Listening to Indians

SCOTT TONEMAH, Kiowa

September 30, 1975

Norman, Oklahoma

Part II

This transcript is one of a series of interviews with American Indian people throughout much of the United States by S. I. Myers of the History Department of St. Louis Community College at Florissant Valley, St. Louis, Missouri, 63135.

The purpose of these interviews is to bring the Indian peoples' own comments to students in classrooms, and to foster greater understanding among the peoples of the United States by providing Indians the opportunity to express their ideas and opinions to a wider audience.

This transcript has been edited for clarity and ease of reading, but every effort has been made to preserve the original feeling. Conversations and opinions were encouraged on any subject of interest to interviewees; questions and responses do not necessarily reflect the viewpoint of the interviewer, the National Endowment for the Humanities, or St. Louis Community College.

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September 30, 1975

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Part II

Glen Rock, New Jersey

Microfilming Corporation of America

1978
Sam Myers:
This is the second part of a conversation with Scott Tonemah, Kiowa Indian. Scott, would you comment on the native American Indian religions?

Scott Tonemah:
On that I can start this way. There used to be 67 tribes in Oklahoma. Many of them disappeared because they were assimilated and moved out. We borrow from one another. This is very important. Today we are inter-tribally assimilated and non-Indian assimilated. It's well above 95% among the Cherokee, that's a fact. The rest of us in western Oklahoma are close to the reservation people, but even there we borrow from one another. The Sun Dance was our spiritual way of life. We assembled almost in a primitive instinct, like nature. We assembled at the springtime of the year, just before summer, when the cottonwood trees begin to burst their little cottonheads, which is late June. We start assembling the different bands; there were six military organizations in the Kiowas. We foraged in different parts of the plains. The buffalo herds were plentiful. That was our spiritual way of life. We assembled; we replaced warriors who were killed during the year; we reunited with families, like a family reunion; we replaced a buddy. We used to have a buddy system, like for instance, my organization today is the Black-legging Warrior Society. In older days they used to join two by two. You didn't join alone, you had a buddy with you, so that if one of them were killed, at the annual Sun Dance he was replaced, and this perpetuated our human way of life here in the mid-regions. We have a legend we came from the north country. The Kiowas split one day over a simple quarrel over game. One group headed north, and we hear stories that there's a group of Kiowas somewhere up north yet today, whereas this group of Kiowas down here in Oklahoma, settled down here. So this is how we used to gather, that was the basis of our oldest religion. And the oldest objects of our religions are
these Tai-me, prayer bundles, especially the Sun Dance symbols. This is the oldest tribal symbol that we have as Kiowa people, and it was the center of the Sun Dance ceremony. Later on, our mythology came up with ten prayer bundles, medicine bundles. This was another heart of our Kiowa religion, and when the Sioux scares came about, the uprisings in the reservation areas came about, we Kiowas were still doing the Sun Dance. And they brought us to a reservation close to Fort Sill. We were watched by the Fort Sill military and Fort Reno military, the Cheyenne and Arapahos. And so when we started out to have our last Sun Dance, about 1887 I think it was, the military troops came and stopped it. Well, we don't need to go into the details because students can dig these things out. The next phase was this--just about that time we heard of an Indian messiah in Nevada, the Paiute country, Wovoka. The Ghost Dance religion came from that, and our chief, which is my grandfather's older brother, Ahpeatone, was our recognized chief then. His son died, and the promise of these songs as they chant them is that you will see the dead rise, and that a carpet of green grass would cover this earth again, the buffalo would be restored. That's the song, the promise. So our chief made a trip--our relatives gathered money for him and got a nice horse and took some money with him, took a trip up toward Newton, Kansas, and then up Pine Ridge or some place up there. He had relatives up in the Pine Ridge country, he was part Sioux, I'm part Sioux. So he went out to Duck Valley and he found this slothful--that's what he called him, he described him--this person had been among the whites, was raised kind of like an orphan among the white missionary, and he had learned about Christianity and so on, and he could turn a despairing Indian spiritual life into a new religion. We needed a new religion, it is true, but it had to be in the form of a second-hand, ignorant. . . .

SM: Wovoka was called Jack Wilson?
ST: And it had to come through a person like him, which makes it all the more despairing. Ahpeatone observed him carefully—he's an observing man, intelligent man. He saw that he was more interested in the gifts that were coming in from every tribe, everywhere gifts. Of course Ahpeatone felt that that was his main concern, women waiting on him, and so on. And he saw that he was lazy and slothful, and ungainly appearing, and he couldn't cause him to see his son, his dearly beloved beautiful son that died. Wovoka couldn't cause that to happen. He came away disappointed. He came to an agency here at Anadarko with a big gathering of all the tribes, perhaps 23 tribes, including the Caddos, the Wichitas, the Delawares, who were also doing the Ghost Dance for some hope. They were doing this, and the government stepped in again.

