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Kiowa Powwows: Tribal Identity  
Through the Continuity of the Gourd  
Dance

Benjamin R. Kracht  
Northeastern State University, Tahlequah, OK

## KIOWA POWWOWS: TRIBAL IDENTITY THROUGH THE CONTINUITY OF THE GOURD DANCE

Benjamin R. Kracht

*Geography/Sociology*  
Northeastern State University  
Tahlequah, OK 74464

**Abstract.** *Today, intertribal participants at Southern Plains powwows (Oklahoma and Texas) celebrate common history and culture—their sense of “Indianness”—through the enactment of ceremonial song and dance. The Kiowa play a central and assertive role in the Southern Plains powwow network, and they use the Gourd Dance as the vehicle to identify their “Kiowaness.” The thesis of this paper is that the Kiowa continue to maintain their tribal identity through performances of the Gourd Dance, which they claim as their own. The maintenance of identity is traced from the late nineteenth century through the evolution of Kiowa dances leading up to the Gourd Dance.*

In the following passage, Pulitzer Prize-winning Kiowa author and poet, N. Scott Momaday, describes the Kiowa Gourd Dance, and how it feels to dance with his fellow tribesmen in the sacred circle of the dance arena:

*The sun descends upon the trees. The heat is hypnotic. . . . It is as if I am asleep. Then the drums break, the voices of the singers gather to the beat, the rattles shake all around—mine among them. I stand and move again, slowly, toward the center of the universe in time, in time, more and more closely in time.*

There have been times when I have wondered what the dance is and what it means—and what I am inside of it. And there have been times when I have known. Always, there comes a moment when the dance takes hold of me, becomes itself the most meaningful and appropriate expression of my being. And always, afterward, there is rejoicing among us. We have made our prayer, and we have made good our humanity in the process. (Momaday 1975:44)

A member of the Kiowa Gourd Clan, Momaday perceives the dance as “a religious experience by and large natural and appropriate. It is an expression of the spirit” (Momaday 1975:39). Kiowa elder Clifton Tongkeamah commented to me that the Gourd Dance is sacred; participating in it is an expression of “Kiowaness,” because “the Kiowa are born to dance” (Fig. 1) (Kracht in press).

Since the post–World War II era, ethnologists have described powwows as secular, or social events consisting of dances that have lost their religious symbolism. Reporting on powwows in the early 1950s, John Gamble (1952) described what are now called “benefit” dances, powwows held for the purpose of “materially benefiting the promoters,” and characterized by dances that had “drift[ed] from religious to secular.” His contemporary, James Howard (1965, 1983), suggested that powwows emerged from the War Dance complex of the Southern Ponca Hethushka Society, noting that after most of its religious symbolism had vanished, the Hethushka Dance became more secularized. Nancy Lurie (1971:449–50) perceived powwows as secular dances—“based on ceremonial patterns of the Plains”—that emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century. More recently, William Powers (1980, 1990) described powwows as “mainly secular in context”; Oklahoma powwows in particular are “secular event[s]” (Kracht in press).

A trend in the powwow literature has been the emphasis on “pan-Indianism,” or the development of a “nontribal [intertribal] ‘Indian’ culture” (Howard 1955:215; Ashworth 1986). Some authors even have suggested that powwows represent the “religious sphere” of the so-called pan-Indian movement (Howard 1983:71; see Howard 1955:218; Hirabayashi et al. 1972; Thomas 1965; Brant 1950; Hertzberg 1971; Young 1981). Howard (1965:216) identified the War Dance as the “prime secular focus of pan-Indianism,” and Reginald Laubin and Gladys Laubin (1979) contended that war dancing is a secular dance on which the powwow is based (Kracht in press).

