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THE KIOWA HOMELAND IN OKLAHOMA

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Abstract. Kiowa Indians derive their common identity from deep roots in southwestern Oklahoma, an area they call their "homeland." On this landscape are recognized and distinctive marks, both visible and invisible: The Kiowa have blanketed it with their significant stories. The region is important as a psychological anchor in the Kiowa past and as a core for their modern identity as a distinct people. In this article I explore Kiowa stories, ideas, and feelings about specific landmarks of the homeland. I also step back to discuss how the homeland generates attachments that are not attributable to individual elements within it. Keywords: American Indians, homeland, Kiowa, Native Americans, Oklahoma, sense of place.

Growing up in Oklahoma, I was inculcated with the notion that the state has a rich American Indian heritage. More often than not, though, teachers would speak of this heritage in the past tense, and they left the impression that Indians had seamlessly blended into mainstream Oklahoma culture. Reality is, of course, more complicated than any such textbook generalization, and I gradually became aware that Oklahoma's Indian peoples are far from completely merged into the dominant Euro-American culture.

Oklahoma Indians remain distinct in their attachment to place. Although standard maps of the state may not show it, because there are no Indian reservations at all in the state, Indian groups maintain strong emotional ties to particular areas, ties that differ markedly from those of non-Indian residents in the same areas. The historian Arrell Gibson characterized Oklahoma as the "Land of the Drifter," describing a state whose economic history has hampered the development of a sense of rootedness (1986). But this displacement is certainly not the case among many Oklahoma Indians. Loyalties to places they call "homelands" provide Indians with an important part of their sense of themselves. In this essay I explore the particular attachment of the Kiowa people to a portion of southwestern Oklahoma.

The Homeland Concept in Geography

Cultural geographers have taken to using the term "homeland" in a sense not explicitly tied to political concerns. This usage signals an increase in the complexity and so-

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phistication with which geographers are exploring ethnicity. More than simply a refinement of the culture-area concept, the growing focus on homelands is a recognition of the inadequacy of broad culture regions to describe emotional attachments to place in the United States.

Perhaps the earliest use of the homeland concept in a formal study came in Alvar Carlson’s dissertation on the Spanish-American core in New Mexico (1971). Yi-Fu Tuan later explored the idea in an abstract sense (1977), but it was not until Richard Nostrand’s 1980 study of Hispanics that “homeland” gained exposure among geographers as an analytical tool.

Consensus exists on only one aspect of the definition of “homeland”: that it involves the emotional bonding of a self-conscious group (usually ethnic or religious) to a particular area of land. What separates this concept from ideas such as “sense of place” or “topophilia” is its explicit focus on group identity. Rather than being simply an individual’s response to place, homelands involve attachments that reinforce a person’s identity as a member of a group. Such attachments, as Tuan has discussed, are deeply rooted in the visible landscape of the homeland:

Landscape is personal and tribal history made visible; the native’s identity—his place in the total scheme of things—is not in doubt, because the myths that support it are as real as the rocks and waterholes that he can see and touch. He finds recorded in his land the ancient story of the lives and deeds of the immortal beings from whom he himself is descended, and whom he reveres. The whole countryside is his family tree. (1977, 157–158)

Homelands are also different from culture regions, as traditionally defined by cultural geographers (Meinig 1965; Jordan-Bychkov and Domosh 1999, 7–13). Culture regions are most commonly delimited either by demographic strength or by the dominance of particular cultural traits. But many groups, including the Kiowa people, are not the majority population anywhere in their home region; they have been swamped by influxes of outsiders. Nevertheless, their attachment to their homeland is undeniable. Strength in numbers is nowhere near as important as strength of the group’s emotional ties to a landscape. Indeed, some vitally important areas of homelands actually have no resident members of the cultural group at all.

Michael Roark (1993) and Michael Conzen (1993) have discussed the uncertainties in setting out the defining traits of a homeland, including whether there can be a bottom limit to the number of people or the size of territory in a homeland. Additional questions emerge about spatial contiguity and the dominance of a group under consideration. Are homelands mutually exclusive, or can they overlap? What causes homelands to strengthen or weaken? How strong and distinctive does a culture have to be in order to maintain a homeland? Each of these is a worthwhile avenue of investigation. The main caution is against setting too rigid a definition for homelands: An overly constrained definition can supplant the cultural group under examination as the guiding force behind a study, blinding scholars to the complexity and uniqueness of the group’s attachment to place. A concept need not have a strict
definition in order to be analytically useful; ideally, any definition will only be a set of guidelines used to help sort out the dizzying variety of ways in which groups create place out of their space.

**Focus and Method**

What does a geographer look for when studying a people's homeland? One possibility is to examine the material imprint that a group has made on a particular landscape. Another is to look at features that are not quite as obviously cultural constructs: particular landmarks that have special significance to a people. Or one can step back and look at broader questions of group identity and belonging to a community, questions not reducible to individual features. All three are important parts of maintaining a group's connection with its homeland, and in this article I examine each in turn.

My research focuses on the bond between the Kiowa Indians and a portion of southwestern Oklahoma. I studied their feelings, stories, and identity through a series of unstructured interviews—or, more accurately, conversations—with members of the tribe. As John Western found elsewhere, such interviews allow the researcher to explore a subject in greater depth than questionnaires allow (1992). In the course of the project, during 1993 and 1994 I spoke with thirty people at length. The majority of these contacts were made with the help of the director of the Elders' Center in the tribal complex in Carnegie. Each weekday many Kiowa elders come to the center from throughout the region for lunch, bingo, cards, and other activities. The remainder of my interviewees consisted of Kiowa who live outside the homeland, in Norman, in Oklahoma City, and in Lawrence, Kansas. Some interviews took place over lunch; others, in an office or a home. Beyond these informal interviews, I made numerous briefer contacts with Kiowa at tribal events.

