

Migration of the Southeastern Tribes – Proposal Rewrite

It can be argued that most popular works on Native American history focuses on Native American culture after European contact. Because of this, the proposed project will focus specifically on Native Americans pre-contact, by seeking to determine the geographic origins of the Southeastern tribes, most notably the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek, before colonial contact circa 1550. More specifically, this project will show that the Southeastern tribes, following migration across the Pacific Ocean, originated in the modern-day southwestern United States and northern Mexico before eventually settling in the southeast. This will be accomplished by analyzing Native American oral histories and mythologies in relation to archaeological evidence and geographic features, as well as the diffusion of cultural elements and linguistics across tribes. This project will synthesize what is already discussed to smaller degrees in other works.

The proposed project focuses on the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek tribes. These tribes were specifically chosen due to the well-established relationship between these large tribal groups, as shown through linguistic, mythological, and geographical similarities, showing that their origins are related to one another and thus should be studied together, while also acknowledging and interpreting their differences. Technically the term “Southeastern” can be used to describe numerous tribes, though they generally include what are considered the “five civilized tribes,” which are those previously listed in addition to the Cherokee and Seminole. However, there are enough differences between the Cherokee and Seminole cultures that, for the proposed project, they will be excluded.

The primary method to be utilized for creating an approximate timeline is comparing Southeastern origin, creation, and migration stories to one another and to physical evidence. For example, geographic reference of the Mississippi River and other landforms in such stories can be

used to trace a supposed migration and archaeological evidence can be identified and dated to determine if it correlates with the correct tribal traditions. Beyond comparing stories of the Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Creek to one another, variations of the same story from the same tribe can also be compared to ensure that the story referenced is the most accurate. Because these are oral histories that have existed and been passed down since before colonization, different versions exist. Add to that the diversity present within the tribes allowing for slightly different retellings, and the fact that these origin stories have been translated and communicated into English from their native languages, comparing stories from the same tribe and determining when they were recorded and from whom can help identify whether they are technically accurate. The primary reference for specific oral histories and mythology is Bill Grantham's *Creation Myths and Legends of the Creek Indians*, as it provides the different versions of creation and migration myths of the Creek, Chickasaw, and Choctaw tribes.

Robert V. Davis's *The Search for the First Americans: Science, Power, Politics* is one study that examines Native American migration through tradition and science at a far larger scale than the proposed project, as it studies Paleo-Indians as a whole beginning with the migration from Asia over 12,000 years ago and their dispersion throughout the North American continent. *The Search for the First Americans* provides an example for comparing both traditional and modern perspectives in Native migration. Additional works featuring the histories of individual tribes, such as James Taylor Carson's *Searching for the Bright Path* offer greater context for traditions, beliefs, and events prior to European arrival.

By comparing oral histories and mythologies with evidence discovered through archaeology and geography, it is possible to show how the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek migrated across continental North America and came to live in the southeastern region by start of

colonization. This will be accomplished using existing studies of Native American history and archaeology, as well as recorded mythologies of the tribes to establish a chronology of their movements.

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

Caitlin Ervin

Annotated Bibliography

Carson, James Taylor. *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999.

Carson is an associate professor of history at Queen's University in Ontario. This book is adapted from his PhD dissertation from the University of Kentucky and was published as part of the series "Indians of the Southeast" by Theda Perdue and Michael D. Green. In his book, Carson explains how the Choctaw's culture and identity changed with the introduction and influence of European colonization, focusing on adaptation to European traditions. As such, the colonial and post-colonial eras account for most of the book. Only the first chapter focuses on Choctaw pre-history, though largely through the lens of the effects of European contact. Carson's work does provide an understanding of relations and migrations of Choctaw sub-groups.

Davis, Robert V. *The Search for the First Americans: Science, Power, Politics*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021.

