The Paradoxical Power of Endangerment
Traditional Native American Dance and Music in Eastern Oklahoma

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In July 1999 Newman Littlebear, a respected Yuchi (Euchee) elder, was in the hospital. This, for his many friends and his large family, was crisis enough, but his illness came just before the annual Green Corn Ceremony of the Polecot Ceremonial Ground. The Green Corn Ceremony is the most important event in the annual cycle of rituals performed by Yuchi “traditional people.” Bestowed upon the Yuchi at the time of their creation, it represents an annual obligation of the greatest importance. Central to the event are songs and dances that renew not only the community but the entire world; thus human well-being, not simply Yuchi custom, hangs in the balance when Yuchi prepare to undertake this ceremony each summer. At the time of his illness, Mr. Littlebear was the singer who sang all the songs central to this ritual in the Polecot community, one of three Yuchi settlements in eastern Oklahoma. Throughout the 1990s, he had been training younger Yuchi men to sing the Yuchi dance song repertoire, but his hospital stay, coming in the days just before the Green Corn, framed the situation in a stark light. In his unexpected absence, could his young students prepare quickly to take on this crucial and unexpected role? Mr. Littlebear had made a series of audio recordings to assist his students in learning the songs of the ceremonial, but one key song had not yet been recorded. The fragility of the process was revealed when, from his hospital bed, this final song was recorded in just enough time to allow two young men from the community to complete their preparations. Still recovering, Mr. Littlebear was fortunate enough to be discharged just in time to attend parts of the Green Corn Ceremony and, along with his age mates and other community members, experience something completely new and wonderful—the songs of the Green Corn Ceremony being sung in the loud, strong, confident voices of men decades younger than had ever filled such a role previously. Moments such as these, combining great joy and great anxiety, are a reoccurring theme in the story of Woodland Indian music and dance today.

Traditions are traditions because someone is self-conscious enough about the importance of a human practice or belief to sing it out as special and to narrate to others its career in time so as to emphasize patterns of continuity over those of change. This does not mean that traditions are simply spurious products of rhetoric, although purposeful fabrications are sometimes built up into lived traditions. It does mean that traditions are not things found in the world separate from the unfolding social work of actual people. One means of capturing this way of thinking about tradition is to say that traditions are things that we hold up and celebrate as traditional. Not all the threads woven into the tapestry of a culture qualify thus as traditions. Some of our cultural life is habitual. Consider the techniques one might use for tying a pair of shoelaces or holding a fork while eating. Similarly, we can acknowledge such habitual North American
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bodily practices as running one’s fingers through one’s hair or staring at nothing in an unfocused way while riding in a crowded urban subway. We only realize how completely culturally constituted such actions are when we find ourselves in an unfamiliar setting where our own norms do not hold sway. Traditions are culture of a different sort. Traditions demand more active engagement, even if this takes the form of conscious rejection, as when a young adult, despite the pressure of family and community, prefers things foreign and new over those marked as ancestral and customary.

Seeing traditions not as thing-like entities but as a way of talking and acting in the world—what folklorists have called traditionalization—offers a vantage point on the related phenomena of cultural endangerment, including endangered languages and musical practices. To call something traditional within the family circle or in a public gathering, such as a community celebration, is to make a statement about its importance. Such framings emphasize continuity through time within a circumstance in which such continuity has become worthy of comment rather than being taken for granted as an unspoken norm. Some idea, belief, or practice—a recipe for cornbread perhaps or a belief about the spiritual significance of a rainbow or a distinctive way of wearing a piece of clothing—is singled out as an important part of a wider heritage that ties people, usually specific people, to the present to particular people in the past. To identify cultural forms as endangered does such traditionalizing work even more intensely, as framing culture as endangered signals not only its ongoing or timeless importance but also describes it as being, dishearteningly for the narrator at least, on the verge of disappearance from the lived world of everyday existence.

Ancestral beliefs and practices disappear from the world all the time, all the more so under the conditions of rapid social change that we today call globalization. While some of this loss goes unnoticed or is even welcomed by those experiencing it, cultural endangerment and cultural loss is a reality, one that is often quite painful to those who experience it. To be elderly and to know oneself to be the last speaker of a language or the last singer of a particular song is a painful, reoccurring reality today. Yet customary knowledge and practices take on new power when identified as endangered traditions. To speak and act toward a tradition as if it were endangered is, paradoxically, a means of preventing the loss that the category of endangered attempts to describe. While the common analogy between endangered species and ecosystems and endangered languages and cultures is deeply problematic in many respects, there is a clear overlap at this point. Describing something as endangered is a way of both highlighting its special value (perhaps as yet not widely recognized) and of mobilizing people to intervene to prevent the loss—the disappearance—that is being evoked. More powerful in some ways than its conceptual neighbors tradition and heritage, endangerment can galvanize people to action, even as all these ways of thinking about culture significantly change the very phenomena they seek to celebrate. Such social processes are at work globally in the world of customary forms of music and dance. The situation among the indigenous peoples of eastern and central Oklahoma provides a rich instance illustrating these issues.

