

## The Otoe-Missouria Flag Song

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### Introduction

As the title suggests, the focus of this paper is upon a single important song within the Otoe-Missouria tribe. This is a preliminary sketch, or a truly working paper as the KU publication series denotes. In subject and approach, it has been inspired by the venerable tradition of collecting, preserving, and analyzing Native American texts begun with 19<sup>th</sup> century BAE ethnographers such as James Owen Dorsey, encouraged by Franz Boas and his Americanist students, and celebrated by more recent scholars of verbal art as Hymes, Tedlock, Sherzer, and Basso. The particular esthetic principles used in the text will link it clearly to other tribal songs, and to the performance context as well. I will also raise issues of cultural change and continuity in the context of language shift, and finally, I argue that this Flag Song compellingly demonstrates the value of maintaining a heritage language within endangered and obsolescent language communities.<sup>1</sup>

By a **heritage language**, I mean a language which may no longer exist as an “everyday spoken medium of communication” but which may persist in special settings, such as the realm of sacred language in songs and prayer.<sup>2</sup> The Western tradition has the familiar example of Latin preserved by use in the Church and as the common written language of scholars, but unlike Latin, the majority of Native languages were not represented in written form by their respective speech communities.<sup>3</sup> The numerous circumstances leading to language shift within the Otoe-Missouria community have been similar to that documented elsewhere for the First Nations peoples in the U.S., and it is beyond the scope of this paper to review that tragic process in detail. Rather, through an examination of this brief song text, its history, and current status within the local tradition, it encompasses what Kroskrity (2001:106) has called the **nested identity** of contemporary Native Americans as Americans, American Indians, and members of specific tribe(s).

### Historical background

Although originally from southeast Nebraska and Northwest Missouri respectively, the Otoe-Missouria tribe has been located in north-central Oklahoma for the last 126 years.<sup>4</sup> They are a small tribe, most closely related to the Iowas, and then the Hochank (more commonly known as the Winnebago). The Otoes have a Siouan language as their ancestral heritage, although few if any fluent speakers of Jiwere are still living to my knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Moore (2001:60-63) gives an overview of the term “endangered” and obsolescent languages.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of this issue relating to language planning, c.f. Stanley and Furbee 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Walker on Native American Writing Systems. *Language in the U.S.A.*

<sup>4</sup> Chapman

<sup>5</sup> Note the difficulty of defining fluency in endangered language communities, as discussed in Dorian 1989, Stanley and Furbee 1989.

But let us step back for a moment into the years after the First World War. Many Indian men served as soldiers “over there”; the ethnomusicologist Frances Densmore collected a set of seven Winnebago songs composed during or after WWI, and also documented a tremendous exuberance in performing traditions surrounding the return of the warrior/veteran among many tribes (Densmore 1934). Densmore vividly described witnessing versions of the traditional warriors’ welcome dance<sup>6</sup> performed by mothers of Pawnee veterans (including a German helmet with a knife protruding from the top, hoisted on a pole by a soldier’s mother). Other war trophies such as buttons cut from enemy uniforms were gifted to the drum among the Hochank; honor songs belonged to individual soldiers detailing their exploits and experiences, and Veteran’s songs spoke about love and gladness toward the U.S. flag (three by Winnebago soldiers) (Densmore 1934:421-423).

It was within the atmosphere of general excitement in the entire nation after the signing of the Armistice and welcoming the “boys” home, that an Otoe-Missouria woman named Nannie Childs Alley was led to compose a song about the flag. The reference of a religious experience or dream as influencing Mrs. Alley’s talents shows the continued respect for dreams as sources of spiritual power and inspiration.<sup>7</sup> She then formally gifted the song to the tribe as a whole, so that it belonged to all members, rather than to any one individual or smaller group, as was the custom for songs as intellectual and social property.<sup>5</sup> Some O-M claim that theirs was the first official flag song for any Indian tribe to adopt as their national anthem. Powers (1990:68) states that most tribes now have them, and attributes it likewise to that same post-war era. I do not venture to claim Mrs. Alley was the first such composer, because I have no firm dates and there appears to have been such a wave of song composition throughout the many tribes welcoming their soldiers home.