Powwows are sacred to Native American peoples of the Southern Plains because they are replete with set patterns of ceremonial song and dance that reflect an Indian identity. Powwow celebrations include musical performances that designate a sense of “Indianness” based on the common history and dance traditions of Plains cultures. More specifically, the Kiowa—whose ancestral homelands are in southwestern Oklahoma—utilize powwows to maintain a shared tribal identity. Today, the Gourd Dance is one of the featured dances at Southern Plains powwows; it is a dance the Kiowa claim as their own. The dance is “sacred” because it is integral to Kiowa identity,

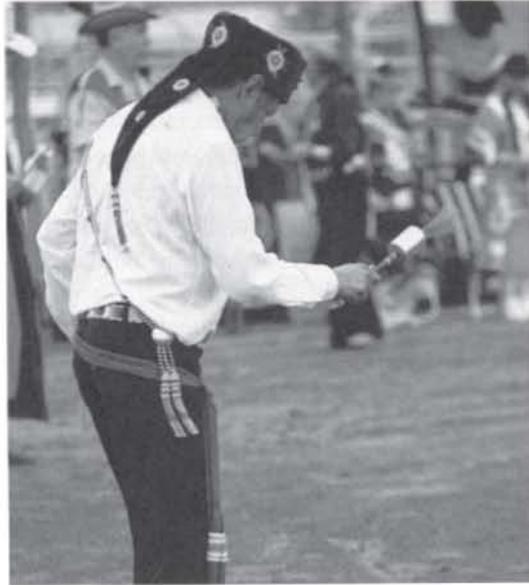


Figure 1. The late Clifton Tongkeamah performing the Gourd Dance at the 24th Annual National Championship Pow-Wow at Traders Village, Grand Prairie, Texas, September 1986. Photo courtesy of the author.

and through the performance of the Gourd Dance, powwows have become vehicles perpetuating a sense of “Kiowaness.” Hence powwows are sacred because they are the vehicle perpetuating Kiowa identity.

A brief synopsis of the historic and contemporary dimensions of dances performed by the Kiowa will illustrate this point. Many Kiowa dances assumed different guises between 1889 and 1934, the period when many American Indian dances were outlawed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Significantly, the Indian Office informed Indian agents to suppress many religious dances, although secular dances that attracted tourism—for instance, war dances in Wild West shows and Indian fairs—were tolerated. Enforcement of the Indian Office anti-dance policy varied from agency to agency with some Kiowa agents attempting to suppress dances while others did not. Whenever the Kiowa felt that important dances were targeted for eradication, they disguised them as tourist attraction type dances, or performed them on remote allotments.

### A Brief History of Kiowa Dances

The Sun Dance was the most important nineteenth century Kiowa dance, for it united the tribe spiritually and socially. When sponsored by a pledger, the Sun Dance was held in June or July, and lasted for about a month. During the four dancing days of the Sun Dance proper, the dancers prayed for the renewal of the Kiowa people and the bison herds on which they depended. Social festivities were marked by public and private performances by the six Kiowa warrior societies.

The Sun Dance, an intertribal attraction, was discontinued following the disruption of the 1890 "sun dance when the forked poles were left standing." Rumors of army patrols sent by the Kiowa agent caused the cessation of the dance (Mooney 1979 [1898]). The collapse of the Sun Dance caused the six warrior societies to become dysfunctional; few sodality dances occurred after 1890. Several Kiowa attempted to revive the Sun Dance in the 1920s, but were blocked by the agent (Kracht in press).

The Ghost Dance filled the Sun Dance void almost immediately when the ceremony came to the Kiowa. In October 1890, the largest Ghost Dance in Kiowa history was held at the mouth of Rainy Mountain Creek, west of present day Carnegie, Oklahoma. The dance waned after February 1891, when the skeptical Wooden Lance delivered a stirring anti-Ghost Dance speech at the Anadarko Agency, but was revived in 1894 by Afraid-of-Bears, a blind clairvoyant. The revived Ghost Dance was noted for trances in which supplicants visited deceased relatives in the spirit world. Adherents of the movement opposed Christian churches, houses, and "progress" associated with allotment and homesteading on the KCA (Kiowa, Comanche, and [Plains] Apache) Reservation. Before 1916, the Ghost Dance had gone unchallenged because the Kiowa dance leaders conducted the dance under the auspices of church picnics and national holidays such as New Year's and the Fourth of July (Kracht 1992). However, in 1916, the Kiowa superintendent outlawed the Ghost Dance. Despite opposition from missionaries and their Kiowa converts, intertribal war dancing flourished during the height of the revived Ghost Dance. The Kiowa Ghost Dance followers adamantly claimed they had chosen the "dance road" over the "Jesus road," because the latter did not tolerate tribal dances. In 1935, White Fox, the son of Afraid-of-Bears, informed Weston LaBarre that war dancing occurred during the large biannual Ghost Dance ceremonies. I believe that White Fox described

