

A “Sense of Beginning”
The Ancestral Relationship of the Choctaw and Chickasaw
as Told through Oral History

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I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have
neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.

Abstract

The aspect of Native history which this essay explores is how migratory movements of Native Americans are remembered and recorded post-colonization through oral histories, with a focus on the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes of the Southeastern United States. With these tribes in mind, it can be argued that oral histories, particularly migration histories, when combined with linguistic and geographic knowledge, provide evidence of shared origins and development prior to their settlement in the Southeastern United States. Simultaneously, when considering oral histories as perhaps the only existing histories of Indigenous peoples, it is necessary to understand the possible efforts made at misconstruing them by Europeans and Euroamericans. Overall, the migratory origins of the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes can be determined by understanding the different versions of recorded oral histories and their references to geographic landmarks.

Most historical research about Native Americans focuses either on the origins of Native Americans in the Americas, such as how and when they arrived in the “New World,” or on the changes made to Native life and culture following European colonial contact. Exceptions to this are studies of Mississippian culture and other tribal settlements, which could be argued by historians as evidence of early Indigenous civilization.¹ While these topics are important in understanding Indigenous history, they are limited to three key points: introduction, civilization, and colonization. The aspect of Native history which this essay explores what occurred between the periods of introduction and civilization and how migratory movements of Native Americans are remembered and recorded post-colonization through oral histories. Because many oral histories provide a supernatural origin for creation and humanity, the selected oral histories are considered more literal, and potentially more accurate, representations of historical event and fall under the genre of “migration narratives.”² With the potential to study countless tribal groups, the decision has been made to focus on the migration histories of tribes of the Southeast, particularly the Choctaw and Chickasaw. With these tribes in mind, it can be argued that oral histories, particularly migration histories, when combined with linguistic and geographic knowledge, provide evidence of shared origins and development prior to their settlement in the Southeastern United States. Simultaneously, when considering the use of oral histories as perhaps the only existing histories

1. Gregory D. Smithers, *Native Southerners: Indigenous History from Origins to Removal*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019), 11-13; Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, *The Columbia Guide to American Indians of the Southeast*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 11-13.

2. Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 16. Additional genres of origin stories not focused on in this paper include “earth emergence stories, earth-diver creation stories, deluge [flood] stories, . . . human creation associated with the Sun or Moon, and corn mother narratives.” The exact genre of story depends upon the tribe, the transcriber, and, in some cases, simply the individual version of what is otherwise the same story.

of Indigenous peoples, it is necessary to understand the possible efforts made at misconstruing them.

Oral histories are the primary way in which Indigenous history has been remembered for thousands of years. Oral history, by definition, is retold through speech, and as a result, the telling of those stories can change over time. However, some historians argue that a greater issue comes from the recordings of oral histories. These written forms of Native oral histories have largely been translated and recorded by Europeans and Euroamericans hundreds of years after the events occurred during periods of colonization and imperialism.³ The process of recording and translating already lends to accidental errors and inaccuracies in the stories. However, there is also the possibility that whoever wrote down the history intentionally changed details which reflect personal biases and agendas. This is the greatest issue when these changes are made to promote their own beliefs of what Indigenous history ought to have been, regardless of what actually occurred. Historian Gregory D. Smithers wrote in his book *Native Southerners: Indigenous History from Origins to Removal* that “where Native Southerners set out traditions that explained their respective connection to the landscape and local ecologies, and provided the basis for social structures and institutions, Europeans sought to circumscribe Native identities by presenting origin stories as ‘myth.’”⁴ This discreditation of oral histories as real history by white people intentionally undermines the importance of these stories as the primary record of tribal communities and serves to present them as more primitive and backwards. These representations were cited by colonialists

3. Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 15. *Euroamericans* refers to modern (post-colonial) Americans who are of European descent. Throughout this essay, Euroamericans and Europeans will also be referred to more generally as white people. Oral histories were primarily recorded between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Dustin J. Mack, “The Chickasaws’ Place-World: The Mississippi River in Chickasaw History and Geography.” *Native South* 11, no. 1, (2018), 1.

4. Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 23-24.

during attempts to remove Native Americans from their lands by identifying them as migratory groups incapable of producing a culture of substance or complexity, ignoring their status as sovereign tribes.⁵ While changes made by white historians, interviewers, and translators provide insight into the European and Euroamerican perspectives of Native American life, they disregard and misinterpret the original history during a period in which Native tribes had limited self-advocacy and excuse the reasons for forgotten or lost histories as the fault of the tribes, rather than that of the colonizers.⁶

In some cases, writers made parallels between Indigenous stories and Christian beliefs, generally using biblical language, making “disentangling the threads of Native American and Christian culture . . . one of the major challenges confronting students of the Native South.”⁷ Examples of this appear later in the post-colonial period, after the forced acceptance of Christianity and could indicate the broader inclusion of Christian ideology into Native religion and tradition, rather than direct interference by the author.⁸ This is potentially prevalent in the oral histories of the Choctaw and Chickasaw, as they are considered two of the “Five Civilized Tribes,” being the

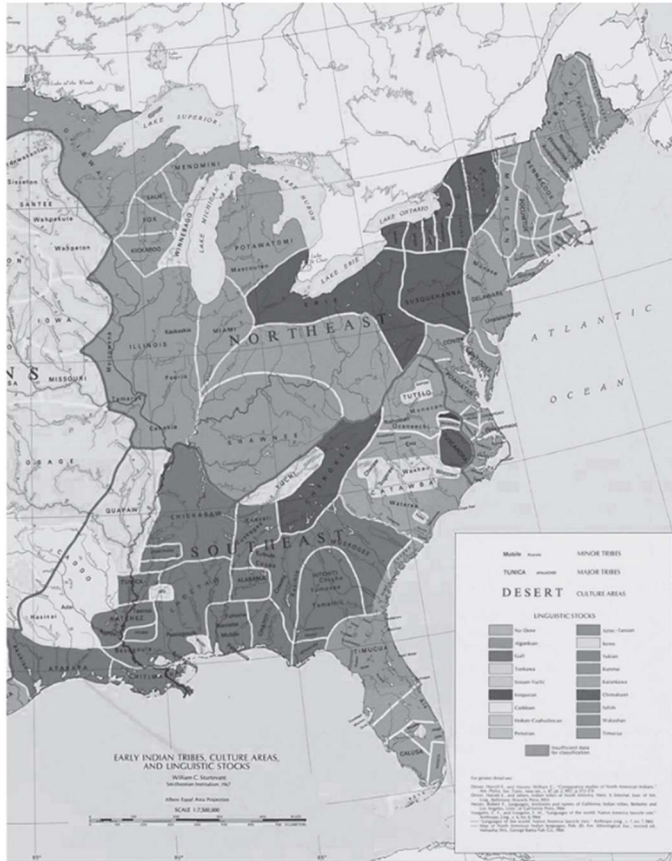
5. Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 24-25.

6. Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 23-24. According to Smithers, early twentieth-century anthropologist Frank Speck noted a “distinct lack of insight among the Catawbas [an Eastern tribe] about their origins” which he “attributed (in an overly racialized and condescending way to way) to the Catawbas being ‘lax and shiftless in vital concerns.’” Fellow anthropologist Charles Hudson claimed that many Natives were not interested in their tribe’s origin stories. Smithers, 17-18; Robert V. Davis, *The Search for the First Americans: Science, Power, Politics*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021), 22.

7. Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 17.

8. For example, one oral history, recorded by Albert S. Gatschet and later published by John R. Swanton, describes the Kasihta-Chickasaw-Coweta origin migration using language reminiscent of the biblical Revelations. Bill Grantham, *Creation Myths and Legends of the Creek Indians*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 119-30.

Southeastern tribes who most greatly assimilated to European customs.⁹ This creates the potential for even unintentional religious influence in the retelling and language of oral histories, as many Choctaw and Chickasaw converted to Christianity.



Prior to the Indian Removal Act of the 1830s, the Choctaw and Chickasaw occupied part of the western region of the Southeastern United States, consisting of modern-day Mississippi and western Alabama.¹⁰ Exact dates of prehistoric movement cannot, or at least have not yet, been determined, but it is known that Native Americans developed agriculture in the Southeast circa 3000 B.C.E., which indicates near-permanent settlement, so the Choctaw and Chickasaw likely migrated

and taken up residence there prior to that time.¹¹

9. The other “civilized” tribes include the Cherokee, Creek, and Seminole.

Image: William C. Sturtevant’s map of Indian tribes, cultures, and language (1967).
Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division, Washington D.C., included in Smithers,
Native Southerners, 9.

10. Perdue and Green, *The Columbia Guide*, 188. What exactly defines the Southeastern region depends on the researcher, however, based on the spread of Muskogean languages, it most reasonably includes the southernmost states east of the Mississippi River, including modern-day Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida.