However, the Otoe-Missouria Flag Song does predate the legal status of its non-Indian counterpart. The United States did not adopt “The Star-Spangled Banner” as the official national anthem until 1931, although there had been legislation pending in Congress for decades advocating that action (2007 Library of Congress site). Evidently, Mrs. Alley’s gift was well-received, as the performance of this song as the tribe’s own unique national anthem continues to the present. It substitutes for the U.S. national anthem in those contexts wherein the American flag is raised or lowered, such as at the tribal cemetery during the Memorial Day observances, and for the morning and evening flag rituals for the four days of the annual Otoe Encampment. In the latter case, this practice is a tradition of honoring veterans, particularly those who may have passed away in the past year. The family will bring the service flag of their loved one, and it will be flown over the powwow arena and campground for one day, then returned to the family. Such was the occasion for the recording of the Otoe-Missouria Flag Song from the 1990 tribal encampment. Those families involved later expressed their gratitude for this honor through having a “special,” including enlisting a speaker to make a formal speech on their behalf, followed by a dance, and then a giveaway.)

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<sup>6</sup> Powers deemed it the women’s Victory Dance, with “female relatives of the warriors carried trophies of war” (1990:75).

<sup>7</sup> McAllester 1949, Whitman 1937.

Example 1.<sup>8</sup>

ref	Otoe-Missouria Flag Song					
tx	p <sup>h</sup> ǰθka					
mr	p <sup>h</sup> ǰθka					
mg	cloth white					
gc	n., adj.					
tx	gibrabra					
mr	gi	‡bra		‡bra		
mg	with object-away=separated, spread out in layers/slices=flat, broad					
gc	instr	=redup. prefix of st. v. bra(hge)		=adj./st. v. (brahge, brathge)		
tx	egranagriñe,					
mr	e	‡gra	‡añi	‡a	‡gri	‡ñe
mg	it	=one's own=have=they		=arrive back home	=they	
gc	3p.pro.=poss.	=v.	=3 p. pro. for motion	v=v. (motion, vertitive)	=pl(indef)	
ft	The flag, they brought it (their own) back home.					
ref	Otoe-Missouria Flag Song					
tx	gošidahare,					
mr	goši	‡dahe		‡are		
mg	there, yonder=standing pos.=it is					
gc	adv.	=v., st.		=v.		
ft	There it is (standing).					
ref	Otoe-Missouria Flag Song					
tx	arastawi			k <sup>h</sup> e	owe	.
mr	a	‡ra	‡sta	‡wi	k <sup>h</sup> e	owe
mg	on,[a=da]'see'=you =see			=you	mas. decl. chant	[repeat]
gc	loc.	=2p.agt.=v., irreg.2p. s + a-da=pl/def		mas. decl. vocable		performance note

The Flag Song opens with a verse of vocables, or syllables which carry the tune, but do not have lexico-semantic content. Some students of Native American music have noted the widespread use of vocables (Densmore 1943, McAllester 1949, and Nettl 1953, for a start). In true Plains musical tradition, the melodic line begins in a very high falsetto voice, and is repeated at lower pitches for the first repetition. The second time through, the vocables are replaced by the Jiwere text. The free translation is “The flag (waving), they brought it (our own) back home, there it stands, you(all) see it.” In this musical context, the word stresses become aligned with the drumbeat, rather than where they might fall in natural speech stress and rhythm. The song text is very short, but the interplay between melody and meaning create a powerful combination for tribal members.

Consider in addition the contemporary situation of language obsolescence. Some listeners may know the tune and the associated syllables of their Flag Song, and even have a general knowledge of its meaning. Others may lack that specific knowledge, but still recognize the song

<sup>8</sup> Transcription and glosses are based upon various sources, including Good Tracks 1992, author’s field notes and field recordings.

as uniquely Otoe, and have a deep personal attachment to it born from the many memories of hearing it while standing in respect, listening to THEIR anthem during a secular celebration of patriotism, and especially the faithful military service of their family, friends, and elders.