I did not try to develop a statistically representative sample of interviewees, other than in a very rough sense, because the kind of information I was after does not lend itself to quantitative analysis. The main bias in my sample was age: Although the interviewees varied from sixteen to ninety-five years of age, the majority were retirees. This was a natural result of my reliance on the Elders' Center as a source, but it is also partly a function of the Kiowa tradition of oral history. People would usually refer me to elderly Kiowa because they considered them to be most knowledgeable about things Kiowa. If I had spoken more with younger tribal members, I likely would have encountered a somewhat different set of ideas.

In a general sense, the questions I asked were consistent; they were attempts to elicit ideas and information about the homeland, the stories and history that color the landscape. If a person seemed inclined to talk about a particular subject, however, I let the conversation drift in that direction. In the ideal interview, I talked as little as possible, trying only to steer the conversation when it moved too far afield. In this way, I discovered information about the Kiowa landscape that I never could have anticipated, and I heard many stories that a formal survey would have missed entirely.
Historical Background

The earliest place where the Kiowa are known to have lived is the northern Rocky Mountains, near the headwaters of the Yellowstone and Missouri Rivers. Unlike the Cheyenne and the Arapaho, the Kiowa have no memory of ever having been an agricultural people. Sometime prior to 1700 the tribe moved eastward out of the mountains into the Black Hills. About this same time they acquired horses, probably from the neighboring Crow, and began to develop the buffalo-hunting culture that was to define them as a people for future generations (Mooney 1979).

In about 1750 the Kiowa were forced from the Black Hills by the Cheyenne and the Lakota, and they began a long, gradual, southward migration. By 1833 the Kiowa had centered their lives near the Wichita Mountains in southwestern Oklahoma, and, along with their allies the Comanche, they soon held firm control over the southern Plains from the Arkansas River all the way into central Texas, and from the Cross Timbers of central Oklahoma westward into the Llano Estacado of the Texas Panhandle. In 1867 the Medicine Lodge Treaty required the Kiowa to settle on a reservation—along with the Comanche and Plains Apache, who are usually misleadingly referred to as Kiowa-Apache—in southwestern Oklahoma. Their new reservation was but a fraction of the size of their previous range.

Even this reduced range was not to remain theirs for long. As the so-called Boomers agitated for opening lands in Indian Territory to white settlement, the U.S. Congress passed the Dawes Severalty Act, which provided for the dissolution of tribal reservations (Gibson 1987). The legislation allotted each Indian a 160-acre homestead; the government purchased the remainder of the land and opened it to white settlement in 1901 (Figure 1). Whereas the Kiowa settled almost exclusively along creeks north of the Wichita Mountains, the Comanche tended to take their allotments south of the modern town of Apache and farther south of the mountains. Members of the much-smaller Plains Apache tribe generally chose land along a strip running roughly from Apache north to the intersection of today’s Oklahoma Route 9 and U.S. Route 62/281, just south of Washita. By the time of the last allotment, the amount of land in Indian hands had shrunk by two-thirds, to 443,338 acres (Mayhall 1971, 319). Land sales and outright swindling soon deprived tribal members of many more acres.

The insufficient size of land allotments and the lack of farming knowledge doomed any chance the tribe had of maintaining a self-sufficient economy. To gain income, Kiowa began to lease their lands to white farmers and ranchers. This practice continues today; Kiowa who farm or ranch their own land are the exception. Landholdings have become increasingly fragmented through inheritance, and quarter-sections with twenty or thirty Kiowa owners are not uncommon. To make a living, over the past hundred years many Kiowa have been forced to move from rural allotment lands to towns and cities, either in the region or farther afield, and today about half of the tribe’s 8,600–plus members live outside the former reservation lands, with about a quarter living out of state (Figure 2).

Because the federal government dissolved the Kiowa reservation almost a century ago, and because half the tribe no longer lives there, one might think that the
Kiowa Landmarks and 1901 Allotments

Fig. 1—Kiowa landmarks and 1901 allotments on the former Kiowa/Comanche/Plains Apache Reservation. Allotment records consulted were incomplete; many of the tribally undifferentiated allotments (light gray) in the northern portion of the reservation undoubtedly belonged to Kiowa as well. This map does not include lands later given to those members of Geronimo's band of Chiricahua Apache who elected to stay in Oklahoma upon their release from captivity at Fort Sill in 1913. Sources: BIA ca. 1901; Griffin 1901.
Kiowa would place less importance on southwestern Oklahoma. Yet the reality is markedly otherwise. The region remains a stout psychological anchor for them, an intrinsic part of who they are. They maintain an intense loyalty to this particular area, a loyalty of which their white neighbors are often completely unaware.

My exploration of the homeland here can be likened to a visitor's experience of the area. When first exploring this new landscape, one notices material cultural features, things that are physically a part of Kiowa everyday lives. After becoming more familiar with tribal members' own sense of the area, however, one becomes aware of ideas and attachments that are less tangible but more meaningful. In this article I fol-
low the same progression, building from a discussion of material features, to an exploration of ideas that are more complex—and, ultimately, more significant—to the idea of a homeland.

**Material Landscape Features**

When examining the material imprint of the Kiowa on the landscape, I looked not only at the distribution of particular features but also at the meanings these features held for the people. It is an elaborate body of created meanings, after all, and not any individual feature itself, that binds people emotionally to their homeland and allows them to identify with it. Among the features that strengthen the Kiowa attachment to their homeland are arbors and mission churches.