SM: Fearful of some gathering that might cause trouble?

ST: There we are again, cut off from a spiritual life we could have understood as native American Indian people. Then from Mexico, the Aztecs, or whatever tribes there are in Mexico, knew about many, many types of herbs. One of them was a peyote. It can be researched too, it takes a good student to really go into that. Anyhow, the next religion we heard of came from the south, the land of ancient Aztecs, Mayans. And the Comanches, being in that area in Texas, the Caddos, and many other tribes, heard of this peyote religion, and it was a beautiful medicine, a flower. That's the way the Kiowa received it, about the 1880's, 1890's. But we received it officially from the Comanches, the Quohada Comanches, Quanah Parker. Our group, the Mt. Scott Kiowas, were out in front. My grandfather, he's a religious man—that's the first generation that's ever had any schooling, Mr. Charles Apekauam—and he was born right close to the Wichita Mountains where the buffalo are. And so he was the first generation, and his father's group was the first that received this peyote religion, the Native American Church later, from the Comanches. The Comanches had received it from the Lipan and Mescalero Apaches, which back in those days were
practically the same, and they had received it from the Aztecs in Mexico. And the plant grows along south of here, along the Rio Grande River, and this was all of our territory, the Kiowas, Comanches and Apaches. This was our hunting and foraging area, all of it. So it does seem logical that we would hear this story of this healing plant, and the flower, the beautiful flower it brings up. And then finally came this ritual through Quanah Parker's Comanches—they live also at the lake bed of Lake Lawtonka, that lake is there now. Comanches lived on the east side of that lake, the Kiowas lived on the north and west side of that lake.

SM: Where is Lake Lawtonka?

ST: Right at the foot of Mt. Scott, at Fort Sill. Anyway, they showed us how to hold this service, this ceremony. You dress up in the finest native things that you can put on, you go into a sweat bath first. And the reason the Kiowas went for it, I believe, was the sweat bath, because we always had that in the Sun Dance. It related, and I suppose because Chief Ahpeatone had discovered fake when he met with all these tribes at Anadarko, he pointed his finger at a man who called himself Chief Sitting Bull. He was an Arapaho—this is not the Sitting Bull of the Sioux—but the Kiowas called him Sitting Bull, I don't know what he was called in Arapaho. This is the Kiowa way. When you have thoroughly investigated something, and discovered some error, after you have gathered all your facts, it's the Kiowa custom to reveal for humanity the wrong that was being perpetrated. Chief Ahpeatone pointed his finger at Chief Sitting Bull in that huge gathering and explained his trip out west to Wovoka, the Indian messiah, and said that he was false, he was a fake, that from this day on there would be no hope in the Ghost Dance for the Kiowa people. But they loved the songs by then; they would sing the songs. My father remembers some of the songs, and I caught some from him, and, of course, he learned it from his grandmother, who were the real
ghost dancers of the tribe. They're my paternal ancestors, and they were leaders of the Ghost Dance. Anyhow [For the Peyote religion] we learned this rigid ceremony, which is an all-night ceremony. But the night before, there was a purification ceremony that we call a sweat bath, in which rocks were heated, put into a hole in a wickiup-like, which was air tight. Then you stimulate your sweating by beating your body with long buffalo grass, and it brought the perspiration. It was a purification ceremony. And when that was over you either went into the creek—it was usually built by a creek—went to swim in this cold stream, or we had cold water set up right by there and they washed off their perspiration from that. And then they felt like they were relaxed and ready for meditation, ready for this serious ceremony of taking the medicine and going through the all-night ceremony of the peyote religion. This was around 1880. For the actual ceremony itself, there is no written document. The Quohada Comanches, for instance, taught our group of Kiowas at Mt. Scott. But we were adjacent to them, and these people who lived on the east side of the lake, and the Kiowas who lived on the northwest side of the lake—that lake bed, you can hear the drum.

SM: From across the lake?

