Review Essay

New Religions and Old Ways

Kiowa Religious Change and Continuity in a Time of Upheaval

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The Gods of Indian Country: Religion and the Struggle for the American West. By Jennifer Graber. Oxford University Press, 2018. 312 pages. $35.95 cloth; ebook available.

Religious Revitalization Among the Kiowas: The Ghost Dance, Peyote, and Christianity. By Benjamin R. Kracht. University of Nebraska Press, 2018. 342 pages. $75.00 cloth; ebook available.

Crafting an Indigenous Nation: Kiowa Expressive Culture in the Progressive Era. By Jenny Tone-Pah-Hote. University of North Carolina Press, 2019. 162 pages. $90.00 cloth; $29.95 paper; ebook available.

The Kiowa Indian Tribe of Oklahoma is a sovereign Indigenous nation with historic ties to what is now the Southern Plains region of the United States. Kiowas have a distinct history, language, culture, and religion. The nineteenth century brought significant changes to practitioners of Kiowa religious traditions. In October of

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1867, members of the Kiowa, Comanche, Kiowa-Apache, Southern Cheyenne, and Arapaho nations signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty (a singular descriptor for what was actually a series of treaties) with the U.S. government. As more Euro-Americans had moved West following the Civil War, settlers and the U.S. military disrupted and attacked Native communities whose lands they sought to claim. Warriors from Native nations throughout the Plains had resisted the intrusions, at times with deadly violence. The U.S. government, concerned about the cost of continuing armed engagements, wished to establish a military truce with Native nations. But more than that, the federal government wanted to pressure Native Americans to change their ways of life in order to, theoretically, reduce tensions between the original inhabitants of the Plains and the predominantly white settlers who encroached upon Native lands—including lands that had been specifically designated as Indian Territory.

The Medicine Lodge Treaty ushered in the assimilation era as the U.S. federal government sought to transform Native lifeways. By restructuring nearly every aspect of Native individual and communal life—including those rooted in multifaceted connections to their homelands—architects of assimilation policies believed that that they could minimize Native dependence on large territories, thus opening lands for non-Native use. The treaty established the Kiowa-Comanche-Apache (KCA) reservation in what is now Oklahoma, which radically reduced Native territory. Christian missionaries, enlisted to serve as reservation administrators, came to be the adjudicators of traditional cultural practices. In the assimilation era, Plains Natives had to contend with the hard power of the federal government and the soft power of Christianity in efforts to survive settler colonialism.

Scholarship on new Indigenous religions frequently draws on the theory of "revitalization movements," which some have critiqued for placing too much emphasis on external factors that influence the development of new religions. Three recently published books help to move this conversation forward in productive ways. Scholars Jennifer Graber, Benjamin Kracht, and Jenny Tone-Pah-Hote highlight the challenges facing the Kiowa community as well as how Kiowas drew on religion as they adapted, changed, and persevered in this period. Each book is shaped by the author's perspective on American religious history, anthropology, or Native American and Indigenous studies. But read together, these three books offer scholars of new religions valuable insights into the religious and cultural changes that Kiowas underwent during this tumultuous period. Further, this Kiowa case study offers important lessons for students and scholars interested in new religious movements among Native American nations more broadly.

Jennifer Graber's *The Gods of Indian Country: Religion and the Struggle for the American West* is a significant study of Indigenous sovereignty, U.S.

governance, and religious adaptation on the Plains. A professor of Religious Studies and an affiliate faculty member in Native American and Indigenous Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, Graber masterfully draws together Indigenous and Euro-American sources to document spiritual competition over the fate of Kiowas and other Native nations during a period of American expansion. She demonstrates that Kiowa individuals and communities drew on new and old forms of religion as they resisted efforts on the part of Euro-Americans to challenge and change their ways of life.