**ARBORS**

Brush arbors, locally known as “Indian shade” or, more lyrically, as “Indian air conditioning,” are common among groups of Indians west of the Mississippi River. Their construction varies widely, and they can be anything from efficiently simple lean-tos of poles and branches to elaborate structures made by bending willow trees down, tying the ends together, and interweaving tamarisk branches. Some are so strongly built that goats can graze on top of them. Arbors provide a shady, vented area for sleeping and cooking in the summertime; indeed, many families used to live exclusively in them during the hot months. A number of my interviewees described vivid childhood memories of peaceful, slow summers spent in arbors.

Although traditional arbors were—and are—made of brush, they can also be permanent outbuildings; their specific construction material is not as important as their function. Although far less common today than in the past because of the introduction of electrical air conditioning, Kiowa still build and use arbors. Usually situated behind houses, they provide great relief from the scorching Oklahoma summer sun. More important, the building of an arbor today is a statement of identity. It is a way for Kiowa to feel that they are living, at least in part, the way their ancestors did.

In addition to family arbors, large circular arbors that formed part of the medicine-lodge structure of the Sun Dance were also an intrinsic part of Kiowa culture. They served as shade for spectators. Modern versions of these circular arbors exist as well. Like the old ones, they provide shade for spectators at tribal dances, where they encircle the dance ring. Because canvas tents could serve the same function and would be easier to construct, practicality clearly is not the guiding rule. The circular arbor is a visible and meaningful link between the old Sun Dance and modern tribal gatherings and lends a sense of continuity to the proceedings. Although their practical necessity has declined, their symbolic importance has ascended in modern times.

**CHURCHES**

The first white missionaries among the Kiowa were Quakers, who arrived in Oklahoma in the late 1860s (Corwin 1968). They represented a new policy of the U.S. Con-
gress toward all Indian tribes, whereby control of Indian agencies passed from the military to religious groups (Hagan 1990, 57). Although officially charged with bringing the gospel, missionaries in reality were tools of the government in their continuing attempts to “civilize” and calm the “savage” Plains tribes (Hagan 1990, 58). Even after 1878, when the government replaced the Quakers with agents who were less inclined to peaceful methods of control, mission work was encouraged.

Methodists began work among the Kiowa in the late 1870s (Vernon 1980–1981). They became a significant force on the reservation in 1887, when J. J. Methvin established a church at Anadarko. At about the same time, Catholic missionaries also became active, establishing Saint Patrick’s Church and an associated mission school at Anadarko. The Catholic school sparked Methvin to start a mission school of his own, lest too many souls slip into the wrong hands. Neither Catholics nor Protestants accepted the legitimacy of the other during these years (Vernon 1980–1981, 401). Methvin’s school was influential and sought to instill white values along with the English language in the Indians to make the saving of their souls a less-exacting task. The school also trained significant numbers of Kiowa preachers and other religious leaders who would later spread the church’s influence among the tribe. The Methodist mission church established at Mount Scott in the 1890s was an outgrowth of Methvin’s work in Anadarko and became known as the “Mother Church of Kiowa Methodism” (Vernon 1980–1981, 407).

Baptist missionary work among the Kiowa began in the late 1880s (Corwin 1968; RMKIBC 1993), and, at the invitation of Lone Wolf in 1892, missionaries were sent to the Kiowa camp on Elk Creek, south of Hobart. Despite protests from many Kiowa, the government gave the Baptists 80 acres near Rainy Mountain and another 80 acres near Elk Creek, along with 5 additional acres at each location for tribal cemeteries. Missionaries founded churches at each site in 1893, and the success led them to found other Baptist churches at Redstone and Saddle Mountain (Figure 3). Five generations after the death in 1903 of Isabella Crawford, founder of the Saddle Mountain Church, the Kiowa still speak of her with great reverence, as they do of the other missionaries who started Kiowa churches. She is buried in the Saddle Mountain Cemetery.

In the competition for converts, the Baptists and the Methodists were ever so much more successful than were the Catholic, Quaker, Presbyterian, and other missions. They remain the two principal Christian church groups among the Kiowa. Original Baptist mission churches are still in operation at Rainy Mountain, Elk Creek, Redstone, and Saddle Mountain; the Methodists hold forth at Mount Scott, Cedar Creek, Methvin, and Botone (Figure 1).

The U.S. government’s goal in promoting Kiowa Country mission activity was to assimilate, not to provide a series of foci for, the Kiowa community. Ironically, however, the mission churches throughout Kiowa Country became and remain just that—centers of activity that set the Kiowa community apart from the surrounding non-Indian population. Although some Kiowa attend white churches, most who live in the area prefer to do their churchgoing at the old missions. Part of the reason
for this is a feeling of being unwelcome in white churches in the area, a manifestation of the subtle—and sometimes not-so-subtle—racism that many of my interviewees felt in Kiowa Country. Equally important, however, is the opportunity the Kiowa churches offer for participation in a uniquely Kiowa brand of Christianity. The all-Kiowa-language service of earlier years has disappeared, but much of the singing continues to be in the native tongue. A few traditional English-language hymns have been translated into Kiowa, but many Christian songs are unique to the Kiowa and continue to be written by church members, setting Christian lyrics to traditional Kiowa melodies.