the *O-ho-mah* Dance presented by the Cheyenne to the Kiowa in 1883, a dance that rapidly gained popularity among the Kiowa (Kracht 1992).

James Mooney likened the Kiowa *O-ho-mah* Dance to the Southern Cheyenne-Arapaho Crow Dance, an auxiliary to their Ghost Dance ceremonies in 1890–1891. Mooney (1896) also claimed that the dance was conducted to achieve trances. Later scholars identified the *O-ho-mah* Dance as a variation of the Grass Dance (Laubin and Laubin 1979; Gamble 1952; Howard 1965). In 1916, Clark Wissler (1916:868) noted that “the ghost dance was but one of a group of modern ceremonies which have since become conspicuous because of their diffusion. Among the best known of these are the peyote, the hand game ceremonies, and the grass dance.” Although the Kiowa elders I have interviewed maintain that the Ghost Dance and *O-ho-mah* Dance were not related to one another, I believe that the Ghost Dance served as a vehicle to perpetuate war dancing in the form of the Grass, or *O-ho-mah* Dance. In the 1910s, those who supported the Ghost Dance were known as the “dance crowd,” because the Ghost Dance faction supported old-time activities like the hand game and dancing (Kracht 1989).

By 1910, the *O-ho-mah* Dance was so popular among the Kiowa that it was noted by their agent, who mistakenly called it the “Gift Dance” because of the giveaway ceremonies between dance sets. Gloria Young (1981) has suggested that the Gift Dance grew out of the *O-ho-mah* Dance because of the importance of ritual gift giving at intertribal dances in Oklahoma. Officials at the Kiowa Agency disliked the dance because they felt that wanton gift giving left the Indians destitute, and moreover, interagency visiting left houses and farms unattended, thereby interfering with “civilization” policy (Kracht 1992, in press).

The Gift Dance was targeted along with the Ghost Dance for eradication. In 1916, the Kiowa agent blacklisted 79 Kiowa dancers for participation in the dances, and threatened to withhold their per capita payments if they failed to sign an affidavit pledging to abandon dancing. Only 44 Kiowa signed. Significantly, the Kiowa allowed the Ghost Dance to die out, but *O-ho-mah* dances continued unabated as surreptitious ceremonies in remote areas. Kiowa elders who witnessed these clandestine dances have told me that guards were posted at various vantage points to prevent the attendance of non-Indians. During the 1920s and 1930s, most *O-ho-mah* dances continued on private allotments with unrelinquished vigor (Kracht 1989).

The *O-ho-mah* Dance, a variant of the Grass Dance, known today by its generic form, the War Dance, became popular in the intertribal arena due to American Indian involvement in World War I. The safe return of Indian

veterans prompted Armistice Day celebrations that the agents were unable to eradicate due to the large-scale involvement of Indian peoples. Concomitant to the popularization of the Grass Dance after World War I was the rise of war dancing in Indian fairs and expositions. Wild West shows had featured secular war dancing since the early 1880s, but in southwestern Oklahoma, the early 1920s witnessed the rising popularity of Indian dances at county fairs. Again, the agents were unsuccessful in abolishing the dances due to their popularity as exemplified by the large profits obtained by promoters and townships (Kracht 1992).