The Gods of Indian Country depicts Kiowa religion as an ever-evolving site of power and contestation. The book opens with a brief discussion of the Kiowas' 1873 Sun Dance, emphasizing that even when practicing "traditional" or long-standing ceremonies, when circumstances demanded it Kiowas already drew upon sacred power through established ways *and* new ways. Religious innovation, in other words, was not new to the Kiowa. This opening vignette highlights the recurring theme of access to sacred power—*dwdw*—that continues throughout the book. Offering essential historical and political context to developments of the assimilation era, Graber describes the role of religion in key U.S. federal Indian policies. These encompass the removal policies in the 1830s (which wrested Native nations throughout the East and Midwest from their original homelands); President Ulysses S. Grant's 1868 "Peace Policy" (which placed Christian missionaries as administrators of reservations); and the 1887 Dawes Act (which partitioned communally-held reservation lands into individual plots and transferred ownership of "excess" plots to non-Natives).

A primary contribution of Graber's book is her analysis of the roles of so-called "friends of the Indian" in the administration of Indian policies. These friends were white Protestants who maintained that they had Native Americans' best interests in mind when they advocated for assimilation policies. Through a careful reading of sources, Graber demonstrates that Kiowas selectively engaged in new religious rituals and ideas, drawing on sacred sources of power to mitigate policies that specifically targeted their traditions for elimination. This included their adaptation of the Ghost Dance, which took the form of the Feather Dance among the Kiowa, the use of peyote as a sacrament in what would become the Native American Church, and selective incorporation of elements from Catholicism and Protestantism. Throughout the book, Graber demonstrates how Kiowas explored new ways to draw on existing forms of sacred power that would enable them to maintain key aspects of their lives and societies.

The Gods of Indian Country is divided into three parts. "Open Lands" covers the period from 1803 to 1867, "Closed Lands" covers 1868–1881, and "Divided Lands" concludes with 1882–1903. Early chapters document efforts on the part of the U.S. government to learn more about

lands that were home to the Kiowa and other nations and Christian missionary work among the Kiowa. Later chapters describe the imprisonment of Kiowa men in Fort Marion, Florida, as well as the establishment of day schools and boarding schools for Native children. Prisons and schools each had parallel goals of disciplining Native subjects. While Graber does draw on expected sources—including government reports and documents from Christian missionaries engaged with missionization—she makes a significant effort to draw on Indigenous documentary evidence as well. She analyzes a variety of Kiowa sources, including painted shields and tipis, calendar entries, and drawings. These sources record Kiowas' reactions to policies that greatly impacted their families. In addition to offering a valuable window into historical Kiowa perspectives, Graber also usefully situates her story within a larger context of white Protestant supremacy. Indian assimilation efforts occurred amidst violence against Black individuals and families, anti-Asian sentiments and legislation, antisemitism, concerns about immigration from Eastern Europe, and anti-Catholicism. *The Gods of Indian Country* is a must-read for scholars interested in the intersection of American religious history and Native American and Indigenous religions.

For another perspective on Kiowa religious change beginning in the nineteenth century, Benjamin R. Kracht analyzes the adoption of new religions among the Kiowa within an anthropological framework. A professor of Anthropology at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, Kracht has been studying Kiowa ritual and belief since 1987. In *Religious Revitalization Among the Kiowas: The Ghost Dance, Peyote, and Christianity*, he uses anthropological methods and theories to analyze new forms of religious experience that developed among the Kiowa after the creation of the KCA Reservation in 1869. Like Graber, Kracht examines Kiowa engagement in the Ghost Dance, Christianity, and peyote traditions, including the Native American Church. His data include historical anthropological reports and his own long-term ethnographic research, incorporating decades' worth of participant observations and interviews. He draws heavily on anthropological theory, employing the concepts of revitalization, syncretism, and redemptive and expressive movements to explain the adoption of new religions among the Kiowa. Kracht's study, deeply rooted in the discipline of anthropology, does not always reflect recent critiques of revitalization theories proffered by scholars of new religions. It nonetheless offers a valuable contribution for scholars and students in this area.

Kracht's lengthy, detailed chapters are also divided by time period and topic. He begins by discussing Kiowa culture in the nineteenth century before moving to examinations of Christianity, peyote traditions, and the Ghost Dance from the creation of the KCA Reservation onward. Kracht's narrative extends beyond Graber's, tracing Kiowa Christianity and Native American Church participation after World

War II. Part of Kracht's study, like Graber's, is devoted to Euro-American Christian missionary activity among the Kiowa. Kracht covers Quaker, Methodist, Presbyterian, Baptist, and Catholic missions, including the creation of schools and churches. He considers the ways that Kiowas adopted and adapted Christian messages, in time spreading their own versions.

