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## ARTICLE

### **YEE P'AY GYAH MAW TAME AIM:**

### **The Kiowa Clemente Course in the Humanities and Two Perspectives on Poverty**

Rachel C. Jackson

University of Oklahoma and the Meredith Indigenous Humanities Center

In 2007, the state of Oklahoma celebrated its centennial year. In 1907, Oklahoma was admitted as the 46<sup>th</sup> state of the union of the United States, an act that simultaneously joined what had previously been two separate territories – Oklahoma Territory and Indian Territory. For a great many people, this highly politicized event marked a joyous passage, the result of much debate and compromise and the culmination of sacrifice and success. Yet both at the time of Oklahoma's statehood and one hundred years later during the centennial celebrations, not all of the people affected by statehood agreed that Oklahoma's passage into the union as one political body was a positive step forward. To Oklahoma's native people, statehood was and remains only another dark milestone in a long history of injustice, oppression, and cultural loss. Celebrating the state's centennial in 2007 was, from such a perspective, more closely akin to celebrating state-sanctioned genocide and theft. One hundred years after Oklahoma's statehood, these two perspectives had yet to be reconciled, and only one of them – the dominant culture - was given voice in the centennial activities and commemorations that occurred statewide.

The state of Oklahoma reached another milestone in its centennial year. According to an Associated Press article published August 28, 2007, "while the nation's poverty rate dropped, the number of Oklahomans living in poverty continued to climb" (Oklahoma's Poverty, 2007). The article continues, "the number of Oklahomans living in poverty in 2006 reached 17%, tying Oklahoma with Kentucky for the seventh-highest rate in the country, according to the US Census Bureau's American Community Service figures" (Oklahoma's Poverty). This information was not widely disseminated amidst 2007 celebrations heralding the state's many accomplishments, despite the fact that Oklahoma's history and cultural identity are rich with the experiences of the poor, many of whom came here in a desperate, hopeful search of a new economic start in what had been billed by the federal government as "unassigned lands." In actuality those lands belonged to people of diverse and proud tribal cultures.

Tribal economies, in some cases already damaged by contact with western economic constructs, clashed with the capitalist economy spreading rapidly into the region as townships and businesses boomed and new land holders "improved [their] claim" (Hoig, 2007). The means through which tribes sustained themselves, all of which were deeply culturally relevant, quickly became inadequate under the force of capitalism and the influence of a system of individual ownership and competition. Tribes that had practiced cooperative communitarianism as a way of life for centuries had to adjust in order to survive. According to recent poverty statistics of Oklahoma counties with a high percentage of native residents, the economic adjustment is not complete -- even a century later.

Caddo County is just one of these counties in Oklahoma. Located in southwestern Oklahoma, the town sits among the lands of the Wichita, Caddo, Delaware, Kiowa, Comanche and Apache tribes, on the south bank of the fertile Washita River. Caddo County is part of the original reservation lands assigned to the Comanche, Kiowa, and Apache tribes, beginning with the 1867 Medicine Lodge Treaty. The federal government would not allow them to leave the land they had inhabited voluntarily for many generations. In 2006, the Oklahoma State Department of Health's "State of the County's Health Report" states, "21.7 % of persons living in Caddo County for whom poverty status was known had an income below what was needed to live at the poverty level. Caddo County is 48% above the state (14.7%) and 75% above the nation (12.4%) for persons with incomes below the federal level"

("State," 2008). In this same report, with figures based on the 2000 Census, 24% of the population in Caddo County is identified as Native American ("State," 2008).

In the fall of 2000, the Kiowa Clemente Class began in Anadarko, Oklahoma, the Caddo County seat. It was the culmination of the work of many good people and was a grassroots effort from its inception. The group was led by the work of two western scholars, one of whom was Earl Shorris, the author of *New American Blues: A Journey Through Poverty to Democracy* (1997) and *Riches for the Poor: The Clemente Course in the Humanities* (2000). In 1995, Shorris began the first Clemente Course in the Humanities in New York City's Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center, after which the course was named (Shorris, 2000, p.121). Under the guidance of his theory and previous work, and with examples of other courses that had been based on his design, everyone involved in the process felt a strong sense of purpose in developing the course.