Indian and county fairs caused the Grass Dance style to evolve to a faster paced dance designed to please tourists. During the 1920s, two basic War Dance types evolved in Oklahoma: the Fancy Dance and the Straight Dance. The former features multicolored bustles, a "fast and furious" dance style called "cutting up," whereas the latter is a slower, "dignified" dance requiring straight posture. Straight dancing is closer to what O-ho-mah dancing used to be. By 1950, the O-ho-mah Dance was losing popularity in favor of the faster intertribal War Dance (Gamble 1952).

In 1958, after consulting tribal elders, a handful of Kiowa veterans revived two near-defunct warrior societies: the Black Leggings and the Gourd Clan. The early dances were a huge success, and both societies are active to this day. Notably, the Black Leggings society copyrighted its songs and ceremonial regalia, but the Gourd Dance has diffused throughout the United States since its revival (Howard 1976). Although there is some disagreement about the origin of the Gourd Dance, evidence is strongest for the Kiowa, who claim that Red Wolf gave it to them saying: "These songs and this dance will remain with the Kiowa for as long as they protect and cherish their Kiowa ways. Tell your people to be proud when they enter the dance arena" (Kiowa Gourd Clan 1976:7).

The costuming and dance style of the Gourd Dance are difficult to describe due to great variation among groups. In the annual July Fourth dance in Carnegie, Oklahoma, sponsored by the Kiowa Gourd Clan, most of the dancers are clad in dress slacks or blue jeans and silk ribbon shirts. Many wear cowboy boots and cowboy-style hats. These articles of clothing, referred to as "street clothes," are allowed, but the Kiowa Gourd Clan leaders discourage baseball caps or tennis shoes, which they consider to be in poor taste. Only a few individuals can afford to wear what they interpret to be traditional regalia: beaded moccasins, buckskin leggings, blackstring shawls tied around the waist, red velvet sashes that trail to the ground in back, and either beaver caps or porcupine roach headdresses. Some wear German silver arm bands as well.

All dancers wear mescal bean or German silver bead bandoliers draped over the left shoulder. Small silk scarfs containing *doi* (medicine) are tied to the bandoliers over the left scapula. Some wear red and blue peyote blankets over their shoulders. The Gourd Dance costume is completed by holding feathers or multicolored feather fans in the left hand, and gourd or German silver shakers in the right hand, if the dancer is right-handed (Howard 1976; Kracht in press).

The July Fourth Gourd Dance is held in a large open arena surrounded by a circular arbor constructed of cottonwood poles and branches. When the dance begins, the dancers are seated on wooden benches running the perimeter of the arbor. The Kiowa Flag Song marks the beginning of the ceremony, followed by the Starting Song. During the performance of the Flag Song, the dancers sit quietly in the shade, but once the Starting Song begins, the dancers begin to shake their shakers. The third song is the Starting Song repeated, but with a faster beat. The fourth song is the Chief's Song; during its performance, the dancers remain seated while shaking their shakers. The dancers rise to dance after the fourth song (Kracht in press).

While dancing, the men shake their gourd rattles in time with the cadence of the drum. Good dancers use their entire bodies while dancing, in that their heels strike the ground synchronous to the drum beats. The Gourd Dance is best described as the dancers alternately bobbing up and down and moving toward the center of the dance arena in time with the drum. In the middle of the songs, two loud drum beats are followed by lighter drumming; during this time the dancers take two or three steps inward without shaking their rattles. As the drum beat picks up in intensity, the dancers stop, then dance in place while shaking their rattles. Each song, sung four times, ends with a flourish of rapid drum beats, followed by howling, which the Kiowa claim emulates Red Wolf, who gave the Gourd Dance to them. As they howl, the men raise their shakers high in the air. After each song, the dancers either remain in place, or walk back to their seats to begin dancing the next song. This is considered to be the proper Kiowa style (Howard 1976; Kracht in press).