Like many rural churches throughout the United States, the Kiowa churches are now experiencing declining attendance and membership. Despite the decline, Kiowa mission churches remain an important and vital force. Although it may be questioned whether the original goal of assimilation was successful, the churches did have the highly unintended effect of tying the Kiowa to place by providing a concrete focus of activity in the local communities. At the centennial celebration of the Rainy Mountain Church in the summer of 1993, a speaker addressed this issue: “Today as our people have sought education, there are doctors and lawyers among the Rainy Mountain People. They may live far away, but they have not forgotten Rainy Mountain, for their roots are here. Rainy Mountain people are those people all over the country who return as often as they can, because their memories are here. They bring their loved ones here for burial.”
As Kiowa increasingly move away from their checkered allotments to towns and cities, the rural locations of these churches make little practical sense. Many of the members of Rainy Mountain Church ("the Kiowa Vatican," in the words of one Kiowa) must travel as far as 40 miles to attend church. Yet when given the chance to move the church to Mountain View, the congregation voted to keep it in its old location. One reason is the natural beauty of the setting: From the church few other human structures can be seen, and the Wichita Mountains stand silently on the horizon. Another reason is the symbolic importance of the old location. There did their ancestors choose the spiritual path that provided them with hope in the desperate times when their traditional buffalo culture was dying. At Rainy Mountain are their ancestors buried, and there their descendants wish to continue to follow what they still call the "Jesus Road."

**THE INVISIBLE LANDSCAPE**

Although observable impacts on the land are important parts of any study of a people's homeland, the invisible landscape is arguably more vital. The folklorist Kent Ryden, in his study of the Coeur d'Alene mining district of Idaho, explained this idea: "For those who have developed a sense of place, then, it is as though there is an unseen layer of usage, memory, and significance—an invisible landscape, if you will, of imaginative landmarks—superimposed upon the geographical surface and the two-dimensional map" (1993, 40). Places acquire meaning through language, for through stories and history are meanings shared. In Tuan's words, "Although speech alone cannot materially transform nature, it can direct attention, organize insignificant entities into significant, composite wholes, and in so doing, make things formerly overlooked—and hence invisible and nonexistent—visible and real" (1991, 685).

Keith Basso's work on the Western Apache vividly illustrates this process. Through the power of language and storytelling, culture and landscape have become one for the Apache, and geographical features have become "indispensable mnemonic pegs on which to hang the moral teachings of their history" (1990, 128). When history and mythology become connected with certain places, these geographical locations are transformed from simple points in space into symbolic creations, continuing sources of identity for future generations.

In discussions of homelands, attempts to delineate a compact area defined by demographic strength are common. Yet, for people like the Kiowa, who in the course of several hundred years have ranged over much of the Great Plains, the notion that tribal identity would be tied completely to a contiguous land base is dubious. In fact, some of the most evocative landmarks for the Kiowa with whom I spoke are located far from home. They act as foci of exceptional historical and mythological meaning, which makes them intrinsic, though outlying, parts of their homeland.

**DEVIL'S TOWER**

Both in the physical landscape of the northern Plains and in the mythological landscape of the Kiowa, few landmarks are as prominent as Devil's Tower, in eastern Wyo-
ming. Despite being nearly 800 miles from Carnegie, the landmark is a vital part of Kiowa identity. The prominent Kiowa author N. Scott Momaday recounted the legend attached to that altogether distinctive place, a legend shared with several other Plains tribes:

There are things in nature that engender an awful quiet in the heart of man; Devil’s Tower is one of them. Two centuries ago, because they could not do otherwise, the Kiowas made a legend at the base of the rock. My grandmother said: Eight children were there at play, seven sisters and their brother. Suddenly the boy was struck dumb; he trembled and began to run upon his hands and feet. His fingers became claws, and his body was covered with fur. Directly there was a bear where the boy had been. The sisters were terrified; they ran, and the bear after them. They came to the stump of a great tree, and the tree spoke to them. It bade them climb upon it, and as they did so, it began to rise into the air. The bear came to kill them, but they were just beyond its reach. It reared against the tree and scored the bark all around with its claws. The seven sisters were borne into the sky, and they became the stars of the Big Dipper. (1969, 8)

This story, with its beginnings in the distant times when the Kiowa first came onto the Plains, does much more than simply provide a fanciful explanation for the formation of a prominent physical feature; it makes the tower and the stars landmarks of protection and rebirth. The “Talking Tree Stump” becomes a metaphorical gateway from dog-and-travois life in the mountain wilderness to the horse-and-buffalo culture of the Plains. It is also a permanent representation on the landscape of the spirit forces that protected the Kiowa from the bear—a complex, sometimes ambiguous symbol throughout Kiowa mythology of evil and destruction as well as of power and strength—during and after the transition to Plains life (Boyd 1981, 10). Most of my interviewees consider this relatively short period of equestrian culture the “golden age” of their people, a time when the tribe was living closest to its “truest” self. In contrast, they see the earlier period in the mountain wilderness as a constant struggle for survival and the later period on the reservation as the dying gasps of this age.

Modern Kiowa still hold Devil’s Tower as an important element in their identity. The Kiowa Elders’ Center in Carnegie, for example, plans trips to the monument nearly every year. Even if an individual has never seen the Talking Tree Stump firsthand, its image is still important: “I’ve never visited there in person,” one woman told me, “but I’ve visited it through the stories of our people; I think of it as mine.”

**Palo Duro Canyon**

Palo Duro Canyon, in the Llano Estacado of the Texas Panhandle, has a darker relevance for the Kiowa. In what was to be the last armed Kiowa resistance to a sedentary reservation life imposed on them directly by the U.S. military and indirectly by the destruction of the buffalo herds of the Plains by white bounty hunters, a group of Kiowa under the leadership of Lone Wolf and Maman’-te’ attacked the Wichita Agency at Anadarko in 1874. In the aftermath of the uprising, they and their followers, constituting more than half of the tribe’s estimated 1,700 members, fled up 200 miles up the Washita River and into the Texas Panhandle (Nye 1942, 210; Mooney 1979, 236).
Experiencing miserable weather all the way, they finally took shelter in Palo Duro Canyon, along with bands of Comanche and some Cheyenne who were also opposed to the instigation of reservation life (Mayhall 1971, 295–296; Boyd 1983, 247–249).

