



Native American Music

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Introduction

On April 3, 2002, the Friends of the Alexander M. Bracken Library assembled at the Ball State Alumni Center for their annual meeting. Luke Eric Lassiter, associate professor of anthropology at Ball State, delivered the second annual Kirkham Lecture. He spoke to the members and guests about “Native American Music.”

Dr. Lassiter joined the Ball State faculty in 1996. Previously, he taught at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma, and Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. His research areas include ethnographic theory and practice, ethnomusicology, folklore and community aesthetics, race and ethnicity, and Native American studies.

In addition to numerous articles, essays, reviews, and book chapters, Dr. Lassiter has authored or co-authored five books, including *The Power of Kiowa Song: A Collaborative Ethnography* (2001) and *The Jesus Road: Kiowas, Christianity, and Indian Hymns* (2002). His latest work, *Powwow: Native American Performance, Identity, and Meaning*, is currently under review by the University of Nebraska Press. He has also produced or co-produced three ethnographic recordings of Native American music.

I am pleased to provide friends who were unable to attend the annual meeting the opportunity to enjoy Dr. Lassiter’s remarks through this publication.

John B. Straw
Executive Secretary

Native American Music

by Luke Eric Lassiter

From the southwestern to the northeastern United States, from central Mexico to northern Canada, Native American music is as vast and as diverse as American Indian people themselves. As in all societies, Native American music serves a variety of functions. Whether facilitating emotional expression or affirming group identity, Native American music has common elements with other musical traditions the world over. For example, like most of the world's people, many Native Americans distinguish this phenomenon we call in English "music" from everyday speech; and like people everywhere, Native Americans use music to make statements about experience that spoken language cannot.

Defined broadly in this way, music is a cultural universal. But whether we are talking about Native American music, Western classical, or Rock and Roll, we must understand the stories, the history, the context—in a word, the meaning—behind a particular genre of music. It is like learning a special kind of language: when we want to learn about a specific piece of music and what it means to a specific group of people, we must essentially approach it as we would approach learning the meaning of an individual word in any given language.

Ultimately, the meaning of music is what makes musical traditions vastly different from one another. Ethnomusicologists—those who study the world's music—have long argued that the diversity of sound that we hear in music the world over is tied to the diverse ideas and concepts *behind* music. So with this in mind, it follows that Native American music is particularly unique because of the specific meanings that it has for particular groups of American Indians. Moreover, what makes them different extends beyond their various sounds; their most profound differences exist in their *meaning*: that is, the significance that they carry for a particular group of people. To know just what these songs mean, then, we must explore not so much the structure of their sound (which is often a typical Western musicological response), but the creative cultures and societies of the people who sing them.

To make this point, I will focus on one Native American song tradition in this paper: the Kiowa—a song tradition on which I have focused for the last ten years. Like other Native American song traditions, the Kiowa musical world is incredibly vast, with literally hundreds, if not thousands, of songs. These songs are broken into "sub-genres" of songs, songs that song specialists—who are primarily men—focus their entire lives on learning and performing. The immensity of songs within each of these sub-genres of Kiowa song is mind-boggling—especially concerning the meaning that each song

references for Kiowa people. In several of my writings, I have focused on a number of these different sub-genres of song, from Christian church hymns (the topic of my latest book, *The Jesus Road: Kiowas, Christianity, and Indian Hymns*, co-authored with Clyde Ellis and Ralph Kotay) to powwow songs (which was the topic of my first book, *The Power of Kiowa Song: A Collaborative Ethnography*). Among the most interesting Kiowa songs, however, are songs from a sub-genre of songs that Kiowas call “the Gourd Dance,” a sub-genre of song on which I will focus this paper.

Before I go any further, and before I talk about who the Kiowa are, I’d like for you to first listen to one of these songs, a song I recorded just a few years ago. Listen well, because I will be talking about this song throughout the rest of this presentation. Not knowing about Kiowa song, what you are getting ready to hear will probably be unfamiliar. But you will indeed recognize something in this recording: that is, if you have ever watched American Westerns. When you hear this, think about what comes to your *own* mind. For Kiowa people, I can assure you, what they are hearing is entirely different from what *we* are hearing.

Listen to this song on http://www.bsu.edu/csh/anthro/lassiter/temp/kirkham_lecture.html.