As an ethnographer working there since 1993, I have had the good fortune of spending a lot of time among the Native American peoples residing today in the eastern two-thirds of the state of Oklahoma. This region is home to a large number of different indigenous communities whose ancestral homelands are found in the eastern half of North America, the cultural region described by scholars as the Eastern Woodlands. These peoples share a region-wide musical culture that is localized in distinct ways in each Woodland Indian community. During the nineteenth century, some Woodland peoples evaded forced removal (by the United States government) to what is today Oklahoma and therefore remain closer to their aboriginal homelands. Whether residing today in Oklahoma or elsewhere, Woodland communities today all possess rich musical lives. Among contemporary Woodland Indian peoples one can find performers and appreciative audiences for the full range of contemporary and popular music, from blues and jazz to hip-hop, marching band, and classical genres. There are also forms of music that are marked off as distinctly Native.

Emblematic of Woodland Indian musical life are songs performed in community dance events, both social gatherings and collective rituals centered on the performance of specific ceremonial dances. These two kinds of dance events, while they can occur separately, regularly happen within the same overarching event. For instance, several times each year the Caddo people gather to dance. In the afternoon, the Turkey Dance is held. This
is a multipart dance event performed, with the exception of its final phase, solely by women. While some other Woodland communities also perform it, the Turkey Dance is at its most elaborate among the Caddo, who possess scores of musically complex songs to accompany its performance. Some of these songs are sung in the Caddo language and recount episodes in tribal history from the colonial era, when the Caddo lived in a large area encompassing parts of Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, and Oklahoma. The Caddo Turkey Dance is so emblematic of Caddo identity that it appears on the seal of the Caddo Nation. Participation in an afternoon of Turkey Dancing is open to any would-be participant but is largely a Caddo-only concern. The ceremonial nature of the Turkey Dance is also expressed by the requirement that it must be completed before sunset. Many Woodland people share with the Caddo a pattern in which ceremonial dances are local concerns that take place at a fixed community dance ground during daylight hours.

Paired with such daytime ceremonial dances are often evening and nighttime dances of a more social character. Often held in the evening after the conclusion of an event's daytime rituals, these night dances are often participated in not only by local people but also by guests from neighboring, and sometimes distant, communities who visit the host's event. The pattern in which communities alternate in visiting other communities to participate in nighttime dance events and, in return, similarly host such visiting delegations in their own community sets up patterns of collective reciprocity through time that give the wider Woodlands region its distinctive social dynamic. These patterns also help explain why the social dance repertoire of the region is so widely shared, with the same basic songs and dances often being found very widely in the region. To take one example, the Bean Dance is a dance that is performed today as a nighttime social dance among almost all Woodland peoples in Oklahoma, but it is also sung and danced today as far away as the Six Nations Reserve in Ontario, Canada, home to numerous Iroquois (Haudenosaunee) communities.

With a few minor exceptions, ceremonial and social dance music is today understood as a fixed canon in which songs can be preserved and passed down to the next generation or lost when the chain of transmission breaks, but not composed anew. While acknowledging that composition of new dance songs may have taken place in the past, Woodland peoples in Oklahoma today generally see these songs as a heritage that was created for them in the past, sometimes by ancestors long ago, sometimes by the Creator at the beginning of time, and handed down to the present in fixed form. In Woodland social thought, they should be passed on and great effort should be invested in preserving the fidelity of earlier forms, neither adding to, or taking away from, the inheritance. This closed canon of songs greatly conditions the meaning of endangerment relative to Woodland Indian dance music.