The diffusion of the Kiowa Gourd Dance dates back to the early 1960s, when factionalism within the Kiowa Gourd Clan—called the *Tiah-pah* Society at the time—led to fission into two groups: the Kiowa Gourd Clan and the Kiowa Taipeh Society. The Kiowa Gourd Clan claims to have the most full-bloods and “traditional” Kiowas, and that they are the “original” Gourd Dance society; they sponsor the annual July Fourth dance at Carnegie Park. The Kiowa Taipeh Society, now called the Gourd Clan of Carnegie, performs their

July Fourth dance 10 miles south of Carnegie at Chieftain Park. Today, there are two more Kiowa Gourd Dance societies: the Gourd Clan of Oklahoma, an intertribal club that dances at Taipeh Park north of Lawton; and the Kiowa Warrior Descendants, whose annual Labor Day dance is conducted at Lone Bear Dance Grounds several miles southeast of Carnegie.

The main distinction among the different Gourd Dance clubs is that the Kiowa Gourd Clan perceives its annual dance to be the "granddaddy of them all." At one time, the only two non-Kiowas on the membership roster were two Otoes "adopted" by the society, but there are currently members of mixed tribal heritage and other tribes. The other Gourd Dance organizations permit members of other tribes and non-Indian hobbyists to dance. Until recently, strict membership rules in the Kiowa Gourd Clan created stress among the different organizations, particularly since the Kiowa Taipeh Society was responsible for giving the Gourd Dance to other groups. For instance, in April 1970, the Taipeh Society honored a delegation of Omahas from Macy, Nebraska by "giving" them the Gourd Dance (Liberty 1973; Howard 1976). The Gourd Dance also has been adopted by the Alabama-Coushatta of Polk County, Texas. According to Clifton Tongkeamah, the Alabama-Coushatta have "lost" their traditions, and are dependent on the Kiowa to help them "run" their annual powwow each June. Typically, popular Kiowa singers and dancers are invited to lead in the ceremonies (Kracht 1989, in press).

The large-scale migration of American Indians to urban areas following World War II contributed to the rapid diffusion of ceremonial song and dance, particularly the Gourd Dance. In the early 1960s, the Gourd Dance appeared in the San Francisco Bay area, where the Kiowa were noted for their involvement in intertribal powwows (Ablon 1964; Krutz 1973a, 1973b), and more recently, the Kiowa have been observed as active participants in Los Angeles powwows (Weibel-Orlando 1991). In 1987, I observed a Gourd Dance on The Mall in Washington, DC, as part of the Smithsonian Folk Life Festival. Leaders of the Kiowa Gourd Clan now claim that the Gourd Dance has spread to Canada, and that there is a Gourd Dance organization in Germany.

The increased popularity of the Gourd Dance since its revival has resulted in its widespread acceptance in the Southern Plains powwow circuit. Since 1983, I have attended numerous powwows in Texas and Oklahoma that have featured afternoon and evening sessions of the Gourd Dance (see Howard 1976). Even the tourist-oriented powwows highlighted by the competitive War Dance include afternoon sessions of the Gourd Dance—for instance, the annual Trader's Village dance in Grand Prairie, Texas. More-

over, every powwow I have attended has been partially staffed by Kiowa singers and dancers. Clifton Tongkeamah has repeatedly stated that “without the Kiowa, there would be no powwows in Texas and Oklahoma” (Kracht in press). That the Kiowa dominate the powwow arena also has been noted by Dan Gelo (1986:178).

### Conclusion

The Kiowa Sun Dance, targeted for termination by the Indian Office, was last performed in 1890. Had it not ended at this time, it probably would have died out anyway due to the passing of the horse and buffalo culture. The cessation of warfare, and the extinction of the Southern Plains bison herds led to the demise of the ceremony, which had become increasingly difficult to perform in the 1880s since it became impossible to obtain the buffalo bull head for the Sun Dance arbor. The demise of the Sun Dance also caused the warrior societies to become inactive.

Once the Sun Dance was abandoned, the Kiowa picked up the Ghost Dance, a religious ceremony that attempted to keep Kiowa traditions alive, such as the medicine bundle complex, peyotism, and dancing. The Kiowa agent pressured the Kiowa into abandoning the Ghost Dance in 1916, consequently the only dances performed at that time were sponsored by the O-ho-mah Society. By the end of World War I, Armistice Day dances, and county and Indian fairs became the vehicles for perpetuating the O-ho-mah Dance, which evolved into the popular intertribal war dances.