Right now, with the exception of the bugle, this song is merely a “bunch of sounds.” It may seem so distant from our experience because we know nothing about the meanings behind the music. Even when we consider the bugle: while we may be thinking about our experience watching American Westerns, for example; for Kiowas, the bugle’s meaning couldn’t be further from our own assumptions. But before I talk about this, there are several unanswered questions I need to address. Perhaps you may already be asking yourself: Who are the Kiowa? Where do they live? What are these so-called Gourd Dance songs? Answering each of these questions puts us on the path to understanding the meanings behind this one Kiowa song, and in turn, on the path to understanding the deeper meanings of Native American music in general. As I said before, to understand a song like this, we need to elicit the stories and knowledge that surround this song.

Let’s begin with the Kiowa: Who are they? Where do they live?

As I said before, Native Americans are incredibly diverse. Hundreds of indigenous groups lived and still live—albeit very differently today—in Native North America. To better grasp this diversity, long ago anthropologists and other scholars divided Native America into several different geographical regions like the northeast, the southeast, southwest, and so forth.

In general, American Indians in each of these regions at one time shared cultural attributes, such as common food-getting strategies, economies, or political structures. With dozens of other American Indian groups, the

Kiowas once hunted buffalo on the Great Plains in the American Midwest. With other Plains Indians, the Kiowas shared common cultural attributes such as a nomadic lifestyle; a dependence on the American bison for food; a tribal political structure; a focus on warfare; and rugged individualism.

While many people are familiar with the popular stereotype of the headdress-clad mounted warrior, many are less familiar with how our common perception of Plains Indians represents a relatively short-lived era in Native American history. Four hundred years ago, very few people lived on the Great Plains; and those who did didn't hunt buffalo as their main food-getting strategy.

Before 1600, the largest numbers of people settled on the margins of the Great Plains. On the northern Plains, for example, groups like the Mandan, Hidatsa, and Arikara lived on major waterways; they farmed mostly, and relied heavily on agricultural staples such as corn, beans, and squash. They did hunt buffalo to supplement their diet, but they didn't depend on the animal as much as Plains Indians eventually would. Hunting buffalo was a sporadic activity, and farmers on the northern and southern edges of the Great Plains ventured out only occasionally to pursue the animal. And for good reason. It was incredibly dangerous. For one, hunting was done on foot. And considering the disposition of the American bison—even among their descendants today—the possibility of the animal trampling hunters was a very real consequence. The risks clearly outweighed the returns.

This all began to change, however, between 1600 to 1700 A.D. This historical shift has often been called a “cultural explosion” by some, mainly because of how a developing economy so drastically altered the cultural landscape here. The trade of two items—namely guns and horses—were almost entirely responsible for this explosion. At settlements in the northern Plains, French and English traders introduced guns; and in settlements in the southwestern Prairie-Plains, Spanish traders introduced horses. These two trade items had a profound effect on the region; guns and horses literally traveled up and down the Plains through large and small settlements alike, creating an economic boom of sorts—an economic boom comparable to the effect of computers on our lives today. One of the most important consequence of this trade was that guns and horses made hunting bison incredibly efficient. Horses, especially, allowed people to follow buffalo as their herds migrated up and down the Plains. A small family, for example, could now carry their belongings on a horse trailer of sorts—called a “travois” by the French. And on this travois a family could carry their portable home—a tipi, which allowed for quick setup and tear down.

Amazingly, within the course of a few decades over thirty major groups moved out onto the Plains as full-time hunters of buffalo. Living the settled life was now passe, as passe as a Pentium I computer. The Cheyenne,

for example, once farmers, abandoned their settled way of life; moved out onto the Plains; and almost overnight adopted this new lifestyle.

This is where the Kiowa come into the picture. They first migrated onto the Plains from present-day Montana. According to oral tradition, an argument between two rival chiefs led one chief and his band to migrate northwest, and the other, with a larger group, to cross the Yellowstone River and move to the northern Plains around 1700. There, these Kiowas (and the Kiowa-Apaches, who were a small, linguistically unrelated group who were allied with the Kiowas well before their historical period) lived in close proximity with other established groups; and their relationship with settled agricultural groups like the Crow, Arikira, Mandan, and Hidatsa led to a rapid adoption of the Plains lifestyle.