Some types of Woodland Indian dance music are thriving, thus warranting the label traditional, but are not endangered. The widely performed Stomp Dance would qualify thus. The Stomp Dance is the basic building block of nighttime social dance events in Woodland Oklahoma, and the genre is found throughout the Eastern Woodlands region. This is a very modular dance form in which a man is selected to lead a round of dancing. He leads a single-file line of men and women around an open fire that is the literal and symbolic center of a Woodland dance ground. While leading the dancers in a simple trotting or stomping step, he also leads a series of short antiphonal songs one right after another in succession. These short call-and-response songs, of which there are a large but finite number, can be mixed and matched in almost any order, allowing each performance to vary individually while also allowing participants to learn the constituent songs and to sing in answer to the leader in a coordinated but unhearsed manner. All men participating in the dance are expected to sing in response to the leader, while women participating in the dance keep time with distinctive paired leg rattles, one of which is worn on each leg. While other social dance genres, such as the Bear Dance or the Quapaw Dance, will typically be danced only once over the course of an all-night dance event, the Stomp Dance will be performed repeatedly, with each man present who is able to do so taking a turn as leader. Its form has shaped its centrality to Woodland dance events in Oklahoma, and its centrality in turn has ensured that it is widely known, sung today by thousands of men in numerous different communities across the state.

Paired with the Stomp Dance are other Woodland dances that are performed less frequently and less widely. These dances are individually named and possess distinctive choreographies and songs. They are also often more complicated and difficult to perform. All these factors have shaped their status and have caused them to be understood in Woodland communities as endangered. Many of these dances are named after animal species with which they are associated in story, song, and
imitative choreography. Examples of such dances include the Garfish Dance, the Mosquito Dance, and the Duck Dance. Others are named after Native nations believed to have originated them: for example, the Calusa Dance, the Seneca Dance, and the Cherokee Dance. A few take their name from some distinctive aspect of their choreography, such as with the Stirrup Dance, a hilarious couples dance in which partners dance side-by-side holding hands in the skaters’ embrace. On musical cue, the woman places her inside foot atop the inside foot of the male dancer. With the pair holding these feet together in the air between them, with the woman’s foot resting on the man’s, as in the stirrup of a horse saddle, the pair hops forward in line on their other feet. The dance results in great exhaustion and much amusing stumbling.

Such dances are known to have disappeared from the repertoires of Woodland communities throughout the twentieth century, but this trend began to reverse in its last decades, and today Woodland communities are investing great energy in the difficult work of learning and teaching these dances. Sometimes they are being revived with the help of archival audio recordings and the memories of elders who had danced, but not led, them. Among the Yuchi, the last social dance known to have been lost was the Horse Dance, the performance of which ended with the death of a community elder who had not yet trained a younger man to sing its distinctive songs. Once widespread, this dance is no longer performed in many of the communities that previously knew it. Yet it is not completely gone, as versions of its songs exist on older recordings and, most importantly, the dance is still performed in at least one Oklahoma Cherokee community. Visiting this Cherokee community in recent years, Yuchi elders were thrilled to see a dance that they remember dancing in their youth. Younger Yuchis had their first opportunity to dance this dance in the company of their Cherokee hosts, and it is at least possible that, in keeping with similar reintroductions, some may learn the Cherokee version of the dance and reintroduce it to Yuchi dance gatherings. Like the Stirrup Dance, the Horse Dance emphasizes the social quality of the social dance repertoire, as it contains a very amusing final stage in which the women, when cued by a change in accompanying songs, break from their formal and reserved choreography to race forward and steal the hats of the men who are dancing. With the dance ended in laughter and commotion, those capturing such a prize then extract a ransom from their victim for the hat’s safe return.

Returning to the idea of endangerment as a powerful source of motivation, Woodland communities today are innovating within their traditions to keep such disappearances from happening again. Novel activities directed toward this end include actively and systematically recording song repertoires to facilitate learning by younger community members. Similarly, many communities have been organizing, often with external grant support, formal master-apprentice projects in which younger singers study formally with elders and other knowledgeable individuals, thereby actively learning dance songs and other forms of “traditional” music. Related is the proliferation of grassroots cultural camps and weekly community gatherings that are aimed explicitly at transmitting knowledge of music and dance as well as of other valued forms of cultural knowledge and practice.

Exemplifying all these strategies is the Hasinai Society of the Caddo Nation, which holds a Summer Youth Camp each June as well as weekly after-work dinner meetings. In all these gatherings, Caddo children and teenagers gather at the tribal complex and dance ground near Binger, Oklahoma, and are taught a range of specific cultural practices, including games, foodways, language, and crafts as well as Caddo music and dance. While fun activities and formal instruction are programmed and led by knowledgeable older Caddos, these gatherings also intensify informal connections between community members and inculcate in Caddo children less-often described, but deeply important, community values such as generosity, hospitality, fellowship, and respect, not as abstract principles but as ideals realized in culturally specific social practices. Music and dance play a prominent part in these processes, and each weekly Hasinai Society meeting includes sessions devoted to learning dance music and choreography. Each night during summer camp, campers organize for themselves, with adult help, a full social dance to which all community members, as well as guests from other tribes, are invited. Like cultural groups in other Woodland communities, the Hasinai Society has used grants from the Oklahoma Arts Council and other agencies to support the costs of such activities, thereby ensuring that they are accessible to all who wish to participate.