On 17 September 1874, Colonel Ranald Mackenzie's forces found the encampment. Only three Indians were killed in the battle, but Mackenzie captured 1,400 ponies, most of which he slaughtered, and destroyed all of the Indian villages and property. Some of the survivors attempted to remain on the Plains through the harsh winter that followed; without horses, lodges, or buffalo, that was impossible. Not only were horses the means of transportation for the tribe, they were symbols of wealth, and their loss was devastating.

The importance of Palo Duro Canyon in Kiowa history became clear only in retrospect, however. The annual calendars kept by the Kiowa scarcely mention the entire 1874 outbreak of hostilities (Mooney 1979, 145), but now the canyon is accorded symbolic status. Although a few isolated battles followed, Palo Duro has become a central symbol of the final military defeat of the Kiowa. As with Devil's Tower, Kiowa often visit the canyon to connect with their past, and the tribe periodically organizes group trips.

My interviewees showed little bitterness over the defeat at Palo Duro, only a very palpable sadness. As one woman described her visit, "When we went down there, I wasn't really into visiting museums and things like that; I've only recently become interested in that. But when we were in there, coming by the bluff, I got a feeling and I
began to cry. How frightened they must have been running around there, trying to find someplace to hide. I could see them running around; I felt their fear.”

Inherent in every ending, however, is a beginning; and through the process of enduring change, continuity can be achieved. Another man told me what Palo Duro means to him: “It’s a very spectacular place. You say to yourself, what were they doing in there? It was just survival, they just wanted to be left alone, and if they had left them alone, they probably would have stayed. But history wanted it to be a certain way, and that’s how it was. I imagined them being pretty desperate. . . . But that story is also one of change, of settling down and changing, of people’s ability to adapt to a different lifestyle. It is the story of human endurance that is the best story of civilization.”

In addition to sadness, the canyon is a source of pride for some, pride in the resistance and endurance shown by their ancestors. At a tribal dance I overheard one Kiowa suggest to another that a movie be made about the Kiowa: “They could call it Palo Duro Canyon II, or Last of the Holdouts.”

FORT SILL

Fort Sill, like Palo Duro Canyon, is a grim reminder to the Kiowa people of an abject military defeat. Founded in the heart of Kiowa Country in 1869 by General Philip Sheridan during his winter campaign to subjugate the southern Plains tribes (Nye 1942), Fort Sill today is a massive training center for field artillery. Alongside the fort’s modern war-making equipment, much of the Old Post has been preserved and is open to visitors. Among the buildings is the Old Stone Corral, built to thwart horse raids by the Kiowa, Comanche, and Plains Apache. The commemorative plaque labels it as the final tribal “roundup” point. But what to most visitors is simply one additional monument to the colorful, cowboys-and-Indians movie history of the West is to the Kiowa a solemn reminder of the final military defeat and internment of their people. As bands of Kiowa and Comanche straggled into Fort Sill and surrendered after the battle in Palo Duro Canyon, they were imprisoned in the corral (Figure 4).

Many present-day Kiowa knew their grandparents or great-grandparents who were held captive there. One woman asked me whether I had noticed her light-colored hair. She explained it this way: “[After the surrender at Palo Duro Canyon], at the stockade at Fort Sill, they kept the adults in the jail, but they let the very young and the very old stay in the camps, and they assigned a man to ‘guard’ them. My mother’s mother’s mother was raped by a guard at Fort Sill; he also raped a number of other twelve-, thirteen-year-olds. That’s where my white blood comes from.”

Momaday has written of the corral as well: “My grandmother was spared the humiliation of those high gray walls by eight or ten years, but she must have known from birth the affliction of defeat, the dark brooding of old warriors” (1969, 6). Later, he added further description: “The corral, the high stone wall: it is a great ring, a well. At night it is perhaps beautiful when the moon shines down upon the many facets and smooths them out, so that the figure is whole and softly defined and gleaming. And inside the ring is nothing, blackness” (1976, 36).
The Old Post Guardhouse that held Kiowa leaders after the surrender still stands, and is known as the “Geronimo Guardhouse,” after its most famous prisoner (who was not Kiowa but Apache). As one woman told me, “I was very young when I first visited the fort and saw the jail cells, but I could feel that the place has some feeling to it. People locked up and the people you’re supposed to take care of still outside, out there.” Whereas Devil’s Tower marks the beginning of the Kiowa “golden age,” the prison and stone corral at Fort Sill represent the collective forces that brought it to an end.

The “chieftain section” of the Fort Sill Post Cemetery is another landmark for the Kiowa Indians. Established in 1869, it was the only cemetery in southwestern Oklahoma until Indian mission cemeteries were opened in the 1880s. Fort Sill contains the graves of many a revered Kiowa leader of the treaty period: Sitting Bear, Satanta, Stumbling Bear, Kicking Bird, Big Bow, and Hunting Horse of the Kiowa, as well as Quanah Parker, the “Last Chief of the Comanche.” Inscriptions on the headstones make clear what qualified an Indian for interment: beyond the personal names, most stones list only tribal associations and that the person was a signer of either the Little Arkansas Treaty or the Medicine Lodge Treaty, which gave up vast tracts of land in exchange for peace and annuities. A few stones identify Indian scouts for the U.S. Army.

Originally, many of these Kiowa were buried at Fort Sill against the wishes of their families. Nevertheless, this cemetery too has become part of the homeland of the Kiowa. In 1963, descendants of Satanta—with the permission of the Texas legislature—moved his body to Fort Sill from the cemetery of the Huntsville Penitentiary, where he had committed suicide nearly ninety years earlier. One of the people involved in the repatriation told me that “it was kind of sad in a way to have it done, but we all wanted his bones to be back here, home with us.”

