

Chapter 9

Kiowa Ethnohistory and Historical Ethnography

9.1 Introduction

Kiowa oral and recorded traditions locate their original homeland in western Montana near the headwaters of the Yellowstone River. Through a series of migrations east, the Kiowa settled near the Black Hills, establishing an alliance with the Crow. Closely associated with the Kiowa were the Plains Apache, who were eventually incorporated into the Kiowa camp circle during ceremonies. While living in the Black Hills, the Kiowa adopted the horse becoming mobile.¹

The intrusion of the Cheyenne and Sioux forced the Kiowa southwest. Spanish sources place the Kiowa on the southern plains as early as 1732.² However Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, in 1805, located the tribe living along the Platte River. Jedediah Morse, in his 1822 work, A Report to the Secretary of War of the United States on Indian Affairs also reported to Secretary of War John C. Calhoun that the Wetapahato or Kiawas were located "...between the headwaters of the Platte River, and the Rocky Mountains."³ Through changing political and economic circumstances the Kiowa eventually established a homeland north of Wichita Mountains and the headwaters of the Red River.⁴

The forays into Spanish territory enabled them to acquire more horses, captives, slaves, and firearms. The acquisition of horses, either through raiding or trade, completely reshaped Kiowa society. Differences in wealth and status emerged, a leadership structure evolved that united Kiowa bands into a singular polity with shared tribal ceremonies and societies.⁵

Possibly as early as 1790, the Kiowa concluded an alliance with the Comanche. The two tribes traded horses and captives east through the Wichita and Taovayas to the

French and English for guns, ammunition, and other valued trade goods. The Kiowa and Comanche political and geographical position on the Southern Plains, afforded them the opportunity to raid deep into Mexico to feed this economic system of exchange.⁶

9.2 Natural and Social Environment

Kiowa territory was positioned to not only raid, but also participate in a vast trading network that extended to the Rio Grande Pueblos as well as the Mandan and Arikara. Their core territory around the Washita and Arkansas Rivers was rich in buffalo and had mild winters. However the region south of the Arkansas River was prone to periodic drought, often limiting grazing for bison and horses. The dry conditions although favored the seasonal migration of buffalo herds north into the Arkansas River valley as streams further south dried and grazing became scarce.⁷ During the dry periods the Kiowa often were not able could not launch large-scale raids or gather for the annual Sun Dance. During the periods between 1846 and 1874, the Kiowa failed five times to hold the ceremony.⁸

9.3 Subsistence Economy

Kiowa subsistence centered on two major activities. The centered availability of bison herds and raiding opportunities partially determined band movements and camping locations. Large winter camps were located along river bottoms where firewood and sufficient grazing for horses were available for exploitation. With the arrival of early spring, small bands scattered themselves across the landscape, hunting and gathering available resources. By late spring the buffalo began to appear from the south in increasing numbers. Related bands would then come together to hunt. By late June or early July, it was an expectation that the Kiowa bands would gather for the annual Sun Dance ceremony. During the ceremonial, communal hunts were undertaken and raids organized, but climatic conditions sometimes required the Kiowa to disperse. Hunting of bison by bands continued throughout the fall in preparation for winter.⁹

Although bison formed the core of Kiowa subsistence, other animals such as deer, antelope, and elk were used for food and materials items. Fresh meats were roasted,

broiled, or boiled, but the majority was sun dried, pounded into a powder, mixed with lard, and made into pemmican. The Kiowa would also eat smaller game. Some Kiowa did have food taboos, but all Kiowa did not eat bear, fish, or birds.¹⁰

Hunting was a man's primary labor activity. The other duties of adult men were to protect the camp, engage in war and raiding, and religious activities. Kiowa men also were good "baby sitters" for the little children. Men were responsible for the manufacture and maintenance of most of the material cultural items associated with these activities. As with other Plains societies for example, plant materials played a major role in the manufacture of weaponry. The main weapons and implements used were the bow and arrow, spear (lance), tomahawk (a metal type with a pipe at one end became a trade item), chipped flint and obsidian knives, various flint saws, scrapers punch or needle of flint or bone, hafted axes and a hafted wide scraper for cleaning hides, a fist axe, and eyed bone needles, often steel trade needles when available.