In light of those sociolinguistic factors, the discussion of specific grammatical features in the song may resonate primarily with individuals such as singers, whose training might have led them to more specific understandings of the language. I have not attempted to survey singers' knowledge. Even the accomplished singer recorded in 1992 was not considered a fully fluent speaker of the language at that time. As in any musical genre, it is possible for one to memorize and perform a song without speaking the language! Aside from some elders who retain some vocabulary, conventional phrases and listening comprehension, the ethnopoetic description will emphasize primarily what was meaningful and pleasing to generations past.

The first phrase represents the focus of the song, the U.S. flag. The word for **flag** is a native coinage, based on an earlier compound representing the term 'cloth' from the currently unattested root **pha~**, which I am here glossing as 'woven' based upon closely related forms such as Winnebago **paa** 'bag, sack' from Miner's lexicon( #2442) and Proto-Siouan reconstruction **\*hpa:h** (Rood, Rankin, Taylor, et.al, n.d.) + **thka** '(be)white'.<sup>9</sup> The choice to use a native term rather than incorporate a loanword falls within the strong avoidance of such loans documented among Plains Indians, particularly Siouan-speaking tribes (Brown 1996).

The second part of the opening phrase, **gi-bra-bra**, elegantly describes the motion of the flag, using the instrumental prefix **gi-** 'with object away', while **bra** denotes a state of flatness or smoothness. When that form is reduplicated > **brabra**, it represents the motion the flag makes in the wind, being smooth, then rippled, then smooth again, as a continuous movement. I have translated it here as 'wave'.<sup>10</sup>

The second phrase, **e-gra-nya-gri-nye** begins with the 3<sup>rd</sup> person definite pronominal prefix **e-** followed by the possessive prefix **gra-** meaning 'Our own'. The next syllable was more frequently pronounced as **nya**, which I analyzed in 1996 as an abbreviated form of **anyi** 'to have', followed by the 3<sup>rd</sup> person pronominal prefix **a-**, which would relate to the following verb. In that version, it is the flag which is the focal point, 'they brought it (their own) home. (More recently when examining older field notes rather than transcriptions of the videotaped session, the [ny] had been transcribed as a plain [n], it could be a simple error on my part, but it could support an alternate interpretation, since the instrumental prefix **na-** 'by foot' would also potentially be appropriate. The soldiers are not mentioned directly, but the possessive and plural pronominal markers make it clear that they (our boys) are the ones acting, and they performed this feat of valor.

Finally I would like to focus upon the key verb here, **gri**, meaning 'to come home here'. This morpheme in particular is highly compact, yet has an incredible aesthetic and semantic

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<sup>9</sup>There are the expected dialectal variations in the initial consonant of the second syllable, with an alternation between [theta] (Otoe-Missouria) and [h] (Ioway) for the initial sound here. GoodTracks records the following variants from earlier sources, each meaning 'cloth or blanket' [**phanthka**] from J.O. Dorsey vs. [**panhga**] from Joe Young (Ioway) and [**panhka**] from Lila Wistrand-Robinson (GoodTracks 1992:54).

<sup>10</sup> Tedlock (2001:113-115) describes reduplication as a "universal ideophonic phenomenon, as shown by Roman Jakobson and Linda Waugh;" he defines an ideophone as a linguistic expression which "does the work of representation by phonetic means."

impact, demonstrating the emotional potential inherent in a very interesting grammatical form, namely the **vertitive** form documented across the Siouan language family by Taylor (1976). He makes it clear that the location **Home** is distinguished from **Not-Home** in the set of motion verbs. This set of verbs also encodes whether one has gone **To** or **From** a location (goal vs. source), and the completed **Arrival** vs. **Movement** on the way or ‘en route’. In the Jiwere motion verb paradigm, the initial consonants **g-** / **gr-** consistently represent the notion of ‘home’, the place where one belongs. (C.f. also Hopkins 1990.) The 3<sup>rd</sup> person indefinite plural suffix [-**nye**] ends the phrase, which is grammatically necessary, but it also “fits” rhythmically where the drumbeat falls.