In addition, he describes the introduction of peyote to the Kiowa. The ritual consumption of peyote had been a longstanding tradition in Mexico, and by the mid-nineteenth century the practice had spread among members of the Kiowa community. Aspects of the tradition drew on Mexican practices, but Kiowas incorporated it into their own traditions. Throughout his descriptions of rituals involving peyote, Kracht notes ways in which this "new" tradition nonetheless drew on previous aspects of Kiowa ceremony—for example, the organization of the ceremonial space, movements within the space, prayers, feasting, and the use of sweat lodges and other forms of physical and ritual purification.

Another focus of Kracht's study is Kiowa interest in the Ghost Dance, which originated from the visions of the Paiute man Wovoka. Combining Christian apocalypticism with earlier forms of dancing, this ceremony became popular among numerous Native nations, including the Kiowa. *Religious Revitalization Among the Kiowas* includes detailed descriptions of historical dances provided by participants who were present and by anthropologists or missionaries who witnessed them. Kracht describes how the Ghost Dances helped participants to maintain a sense of Kiowa identity and subvert impositions from white Americans. Some participants incorporated Christian elements into the new practice. Others adopted the Ghost Dance while refusing other forms of cultural innovations, such as the houses that the government and missionaries wanted them to build. Ultimately, Kracht takes care to note that not all Kiowas were necessarily interested in, or approved of, this new tradition.

Kracht describes how Euro-American federal Indian agents and missionaries sought to control Kiowa engagement in self-determined religious practices, as does Graber. Missionaries portrayed Ghost Dance camps very negatively. Federal agents threatened, cajoled, and sought to prevent Kiowas from participating in the dances through the withholding of essential rations. Because Kracht's intensive study closely tracks his detailed sources, he offers less of a broader narrative about the role of religion in U.S. settler colonialism, which Graber's book helpfully addresses. His later chapters discuss the progression of these practices after World War II, including the ways some divisions have lingered between adherents of the Native American Church and Christian denominations that do not draw on peyote. Ultimately, Kracht succeeds in showing the many ways Kiowas blended religious and cultural forms, while simultaneously documenting the longstanding diversity of opinions among Kiowas about religious innovations.

A final book offers another noteworthy and important perspective on Kiowa religion and culture during this era of forced assimilation. Tragically, Jenny Tone-Pah-Hote (Kiowa), Associate Professor of American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, lost a battle with leukemia shortly after the 2019 publication of *Crafting an Indigenous Nation: Kiowa Expressive Culture in the Progressive Era*. Her book examines Kiowa material culture and survival in the same time period that Graber and Kracht view through historical and anthropological lenses. An expert in American and Native American and Indigenous Studies (NAIS), Tone-Pah-Hote does not foreground the category of religion—something that is not unusual in American Studies and NAIS scholarship. Nonetheless, she briefly describes the religious changes of the assimilation era that Graber and Kracht take up in more detail. Furthermore, analyses of religion are present through her discussions of Kiowa ceremonialism, peyote use, dances, and material culture. As a singular contribution to accounts of Kiowa expressive culture, drawing on important contributions from her own family's history, her book is a valuable source for scholars interested in new religious movements among the Kiowa.

As Tone-Pah-Hote observes, her book does not concentrate on famous events or leaders. Instead, she examines ordinary people—how they "lived, died, and carried on about the business of being Kiowa during and after the reservation era" (xiii). In order to explore this theme, Tone-Pah-Hote turns to what she describes as "expressive culture"—including visual culture, art, performance, music, and dance. Tone-Pah-Hote resists the arbitrary hierarchy between "arts" and "crafts," considering a range of items under the single category of expressive culture that might otherwise be sorted into one or the other classification, including silver jewelry, beaded clothing, and paintings. She also analyzes the modes of production and use of these objects. This approach is similar to the way she addresses religion throughout the book—generally not directly, but as a feature of broader Kiowa culture and society. By studying Kiowa expressive culture, the author seeks to show that, despite the turmoil of the assimilation era, Kiowas were able to maintain important aspects of their cultural identity. As they created pieces of art, jewelry, and regalia, Kiowas were also crafting a sense of identity, asserting their sovereignty, and resisting externally imposed changes.