The Kiowa maintained a tribal identity through the perpetuation of each of these dance forms. When the Sun Dance ended, the Kiowa adopted the Ghost Dance, and after it was banned, they supported the O-ho-mah Dance. Once the O-ho-mah Dance became popular in its intertribal forms, the Kiowa looked for a new vehicle to promote their sense of tribalness. The post-World War II era helped foster the revival of the near-defunct warrior societies—the Gourd Clan and the Black Leggings—in part because of the great number of returning veterans. After the revival of the Gourd Clan and the Black Leggings in 1958, the Straight and Fancy dances continued to be very popular pan-Indian war dances, but the warrior society dances assumed a Kiowa character of their own. Since that time, the Gourd dance diffused from southwestern Oklahoma to urban areas in diverse geographic locations, becoming an important dance for many Southern Plains powwow devotees. The Gourd Dance is now a central feature of Southern Plains powwows, and the high frequency of Kiowa participation in intertribal dances attests to their

belief that the Gourd Dance should be performed properly; it is a salient feature of their tribal identity (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Raymond Tongkeamah (left) and Frank Tongkeamah (right) performing the Gourd Dance at Traders Village, September 1986. Photo courtesy of the author.

The Gourd Dance cannot be appreciated without understanding the feelings of the dancers as they bob up and down to the cadence and chants of the songs. Dancing the Gourd Dance or singing with the drum is a celebration of Kiowa heritage; many believe that the dance perpetuates Kiowa history and culture. Many Kiowas today believe that their ancestors were persecuted for dancing and, along with other American Indians, share an identity of past oppression. A common identity in dancing is exemplified in the following compilation of speeches made by the arena emcee at the 1989 Kiowa Gourd Clan annual Fourth of July celebration in Carnegie Park:

It's only once a year that we come together here, get in the arena and dance and sing with one another. This is where it [the Kiowa

Gourd Dance] started. We're not celebrating Independence Day here . . . we're celebrating history, tradition. We're here because in our history, our Kiowa history, it's what we're trying to preserve. And this is why we have gathered—Kiowa homecoming.

We have rules and regulations in this arena that have been handed down to us over the years; rules and regulations that maintain the arena. Things that we can do, things that we can't do. Regulations that pertain to the drum. This is how you dance in the arena. We try to adhere to that.

We're glad that you all are here with us; we want you to enjoy yourselves. When you leave here we hope that you take a little bit of our history as well as the good feeling that we hope we can give you here through that drum. All of our elders believe that the drum has medicinal powers; it makes you forget . . . makes you feel good . . . it enlightens you . . . and whatever obstacles that may be confronting you, it gives you that added strength to confront them. That's what that drum does for you. Many people [have been] cured around that drum. Many people come and dance and they put their problems . . . they put their prayer requests on that drum. That is part of our life here, our Indian way of living.

This arena is called a circle of life; it goes forward, you never look back, you go forward. Everything here has a purpose. A lot of our elders, they get up and they talk, they say God is here with us today.

Throughout the afternoon, perhaps there's times that I may holler out . . . it's . . . I get a little emotional . . . sometimes I get caught up in the spirit. The spirit comes out and they say don't quench it, let it show, holler out. Let people know that you enjoy it. These songs make you feel good. You men dancing, whenever the spirit comes in, don't be afraid to holler. That's what it's all about. That's what we want, we want that good feeling. . . . (Kracht field notes)

Over the last century, the Kiowa have maintained a tribal identity through the Sun Dance, the Ghost Dance, the O-ho-mah Dance, and the Gourd Dance. The Kiowa have always maintained their love for dancing, and have always found a traditional arena for keeping their dance traditions alive. In the Southern Plains, the Kiowa are among the numerous Indian and non-Indian followers of the "dance road" that has continued in various forms over the last century and a half. By performing ceremonial song and dance, powwow

attenders help perpetuate common Indian traditions and history. Importantly, they believe that they should maintain these traditions (Kracht in press).

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