Women's labor included work surrounding the daily activities of camp. They worked at tanning hides, drying meat, cooking, preparing pemmican, sewing clothing, setting up the tipi or dismantling it, and packing the bedding, directing slaves and young children in moving the horses to pasture, and caring for infants in the cradleboards. Kiowa women also cared for the dogs. Women owned exclusively the dogs and the dog travois. When it was necessary to move, the women could be ready to move in as few as thirty minutes. Children, puppies, and the ill were put on the travois that the women used.

Another major economic activity was the gathering of plants for consumption and other uses. Women seasonally gathered a wide array of plants. Prominent food plants included Tipsin (*Psoralea esculenta*), ground bean (*Falcata comosa*), and other wild foods. The Kiowa also obtained tobacco, corn, beans, and melons in trade from the Wichita and Caddo. Kiowa plant knowledge extended beyond flora regularly found in their nineteenth century territory on the Southern Great Plains. Some species of plants were only found in Montana and the foothill regions of northern Wyoming.¹¹

9.4 Technology and Material Culture

The Kiowa fashioned tools from stone, bone, horn, and flora. Knives and points were manufactured from flint, chert, and obsidian. Awls were made of bone and hide

fleshers had bone handles with stone blades. Skins were used for containers, sacks, or bags, parfleches, robes, and tipi coverings. Rawhide paunches were used for water containers and to stone-boil meals.¹² The Kiowa did not make pottery.

Young children wore little or no clothing. Men wore skin shirts, with fringe of human hair in the side of the sleeves. Breechclouts, leggings, and moccasins with long flaps that trailed the ground filled out everyday men's wear. Men adorned their braided hair with fur wrappings, wore breastplates of pipestone, and decorated skin robes. Sometimes feathered headgear or a fur cap was worn.

Women's clothing included a wrap-around skin dress, knee-length moccasins, and poncho-like upper shirts. Women also wore full-length dresses. Their clothing was decorated with trade beads, elk teeth, and quills. Some women had tattooing done and pierced their ears. Women painted their faces and hair part with vermillion.¹³

9.5 Marriage, Kinship, and Family

The most stable economic and social group was the extended family, consisting a several brothers and occasionally sisters. The brothers cooperated in hunting and raiding activities, under the direction of elder brother. Oldest brother was the recognized leader of the family. Descent was bilateral, enabling individuals to create close ties with father's and mother's kin.

Kinship terminology was generational. On the parent's generation, mother and mother's sister were called by the same term, although father and father's brother were separate terms. Separate terms also were used for father's sister and mother's brother. A man's brother's children and a woman's sisters' children were called sons and daughter. Conversely, a man's sisters' children were addressed by the terms used for mother's brother, although a woman's brother's children were called by separate terms.¹⁴

Men addressed maternal and paternal grandfathers and all grandchildren by the same term. Women used the same term only for grandfathers and referred to grandchildren by separate terms. Men and women used separate terms for their paternal

and maternal grandmothers. All great-grandparents and great-grandchildren were referred to as brothers and sisters.¹⁵

The smallest, recognized kinship unit in Kiowa society is the family. The family consisted of parents and all unmarried children. A mother was close to her son, but a father trained and pushed his son to prominence. Sons respected their father and the older men. In raising children, corporal punishment was not used. Boys could be shamed or ridiculed by their elders. The family depended upon a son to become a provider, and his success was more important than a girl's, but girls could bring wealth to the parents in horses or gifts when a man wished to make a bride price. Grandparent and grandchildren were on intimate terms. The grandparents were the teachers, companions, and storytellers of history, legend, and religion.

Brothers exercised a degree of control over sister's choice of marital partners, to assure compatibility with brothers in laws, who would join them in hunting and raiding activities. Men were responsible for their sisters' well being and were expected to take part in her marital disputes. A man also was responsible for sister's children, who regarded them as second fathers. It was not uncommon for brothers and sisters to marry siblings from the same family, enlarging the hunting group of the same generation.