11. Perdue and Green, *The Columbia Guide*, 223.

Beyond existing within relative proximity to one another, the Choctaw and Cherokee share a similar linguistic history. The Choctaw and Chickasaw languages belong to the Muskogean language group, which was the most common in the Southeast prior to colonization.¹² While the exact distinctions between the Muskogean languages are not known, linguists agree that Chickasaw and Choctaw are the oldest within this language family, though it is not established whether they are technically separate languages or different dialects of the same language.¹³ Regardless, it is well established that the Choctaw and Cherokee share the necessary linguistic similarities which indicate a foundational relationship between the two tribes.

With this basic geographic and linguistic evidence in mind, one can turn to the actual oral histories to determine how or why these tribes developed together before apparently separating into two distinct tribal groups, as they are known today. Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green, professors of history and American studies who are considered experts on Southeastern Native American culture, wrote that the Choctaw preceded the Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Creek tribes from Nanih Waiya in Mississippi according to Choctaw emergence myths.¹⁴ However, this

12. Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 23; Perdue and Green, *The Columbia Guide*, 188; Deborah A. Bolnick and David Glenn Smith, “Unexpected Patterns of Mitochondrial DNA variation among Native Americans from the Southeastern United States.” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 122, no. 4, (December 2003), 336. Besides Choctaw and Chickasaw, the Muskogean languages include the Creek and Seminole tribes, among others.

13. Bolnick and Smith, “Unexpected Patterns of Mitochondrial DNA variation,” 336.

14. Perdue and Green, *The Columbia Guide*, 21. Nanih Waiya is a burial mound associated with Choctaw origin stories. It serves as an important cultural touchstone for the Choctaw people. Perdue and Green, *The Columbia Guide*, 188. Perdue and Green generalize the Mississippi origin stories by stating the Choctaw have an emergence origin, while the Chickasaw have a migratory origin. This is not entirely reflected in the actual oral histories, as there are examples of Choctaw migration histories. Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 22. The Choctaw migration story as a whole also shares similarities with some Cherokee and Creek migration stories.

disagrees with at least one oral history recorded by ethnologist Albert S. Gatschet which was published in Boston's *Missionary Herald* in 1828.

When they emigrated from a distant country in the west, the Creeks were in front, the Cha'hta¹⁵ in the rear. They travelled to a "good country" in the east; this was the inducement to go. On the way, they stopped to plant corn. Their great leader and prophet directed all their movements, carried the hobuna or sacred bag (containing "medicines") and a long white pole as the badge of his authority. When he planted the white pole, it was a signal for their encampment. He was always careful to

set this pole perpendicularly and to suspend upon it the sacred bag. None were allowed to come near it and no one but himself might touch it. When the pole inclined towards the east, this was the signal for them to proceed on their journey; it steadily inclined east until they reached Nánni Wáya.¹⁶ There they settled.¹⁷

Besides stating that the Choctaw arrived after the Chickasaw, this particular origin story also negates the assertion that Choctaw origin began by emerging from Nanih Waiya. In this story, Nanih Waiya is instead discovered during the migration and is their indication to remain and create a settlement. As this variation lacks the sort of supernatural influence of the emergence story, it is

15. In early writings on Native Americans, there were rarely standardized spellings for Indigenous words, including tribal names. This instance of *Cha'hta* is a phonetic spelling of *Choctaw*. It is also transcribed as *Chahtah*. Regardless of spelling, all instances are referring to the Choctaw tribe.

16. *Nánni Wáya* and *Nunih Waiya* are examples of nonstandard spellings for the location *Nanih Waiya*.

17. Albert S. Gatschet, *A Migration Legend of the Creek Indians, With a Linguistic, Historic and Ethnographic Introduction*, Brinton's Library of Aboriginal Literature, Number 4 (Philadelphia: D.G. Brinton. Reprint, 1969, New York: AMS Press, 1884), 1: 219-20, quoted in Grantham, "Choctaw: Choctaw Migration (Cho3)," In *Creation Myths and Legends*, 155. In Grantham's book, each oral history is divided into numbered lines; these lines have been kept in the quotations for this essay. Another oral history, recorded by Anna Lewis and Gideon Linoecum, describes the settlement at Nanih Waiya and its usage as a burial mound, which has been archaeologically proven. In it, it is stated that their migration lasted many years. Grantham, *Creation Myths and Legends*, 157-58.

likely that this version is more historically accurate. The emergence story instead could be perceived as a more metaphorical view of the tribes separation from the Chickasaw and others.