During their early tenure on the northern Plains, the Kiowas occupied the Black Hills. Near the beginning of the eighteenth century, however, the Sioux and Cheyenne began exerting pressure on them from the east and northeast. Understand that with so many people moving out onto the Plains, competition for land and territory increased markedly; competition that would eventually lead to a whole cultural matrix organized around intense competition and warfare. As a result of this competition with the Sioux and Cheyenne in the northern Plains, the Kiowas eventually moved southward until they encountered the Comanches, with whom they warred for control of the southern Plains until the close of the century.

Like the Kiowas, the Comanches also migrated onto the Plains around 1700. As with the Kiowas, the Comanches probably first moved onto the southern Plains due to pressures from other groups to the northeast (Blackfeet and Crows, e.g.) and the desire for a more abundant supply of horses in the Southwest—an important element for the growing bison-centered economy. The Comanches were among the first Plains' groups to acquire horses, and as mounted warriors they dominated much of the southern Plains.

The Comanches and Kiowas fought for control of the southern Plains until the late eighteenth century. According to tribal accounts, hostilities between them ended around 1790 when two groups of Kiowa and Comanche warriors unknowingly visited the home of a Spaniard with whom both parties were on friendly terms. Upon hearing about the presence of their sworn enemies, the Kiowa and Comanche contingents prepared to fight one another. But their host intervened and encouraged them to establish peace. The men then met and discussed the prospect. One of the Kiowa men and a Comanche captive who lived with the Kiowas agreed to visit with the Comanches until the fall season to negotiate an accord. If they did not return, the remaining Kiowa warriors would avenge their deaths. They did in fact return, and the following fall the Comanches and Kiowas gathered again at

the aforementioned home of their Spaniard host and peacefully put to rest years of conflict.

Allied with the Comanches, the Kiowas became one of the most formidable powers on the southern Plains. They were at war with other powerful nations such as the southern Cheyenne and Arapahos until the mid-nineteenth century. With alliances with such groups as the Mescalero Apache and the Wichitas, the Kiowas were able to increase their range markedly, even raiding as far south as north-central Mexico.

As was true for many Plains people, the accumulation of horses through trade or by raiding neighboring groups became one of the foremost activities of the Kiowas. But horses embodied much more than their obvious function. They carried enormous symbolic capital as well: that is, prestigious warriors and their families increased their status and power by the number of horses they owned. And the Kiowas, not unlike the Comanches and many other Plains peoples, were well-known for their massive herds numbering into the thousands.

During the fall and winter months, Kiowas moved about in small groups hunting buffalo and other small game. But once a year during the spring and summer months, several thousand Kiowas began to gather on the southern Plains to hunt buffalo communally as the herds passed through their territory. They gathered in a large circular arrangement hundreds of meters across, with extended families assigned to each part of the circumference. In the Kiowa language, this gathering was called the K'aw-tow, literally meaning "the gathering." In addition to the annual communal hunts, the month-long gathering consisted of feasts, dances, songs; and the K'aw Dance—a four-day ceremony commemorating the bison-centered lifestyle of the Plains. For the Kiowas, the dance took place in the exact center of their camp circle. Often called the "Sun Dance," in this four-day ceremony the Kiowa gave thanksgiving and prayed for the buffalo's return the following year. While dancers were charged to offer prayers for their respective families and the tribe as a whole, an important part of this ceremony included the performance of songs and dances of several men's and women's societies, association groups that cross-cut family relations. Although there were a couple of women's societies, the vast majority of them were men's focused on the activity of warfare. The Kiowas had six of these warrior societies: two for training young boys and teenagers to become warriors; three for distinguished, seasoned warriors; and only one for an elite group of ten warriors. Each society had its own dances and songs based on war exploits that the members performed each year during the K'aw-tow, the Kiowa's annual gathering.

One of these men's warrior societies, its dances and songs concerns us here. The song we listened to earlier belonged to one of the three men's warrior societies for distinguished, seasoned warriors. It was called the

Taimpego, a word which has several meanings, including “Unafraid of Death.” The dance they performed—which the organization essentially owned—was called Ton-ga, which means Rattle Dance. The dancers stood in place, shaking to the rhythm of the song a rattle made of buffalo hide. In the 1940s and 50s, the dance would be renamed in English the “Gourd Dance.” But I’m getting ahead of myself.