Primary among those reasons was the desire to preserve and promote the indigenous humanities and intellectual traditions of Oklahoma's native peoples, which includes their languages; to build a better bridge between the Native American population in Oklahoma and higher education opportunities; to give them access to a democratic experience in the classroom; and to critically question assumptions made by Native Americans and Euro-Americans alike in regards to each other.

Ultimately the group's hope was to inspire a more democratic and equitable relationship between the two cultures. At the core of this reasoning, as evidenced in Shorris's theory, was the supreme belief that the study of the humanities provides the experience of personal liberation -- from the realm of reaction to force, to the world of reflection and political action (Shorris, 1997, p. 305). Shorris holds that the only people to fix the problems of the poor should be the poor themselves, empowered by autonomy and democracy. "Coming into possession of the faculty of reflection and the skills of politics leads to a choice for the poor" (p. 390), without which they are otherwise coerced into dependence upon and alienation from power.

However, the Kiowa Clemente Course added a new and equally powerful hypothesis to the Clemente model, particularly relevant to the experience of indigenous people in Oklahoma, that this liberating characteristic was true of the humanities in any culture and that all humanities' traditions were equally valuable in that regard. To emphasize only western humanities is to emphasize European traditions and perspectives, and thus perpetuate the disregard of the intellectual traditions of native cultures. Studying Kiowa humanities and western humanities side-by-side is intended to double the benefits to Kiowa students taking the class. Not only would they gain access to the kind of study of the western humanities generally reserved for the privileged and influential, but they would also gain deeply valuable access to the cultural knowledge of tribal Elders and participate in the much-needed preservation of Kiowa language and ways. It seemed to everyone involved that the two perspectives voiced equally in the classroom would be the better model of democracy in Oklahoma.

The curriculum was named in Kiowa YEE P'AY GYAH MAW TAME AIM, meaning "two ways of learning" or "two ways of knowing." It was designed through a dialogue inspired and facilitated by Dr. Howard Meredith, Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma (USAO) in Chickasha, 20 miles east of Anadarko. The participants in the dialogue included Kiowa Elders, U.S.A.O. American Indian Studies program undergraduates, and U.S.A.O. western humanities faculty. The course was originally funded through a grant from the Oklahoma Humanities Council, and U.S.A.O. granted college credit hours for the course.

Jay Goombi, both a Kiowa and a student of the late Dr. Meredith, actively contributed to the work that went into the course design and served as a facilitator for the course in its first few years. In his recollections of the original aims of the course, he uses the example of a traditional Caddo dance to

explain the guiding principle behind the concept of YEE P'AY GYAH MAW TAME AIM. The Caddo tribe, the Kadohadacho in their own language, “lived in southeastern Oklahoma at the time of Anglo-American contact” (Meredith, 2007). In the Caddos’ ceremonial Turkey Dance, the drum is placed in the middle and the dancers mimic the behavior of turkey hens when they come upon a new object. The hens approach the object and inspect it, then back away, and then come in from another angle to inspect it again from a different view. The Turkey Dancers do the same: They group together and come in to a certain spot to inspect the drum, and then back away to come in again from another angle. To the Caddo, this symbolizes the spiritual and intellectual practice of viewing an object of consideration from many perspectives in order to best understand it (Goombi, 2008).

To Meredith, this example from Caddo culture had powerful relevance to the relationship between the dominant western culture and the native cultures of Oklahoma. Seeing an issue through the lens of only one perspective, especially the western perspective, does not humanize or democratize native students. He believed that in Oklahoma, in particular, teaching only the western humanities would be to perpetuate the mistakes of the past and alienate Kiowa students even further from their own cultural traditions, as well as from democracy. For him, the only proper model for the curriculum was a comparative model, to view a topic through both lenses, be it in regards to history, philosophy, literature, government or the arts. Instead of drawing from only the western humanities canon, Dr. Meredith believed the class should draw from both (Goombi).