ST: Yes. And so I would say at first it was kind of a lodge, as we understand it, and when I say that we borrow from one another, this is where it applies. I suppose you could say that we Kiowas borrowed this, learned it from another tribe, who in turn learned it from another tribe, who in turn learned it from ancient Aztec and Mayan peoples, who knew about this long, long centuries ago. My grandfather, Apekaum, and a medicine peddler, were the first ones who picked up this religion from the Comanches. And the way they learned it, these songs were perhaps made by Comanches, but to me, as I know singing, they have a basic Apache lilt to them, especially the beautiful songs. A lot of people, Navajos and all these western tribes, reservation
tribes, now say that they're Kiowa and Comanche songs, but if you listen carefully to the ancient songs that were given to us, they've got an Apache lilt to them, the opening and towards the end, and the Apaches from the West and the Navajos love these songs, because they relate to their melodies, basically I mean. But, of course, the Kiowas and Comanches are great singers too, and they add their own little inflections here and there. But when I listened to what music I know--and I know some Apache songs, beautiful, they rise up to a certain way, wind up a certain way, then up again then softly toward the end--that's Apache. But the Kiowas and Comanches put in their own versions, and it adds to the musical balance to the singing. But the way they gave it to us, they gave us an opening song, they gave us a midnight song, gave us a morning song, they gave us a quitting song.

SM: This was in the peyote religion?

ST: The peyote religion. They're disciplined right there. Opening song to open the evening ceremony.

SM: Does this start on a week-end?

ST: Yes, nowadays it does.

SM: It didn't before?

ST: I don't know. It was a matter of curing mostly at the beginning, because Quanah Parker was a sort of a doctor, an Indian doctor, and the paraphernalia he used was a yellow hammer--I suppose it's a variety of woodpecker, and he wears a bunch on his collar. Well, anyway, that was one of the sacred feathers. Now it's on the wild-life list of migratory birds.
SM: Protected?

ST: Yes. See how they're cutting us off again? And then the eagle feathers; the older men, especially the leader of the ceremony, had eagle feathers, the tail of the golden eagle.

SM: Did they choose the leader?

ST: No, you joined this Native American Church. The Christian people who preferred Christianity never attended, never. From then on, they were white people. This was a day when the Indians still had integrity, especially our older people. There was no halfway. All the way or nothing.

SM: Then there wasn't this merging?

ST: No sir. These people dug deeper into their spiritual way.

SM: Then they enter into this new peyote religion which comes to be called the Native American Church?

ST: And this is some of the philosophies that I found. It is a new religion. You can satisfy your spiritual longing. For instance, the Kiowas were cut off from their Sun Dance, from their Ghost Dance. You can satisfy that because you are permitted to pray in whatever language that you have, because only the ceremony was passed over. You used your own language, and, of course, there was no word for Jesus, there was no word for white God, Father, and Christian utterings. It was only the Creator, the Creator of the universe, and this is the word that is used in the Native American Church. In the Christian church you hear the "Father, Jesus, Son of God." But, of course, the Kiowa language had no such words.

SM: What is the word for the Supreme Power Force or God?
ST: De-moy-um-kay, means Creator of the universe. That's about as descriptive as you can get. There is no literal translation. But remember, I said we borrow from one another. The way we received it, with these four songs that held the discipline together all night long, the opening song, the midnight song, the morning song and the quitting song, that's one way to tell that it came from the Comanches. Another way to tell is this. When the water is brought in at midnight, what you would consider a princess, would bring in the water with Indian paraphernalia. A young girl or woman, whoever was given the responsibility, dressed in native—everything has to be native to that tribe that's holding that ceremony. And she brings in the water, and there's a ceremony, a ritual that goes with this. I won't go into detail because you can find it in research, but other tribes do not have the woman in their ceremonies. The Kiowas and Comanches do. I don't know of any Comanche group that doesn't have this woman bringing in, but the Caddos, they probably knew this before the Comanches, because they were down there with the Comanches in Texas. They do not have a woman to bring in the water, it's a man.

SM: A young Potawatomi man said that the women do come in and assist.