The alliteration of the two [**gr-**] forms in this section is both poetic and emotive of the highly charged context in which the song was first composed, namely the celebration of loved ones’ returning back from the dangers and loneliness of the horrific Great War. I propose that the [**gr**] consonant cluster has an element of “metaphoric iconicity”, meaning a set of morphemes which are so closely related in form that each evokes a shared semantic sense (Mannheim 2001:102). In addition to the [**gr**] forms in this text, the form **grahi** ‘to pity, have compassion for’, would seem to fit with this phonetic/iconic group. **Grahi** has usually been equated as the nearest equivalent to the English word ‘love’ by the speakers I consulted.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> phrase is indexical in nature, and bound inextricably with the performance context. **Goshi** is a deictic compound which points to something within speaker and addressee’s shared visual field, but slightly away from the immediate location (with the probable meaning of ‘unextended’ (Hopkins 1988). Then comes **dahe**, the positional form describes the object as ‘standing’ in an upright position, which is the required protocol for carrying the American flag, and pragmatically correct in terms of its being mounted on a pole. **Are** is a ubiquitous deictic demonstrative meaning ‘it is’ (Cf. Hopkins n.d.). The deictic locative + positional verb + deictic demonstrative are phonologically reduced as follows: [goshi + dahe+are = goshidahare].

The final phrase of the text can be interpreted in slightly different ways, depending on which evidential suffix is used at the end. Dr. Dailey rendered it **A-ra-sta-wi khe** with the masculine declarative marker, which would mean ‘You(all) see it.’ Slight variations may occur, such as the substitution of either **-re** or **-ne**, which would instead take a directive tone ‘Look at it’; **-ne** is the more polite request, while **-re** would be an outright command. GoodTracks documented another variant, with the question particle, **je** (1992:145); that variant would be glossed as ‘Do you see it?’

Voila! Four concise lines carrying a powerful, straightforward message, anchored to the physical surroundings, and directing the audience’s vision and thoughts upon the Stars and Stripes’ and their loved ones, who successfully brought it back home.

The effect of this song is quite striking to a non-Indian who hears it for the first time, as an obvious discontinuity with the larger society. After all, when viewing the U.S. flag, the non-Indian expects the “Star-Spangled Banner” or at least a popular “American” patriotic song with English lyrics and traditional European instruments playing. In that setting, to hear instead a distinctly Indian style of song with drum accompaniment, in an indigenous tongue, makes the familiar seem new. The blend of national, Indian, and specifically unique tribal elements (in this

case a text) has proven to be very popular among many Native American groups.<sup>11</sup> Thus the Tribal Flag Song appears to function as a powerful icon of identity, which in many ways mirrors the anthropological concept of **nested identities** or membership among 20<sup>th</sup> century Indians (Kroskrity 2001:106).

While the specific historical aspects relating to 20<sup>th</sup> century warfare and the use of a flag are necessarily and intrinsically linked to the larger society, the complex musical and linguistic traditions surrounding warriors' return, and the proper ways to honor them also represent continuity with ancestral ways predating the reservation era, and possibly much further beyond. Let us examine briefly similarities within a few other Otoe-Missouria "Patriotic" or Veteran's Songs. One is owned by the War Mothers' Society.<sup>12</sup> The Otoe-Missouria have a tribal chapter of the national veteran's support groups which also dates to the Great War; the members have been active in various activities, from sponsoring the annual Memorial Day ceremonies, dance, and feast, to other charitable duties, such as visiting sick veterans in the hospital.)

## 2. The War Mothers' Song

ref	War Mother's Song			
tx	wəʔkwas'ose	ihy	ʒareñe	khe.
mr	wəʔkwas'ose	ihy	ʒe †are†ñe	khe
mg	warrior, veteran, soldier (their) mother(s)			these=it is =they mas. decl.
gc	n.	n.	dem.=v.	=pl(undef) mas. decl.

ft These are the veteran's mothers.