One of the leaders of the Taimpego warrior society was called Satethieday, or in English “White Bear.” And here’s where the bugle comes in. Satethieday was a fierce and tenacious warrior. For example, Satethieday is often pictured wearing the U.S. Army general’s uniform that he wore in several altercations against the uniform’s very owner, General Hancock. He also was quite well known for blowing a bugle in battle. He actually stole a bugle from the army’s mounted cavalry, learned how to play it, and used it against the United States Army in several battles. This was an especially successful war tactic because the U.S. Army used bugle calls to communicate battle maneuvers. So when the cavalry blew the charge, for example, Satethieday blew the retreat. Needless to say, the Kiowas won a few easy battles. The bugle was an extremely important war trophy for Satethieday and his military society. He blew the bugle during the Taimpego society’s Rattle Dances at the K’aw-tow. And today, his descendants blow a bugle during songs that they associate with his memory, songs like that to which we listened earlier.

At this point, we’ve only begun to unpack the varied meanings of this song. We’re getting a little better sense of who the Kiowas are by reviewing their history; we have an idea of what the bugle means for Kiowa people, for example. But there’s much much more to the story.

In their classic period, the Kiowas—as mounted warriors—were both wealthy and powerful. They staunchly defended their territory, and through much of the first half of the nineteenth century they presented a fearful obstacle for Americans who traveled through the southern Plains on their way to California or to the Northwest. For these Americans the southern Plains were desolate and worthless, and their only interests constituted safe passage through the region.

American interests in the region began to change, however, when the United States government established Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) in the 1830s for the forced resettlement of eastern tribes. This removal policy initiated several conflicts with the Kiowas over territorial claims. Around the same time cattle and farming interests began to grow in the region as well, and as it did, hostilities over land on the southern Plains increased many times over.

By the 1850s, the United States government had begun seeking ways to cease hostilities, to remove the Kiowas and other groups from the southern

Plains, and to clear the way for settlement and its outgrowth—including the building of railroads. By 1867, at the treaty of Medicine Lodge, the Kiowas (along with the Comanches and with the Kiowa-Apaches) had agreed to settle in southwestern Indian Territory provided that the U.S. government would promise to curtail the encroachment of illegal settlers on Kiowa land, restrict buffalo hunters (who were rapidly depleting the bison herds) and provide a number of annuities to supplement a settled life within the borders of the reservation.

A number of difficulties surfaced soon after the Kiowas removed to southwestern Indian Territory, however. Competition with other groups living in the immediate area surfaced as food became scarce. The presence of buffalo on the southern Plains had begun a rapid decline by this time; and as the U.S. government did little to restrict white buffalo hunters, the near extinction of the buffalo was well under way. The government fueled the worsening condition by repeatedly failing to provide the promised annuities like food and farming supplies; many people were starving. Protests from the Kiowas were common, and the United States government launched several campaigns to squelch the rebellions. By the late 1860s, the United States had established Fort Sill for the U.S. Army on the Kiowa, Comanche, and Kiowa-Apache reservation to put down any further outbreaks. And by the early 1880s, the buffalo had all but disappeared: with them a way of life ended, propelling Kiowa people into a period of rapid social and cultural change.

As the reservation era began to define the end of the Plains lifestyle, Kiowa military societies like the Taimpego society began losing significance. During this same period, Kiowa religious institutions increasingly came under attack by the U.S. government, who launched a campaign to categorically terminate all traditional practices, including dances and songs. In 1890, for example, Fort Sill enforced this directive by terminating with military force the Kiowa gathering called the K'aw-tow—the ceremonial center of the Kiowas' way of life.

Although the so-called Sun Dance had been outlawed, surviving members of the Taimpego warrior society and their families—indeed, the very descendants of Satethieday—held Rattle Dances sporadically until after the turn of the century. Soon after 1910, in the southwestern corner of the reservation, Kiowa people gathered for a Taimpego Rattle Dance. During the dance, two brothers composed the song to which we've listened earlier. Here it was born, in the midst of turmoil and accelerated change. Today, it is known as the Komalty family song, and family members have rights to the song as Satethieday's descendant's have rights to the bugle. That is, the song is essentially *owned* by the Komalty family. For them, this song references a host of family relationships that go all the way back to the two brothers who first made the song.

Let's take stock for a moment of what we know so far about the song to which we've listened. We now know a little more about what this song means to Kiowa people. It shouldn't be just "a bunch of sounds" any more. And we can begin to leave our assumptions behind, such as what we might imagine as the bugle's meaning. We know, for example, that this song has a name: the Komalty family song; and we know that the bugle references a particular memory of Satethieday. We also know more generally that this one song is part of a much larger song repertoire belonging to a particular warrior society called the Taimpego. Is there more? Well, yes, there is.