In celebrating the power of endangerment as a form of social action, I am clearly not endorsing those powerful and disruptive social forces that have caused Woodland Indian musical and dance traditions, despite the value that communities attach to them, to have
become threatened with disappearance. It is a different matter to consider the role that colonial institutions such as compulsory boarding schools, missionaries, and the allotment of communal land holdings have played in undermining the political sovereignty and cultural integrity of Native communities. The same can be said for more recent transformative processes such as, on the one hand, exposure to mass media and full participation in the labor market and, on the other, the renewal of tribal self-determination and sovereignty and the growing importance placed on cultural and language preservation and revival. To look for endangerment’s silver lining is to emphasize the active role that individuals play in renewing those threads of the cultural tapestry that have mattered the most over time. It is also an attempt at gaining some temporal perspective on the problem, at least as it relates to music and dance. Spending time among Canadian Iroquois people involved in Longhouse ceremonies during the early 1970s, Michael Foster observed that “The notion of ‘crisis’ in taking up ritual roles tends to engender a pessimistic view. But despite the enormous loss to the Longhouse community in the death of many key ritualists in recent years, the remarkable process of succession—of young men stepping forward at the right moment—goes on.” In small communities in which an even smaller number of people can take on the role of being the active performers of any particular song genre, anxious talk about endangerment and impending loss has, for many years, served as a key source of motivation that has, paradoxically, often ensured that such loss has not taken place.

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Editorial note: A short bibliographic essay complementing this article can be found online at the World Literature Today website and on the author’s own website. In addition to offering the reader a listing of sources central to its topic, the online essay briefly discusses other genres of music important to woodland Indian people today.


Organizations Worldwide That Promote Linguistic Diversity

Center for Studies in Oral Tradition
www.oralttadition.org

The Endangered Language Fund
www.endangeredlanguagefund.org

Foundation for Endangered Languages
www.ogmios.org

The Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project
www.hrelp.org

The International Clearing House for Endangered Languages
www.tooyoo.1.u-tokyo.ac.jp/ichel/ichel.html

Native Voices Symposium
http://poetrycenter.arizona.edu/nativevoices.html#

People’s Poetry Language Initiative
www.peoplespoetry.org/declaration.pdf

Summer Institute of Linguistics
www.sil.org/sociol/ndg-lg-home.html

Terralingua
http://terralingua.org

“Intangible Heritage” / UNESCO’s Culture Sector
http://portal.unesco.org/culture/en

Other Online Resources

Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America
www.ailla.utexas.org

Ethnologue: Languages of the World
www.ethnologue.org

UbuWeb
www.ubu.com/ethno

UNESCO Red Book on Endangered Languages Online
www.tooyoo.1.u-tokyo.ac.jp/Redbook/index.html

Universal Declaration of Linguistic Rights
www.linguistic-declaration.org/index-gb.htm

For Further Reading

Mark Abley, Spoken Here: Travels Among Threatened Languages (Houghton Mifflin, 2003).

David Crystal, Language Death (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000).


Leanne Hinton with Matt Vera & Nancy Steele, How to Keep Your Language Alive: A Commonsense Approach to One-on-One Language Learning (Heyday Books, 2002).

The Paradoxical Power of Endangerment
Traditional Native American Dance and Music in Eastern Oklahoma
A Bibliographic Supplement

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This bibliographical note is a supplement to the essay “The Paradoxical Power of Endangerment: Traditional Native American Dance and Music in Eastern Oklahoma” published by World Literature Today 81(5):37-41 in September-October 2007. While rooted in my own experiences among Woodland Indian peoples in Oklahoma, the essay drew upon various scholarly literatures that have shaped my understanding of the issues raised therein. This bibliographic companion will guide the reader to published sources that have informed my thinking on the problems and prospects of cultural endangerment, as well as provide resources for those who would like to know more about American Indian music and dance in Central and Eastern Oklahoma.