I do not have any precise dates for their composition, so I cannot be certain which songs may have influenced the other. With such a small corpus of data, the results can only be considered tentative. There are parallels in the brevity of the texts, as well as the focus on indexicality and the larger context. For example, the War Mothers Song states "These are the mothers of the warriors / veterans." The song would be limited to a particular legitimate public social setting, since it is essentially **owned** by the women belonging to the War Mothers' Society. Its purpose is to direct the crowd's attention toward these women, and upon hearing it, the people stand at attention and honor the ladies while they danced, adorned in their official War Mothers' Society shawls.

The focus upon the mothers of the veterans clearly links with the distant past when a warrior's mother received his war trophy (ideally a scalp) and danced with it in celebration of his successful return. I venture that Indian mothers were especially open to joining the national organization because of their pride in their children, and also, I might add that this society has remained a vital part of the tribe to the present day, and all veterans' mothers are eligible to join,

<sup>11</sup> Powers 1990:155-156 presents a translation of a Lakota War song sung for a victory dance after WWI, and on p. 124, describes the Ponca Flag Song as of the old style songs, with vocable verse, and text for repeated portion. He also remarked upon the tune for Oklahoma Flag Songs as "somewhat standardized". In addition, he documents for the Lakota an older round dance-style song which included handling the flag; the performance featured veterans chosen by a leader to dance in pairs with the flag, and its text describes the dancers' pleasure at being so honored, as well as physical aspects of the dance itself (Powers 1990:144-5). In addition, Densmore's brief corpus of Winnebago and Pawnee war songs of the era mentions Germans (1934:422-23).

<sup>12</sup> Stanley and Furbee 1990; cf. Davidson 1997 for a discussion of Otoe-Missouria and Ioway song ownership.

whether the service was in peace time or war. (Indian women have been service members from WWII on, as well.) It seemed rather interesting to learn that a woman did compose the Flag song, since women are not traditionally allowed to sit at the drum, nor to begin the songs at powwows,<sup>13</sup> but the very close association between mothers and returning warriors may well have influenced Mrs. Alley's thoughts and feelings along those lines. Dr. Dailey emphasized her religiosity and sincerity when translating the song on videotape as an essential aspect of composition.

Other Veterans' Songs (sometimes called Soldier Songs) share the slow beat of the Flag song. Of course, no one dances to the Flag Song, but otherwise, it shares the musical conventions of this particular genre, which differs significantly from War Dance songs, which are much faster, and typically mention specific aspects of warfare, such as the enemy's identity, or other exploits (Powers 1990). Most importantly, the vertitive motion verb **gri** 'return home' also occurs in other Veteran / Soldier Songs, as seems quite appropriate for this highly charged personal subject (Davidson 1997).<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Some scholars of language obsolescence report an objectification of the ancestral language itself as an heirloom or valued antique (Silverstein n.d., Moore 2001, Stanley and Furbee 1989). Perhaps the popularity of the tribal flag songs throughout Native America stems in part from that attitude. Yet that very sentiment, when applied to such a rich semiotic artifact, seems neither quaint, naïve, nor unique to an oppressed minority people. Rather, I hope that the analysis here has hinted at the complexities in this brief text, and thereby done homage to the Americanist tradition stretching from Powell to Dorsey, through Boas, Sapir, and Hymes, to you—all, my distinguished Siouanist colleagues. Those unique cultural creations such as the Flag song must be treasured as key exemplars of the language/culture interplay, and vibrant expressions of deep human emotions and rooted historical experiences.

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<sup>13</sup>"Chorus girls" sit behind the drummer/singers, so called because they join in during the second repetition of the song called the "chorus." Davidson 1997 documents women composing Native American Church songs.

<sup>14</sup>One Veteran or Soldier song (composed by Louis FawFaw) uses the vertitive motion verb again 'they came back (home)' *e-gri- n~e khe*. (Cf. Davidson 1997 Appendix C for full texts of these songs.)

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