Once again, let's step back into history. The reservation system under which the U.S. government established the Kiowa, Comanche, and Kiowa-Apache reservation failed miserably. Each reservation was assigned an agent—a superintendent of sorts—yet most were rarely qualified and almost never represented Indian interests. The government repeatedly failed to supply the necessary resources for their own programs of assimilation. They had promised the Kiowas schools at the Medicine Lodge Treaty, for example, and even when Kiowa people and their agents fervently requested them, the government only partially carried out their obligations.

A final blow to the Kiowas came with the execution of a particular law ratified by Congress in 1887, a law called the Dawes Severalty Act. Under its stipulations tribal groups would no longer be wards of the government, thus freeing the government from the responsibility of supplying annuities established by treaties like Medicine Lodge. The Dawes plan entailed allotting tribal members individual plots of land. They were to become self-supportive farmers, and assimilate to the American mainstream. After the passage of the act, the Kiowas had on several occasions expressed their disdain for plans to allot and break up their reservation. They so opposed the matter that in 1894 they sent a delegation to Washington to air their grievances over the so-called "Jerome Agreement," the contract to implement the Dawes Act on their reservation. A number of discrepancies surfaced over the Agreement, including testimony from the accord's signers who insisted that they had been misled. In the well-known case of *Lone Wolf vs. Hitchcock*, however, the Supreme Court endorsed the United States' rights to allot the reservation. Thus by 1910 the Kiowa, Comanche, and Kiowa-Apache had lost their reservation and tribal members were forced to accept 160 acre allotments of land. Well over two-thirds of their reservation was then opened for white settlement.

During and after the reservation era, Kiowa people were set adrift into an enormous sea of changes. Like most Plains peoples, Kiowas were forced to abandon their previous way of life and adapt to their new one. In many ways, the Plains lifestyle had vanished as quickly as it had emerged just a few centuries before. By the 1920s and 30s, the Kiowa's K'aw-tow (the

“gathering,” or Sun Dance) was thus a phenomenon of the past. Military societies, their dances, and songs had lost their relevance; the Taimpego Rattle Dance, for example, had nearly ceased.

While the performance of the vast majority of Kiowa dances and songs were rapidly declining, there was an exception to this rule. It was called the O-ho-mah Dance, a secular dance that spread throughout Plains communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Popularly called the “War Dance,” it had little to do with war. Although it was organized like traditional warrior societies, it was primarily a men’s secular dance. It would grow to encompass women and children, but even today, it is conventionally known as a men’s dance.

This dance most likely originated with the Omaha, who passed it to several Plains groups. Among them included the Cheyenne, who in turn passed it to the Kiowas in the early 1880s. (Hence this is why the Kiowa call it the O-ho-mah Dance.) The U.S. government outlawed the Kiowa O-ho-mah Dance like it did other dances; but they were unable to squelch its popularity, especially when Indians, ironically enough, wished to use the dance to celebrate American Independence Day, otherwise known as the “4th of July.” The agents assigned to outlaw Indian dances could hardly resist the claims of Indians to celebrate on the 4th of July. What the agents didn’t understand, however, was that these 4th of July celebrations fell around the same time as the annual Kiowa K’aw-tow; and in many ways, the 4th of July celebrations came to replace the older annual gatherings—albeit in a completely new context.

The O-ho-mah Dance would actually serve as the foundation for the revival of many older Kiowa dances. During the first and second world wars, American Indian people volunteered for U.S. military service in unprecedented numbers. In fact, since WWII, American Indians have comprised the largest ethnic group per capita in all branches of the U.S. military. But why would Kiowas, in particular, want to volunteer for an army that had essentially suppressed their people just a few decades before the world wars? For many young Kiowa people, the wars provided an opportunity to become warriors just like their grandparents and parents had been. Not to mention the security of regular paying jobs when there were none, military service revived the prestige of fighting “for your people” and “defending your land” in newer circumstances.