The brevity necessary of an essay in World Literature Today precluded discussion of a number of distinctly Native musical styles that are highly valued among the Woodland Indian peoples of Oklahoma. Some of these Native musical forms are relatively new and were borrowed or adapted from non-Woodland Native peoples. Music of this type includes the music of the intertribal powwow, a social dance institution that has spread across North America from the Great Plains, where it is part of a long-standing dance tradition. The music of the Native American Church has similarly spread widely, including among Woodland peoples. While Woodland people acknowledge that such music does not extend back to antiquity in their own communities, it can still assume an important place in community life and become viewed as traditional. Everywhere that traditions are found, powerfully important practices that may go back only a generation or two can, nonetheless, play a central role in people’s lives. While those peoples who have borrowed such music from other, usually neighboring, groups may preserve songs sung in unfamiliar, foreign
languages, such music is especially portable in Native North America because American Indian songs rely extensively on vocables—meaningless but crucial syllables that are sung as the means of carrying the melody in musical systems centered primarily on vocal music. For a discussion of the powwow as it relates to the kinds of social and ceremonial music and dance discussed in “The Paradoxical Power of Endangerment,” one might consult Jason Baird Jackson, “East Meets West: On Stomp Dance and Powwow Worlds in Oklahoma,” in Powwow, eds. Clyde Ellis, Luke Eric Lassiter, and Gary H. Dunham, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), pp. 172-97. Key sources discussing the Native American Church, including its music and ceremonial ways, can be accessed in Daniel C. Swan, Peyote Religious Art: Symbols of Faith and Belief, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999).

Even more deeply rooted in Woodland Indian life are musical practices that are recognized as regionally, and sometimes locally, specific. In most Woodland communities, local music that is marked off as especially traditional includes songs sung in specific Native languages. Lullabies are a secular music of this type, while the songs learned and sung as part of the therapeutic techniques of “Indian doctors” constitute a more protected, private, and sacred type of local Native-language music. These two genres, while different in many respects, have in common the fact that they are each most often transmitted within families and performed in private, intimate settings, allowing for greater individual and family variation in both musical form and substance. Neither lullabies nor doctoring songs from Woodland Oklahoma have received extensive ethnomusicological study, but some sense of lullabies in the region can be gained from firsthand accounts by singers of such songs gathered in Dayna Bowker Lee’s edited volume Remaining Ourselves: Music and Tribal Memory; Traditional Music in Contemporary Communities, (Oklahoma City: State Arts Council of Oklahoma, 1995). Some insight into the work of an Indian doctor can be gained from an autobiographical account offered by a Muscogee (Creek) practitioner. See: David Lewis, Jr. and Ann T. Jordan, Creek Indian Medicine Ways: The Enduring Power of Muscogee Religion, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).

More public and more widely shared within, and between, communities are the songs performed as part of larger cerebrations and ceremonial events. Across communities, this music falls into two prominent social domains. One of these is the ceremonial and social dance musical traditions discussed in “The Paradoxical Power of Endangerment.” Just as important to a great many people in Woodland Indian communities is another celebratory and ceremonial music not discussed in the essay. In most Woodland communities, as is also true in many other Native North American communities, there are repertoires of Christian hymns composed with local Native-language lyrics or with Native-language lyrics adapted to European American melodies. Such hymns are an important expression of both a general Christian identity and a specific Native one. These hymns are central to the worship experience centered on local, often specifically tribal, Native congregations. While flourishing in many places, such Native hymns are, in some communities, coming to be seen not only as traditional but also as endangered musical forms in need of active conservation. This has in turn led to the production of many recordings and new hymnals, as well as the creation of new performance events aimed at promoting and celebrating the singing of Native hymns. Examples of such gatherings include the Muscogee (Creek) hymn singing gatherings

The Caddo Turkey Dance has been examined from various angles by both Caddo and non-Caddo scholars. Recent works on the subject can be found cited in George Sabo III, “Dancing into the Past: Colonial Legacies in Modern Caddo Indian Ceremony,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 62(Winter 2003): 423-45. For a detailed analysis of such practices in a different Woodland Oklahoma community, see Jason Baird Jackson, *Yuchi Ceremonial Life: Performance, Meaning and Tradition in a Contemporary American Indian Community* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).


For information on the work of the Hasinai Society, see the society’s webpage: http://www.hasinaisociety.com/, accessed May 15, 2007 and a recent study by Rhonda Fair focusing on its cultural preservation activities. See her *Social Networks and Knowledge Systems among the Caddo and Delaware of Western Oklahoma*. Doctoral Dissertation. (Norman, University of Oklahoma, 2007).

I concluded the essay by referencing work by Michael K. Foster, See his book *From the Earth to Beyond the Sky: An Ethnographic Approach to Four Longhouse Speech Events* (Ottawa: National Museums of Canada, 1974), p. 252. This phenomena of reoccurring generational “crisis” is discussed, for contemporary Oklahoma, in greater depth in chapter 9 of Jackson, *Yuchi Ceremonial Life*. 