Goombi also recounts the wishes of the Kiowa Elders who were asked for direction in designing the course. Of course, they wanted the course to begin with a meal: By tradition in Kiowa gatherings, the body must be nourished before the spirit can be nourished. When asked what they wished to be accomplished in such a class, they had two goals: to preserve Kiowa ways and language, and to understand why western society behaves the way it does (Goombi, 2008). As did Meredith, the Elders saw both goals as significant for any student who would take the class; one would give them a renewed sense of cultural identity, and the other would enable them to participate in the dominate western culture with more autonomy.

I began teaching the Kiowa Clemente Course in the Humanities in the fall of 2007, several years after the pilot course. The culmination of a year of centennial fervor was to occur in November, with Oklahoma’s official Statehood Day on the 16<sup>th</sup>. There were heightened dialogue and discontent in indigenous communities regarding the lack of the full truth in the centennial events, including protests of land run reenactments being held in elementary schools across the state without regard to the perspective of native children and their families.

I taught the class alongside Kiowa Elder and Anadarko High School Kiowa language teacher Alecia Keahbone Gonzales, who celebrated her 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday during the course of the academic year. Gonzales, a Grandmother to many in her tribe, holds a Master’s degree in speech pathology from the University of Oklahoma and also teaches Kiowa language classes at U.S.A.O. She has authored both a Kiowa language textbook entitled *Thaum Khoiye Tdoen Gyah: Beginning Kiowa Language* (2001), and a series of children’s books in which she records, translates and explains traditional Kiowa lullabies. Together we designed a curriculum that adhered to the model used in previous semesters by presenting the western and Kiowa perspectives on selected topics for the students to examine, discuss and compare. Through the fall and spring trimesters, topics included the journey of the hero, colonialism, property and ownership, government and leadership, justice, death, and self-image. With both Shorris’ and Meredith’s visions in mind, I suggested to Gonzales the topic of poverty as the focus of a class toward the end of the spring trimester, and she agreed.

That evening, I brought a poem and a short story both commonly taught in American Literature survey courses, William Carlos Williams’ “Pastoral” and Toni Cade Bambara’s “The Lesson.” I also brought

statistics about poverty in Caddo County, where the students of the course live and work. As with each Kiowa Clemente Class and according to Kiowa tradition, we began with dinner and the Kiowa language lesson led by Gonzales. Afterwards, I led the students in a discussion of the two texts from American literature, after presenting the Census Bureau's poverty statistics about Caddo County.

Williams' imagist poem creates a certain and somewhat jarring irony. He juxtaposes his expectations of success for himself in his youth with an unexpected aesthetic appreciation of poverty through the use of the image of what must have been low-income housing that he passed on his walks to make his pediatric house calls in Rutherford, New Jersey. He describes the colors of the roofs, and the chaos and clutter of the yards and fences. He might as well have been describing parts of Anadarko, where Caddo County's 21.7% poverty level finds its way into Native families and homes. He uses these oddly pleasant images as a means to appreciate the ordinary and mundane, as his poems typically do, but Williams also captures the same phenomenon that Shorris would call the *surround of force* in *New American Blues*.

Within the surround of force, people live in poverty and panic. They scurry, going from place to place, looking for food, a new apartment, medical care for a child. The iron wall of the surround pens them into limited areas, but the panic inside the surround has no limits; they may do nothing and everything, suffering from both excesses of both order and liberty. (1997, p.83)

Yet Williams sees this as strangely beautiful, almost phosphorescent. He ends his description with a statement of his admiration of the unique "bluish green" color of weathered, molded boxes in these yards of the impoverished. Williams then ends the poem with an equally strange nod toward democracy: Gazing upon this pastoral scene of the poor in America he states, "No one will believe this of vast import to the nation" (Williams, 1910). I was prepared to ask my students if Williams was just a delusional upper-middle class white man whose privilege blinded him from the reality of the poor. Or was he simply giving us another lens, powerful and legitimate, through which we could look at poverty, a lens that truly saw it as sublimely beautiful and politically important?