Kiowa women usually married around age 14. Young men were eligible to marry after age 16. The prospective groom's relatives delivered gifts of horses to the bride's parents. The girl's parents and her brother would make a decision whether the young man and his family were worthy of binding the two families together. A contract was made by acceptance of the gifts. Residence after marriage was bilocal, but favored matrilocality.¹⁶

Monogamy was the most common form of marriage. Kiowa men although, could take more than one wife. When this did occur, often he married his wife's sister or sororal polygyny. Along with sororal polygyny, the Kiowa also practiced the levirate whereby a man was responsible for his brother's wife if his brother died. A man addressed his wife, his wife's sister, and his brother's wife by the same kin term, revealing their relationship and possible martial relation.¹⁷

Divorce was not common. If a wife desired to leave her husband, usually her father or brother had to give his consent. The bride price was often returned. A woman

who committed adultery could be killed or have her nose cut off by her husband. Infrequently, the Kiowa, similar to the Cheyenne, cast a “woman on the prairie,” which was often a death sentence. Most often the aggrieved husband took property from the guilt man.¹⁸ If the wife was mistreated, a woman could also initiate a divorce.

9.6 Social and Political Organization

The core political unit was the band, led by a bandleader or *topadok'i*. Band size varied considerably, depending on the wealth and generosity of the bandleader and resource availability. Historically there may have been as many as 40 Kiowa bands, ranging in size of an extended family to several hundred people. Bands also fluctuated seasonally, with smaller bands functioning during the early spring, but forming larger political units as resources became available.¹⁹

The bandleader was usually the oldest brother of the core extended family. As larger bands formed a senior bandleader was recognized as the sole political authority. Bandleaders led largely by consensus and sound decision-making. His responsibilities included maintaining law and order, direct bands movements to resources, as well as plan for the defense of the group when faced with attack.²⁰

According to oral tradition, the Kiowa originally were composed of seven autonomous divisions. Each of the divisions had several bands. One social division was referred to as the Biters or Arikara, because of their intimate trading relationship with the Arikara. The second division is the *Kogui* or Elks. The third division was the *Kaigwa*. They were the Kiowa proper. The next division was the Big Shields (*Kingep*), followed by the Thieves (*Semat*) or Plains Apache, and Sendeh's Children or Black Boys (*Kongtalyui*). The final and smallest division was the *Kuato* or Pulling Up. The Sioux exterminated them around 1780.²¹ During the annual Sun Dance encampment the named divisions occupied set locations. It was during these large encampments that communal hunts were held, policed by one of the men's societies. The principle chiefs discussed affairs important to the nation.²² These social divisions comprised the Kiowa camp circle, defining the Kiowa tribe.

Historically, Kiowa bands also were organized into geographical groups. The Cold People lived along the Arkansas River in southwestern Kansas. The Hot People lived further south. By the 1860s the Hot People became closely allied with the

Kwahada Comanche. They were then called the *Guhale*, the Kiowa term for the *Kwahada*.²³ Some Comanche recognized an unnamed middle Kiowa geo-political entity, but little information exists.²⁴

9.7 Men's Shield Societies

Individuals who received powers through vision questing depicted those acquired powers symbolically on shields. Once created, Kiowa men often passed these shields and their power to a son or he could sell it to a non-relative.²⁵ Thomas Battey in 1873 recorded the spiritual power that shields held. After discovering that other Kiowa and Comanche intended to kill Battey, Sun Boy took Battey into a wood, where his medicine shield was placed on poles after the fashion of a painter's easel. He told Battey to remove the coverings and handle the shield, decorated with a representation of the sun, raven feathers, and with an attached eagle bone whistle. Battey was then led back to Kicking Bird and Stumbling Bear. Kicking bird explained to him that he had "...looked the shield in the face, had handled the sacred ornaments, and the spirit residing in it had not been angry, and would now watch over and protect me."²⁶