RAINY MOUNTAIN

Just at the edge of the Wichita Mountains is a small, round-topped knoll. The knoll would be unremarkable if it were nestedled among the larger peaks of the range, but standing alone just beyond the edge of the mountains, it draws the eye (Figure 5). Here also, though, is a landmark that more than any other serves as a symbol of the Kiowa people; indeed, Momaday titled the search for his own Kiowa identity The Way to Rainy Mountain (1969). On the Kiowa tribal logo, designed by Roland Whitehorse, Rainy Mountain is depicted on the warrior’s shield, a representation of the “ancient Kiowa burial ground at the end of the great tribal journey” (Boyd 1983, 304).

Of the area centering on Rainy Mountain, Momaday wrote: “To look upon that landscape in the early morning, with the sun at your back, is to lose the sense of proportion. Your imagination comes to life, and this, you think, is where Creation was begun” (1969, 5). Elsewhere, he referred to it as “the center of the world, the sacred ground of sacred grounds” (1989, 244). Most of the Kiowa I spoke with about the mountain repeatedly applied the phrase “sacred” to it as well.

To understand the significance of Rainy Mountain for the Kiowa, it is important to understand the view tribal members take of their people’s migration from the
northern mountains. By and large, they do not see it as a response to military pressure from the Sioux and Cheyenne or to changing patterns in buffalo migration. Rather, it was a long-term journey that, from the start, had a purpose, a final destination. After much movement, they found a spiritual center for their activity in the Wichita Mountains, where they could bury their dead and return for generations. The base of this mountain, symbolically at least, marks the spot where the Kiowa realized that their southward journey was complete.

One of the early centers of Kiowa activity in the southern Plains developed around Rainy Mountain. This focus continued in the reservation era: "If there were a 'capital' of early reservation Kiowa life," one man said, "this was it." Today, even though many rural Kiowa have moved to towns or cities, the sacred mountain still triggers many strong and complex feelings. One woman I interviewed put it like this:

At Rainy Mountain, there's a lot of stories. It really is a magnificent place; there's just something about it, it has a presence. Many stories from my childhood are there: My grandmother's and my grandmother's grandmother's stories are all in the area. We took my mother out there and she lamented about all the stories and the memories that were there, and that nobody seemed to do anything about saving them. But in the old times, when Kiowas left an area, they were supposed to leave sacred areas. When a certain era and time are gone, so is the place in a way. When I was in the tribal government, I wanted to do something to restore it, to make it thrive with activity like it once did, but the elders cautioned me against it. . . . I don't know how much of it was a fear of trying and not being able to make it happen, and how much
of it was a fear of disturbing the area, a feeling that it has already had its turn, and now things move on.

In the Kiowa tribal museum in Carnegie are ten beautiful murals commissioned by the Kiowa Nation to record the entirety of Kiowa history. The tenth painting, “We Kiowa Are Old, but Ageless We Dance,” depicts modern times and has Rainy Mountain as its focus. Converging on the mountain are the straight, human-built lines of modern times: highway, fence, power line, and edge of field. Standing above it all are representations of traditional Kiowa culture: members of the Black Leggings and Gourd Dance Societies, as well as several famous war trophies still held by the tribe.

“You know that old song ‘Don’t Fence Me In’?” asked the man who was showing me the painting. “Well, the government fenced us in. The kids today, they watch TV all day long, getting bad, insidious ideas, becoming too white. People need to get back to the traditions, to history; that’s how they’ll know their place in this world,” he said, pointing to the mountain.

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE WHOLE**

As evocative as many individual landscape features and landmarks are for the Kiowa, the importance of the homeland as an anchor for identity goes beyond evocation. No matter how widely the Kiowa disperse in search of economic opportunity, many never waver in their desire to return to southwestern Oklahoma permanently and be buried in the land of their ancestors. One woman described this constant connection: “You see, Indian people, we don’t ever consider that we leave home. We may not be there in body, but if nothing else, we’re there in spirit.”

“Home,” for her and for most of the other Kiowa to whom I spoke, refers to southwestern Oklahoma, a place to which Kiowa can always return, where they feel themselves a part of the life of the tribe, a place where they can find strength and restoration for their identity. This feeling goes beyond a collection of material landscape features and symbolic landmarks. It is a sense of wholeness, group identity, belonging, and community that can only be found in one region. The existence of this sense among a people, more than any other factor, makes a particular area their homeland.

**HOMEPLACES**

Part of the explanation of the Kiowa attachment to place is to be found in landholdings. The act of landownership, of having a homeplace, ties individuals to the region in a concrete fashion. Most land owned by Kiowa has been passed through generations of their family from the time that the reservation was dissolved and allotted in 1901. If one is inclined to draw a boundary around the Kiowa homeland, the area of allotments is as good a way as any to do so, for it approximates the area my interviewees referred to as “Kiowa Country” (Figure 1).

Allotted land that remains in Indian hands is still held in trust by the Bureau of Indian Affairs; all sales or leases must be approved by and prosecuted through this federal agency. Currently, the bureau administers 282,599 acres of land for the
Kiowa, Comanche, and Plains Apache tribes. The tribes as a whole own some of the land, but most of it is owned by individuals, thanks to the continuing effects of the Dawes Act. Much of the trust land has been alienated through the years, and the process of fragmentation through inheritance makes it difficult for individuals to live off the lease money, much less make a living farming or ranching the land themselves.

