow amputated fingers and performed other acts of self-mutilation in honor of lost loved ones (Bonner 1972 [1856]: 163; Leonard 1904: 272; Lowie 1912: 227; 1917: 51). The Blackfoot sacrificed horses, and the Osage

placed food on graves and conducted raids to avenge their losses (Mathews 1961: 757–66; Wissler 1912: 287–88). Ponca mourners fasted and gave away all their belongings, including food and clothing (Howard 1995: 154; Skinner 1915: 801). And all of these tribes lost massive numbers to illness and starvation following Euro-American contact (Thornton 1987: 91–133). One wonders, of course, if in times of duress these Indians continued performing their death rituals, which may have accelerated their depopulation. Perhaps. David Wishart (1979: 390) has argued that ceremonial life intensified among the Pawnee and Mandan following widespread death from illness, starvation, and other frontier conditions. In addition, Russell Thornton (1981, 1986, 1987: 134–58) has demonstrated that Indian tribes which suffered high losses were the ones most active in the Ghost Dance movements of 1870 and 1890.

The evidence, of course, is not limited to the Plains Indians. The Catawba of South Carolina, for instance, who had death customs similar to the Kansa's, endured disease and wildlife depletion following Euro-American contact, and they experienced massive depopulation. James Merrell (1989: 136–37) has noted that in times of epidemics healthy Catawba nursed and mourned the sick and destitute instead of hunting, trading, or farming. This weakened the tribe and generated more widespread death from disease. Daniel Richter (1987) has illustrated how the Iroquois responded to devastating European diseases, engaging in warfare with increasing frequency to mourn their losses and acquire captives. Furthermore, among the Indians of the Central Subarctic, Paul Hackett (2005) has recently described the Cree and Ojibway adherence to two mourning customs—the destruction of personal belongings and a yearlong cessation of hunting following the death of a relative—regardless of losses from widespread and severe epidemics until at least the mid-nineteenth century. Hackett is careful to explain the Indians' historically deep cultural and religious beliefs in those customs despite any destitution such customs wrought on the survivors (510–11).

The similarities in situation and custom between other Indian groups and the Kansa at the time of Euro-American contact, combined with the research on Kansa depopulation that I have presented, potentially suggest that other tribes may have conducted death rituals (or similar cultural practices) that tragically increased mortality when combined with repeated episodes of starvation and illness, and that much time (perhaps decades) passed before such practices were modified. This warrants future research. Overall, there has been little discussion on the influence of Indian death customs on the extent of Indian depopulation following Euro-American contact. Exploring this issue will provide a perspective that is long overdue.

Notes

- 1 I use the names *Kansa* and *Kaw* interchangeably because explorers, missionaries, and writers observed both pronunciations, as did the Indians themselves (see Morehouse 1908: 332–36).
- 2 Space does not permit a comprehensive literature review on this subject, but a few studies deserve mention. Calvin Martin (1978) suggested that Micmac, Cree, and Ojibwa beliefs led them to eradicate wildlife in response to European diseases, thereby inducing famine that worsened epidemics. His research has proven controversial (see Krech 1981). John Ewers (1973: 111), Alfred Crosby (1976: 295–99), Kim Lanphear (1983), and Peter Wood (1987: 31–32) have shown how certain Indian treatments for European illnesses hastened the death of Indian victims. In contrast, Paul Kelton’s fascinating study (2004) of the Cherokee, Choctaw, Creek, and Chickasaw during the smallpox epidemics stands alone for demonstrating how their beliefs, customs, and responses actually facilitated their survival. Several more relevant works are discussed in the conclusion of this essay.
- 3 By the mid-1700s, the Kansa were trading on “average 100 bundles of pelts and skins . . . each year” (Unrau 1971: 68). In 1806 Zebulon Pike observed that the Kansa provided “annually” over 350 bundles of deer, beaver, and otter (cited in Wedel 1946: 13).
- 4 Superintendent William Clark is the same man who journeyed across the continent with Meriwether Lewis. He received the position of superintendent of Indian affairs for Louisiana Territory in 1807, and his office was in St. Louis.
- 5 Reuben Gold Thwaites, the editor of Wyeth’s journal, suggests that Wyeth visited White Plume’s village, but he is in error, because Wyeth (1905 [1833]: 48) claimed that this village was “seventy miles from Independence”—Fool Chief’s village is nearest that distance, and the Oregon Trail Wyeth was following passed right by it.
- 6 An excellent overview of the causes compelling many tribes across North America to hunt with increasing intensity and support an expanding fur trade is White and Cronon 1988: 422–25.
- 7 Evidence indicates that the fall bison hunt was gradually adopted by the whole Kansa tribe over several years (ca. 1827–33). The earliest observation that I found regarding this new autumn hunt was made by Isaac McCoy in November 1830 (Barnes 1936b: 375). William Unrau (1973: 318), however, suggests that the Kansa began hunting bison in the fall as early as 1827, but Wyeth (1905 [1833]: 49) observed in 1832 that Fool Chief’s village was still conducting only a summer hunt.
- 8 Unrau (1971: 41–42) suggests that perhaps no fewer than 300 Kansa died from these diseases.
- 9 Thornton (1987: 95) and Unrau (1973: 318) believe the illnesses were due to smallpox. Indeed, a smallpox pandemic raged across the northern plains between 1836 and 1840 (Dollar 1977; Thornton 1987: 94–99).
- 10 Between 1841 and 1845, bison hunting became more difficult and dangerous as the bison retreated westward and numerous tribes increasingly threatened the Kansa on the High Plains (Bamforth 1987: 7–8; Burnett 1902: 410; Carlson 1992: 57–60; Dary 1973: 312; Socolofsky and Self 1988: 35; Wislizenus 1912: 31). Hunger and alcoholism among the tribe rose, and westward-bound settlers rapidly dispossessed the Kansa of land, grass, and wood (Camp 1960: 72–74;

Frémont 1988 [1845]: 11–12; Gregg and McDermott 1957: 210; Hafen and Hafen 1956: 144; Hunter 1823: 37–38; Lee 1916: 119; Palmer 1906 [1847]: 42; Patton 1954: 179; Townsend 1905 [1839]: 148).

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