The Kiowa had several shield societies. These societies were organized to enhance the power and the prestige of men who obtained similar medicines. The Taime Shield Society is the oldest, representing the power of the Taime. To be a Taime Shield Society member, men had to be wealthy, as they were required to present many gifts to the Taime Keeper. Their shields always were made from elk hides and hung behind the Taime in the Sun Dance Lodge.²⁷

The Eagle Shields Society, although founded after the Taime Shield Society, grew in equal prestige. Sitting Bear or Santank, the last leader of the Principle Dogs, was also the leader of the Eagle Shield Society from 1850 until 1870. He received his sacred shield from the society's founder, who made 23 eagle shields. Eagles are war medicines and those who owned the shields were considered invulnerable in battle.²⁸

Buffalo Shield Society members had healing powers. They were specialists in curing wounds and broken bones. Society members accompanied war parties as doctors. Originally, a woman founded the society, with 12 buffalo shields being made. No woman could belong to the society, but all the leaders had to be a descendant of the

original woman. During curing, the original woman's voice would be heard emanating from the top of the tipi lodge.²⁹

Owl Shield Society members, through the owl's powers, had the ability to enlist dead spirits to find lost articles and foresee the future. The society began with *Mamanti* ("Sky Walker"), who could see the outcome of raiding parties. He and his three apprentices painted themselves before battles white with blue owl designs on their chests and backs.³⁰ The shields were passed from father to son, nephew, and occasionally to a son-in-law. The transfer of power had to be made before the owner's death. Several core extended families owned this power. The Owl Shield Society was founded before the 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge, along with the Five Shields Society. The Five Shields was based on war power and never had more than five members.

The Bear Old Woman Society is related, some Kiowa believe, to the Taime Shield Society. It was a feared woman's society that controlled bear power. Women selected their daughters or other close women kin to succeed them.³¹ It was curing society. Parents could offer to feast the members if the child became well.³² The society members emulated bears and wore bear claw necklaces as a symbol of their powers. When they met to perform their ceremonies and rituals, it is claimed that all young were sent outside of camp because bear medicine was more powerful than Boy Medicines. The Kiowa believed that the Taime were afraid of bear power. Thus the animal was taboo to all Kiowa.³³

Central to Kiowa society was the system of status ranking. Of first rank were the *Q-gop* or *Q-deki* (Onde). They were composed of the greatest warriors, most prominent bandleaders, most owners of the Ten Grandmother Bundles, and the wealthy men having distinguished war records. Second in rank to the *Q-gop* was the *Q-degu-pay* (the Odegupa) or "Followers of the Elite." This rank consisted of lesser bandleaders, medicine men, and successful young warriors who had accumulated property. Third rank was the *Kh-c-cn* (Kaan), meaning "Mediocre." The Kaan were the commoners, composing about half of the tribe. They owned few horses, so could not join raiding parties frequently enough to accumulate war honors and property. The *Dcpom* (Dapom) were the "nobodies." These were the tribe's misfits, crazy people, or those other tribal members considered crazy. They also consisted of people who did not share the major Kiowa values.³⁴

Ranked social status did fluctuate to a degree. Rank depended of a war record, exemplary behavior and horse wealth. Men could raise their rank from commoner status through the accumulation of wealth and honors as well as recognition of their behavior. The achievement of high honors could raise one's rank while misdeeds or meanness could lower rank.³⁵

The Kiowa had men's societies that ideally were of equal rank, although internally every adult member was ranked by social status. With the exception of the Principle Dog Society, all societies had about 50 members. The Horses' Headdresses Society was the least prestigious society. Its membership were young and included some commoners. However higher ranked men also held societal membership.

The Black Legs, like the Principle Dog Society, required the accumulation of war honors as a prerequisite to join it. The Black Legs Society was ranked beneath the Gourd Dance Society because most of its members were younger. Many Black Leg members however eventually became members of the Gourd Dance Society.