Likewise, Toni Cade Bambara's story provides both an inner-city and African American perspective of poverty. It is the fictional account of a young Black teacher named Miss Moore returning to her neighborhood in New York City to "take responsibility for the young ones' education" (Bambara, 1972). The lesson the story illustrates is a hard one, and it becomes clear that Miss Moore's approach to education is radical, as radical as Earl Shorris's and Howard Meredith's. Miss Moore takes a group of lower working class children to an expensive toy store, identified later in the story as F.A.O. Schwartz, to give them an economic lesson about the realities of capitalism. In short, she is teaching them about poverty, and the different realities that result for the rich and the poor. The narrator is a young, streetwise girl in the group named Sylvia, who is resentful toward Miss Moore at being taken away from a fun day of her summer vacation. Though she's too young to articulate it, Sylvia responds to the prices of the toys with shock and anger, beginning with a toy sailboat in the store's front window that is priced at \$195.

Same thing in the store. We all walkin on tiptoe and hardly touchin the games and puzzles and things. And I watched Miss Moore who is steady watchin us like she waitin for a sign. Like Mama Drewery watches the sky and sniffs the air and takes note of just how much slant is in the bird formation. Then me and Sugar bump smack into each other, so busy gazing at the toys, 'specially the sailboat. But we don't laugh and go into our fat-lady bump-stomach routine. We just stare at that price tag. Then Sugar run a finger over the whole boat. And I'm jealous and want to hit her. Maybe not her, but I sure want to punch somebody in the mouth.

"Watcha bring us here for, Miss Moore?"

“You sound angry, Sylvia. Are you mad about something?” Givin me one of them grins like she plannin a grown-up joke that never turns out to be funny. And she’s lookin very closely at me like maybe she planning to do my portrait from memory. I’m mad, but I won’t give her that satisfaction. So I slouch around the store bein very bored and say, “Let’s go.” (Bambara, 1972)

Sylvia makes a connection between the disparities between wealth and poverty that hits close to her home. While others have the choice to spend money on toys, her family does not have that choice. The injustice of it sets her on fire, humanizes her in such a way that she is physically angered by it. She ends her account of Miss Moore’s lesson with what I hoped the Kiowa Clemente students would see as awakened defiance to the reality of the impoverished. Sylvia moves from the place of reaction to the force Shorris describes, to the place of reflection about that force, and action against it. She states toward the end of the story that she is going to “the Drive to think this day through.” She closes with deep certainty as she goes, saying “ain’t nobody gonna beat me at nuthin” (Bambara, 1972).

The reactions of the students in our class were as I had anticipated, and I was pleased with the nature of their discussion. They graciously indulged my connection-making between the two pieces of literature and the poverty in Caddo County. They spoke articulately of the belief that an individual can rise above poverty if given the right opportunity and self-confidence and determination. In short, they demonstrated an understanding of the western perspective on the matter. Perhaps because of this, when it was Alecia’s turn to present something on poverty from the Kiowa tradition, I expected her to talk about the pattern found in Kiowa oral tradition of poor orphan boys being taken in by a Kiowa Grandmother and being taught by her to be humble, loyal and generous. In these stories, the orphan boys generally go on to accomplish fantastic feats for their people, only possible for them to accomplish because of their deeply instilled virtues, and to be chosen as leaders by their people as a result. I wanted her to illustrate the power inherent in the poor from the Kiowa perspective, as I had tried to illustrate from the western perspective. I wanted her to speak in the direction of Shorris’s theory.

She did not do so, surprising me as she had many times that year. Instead of pointing to what I thought was a similarity between the two cultures, she pointed to a distinction. She looked at me, not at the class, and she stated as a matter of fact that there was no word for poverty in the Kiowa language – the implication being that without the word, there was not such a concept, as in the western mind and society.