Davis has a PhD in science and technology studies from Virginia Tech and studies science and public policy. His work seeks to uncover the origins of the first inhabitants of the American continents, referred to as Paleo-Indians, by comparing traditional beliefs with scientific theories, such as the Bering Land Strait, and evidence from archaeological sites. This book focuses on the theories and interactions surrounding the search for information, while also presenting key discoveries from sites and cultures across the Americas. In addition to discussions of tribal migration and origins, this book provides a template of sorts for how the proposed project will be approached, by referencing both Native tradition and modern discoveries.

Grantham, Bill. *Creation Myths and Legends of the Creek Indians*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002.

Grantham is an associate professor of anthropology at Troy State University and is an anthropological consultant for the Florida Tribe of Eastern Creeks. *Creation Myths and Legends* is a collection of variations of Creek cosmogony and mythology. This book is divided into sections explaining the purpose and reason for various beliefs, such as Creation, as well as the actual myths associated with each in their known iterations. This collection includes myths from tribes related to and sub-grouped within the Creek at large, including the Choctaw. This book provides the tribal stories on migration and origin necessary for the proposed project. While these stories were collected by Grantham via previous interviews and publications, they are thoroughly attributed and given context to the times in which they were recorded, noting any inconsistencies between versions.

Mack, Dustin J. "The Chickasaws' Place-World: The Mississippi River in Chickasaw History and Geography." *Native South (Lincoln, NE)* 11, no. 1 (2018): 1–28.

<https://doi.org/10.1353/nso.2018.0000>.

Mack has experience as a museum curator and director, as well as a university instructor. He has a PhD in American History from the University of Oklahoma. In this article, Mack examines the importance of the Mississippi River for the Chickasaw with regard to geography and territory, as well as in the chronology of their histories and migration stories. Mack also acknowledges the necessity, but unreliability, of such oral histories, which have undergone countless adaptations through languages and time. Comparisons of such oral histories with the geography surrounding the Mississippi suggest these stories account for a degree of actual historical record.

Malhi, Ripan S., et al. "The Structure of Diversity within New World Mitochondrial DNA Haplogroups: Implications for the Prehistory of North America." *American Journal of Human Genetics* 71, no. 1 (2002): 905-919. <https://doi.org/10.1086/339690>.

The lead author, Ripan S. Malhi, is a professor of anthropology, and is associated with the programs for evolution, ecology, and behavior, American Indian studies, and genomic biology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. In their study, the authors use genetic evidence from Native American groups across North America to determine the pre-America migratory origins of tribes and correlate them with modern geographic and linguistic similarities. They note that the Southeastern tribes do not follow the same genetic pattern and theorize that this is due to early European contact. While the Southeastern tribes cannot be traced through genetics in the same way as others, this study shows that direct connections can be made between ethnic groups to trace migratory history.

Perdue, Theda, and Michael D. Green. *The Columbia Guide to American Indians of the Southeast*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

Perdue and Green are professors of history and American studies, respectively. They are considered experts on Native American culture and history. In their book, they detail the complex histories of the Southeastern tribes from pre-history to the modern era. Their book is divided into sections by era, focusing on cultural traditions, technological development, interactions with colonial powers, and what remained of the tribes' post-removal. Chapters 1 and 2 are the most applicable to the proposed project, as they focus on approaches to understanding Native American history and the development of the Southeastern tribes' pre-European contact according to oral histories and archaeological efforts.

Smithers, Gregory D. *Native Southerners: Indigenous History from Origins to Removal*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019.

Smithers is a professor of American history at Virginia Commonwealth University who specializes in Native American and African American history. He emphasizes the need to listen to and understand Native American cultural history when trying to identify tribal origins, rather than relying purely on Western scientific evidence, including genetics and linguistics, as these methods have historically come from a place of racial bias. He considers this book to be part of the interdisciplinary effort to understand indigenous

history as told by indigenous peoples through their perspectives. The first chapter on Paleo-Indian origin stories and archaeological discoveries will be the most useful.

The proposed project will contribute to the scholarly conversation by providing possible explanations for the geographic origins and eastward migration of the modern-day Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Creek tribes. It will discuss history as told by both Native Americans and other researchers, such as archaeologists, with an emphasis on the Indigenous perspective as told through oral histories. The proposed project will also focus on the similarities and interactions between the three primary tribes.