The highest ranked society is the Gourd Dance Society, also known as the "Skunkberry People." It is the oldest society, composed of older men. In its functions and organization, it resembled the Southern Cheyenne Bowstring Society.³⁶

The Principle Dogs, founded after the Gourd Dance Society, over time came to out rank it. The society was open only to the highest-ranking war leaders and had only ten full members.³⁷ Membership was highly selective. Members chose non-relative apprentices from other high-ranking families, called "brothers." On the members death the neophyte ascended to full membership, but they must have achieved at least four war honors.³⁸

The Kiowa also had two partially age-graded societies for pre-adult boys. The "Rabbits" or *Phola-hyop*, a society for young boys and, the *Altoyoy* or "Herders" was for adolescents.³⁹

Each society had two leaders and two whip bearers who watched over the behavior of the members. These societies functioned during Sun Dance, held their own ceremonies and rituals, and assisted with the bringing of the Sun Dance pole. Societies also policed the communal bison hunts.⁴⁰

Equal in rank to the Gourd Dance Society was the “Calf Old Woman Society.” The society had war power and other society members would present them with gifts before heading out to war or on raids. To attain membership in the society required a large initiation fee, making it impossible for lower ranking women to join the society.⁴¹

9.8 Religion and Ideology

The Kiowa cycle of recounting oral traditions is divided into two distinct cycles. The tradition of Split Boys was part of the sacred cycle of Spider Old Woman and her grandsons. The Keepers of Boy Medicines could only tell these traditions traditionally during the summer months. The Keepers convened at Sun Dance when each bundle was opened and in turn, each part of tradition was told as part of the ceremonial cycle.⁴²

The second cycle occurred during winter. This cycle concerned *Sandeh*, the Creator, Culture Hero, and Trickster. Mooney recorded one oral narrative that tells of a trickster who leads the people out of the dark world into the present world by climbing up a hollow cotton wood log. When a pregnant woman became stuck in the log the remainder of the Kiowa could not ascend explaining the tribe’s small size.⁴³

There was a general belief in supernatural agencies. The Kiowa universe was animistic, filled with potential power. Pervasive in the Kiowa universe was *dcy* or *dwdw*, “sacred power,” that could be localized in specific objects, spirits, or places. *Dcy* could be located in aspects of the earth, sun, moon, sky, planets, stars, mountains, waterways, animals, and plants. Eagles, hawks, buffalo, as well as the sun, moon, sky, and winds were powerful personifications of *dcy*. The Kiowa believed that these entities possessed spirits that are manifested as natural phenomena, behavioral qualities of animals, inherent powers of plants. All sacred spirits that contained *dcy* are arranged hierarchically in a logical order. Above powers, the Sun was stronger than eagles, but eagles for example were more powerful than bison.⁴⁴

Sacred power was neither good nor bad, but was dependent of the user’s intent and qualifications. Kiowa men received these sacred powers through dreams from spirit beings during a vision quest, which instructed them in its proper use. It was believed that

without a spirit helper it was unlikely he could succeed in life. *Dcy* or *dwdw* however was only available to a handful of men, who successfully supplicated the spiritual forces. Since spiritual power was not easily obtainable, *dcy* was largely restricted to the *Q-gop* (Onde), the wealthiest and highest ranking families of Kiowa society. The most powerful and tribal medicine bundles were kept intact through an inheritance pattern of “favorite child” (*wde*), insuring a transfer of sacred power from father to son.⁴⁵

Other avenues to achieve power were through inheritance, purchase, and dancing for power during the Sun Dance ceremony.⁴⁶ Men who received power did not publicly announce their gift, but revealed it through public demonstrations. Lower status men could obtain power by purchasing it from Onde men. Men purchasing or inheriting power had to undergo a vision quest under the instruction of a man whose *doi* (“medicine”) was painted on a war shield. The seeker took the shield, along with a stemmed black stone pipe and tobacco to a high location. He “slept” with his head on the shield to learn its power. After the fourth day, he descended from his quest. If he was successful, he painted a shield with symbols of his newly acquired power. Purchased and inherited *dcy* is not as potent as powers obtained directly by vision questing. Many Kiowa men did not receive power, so the attainment of it favored higher-ranking individuals.⁴⁷