According to her, the closest word in Kiowa is KAW ON, which refers more to “poor people” than poverty. Even then, Gonzales said that to Kiowas, poor people were not monetarily or financially poor – there was no money or finances before white contact. KAW ON means both materially and spiritually poor. Just as the body must be nourished before the spirit can be, the Kiowa see a synonymous connection between being materially poor and spiritually exhausted. If someone in the Kiowa tribe was KAW ON, it was because he or she was without a provider (i.e., a man or men in their society), as in the case with orphans and widows. In these cases, the tribe took responsibility for them so immediately that poverty did not exist in the tribe, and thus the word “poverty” did not exist in the Kiowa language (Gonzales, 2008).

Goombi, who calls Gonzales “Auntie Al,” explains the economy of Kiowa culture as cooperative communitarian. Everyone within the tribe was taken care of, or as he put it, “Everyone got a piece of meat. The chief got first choice after a kill, but only as a sign of respect from his people, and of their gratitude for his good leadership.” He explains the wisdom behind this tribal economy by paraphrasing a Rudyard Kipling quotation Howard Meredith introduced him to: “The wolf is as strong as the pack and the pack is as strong as the wolf. If everyone in the tribe is satisfied, the tribe cannot become

corrupt” (Goombi, 2008).

From the Kiowa perspective, the concept of poverty plaguing Caddo County is both an aspect and result of western culture. “Poverty came when capitalism came,” Goombi says plainly, without partisan intent. Now instead of sharing material goods necessary for comfort and stability in their native culture, Kiowas compete against each other as well as non-Kiowas for paychecks, and feel obligated to spend money on items they do not need (Goombi, 2008). This type of competition and waste would not have occurred in their traditional tribal economy, and benefits only employers in the area who pay low wages and perpetuate the situation.

Now, Goombi claims, Kiowas face not only economic poverty, but also cultural and spiritual poverty, which impact tribal government. Instead of using the model of Kiowa governance, the tribe now uses the Euro-American model of the West, which was adopted for the benefit of easing transactions with the state and federal government, not for the benefit of the Kiowa. As a result, instead of leaders making decisions immediately for the benefit of the whole tribe, change takes several years and “by then, the tribe’s torn apart” (Goombi). He continues,

Why is there so much political strife? Because people are hungry, but not for food. Food is cheap enough. Kiowas are hungry for their own cultural identity. The strife is driven by a greed we have been taught by western culture. Without our culture, we have no identity and know no other way. In Kiowa culture, wealth comes from other things. We don’t want what we don’t need, and when you’re satisfied with your station in life, fed by your own culture, you aren’t hungry. (Goombi, 2008)

For Gonzales and Goombi, western dominance is responsible for the KAW ON amongst the Kiowa.

In its centennial year, the democratic dialogue in Oklahoma could be improved in proportion to the breadth by which the economic situation in Caddo County – and in other counties where native peoples are numerous – could be improved. For Shorris, the remedy for both situations lies in the inclusion of perspectives and voices of those who generally go unheard here and everywhere, it seems. For Meredith, Gonzales and Goombi, answers to problems of poverty in native communities in Oklahoma will not come from those privileged culturally, and thus economically, by the system in place. The solution will come from those actually struggling with poverty in all its aspects, once their voices are ennobled by equal respect for their perspectives and empowered by a broader, more accurate version of democracy.

Goombi believes that for Meredith, the most important possible outcome of the Kiowa Clemente Course in the Humanities was to give Kiowa students a deep understanding of their cultural and intellectual heritage that motivated them to protect and resurrect them in their own lives, families and communities (Goombi, 2008). Of course, Meredith knew, as did Shorris, “If you want real power, legitimate power, the kind that comes from the people and belongs to people, you must understand politics; the [western] humanities will help” (Shorris, 2000, p. 128). However, in order to effect change for Kiowas living in the *surround of force* in Anadarko, Caddo County, Oklahoma, Kiowas will have to know both their own ways and the ways of the West. As the Caddo dance illustrates, just as the turkey hen benefits by observing all aspects of its environmental terrain, Oklahoma and its people will benefit by knowing all the perspectives of their cultural terrain.

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