Despite its increasing marginality as a means of making a living, trust land is still of great psychological importance to the Kiowa. As a number of people put it, it means that they will “always have a place to go back to.” Even small parcels of land, fragmented through multiple generations, are important to the Kiowa sense of rootedness. More than pieces of land, these properties serve as genealogical reference points; they are the specific ground where forebears finally gave up nomadic life and settled. One man spoke of the allotment he currently lives on: “I’ve got a beautiful spring creek running where I live. It was my great-grandpa’s land allotted in 1903 or 1904, and when he went there, he found this creek and the fresh spring water. It’s really a big, cold, fresh underground river. Now I’m the great-grandson, and I’m living there, I’m drinking it.”

Another Kiowa told me of family vacations to their old homeplace. Although the original house was by this time unoccupied and quite run down, they would sleep on the floor and bathe in the creek that ran nearby. She also told of an elder Kiowa who yearly returns to his homeplace: “He would drive to the old homeplace. There was no longer any house there, and he stayed and slept in the car for the weekend. Of course, we all told him that he could have stayed with us, but he wanted to stay at the homeplace. I don’t want to say that it’s a cleansing . . . maybe a reconnecting to the past. After it, he said that he felt better, really good.”

**HOME**

The psychological restorative power of the homeland is a subject that came up repeatedly in my interviews, and it seems to me to be the single key aspect of a homeland. Kiowa are constantly immersed in a white-dominated society, and many of those I talked to feel their tribal identity chafed and their values fraying with this contact. Periodically returning to southwestern Oklahoma provides a means of restoring and sustaining a separate Kiowa identity.

No matter how widely dispersed they may be in search of economic opportunity, many Kiowa never lose the desire to return to Oklahoma permanently. Although I rarely found older Kiowa in southwestern Oklahoma who had not spent a portion of their life outside the homeland to earn a living, I equally rarely found one who had never consciously planned on returning from the very time he or she left.6 “You [whites] all go down there to Florida when you retire. Not us—we come right back here.” Many Kiowa never feel completely at home in the environment of white, urban America. A woman who spent several decades in Midwest City, Oklahoma, told me about her experience: “There were lots of people around, but it was lonely.” Another man, now living in central Oklahoma, offered the following account:
My generation, the baby-boom generation, many of us are still maintaining traditional values. It’s difficult when you’re surrounded by non-Indian values. I can practice the traditional ways, but nobody will understand; it will be just me. To get focused, you go back home. While I’m here, I try to keep it up, by reading, by visiting, by eating, but it’s hard.... I used to be able to speak a little Kiowa, but being away from it for so long, it’s been washed out of me. When I go home to the various ceremonies, I ask the elders why they are doing them that way, and they tell me that “I can’t tell you as well as I could in Kiowa.” This affects the emotional and psychological mentality of those forty and over who don’t participate every day, who are out of that area trying to make a living. The only way to keep that is to come back. The further away you get from the heart, the harder it gets.

**HOMECOMING: THE KIOWA GOULD CLAN CEREMONIALS**

A desire to return is clearly manifest in the annual Kiowa Gould Clan ceremonials. Held in Carnegie every 2–4 July, this is the single most important annual event for the Kiowa people. The Tiah-pah Society, a descendant of early tribal warrior societies, hosts the gathering, which is nothing less than a modern equivalent of the Sun Dance, an annual religious event that once brought the disparate bands of the Kiowa together. The time of year is even selected to correspond roughly to that of the old unifying ceremony. Tribal members come back from all over the country, planning vacations around the event; in 1993, a quick glance at the license plates in the park one afternoon told me that people had traveled from Arizona, New Mexico, California, Iowa, Texas, Colorado, Kansas, and the Oglala Sioux Reservation, and of course from counties all across Oklahoma. Moreover, the Gould Dance is truly a Kiowa event put on for Kiowa (Ellis 1990); the uninformed gawker would be quickly bored by the absence of the stereotypical fast and the flashy, ersatz “Indian” dancing typical of a more tourist-oriented event. Grass dancing is held in the morning each day; gourd dancing and giveaways take place during the afternoon; and gourd dancing, intertribal war dancing, and giveaways stretch well into the evening and night.

Often, the people I spoke with used the term “pilgrimage” to describe the trek to Carnegie every July. The use of that term is instructive. “Pilgrimage” would conventionally refer to a journey to a shrine or sacred place, and many who live away from the homeland truly do see their trek in this way. What draws Kiowa to this event every summer is more than the desire to watch people dance. Although the Kiowa also hold descendants’ gatherings, in which family history and traditions are passed along, this is the only event that brings together family groups in the tribe. It is a homecoming, often the only chance that people who live far away from the region have to see each other. It is also a time of renewal, a time to reaffirm one’s Kiowaness. As one man put it, it is a chance for the tribe to gather and say, “Here we are again, we are still alive, we survive.... Going back to southwest Oklahoma is important; there’s a lot of memories tied to that place. I know all the sounds and the smells and the singing and the dancing from the July Fourth celebration. It’s all a part of who you are; it restores your feeling, your spirit, your place.” For those who return home each year, it is a restorative event, a chance to heal a Kiowa identity that may be feeling chafed by
its immersion in white society. As another man concisely told me, “I’ve been coming back here a long, long time, and these are the things that are real.”

Conclusions

Thus the common identity of the contemporary Kiowa derives, in part, from their rootedness in southwestern Oklahoma. They have left a distinctive mark on this landscape, in both visible and invisible ways; they have covered it with their stories. The region is important as a psychological anchor in their past, as a core of their identity. It is their homeland.