Of course, there were (and are) clear parallels between American and Plains Indians’ focus on warfare. The wars thus provided Kiowa people the common ground with the American experience to revive their old warrior traditions, especially their associated songs and dances. After WWI, because of their military service, American Indians were granted the full rights and responsibilities of American citizenship; and by WWII governmental pressure against dances and songs had declined significantly. With the directives

against their dances and songs now discontinued, grandparents and parents of young men—and now young women—began using the O-ho-mah Dance to send their warriors off to fight overseas as well as to welcome their sons and daughters home. Families sent their new warriors off to war with old dances like the War Expedition Dance—essentially a send-off dance—and honored returning veterans with such expressions as the Scalp and Victory Dance: a dance that women performed to welcome home their warriors after a battle. In the old dance, scalps were attached atop long poles. During and after the world wars, however, women attached their sons and daughters medals of honor.

During the wars, Kiowa women also formed a new warrior organization of sorts: the Kiowa War Mothers, mothers of men and women who had served in the military. And a host of new songs were made to express this new experience. One song, for example, translates as “Our sons and daughters are the best warriors. We are taking land from the Japanese.”

A whole new generation of young Kiowa men and women thus had become warriors. Given this, many began to revive the old men’s warrior societies. One of the three warrior organizations for seasoned warriors was revived, for example, its membership opened to all Kiowa men and women who had fought in the wars. And of course, its accompanying dances and songs were revived; and like the Kiowa War Mothers, it is a dance that Kiowas continue to perform today.

In the course of all this revival of warrior traditions, the Kiowa Taimpego—the warrior organization of Satethieday who performed the Rattle Dance at the annual Kiowa gathering—interestingly took a different route. Like other military organizations, Kiowas originally used the dance to welcome home WWI and WWII veterans. But it was only used sporadically. Not until 1957 was the organization officially revived. A group of Kiowa men revived the Taimpego’s Rattle Dance. Because “gourd” was the closest translation of “rattle” in their own language, they called the new dance the “Gourd Dance.” And they called their new organization the “Kiowa Gourd Clan,” and held their first celebration on July 4th of that same year—an O-ho-mah Dance practice that was already tradition.

Because any dance is inconceivable without songs, the men approached singers to sing the songs for the revival. The Komalty family song—the one we listened to earlier—and hundreds of Taimpego songs like it, actually lived on in the memory of “singers”—the label given to those men in the Kiowa community who retain song traditions. And the Komalty family song was among the revived songs. Instead of reviving the warrior organization, they instead emphasized the dance and songs to accentuate a spiritual renewal of Kiowa heritage. In so doing, they opened the dance to all men, women, and children—any Kiowa who could hear, understand, and dance to the songs.

Today, the dance itself is relatively simple. Its attire is simple: men wear jeans, nice shirts, moccasins or cowboy boots, and silver and bead bandoliers. In their hands they carry feather fans and rattles—today, made of tin. Most women simply wear shawls over their regular clothing. The movement of the dance is simple as well—restrained and understated. Dancers bob up and down in accord with the cadence of the songs.

By the 1960s, this simple dance became extremely popular as several Kiowa families formed their own Gourd Dance organizations. By the 1970s and 80s, the entire Indian community in southwestern Oklahoma—not just Kiowas, but also Kiowa-Apaches and Comanches—had become enthusiastic adherents as the dance spread throughout Indian country (especially Oklahoma). Today, several dozen community Gourd Dance organizations host their own Gourd Dances several times a year. And because they do, it is now possible to go to a Gourd Dance every single weekend of the year in this part of the United States. Its popularity has all but replaced the well-known O-ho-mah or War Dance.

Let's recap for a moment our struggle to understand the song to which we listened earlier. We now have a firmer foundation to understand the meaning behind this song because we understand the Taimpego tradition from which it emerged. In addition to knowing that this is a particular family song, that the bugle references the Kiowa warrior Satethieday, and that this song is part of a much larger song repertoire belonging to a particular warrior society called the Taimpego, we also now have a better idea of the larger context in which it is performed and understood today.

But do we? Do we know the whole picture? Not yet. Although some people have attributed the Gourd Dance's popularity to its simple attire and choreography, Kiowa people actually attribute its popularity to what is heard and understood and (especially) *felt* in the songs—like the one to which we've listened. Indeed, as outsiders, this is not what we expect and want to see when it comes to American Indians. What we want to see are Native peoples dressed in traditional garb acting out what we perceive as the continuation of “authentic” 19th century representations of Indians.

But this illustrates a very important point: for Kiowas, the Gourd Dance experience is **not** visually-centered. For community members, complex, long-established, song traditions center the Gourd Dance. Elaborate dress is neither desired nor necessary for most Gourd Dances. Elaborate understandings of hundreds of songs, however, are both desired and necessary. You see, because we are trying to understand this Komalty song, we are well on our way to understanding the Gourd Dance.