Tone-Pah-Hote draws on an array of sources in her study, including archival documents, images, objects, and stories. Each chapter in *Crafting an Indigenous Nation* begins with a close analysis of a particular example of Kiowa expressive culture. The author's careful readings of her sources, including photographs documenting the use of objects, offer insight into how cultural production served as a powerful way for Kiowas to mediate challenging political demands. Chapters explore

Kiowa participation in public cultural gatherings, silversmithing and connections between jewelry and religious traditions, dancing and powwows, and women's creative practices, including beadwork.

Taken together, these texts offer several notable insights. First, it is important for scholars of new religions to recognize that Christianity itself can be considered a new religious movement among Indigenous communities. Often, scholars focus on so-called prophetic movements such as the Ghost Dance when considering emergent Indigenous religions. How might scholars benefit from thinking about the spread of Christianity among Indigenous communities not as conversion to a longstanding religion, but as the development of a new form of religion or spirituality? Based on insights from these authors, I believe this could profoundly shape our understanding of Indigenous religious agency.

In addition, these books model the importance of drawing on Native sources, which each author accomplishes in different ways—through texts, oral histories, or material culture. Graber extends her use of common forms of historical documentary evidence to include Kiowa sources, offering meaningful interpretations of drawings and calendars. *The Gods of Indian Country* includes eight color plates and forty-two figures, allowing readers to see and appreciate these sources. In addition, Graber worked with the Kiowa Tribal Museum in Carnegie, Oklahoma to digitize Kiowa calendars online at https://kiowacalendars.org. Kracht revisits narratives from historical ethnographic reports and weaves them together with knowledge gained during his own long-term fieldwork. This enables him to present generations of insight from Kiowa religious practitioners. Finally, Tone-Pah-Hote provides readings of a variety of forms of Kiowa material culture, drawing on teachings from her community. This personal knowledge paired with astute analysis offers a multilayered form of insight that is at once emic and etic. These Indigenous sources greatly enrich and deepen our understanding of Kiowa culture.

Notably, each of these texts, though centered on the past, addresses contemporary Kiowa culture. While Graber's historical analysis ends in 1903, her epilogue addresses the legacy of this history. She reflects on the 500-year anniversary of Columbus' incursion into the Americas and the growing acknowledgment of the role of Christianity in colonization. She also considers her own visits to Kiowa country where she was able to witness the continuing activity of historic Kiowa warrior societies. Kracht begins and ends his narrative with vignettes of his time spent with a respected Kiowa elder who embodied many of the blended spiritual qualities he documents throughout his book. Near the end of her book, Tone-Pah-Hote writes about the ways that Kiowas in the early twenty-first century have continued to build on the forms of expressive culture she describes. These books emphasize change as well as continuity, helping to demonstrate that Kiowas employed new religious and cultural

forms as a means of preserving important earlier aspects of tradition for future generations.

As a final consideration for scholars of religion, it is important to point out that some books in Native American and Indigenous studies that are essential to understanding Indigenous perspectives about religion may not formally use the term religion itself or may do so only minimally or tangentially. (For example, there is no index entry for religion in Tone-Pah-Hote's book, even though she does discuss it.) This is due, in part, to the ways that scholars historically treated Indigenous religions. Each of these books documents how those in power—Christian missionaries, federal Indian agents, lawmakers—dismissed Kiowa practices. Historical scholarship, including academic studies of religion, perpetuated simplistic or racialized assumptions about Indigenous cultural practices that scholars now would place under the rubric of religion. As the authors show, facets of Kiowa religion and spirituality are tied to many other facets of life and society, challenging some assumptions about religion as something that is separate or set apart from everyday life.

These three books are valuable for scholars seeking to understand how external pressures have shaped and altered Indigenous religions. In addition, they document the ways that Native traditions have persisted despite these pressures. They demonstrate in excellent detail the ways in which Kiowa communities have drawn on sacred power and ceremony to strengthen their self-determination.

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