The powers obtained could either be for warfare or curing. Great warriors often became bandleaders. An individual who came to control power was called *Dcucmki* or a “Medicine Man.”⁴⁸ Curing powers often came with restrictive taboos and prohibitions. Some medicine men were feared as sorcerers.⁴⁹

Central to Kiowa religion was the Ten Grandmother bundles.⁵⁰ The origin of the bundles is directly tied to the sacred tradition of the Split Boys.⁵¹ These ten tribal medicines, also referred to as “Boy Medicines” (*Tha-li-dcy*), were the most revered powers the tribe possessed. The bundles were used to settle disputes and cure the sick. Anyone could offer a gift to a bundle and pray to it. Each bundle keeper had to care the bundle and strictly observe its taboos. A stipulation among all ten bundles that each keeper had to adhere to is that no violence could occur in their presence. Thus the ten tipis in which the bundles were housed served a sanctuary for individuals, protecting

them from harm. The Ten Grandmother bundles embodied underlying tribal mores and served to promote and create social harmony.⁵²

Keepers of the Boy Medicines passed the bundles to heirs along with the proper instructions and powers. The associated power, although kept by a person, was considered owned by the Kiowa tribe. Shamans and healers also passed their powers on to apprentices who paid for their instruction.⁵³

The *Kc-to* or Sun Dance was the major tribal religious ceremonial. During the Sun Dance the tribe came together for ten days or more. The ceremony was commonly held annually, the timing of the ceremony fixed by the whitening of the down on the cottonwoods.⁵⁴

The sun was believed to be one of many spirit forces. There were several objects of religious veneration. Sun Boy was the great supernatural and mythic hero and legends related his adventures. The Sun Dance served both for religious and for social cohesion of the tribe. It was believed to recreate the buffalo and rededicated beliefs and traditions. It lasted for ten days, six to prepare the lodge, set up the center post, and have a mock battle before its dedication, and four days for the dancers to seek a vision while dancing about the pole and the Taime. Self-inflicted torture, such as cutting of flesh and breaking of fingers, were employed on occasion but not to the extent as other tribes. In the six days sex license was allowed. Both men and women were allowed to dance about the selected dancers. After the ceremony concluded, the camp circle was broken up and the bands moved off across the landscape. Warriors who had vowed to do so set off on raids.⁵⁵

The symbolic center of the ceremony is the Taime or *T^hayme*. The Taime was an image of a human figure that insured a steady supply of bison and well being for the entire tribe. According to oral tradition, the Kiowa through an Arapaho man who married into the tribe obtained two Taime bundles, one male and the other female. The Arapaho man, in turn, received the Taime from the Crow as a gift. The incorporation of the Taime into the Sun Dance ceremony, according to Mooney, occurred around 1770.⁵⁶ Another male Taime bundle was captured in battle from the Blackfoot. The male Taime bundles were carried into battles against other tribes, however both male Taime were lost to the Ute in a battle occurring in 1868. The Ute never returned them.⁵⁷

9.9 Conclusion

Another important bundle was “Old Woman Under the Ground.” Its keeper always came from the Big Shield division of bands. The “Old Woman Under the Ground” image was exposed in front of the Taime during Sun Dance. The sacred bundle reportedly was stolen in 1890 and never returned to the Kiowa tribe.⁵⁸ The same year “Old Woman Under the Ground” was taken, a woman’s ritual dedicated to the Star “Girls,” the Pleiades went extinct.⁵⁹

The same year the “Old Woman Under the Ground” was stolen, some Kiowa participated in the Ghost Dance religion. Sitting Bull, an Arapaho, brought the revitalization ceremony to them. Some Kiowa believed the ceremony false and Sitting Bull an imposter. The dance continued among the Kiowa until Apaitan made the pilgrimage to visit Wovoka. After Wovoka failed to communicate with Apaitan’s dead son and did not have the crucifixion marks on his hands that he was led to believe, Apaitan returned to the Kiowa and denounced the religion. The Kiowa quickly gave the Ghost Dance up, which symbolized the rapid changes that reservation life was imposing on Kiowa life ways.⁶⁰