Another oral history, this one belonging to the Chickasaw and reported by geographer and ethnologist Henry R. Schoolcraft, shares many parts of the Choctaw migration story, including the use of pole to guide the way East, however this version does not explicitly mention the Choctaw tribe at all. It states that

By tradition, they say they [the Chickasaw] came from the West; a part of their tribe remained in the West¹⁸. When about to start eastward, they were provided with a large dog as a guard, and a pole as guide; the dog would give them notice whenever an enemy was near at hand, and thus enable them to make their arrangements to receive them. The pole they would plant in the ground every night, and the next morning they would look at it, and go in the direction it leaned. They continued their journey in this way until

they crossed the great Mississippi River; and, on the waters of the Alabama River, arrived in the country about where Huntsville, Alabama, now is: there the pole was unsettled for several days: but, finally, it settled, and pointed in a southwest direction. They then started on that course, planting the pole every night, until they got to what is called the Chickasaw Old Fields, where the pole stood perfectly erect. All then came to the conclusion that that was the Promised Land, and there they accordingly remained until they emigrated west of

the State of Arkansas, in the years 1837 and 1838.

...

In traveling from the west to the east, they have no recollection of crossing any large water-course except the Mississippi River. When they were travelling from the West to the Promised Land in the East, they had enemies on all sides, and had to fight their way through, but they cannot give the names of the people they fought

18. It is possible that this “remaining” tribe could be referencing a surviving tribe in the modern-day Southwest. It is not clear which tribe this may be.

with while travelling.¹⁹

The mention of the Mississippi River as the first known water crossing is reasonable, as it is one of if not the largest geographic features present while moving eastward. The Mississippi River had also long been used as the western boundary of Chickasaw territory and was frequently used by the tribe even when settlements were nearly one hundred miles away.²⁰ According to historian and curator Dustin J. Mack, the crossing of the Mississippi River as told in the migration story denotes “beginning of Chickasaw history,” and, as such, it appears consistently in nearly, if not, all variations of the Chickasaw migration story.²¹

While Choctaw and Chickasaw oral histories, even when mentioning each other, can vary widely, there are a few versions of their origin stories that combine elements, creating a singular shared history. The earliest known version of this story was published in the 1820s and features two brothers known as Chahta/Chahtah and Chikasa/Chikasah, who led neighboring peoples to the Southeastern territories. It is indicated that the cause of this migration was due to the overspending of the available natural resources of the West, perhaps resulting in famine.²² Each

19. Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Historical and statistical information, respecting the history, condition and prospects of the Indian tribes of the United States*. Parts 1-6 (Philadelphia, ed. 1851-57), III:309-11, quoted in Grantham, “Choctaw: Chickasaw Migration (Chi1),” In *Creation Myths and Legends*, 153-155. This particular story is interesting in that it could indicate the limitations of retellings as to whether the knowledge of other locations or tribes were lost over time.

20. Mack, “The Chickasaws’ Place-World,” 1.

21. Mack, “The Chickasaws’ Place-World,” 1-3. The Chickasaw’s usage of the Mississippi River as both a geographic location and a symbol within their origin stories, is similar to the Choctaw usage of Nanih Waiya.

22. The outcome of this famine is referenced in Lewis’s oral history describing the creation of Nanih Waiya, stating that the Choctaw carried the bones of their relatives on the migration and chose to bury them at Nanih Waiya. Grantham, *Creation Myths and Legends*, 157-58.

day, the brothers and their respective followers migrated east using a sacred pole which directed them along their path for many months. After crossing the Mississippi River, the travelers were stopped by rain, and the Choctaw chose to remain near Nanih Waiya, while the Chickasaw continued eastward. From that point on, they remained separate tribes.²³ This story shares similarities with known geographic evidence and aligns with the cultural significance of the Mississippi River and Nanih Waiya as the respective origins of the modern Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes.

As the sole surviving historical knowledge of Indigenous peoples, oral histories provide innumerable opportunities to understand Native American culture, especially when combined with modern studies of linguistics and geography. Together these details create a singular image of a shared history of the ancestral Choctaw and Chickasaw, extending beyond their inhabiting the Southeastern territory and beginning with a great migration. It can be determined that the Choctaw and Chickasaw began as a singular or related tribal group in the West and migrated together, or in very close succession to one another, to the Eastern United States, where they then permanently separated into the tribes that they are today. Despite the questions of when the migration occurred and for exactly what cause, it is clear that it did happen and has remained a part of tribal memory for generations since, even with centuries of interference by Europeans and Euroamericans.

23. Smithers, *Native Southerners*, 22; Anna Lewis, “Nunih Waiya”, *Chronicles of Oklahoma* (Oklahoma Historical Society, 1938), 16:215-16, quoted in Grantham, “Choctaw: Choctaw Origins (Cho4),” In *Creation Myths and Legends*, 156-157. *Chikasah* and *Chikasa* are both examples of nonstandard spellings for the word *Chickasaw*. Both instances are in reference to the Chickasaw tribe.

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