ST: See, there's two versions. One does not have the woman in there; the other, like the way we learned it, the Kiowas learned it from the Comanches, does come in with the full regalia—everything, with the water. And this is where we borrow from one another. It begins to then take on different forms today. Today there's every denomination of Christianity within many peyote meetings, because they don't know their own language now. As we received the religion, we didn't speak English, we spoke some Comanche; we were able to pick up from the Comanche the spiritual words which we quickly made into Kiowa. And we already had our word for the Creator—Comanches didn't have to tell us this. They have their own beautiful prayers in their own language, but our group of Kiowas—remember we were adjacent to the
Comanches—we lived with the Quohada Comanches on the last raids. Our people all spoke Comanche, without exception. Every one of our Kiowas spoke Comanche, so we could always interpret into our own, and when we picked this religion from the Comanches we were able to substitute our own words, and De-moy-um-kay was one of the first ones that we used for the Creator in that religion. And we needed a new religion, but at the same time the missionaries came among the Kiowa people they didn't speak a word of English, but they educated a few in mission schools and had them as interpreters. So while the Protestant and Catholic Kiowa were advancing in Christianity, the Native American Church was advancing also in the Kiowa Tribe. You could say in one sense that the Kiowa language went into the Native American Church, and the Kiowa language also went into the Protestant and Catholic Churches, because they began to create hymns out of our language, both Christian and Native American Church. But the most inspired prayers that I have heard, the most sincere, were those that I heard inside of a peyote meeting, in their own language. The Christians try to speak English when they pray, and it's just pidgeon English—thou's and thy's and wilt's and all that kind of thing. I mean, where in the world are they going to use that kind of language? But that's the way they do today; but our Indian people kept their inspirational prayers together in there, and today it's still very good, even though they're educated and they speak the English language. This Kiowa Native American Church, it exists today. It's interesting, or natural, I suppose, to say that there should be an attempt to go complete Kiowa in this Native American Church, even though it was learned from another tribe. To put our own prayers, our own songs, our own language, into a complete Kiowa ceremony.

SM: Has it ever been written down by anyone?

ST: Some of it has.

SM: Could you explain more about how the ceremony unfolds?
ST: Well, a lot of this has already been done, but for me to try to give a fresh viewpoint... I think I’ve covered it when I said we borrow from one another. There are 23 tribes in western Oklahoma. If each tribe had several splits of this Native American Church, they could hold it a little differently from one another. There are many variations, but it’s mostly Christianity today. But when we received it, it was almost pure, and we still practice it fairly close to the original, because when our people go into a meeting, they dress in the finest things they can find. In the Crow reservation country, they wear just ordinary Levis and boots, nothing dressed up, they just dress to rough it out, like on a picnic. So some of the things that you’ll find are going to be different. At midnight, though, comes a sort of a time like the Catholics—we don’t know where these customs come from, they’re rituals. At midnight everyone brings out their featherwork like he has, prayer feathers, and they’re all handed in to the father or the leader. He takes all of these feathers and he holds them over the fire, and he puts cedar, special cedar on those coals, and as the incense comes up he takes all these bundles of feathers, blesses them with the incense, and so forth, and hands them back out, and from then on they can use those feathers till morning. And some of the coincidences occur that are mistaken, but what’s the use of correcting them, because it’s taking such weird break-out forms now. And one is this. At midnight the leader wants to call attention to the Creator, that they have worshipped faithfully up to that point, and they tend to go till sunrise. So he takes an eagle bone whistle, he goes to the east, makes a little prayer, blows, goes to the south, makes a little prayer and blows, goes to the west, makes a little prayer and blows, goes to the north, makes a little prayer, and blows the eagle bone whistle. Then he comes in. Then at this mound that’s in front of the leader inside the tepee, the fire is here, and the sacred sage, and the peyote, resting on it is at the head of that mound, open to east, the top of the mound is right in front of the leader.
SM: He sits at the west?

ST: Yes. Theoretically there is a cross right in the center where he blows to the east, south, west and the north, where those points cross is a holy, sacred thing among the Indian people. And so it was easy for them to convert some of their philosophies and thinkings to American Christianity, the sign of the cross, the incense, they could understand those things. But where the real difference is to me, as a student of history, is this. This is a young nation. Jesus is comparatively new, 1975 years ago. This plant was known thousands of years before Jesus. They say the Creator created this plant as a medicine and as a flower. No one knows how much longer than Jesus' story.

SM: One Indian participant said, "You have Jesus, we have peyote." Is that fair?

ST: That's fair enough, because I think Christianity is almost worldwide. 'Course you have Mohammedanism, and so on. The Jewish religion has Jesus. But some of my people ask these questions. "Why was Jesus never married? Why did he associate with men only? He seems like a queer person. He died young, never married, was illegitimate ... a vague story about that." So these are some of the questions they ask, and the missionaries never answered them. They just forced this religious thinking on them. As a matter of fact, they were very authoritative, from what I read. They said, "This is the devil's road." And this was my father, and my paternal grandparents on that side, my grandparents on this side, who seemed to have a beautiful, spiritual way of thinking. He was the first generation that ever went to school, my Uncle Charlie. My mother only had access to about the third grade in mission school. But somehow he went on, he went to college, he went to school up here at Edmond, and he was in the World War I Navy. He said, "I fought for the freedom of religion."
This was his thinking. So he joined the Native American Church that his father originated at Mt. Scott, and he stayed with it to the end, he was faithful. But he's intelligent. He's not one of our Christian people here who are mixed up between this culture and his own culture, and who is weak in academic studies, and so forth. He was about everything. He made 16 crossings, he was in the U.S. Navy. The first generation of Indians. Now most people can't see that. I'm the second generation. The third generation of our people is at Penn State getting his doctorate.