For community members, the community's foundation rests not in what can be seen and observed from outside the community's borders, but from what can be heard, understood, and felt inside the community. That is,

for Kiowa people, to understand what this song means, we have to emphasize listening and its consequences over the visual, but we have to do so from a Kiowa perspective.

A short story will help to illustrate this point. There's something I haven't told you about this song yet. It has a nickname. While Kiowas refer to this song as the Komalty family song, they also call this song "Charlie Brown." Many folks would immediately think of a popular comic strip by the same name. But the nickname has nothing to do with that. During the 1960s, a U.S. Army General named General Charles Brown visited a Gourd Dance on the Fort Sill Army Base. Hearing this song, he was so moved that he began to dance. Some Kiowa singers thus nicknamed the song "Charlie Brown." The name stuck, and although it is still the Komalty family song, it is more widely known today as "Charlie Brown."

Presumably, General Charles Brown had no knowledge of this song; he was where you stood before I began talking about this song's story. Not knowing what it meant, how could he be so moved by this song? Many Kiowas would respond by saying that the Gourd Dance's popularity within the community centers on what is *felt in sound*. That is, you need not *necessarily* hear and understand the knowledge surrounding Charlie Brown to appreciate and encounter its Power.

This point is perhaps the most significant when trying to understand what this song means to Kiowa people. As I implied earlier, Kiowas today distinguish three levels of understanding a song such as this: hearing, understanding, and feeling a song. We know what it is to hear a song. For community members, to understand a song, we have to know its story, who made it, where it came from, who it belongs to, what it says and what it means. So far, that's what we've done here to a certain extent. But for many Kiowas, there's more to the equation.

Understanding the meaning of a particular song is very different from sensing and feeling a song, which for Kiowa people is a much deeper and intimate level of experiential encounter. This may be extremely difficult for us to appreciate and understand. But "feeling song" should not be underestimated here. Universally, encounter and perception is central to every human experience; we perceive encounter with our world through that which we feel as imparted by our senses.

There is an unseen dimension of Kiowa song that is at the very heart of what this musical tradition means. I mentioned earlier that understanding a particular song is like understanding an individual word in a specific language. Here, understanding the Kiowa word for song will help us understand more deeply how Kiowa people hear, understand, and feel song.

The word for song in the Kiowa language is *dawgyah*. It literally means "to catch power." The word's root, *daw*, means "power" and it exists

everywhere. From the time of the Sun Dance and before, daw, or power, has been thrown to Kiowa people by Daw-Kee, which means “to throw power.” Today, Kiowas translate *Daw-Kee* into English as God. To sing, then, is to catch and embody the power thrown by Daw-Kee. To feel song is to embody daw.

For many Kiowa people, what is being caught in song is much more than merely a concept as it appears to us here. It is encounter with something that is very real and tangible; something that is felt in sound as imparted by the senses. Appreciating how Kiowa people feel song, then, is essential to our search today to understand one kind of Native American music in one particular community.

For Kiowas, feeling the power of song is testimony to their maintenance of a long-established relationship with a Power greater than themselves (i.e., what many Kiowas call daw and Daw-Kee). Often traditional language is seen as maintaining this relationship. But as people are speaking these languages less and less, song is emerging as a powerful conduit for maintaining both individual and community identity, and establishing community boundaries not in what can be seen, but in what can be heard in song. Simply put, the song to which we listened—whether called the Komalty family song or Charlie Brown—has much to tell us about who the Kiowas are as a people. And this, of course, extends much further than just the song’s sound.

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There are several ways to understand a particular Native American community—be it political, cultural, or social. But I think that learning about song in the way we’ve explored it today opens a window into Native American cultures not explored very often. Most especially, when we learn about Native America, it’s incredibly important that we consider our own biases, and oftentimes those biases are founded on what we can see, not on what we can hear, understand, or feel. To be sure, I’ve learned about my own visually-based biases as I’ve learned from Kiowa people about their song traditions. For them, song is one of the more defining characteristics of their community. And for me, understanding song from this point of view has made clearer some of the more absorbing dimensions of Native American experience, an *experiential* dynamic that should help to establish an understanding of American Indians on *community-defined* terms, not those of outsiders. In the end, then, to learn about Native America is also to learn about ourselves.