Homelands, like culture and identity, are not static things, and these terms share other qualities as well. Edward Spicer noted that identity is made up of “the symbols which a people develop, together with their meanings, concerning their existence as a people” (1980, 347). Expanding on this idea, George Castille argued that “the symbol set need not be historically ‘real,’ it need only be believed in, in some ideal sense. The symbols may in fact change, as does all else in the adapting entity, but, as long as a continuity is maintained in the symbol system sufficient to define a collective identity separate from that of surrounding peoples, endurance occurs” (1981, xviii). Historians and anthropologists have recently begun to apply notions of symbolic, rather than material, continuity to the political and social organization of Indian tribes in order to understand why tribal identities have persisted (Spicer 1980; Fowler 1982, 1987; Foster 1991). I think that homelands can also be usefully viewed in this fashion. The idea of a homeland can endure, despite drastic changes in its external appearance. What is a homeland, after all, if not a people’s unique and unifying symbol of a common past and future?

In a discussion of the effects of Dawes Act on the Cheyenne River Reservation, Frederick Hoxie concluded that, although the act broke up traditional patterns of residence and economy, it failed in its larger goal: “The reservations forced on the tribes did not become vehicles for ‘civilizing’ and assimilating them; instead, they became cultural homelands, places where a native identity could be maintained and passed on to new generations. Rather than graveyards for culture, the reservations . . . eventually became centers for awareness and even for hope” (1979, 3). Hoxie focused his discussion of these new homelands on the changing symbolic nature of white-imposed institutions that provided a new focus for reservation life. However, he ignored what was likely an equally important, concurrent development: a growing sense of the symbolic importance of a place itself as a repository of meaning. For the Kiowa, at least, the importance of their core area, as well as of certain places outside that area, is difficult to overstate. It is an anchor for their identity, and it has endured despite the disappearance of the tribe’s territorial integrity, for the existence of a homeland is not simply a matter of real estate.

In closing, consider Satanta’s statement at the Medicine Lodge Treaty meetings in 1867: “When we settle down, we grow pale and die” (Vanderwerp 1971, 179–180). Clearly, this Kiowa leader saw settlement on the reservation as a prison, in which the life he knew would wither. In a sense, he was right: The nomadic life of the eight-
teenth and nineteenth centuries is no more. But adaptation is the story of the Kiowa, as it is of any culture that hopes to survive. Satanta’s people have changed drastically in many ways, but, contrary to his fears, they did not grow pale and die. The Kiowa persist as a people. As diverse and dispersed as their modern lives have become, their ties to a specific place help to keep them unified. It is this attachment that continues to make Kiowa Country their homeland. As a Kiowa living in central Oklahoma told me:

When the Kiowas refer to their history, they refer to places. Much as the Jews have Israel, their promised land, the Kiowas have their homeland. Even American Jews, when you ask why they care, it’s not a direct part of their life, they still find Israel to be important. It’s in terms of the human heart, it’s an emotional attachment. You can’t possibly reason it out.

NOTES

1. I have chosen not to use interviewees’ names in order to ensure their privacy.

2. When studying the importance of the mythology of any group, be they Kiowa, Idaho miners, or social scientists, one would do well to remember the statement by Black Elk, a Lakota: “Whether it happened so or not . . . you can see it is true” (Boyd 1983, 19).

3. Also known as the “Talking Rock”; the Kiowa name for Devil’s Tower, Tso’ai, translates either as “Rock Shelter” or as “Tree Rock” (Mooney 1979, 428; Boyd 1981, 10; 1983, 93; also personal interviews).

4. How much of this view comes from the influence of anthropologists is difficult to determine. Late-nineteenth-century anthropology had as one of its goals the recording of “dying” cultures. Much writing since then, both academic and popular, has used these early written accounts of tribes as representations of their “true” or “traditional” culture, against which any subsequent activity must be measured for its “authenticity.” What were portraits of groups during a short span of time have come to define these groups, often in their own eyes as well as in those of others; this static view of culture is neither realistic nor fair. The buffalo as a way of life is dead, but the culture that once utilized it has moved on and continues to live. One of my interviewees put it best when he said, “You know, Kiowa culture is no more and no less than what those who call themselves Kiowas do.”

5. Some accounts list the date as 28 September.

6. I obviously biased my sample by conducting interviews mainly in southwestern Oklahoma. My focus in this paper, however, is on those for whom the homeland retains its importance, so the bias is somewhat justified.

7. Although the Gourd Dance is found today among all the southern Plains tribes, only the Kiowa version clearly has a historical precedent (Ellis 1990). No Gourd Dances were held during the thirty-year span from the late 1920s to the late 1950s, but the modern event closely parallels earlier versions. Recently, however, the Kiowa Gourd Clan has experienced factionalism similar to that which has plagued the tribal government. At least three Gourd Dance societies now exist, and each holds a celebration on 4 July. Of these, the Kiowa Gourd Clan’s event remains the most important, “the granddaddy of ‘em all,” as the emcee of the event in 1993 put it.

8. “Much of the Indianness of Oklahoma is hidden because the Oklahoma Indian does not conform to the white dictate of what is and is not Indian. A Boy Scout Hobbyist in feathers and headdress is by definition Indian to the students of the frontier myths. But a full-blood worshipper in blue jeans, a white shirt, and a Stetson hat holding up the corporate seal of the Kee-Too-Wahs [a Cherokee religious group] is not Indian in the eyes of the Western moviegoer” (Strickland 1980, 107).

9. I decided not to apply the core-domain-sphere terminology common in discussions of culture areas to my discussion of the Kiowa homeland. Such terms rely on the demographic strength of a group, and, as I have shown, areas that are psychologically important to the Kiowa do not necessarily
coincide with the modern population distribution of the tribe. To apply a scheme such as this would give a quantitative essence to the idea of homelands that I do not feel exists.

References


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