SM: Tremendously rapid change.

ST: It can be done in one generation, but from there it's a great big gap and jump to the second generation that can get inspired and do this. At Carlyle we had the first generation of Kiowas up there. They knew they were aristocrats. They knew they were from well-born Kiowa tribes and Sioux, and yet they were so inept at this contemporary culture that swept over them like a river. At Carlyle they were just like children in this new culture. So some of them, in order to get help perhaps, for personal reasons, joined the Christian churches, the different denominations. Two of our Kiowas became ordained as ministers in the first generation, just like him.

SM: Did he also?

ST: No, he became a sort of a native American priest like, and helped a lot of historians. He helped write books. Dr. Weston LaBarre, from Duke University, had him as a field worker. This is Charles Apekaum, and he did the field work, not only for Dr. Weston LaBarre, but for others. We're descendants on my mother's side from Dohauison, a Kiowa chief that ruled for 30 years among the Kiowa people. He favors that line. I favor more Stumbling Bear, heavy, big physical features. Chief Stumbling Bear and Chief Kicking Bird were peace Indians. And
they ordered their descendants—we belong to his camp—he told us to get an education, and to us that is law, that's law to us. He must have been inspired by some statesman-like quality within him, or else he was a great student. Stumbling Bear and Kicking Bird were great students of Doohauson, and Doohauson always admired and wanted to share this land of ours with the white people. He only knew the tepee way of life, but his wife was neat and clean. He got cattle, and he was the first one to own a wagon among the Kiowas, and those were great sources of pride. So our people, while they were hostile, in many ways are beginning to see hopes in this young country, especially since the Watergate mess. And there was a lot of despair that I saw personally. I saw many, many good American people shaken by this. I told them that this government hasn't had a fair trial yet, and it's just growing pains. I said, "You have the best potential of any country, any time, on the face of this earth to set up a government that would open the way for human development." I said, "Here are the different races of the world, here in America, and the American government hasn't been fair to the Negro. It has bound him like in chains. But this country, it has great potential to develop and make up for those 200 years, in the future." And I said, "Some of we Indians now are putting our faith to this young country, even though historically we do not put in a lot of faith in the younger generation; we believe in wisdom of the older generations." That was our philosophy, but in this case, since this young nation has boldly stood up against bullies, and is trying to make redress, is the reason I say this. It may seem that I am taken over completely by this modern young American government, but I have reasons. I used to serve on a tribal council about 36 years ago. We started to fight then to get redress from this United States Government for this very territory that I mentioned—Texas, New Mexico, Colorado, Kansas, and a lot of this Oklahoma territory. We recently won a case, after 36 years, with the United States Government, and we will recover about $35,000,000 from that.
SM: There is a little hope...?

ST: That's exactly it. You bet there's hope! In this young country there are channels where you can get justice even though it takes years and years and years. I wish I could tell this to the reservation people—to educate their young children, to learn the facts and tell it to this young government. It tries to be honest, it tries to give redress whenever it's reasonable. Sure we've got bureaucrats, but if you educate your children they can find the channels of justice in this country. And 36 years, it may seem awfully long, but I served on that council; I was a veteran of World War II; I got my college education here at the University of Oklahoma, and I dedicated a portion of my life towards this redress, and I felt it was my responsibility as a member of a new generation. But our young fellows, like I and two or three Comanche boys, World War II veterans, we set out to use the resources of this university—a professor, Dr. Wardell, a history professor—to set out the background of our claims. Then we got the finest attorneys that we could afford. It's a different way of getting redress, perhaps, but still this young government, it's new too, it doesn't know all the ways to give redress, and so we found ways. And so I have faith in a young government that tries to be fair, and there's opportunities here. It's just going to take a little while to become adapted and adjusted to this new way of life, because the thousands of years it took us to develop our languages and our way of spiritual life has got to be offset with something else that's worthwhile, something that's worthy. And if we put aside our past, and become educated in this new American young government, put all of our faith in this thing, it better be right. Because if it isn't, we have rejected our Creator, and we'll go down with you.