

Original Article

# My Mother's Clan, My Father's Country: Muskogee (Creek) Intermarriage and Nineteenth Century Nation Building

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**Abstract** - Before the Revolutionary War, intermarriage was already common between European traders and the tribal members of the Muskogee (Creek) confederacy in the area that is now Georgia and Alabama. After the war ended, the larger issue became how to be Native American in the new United States, as tribal culture was replaced with state governments. This paper explores how intermarriage between Muskogee (Creek) Indian women and European men accelerated the loss of tribal land in the southeast, created conflict within the tribe, and influenced nation-building in postcolonial America.

**Keywords** – Intermarriage, Muskogee (Creek), Native Americans, Postcolonial America, Tribal land loss.

## 1. Introduction

During the nineteenth century, intermarriage between tribal and European peoples of distinctly different cultures and the social ramifications it brings are relevant to the study of kinship and the cultural change it undergoes during nation-building. Specifically, the intermarriage between Western European White men and the matrilineal Muskogee (Creek) women during the period of the nineteenth century allows for the study of cultural opposites, such as the old and the new the communal and the individual. From an anthropological perspective, this paper explores how intermarriage between Muskogee (Creek) Indian women and European men accelerated the loss of tribal land in the southeastern United States, created conflict within the tribe, and influenced nation-building in postcolonial America.

## 2. European Fathers' and Sororal Polygyny

Before the Revolutionary War (1775-1783), intermarriage was already common between European traders and the tribal members of the Muskogee (Creek) confederacy in the area that is now Georgia and Alabama. The first federal policies toward tribes were initiated around 1780 and were designed to stipulate laws for trading with Native Americans on their land (Wilkins and Stark, 152). By 1830, this would change to treaties to remove tribes from their land (152). After the war ended, the larger issue became how to be Native American in the new United States, as tribal culture was replaced with state governments.

Like all “river Indians,” the waterways provided resources for survival in foraging cultures. The naming of the tribe varies, as the English called them Creeks because of the waterways they resided on, while they called themselves “Musko’ge,” perhaps originating from the Choctaw word for

“Red Stick” people (Wilson, 38). Within the Muskogee (Creek) tribe, the “red sticks” were traditionalists who preferred traditional cultural customs and disliked assimilation into the European way of life.

Tribes in the southeast were polygynous, matrilineal, and matrilocal, so a liaison between a European man and an Indian woman often entailed few obligations on the man's part (Doan, 11). In other words, he wasn't as responsible for their welfare as the mother's brothers would be. The mother's clan would raise a child, and the mother's brothers would serve as fatherly figures for the children in their clan, teaching them life skills. While North America's Native American tribes were predominately matrilineal and matrilocal, men were warriors, chiefs, and negotiators, which made them influential in nation-building.

Sororal polygyny, a man marrying a wife and her sisters, was common and promiscuity was more acceptable than in European marriage (Perdue, 11). Theda Perdue (11) writes of the economic need of the tribal women and their desire to participate in an economic exchange to provide items for their children. Common law marriage facilitated a mutual dependency at the economic level, with the European men buying furs from Indian hunters and the Indian women having material needs coming together for their matrilineal families.

In the southeastern United States, children of mixed race with Irish, Scottish, and Native American ancestry were common in the nineteenth century. Charles Doan categorizes their upbringing on a sliding scale of being very affiliated with their mom's clan, called “Indian countrymen,” to affiliated with their father's society, called *métis* (Doan, 9). For *métis*, the pull of white society was strong (Doan, 12).



Intermarriage would lead to a larger sociopolitical faction within Creek society that would persist until the Creek were eventually relocated to Indian Territory in the present state of Oklahoma. This sociopolitical faction was ideological and cultural, with *métis* wanting to integrate with white society and those who were “more Creek” wanting to practice traditional tribal ways. The origin of *métis* through intermarriage brought a temporary economic connection for females but a permanent loss of tribal lands.

### 3. Métis in Georgia

The sociopolitical turbulence was so great it erupted into the Creek War (1813-1814). Culminating at the Battle of Horseshoe Bend, when the Creeks lost two-thirds of their Territory from the area of the present states of Alabama and Georgia (Debo, 112). Charles Banks Wilson (38) describes the decades of encroachment after the Creek War ended in the defeat of the Indians, with a treaty in 1814 resulting in them ceding their land in southern Georgia and the Treaty at Indian Springs in 1826 beginning their removal to Indian Territory. The Treaty at Indian Springs was signed by the *méti* William McIntosh, who advocated emigration to Indian Territory and would be paid \$25,000.00 for his residence in the ceded area and given protection by the federal commissioners (Debo, 115).

GM Culbertson describes General McIntosh as one of the “greatest American Indian leaders” who served under President Andrew Jackson (Culbertson, 20). Culbertson describes him as “pushed on all sides by Georgians” and agreed to exchange the tribe’s land in Georgia for new land in Indian Territory (21). The Oklahoma historian, Angie Debo, has a less favorable view of General McIntosh, who she accounts as having written a letter to Cherokee Chief John Ross saying he, McIntosh, was receptive to bribery (115). Chief Opothle Yahola warned him of the fatal consequences “should he sign that paper,” while McIntosh felt he would be protected by federal commissioners (115). Instead, the “red sticks” faction assassinated him for the betrayal (Culbertson, 21). For the Muskogee (Creek), the “Red Stick” traditionalists were defeated, and the tribe was relocated to Indian Territory.

Individual profit over tribal communal land ownership is a decidedly western, capitalistic concept. McIntosh may have realized that the quality of life for Creeks in Georgia and Alabama was so lowered from what it had been that moving to Indian Territory was an opportunity for a quieter, more traditional tribal existence. He underestimated the actions and viewpoint of the “red sticks” and appears to have been a bit greedy on the way out. Chief Yahola, as a “red stick” himself, was more traditional, less greedy, and would lead the tribe out of the southeast when forced by President Andrew Jackson.

### 4. The Louisiana Purchase

Within a few years, Creeks remaining in Alabama were forced to walk to Indian Territory after Alabama lands were open for settlement to whites (Wilson, 38). The white advance was inevitable (Debo 1970, 97), with whites disregarding boundaries declared by treaty in pursuit of killing game, driving cattle, and building houses on Muskogee (Creek) owned land (96). With the purchase of the Louisiana Territory (which extended to the Rocky Mountains), removal of the Indians, rather than inclusion, became an option (Talbot, 177). President Thomas Jefferson, not Andrew Jackson, recommended the removal of the Indians west of the Mississippi River to Congress. By that time, Indians were outnumbered eight to one in the southeast, and the greed for land and desire for a capitalist economy necessitated Indian removal (177).

When the Muskogee (Creek) tribe was being removed from the southeast, Indian Territory was not their first choice as the aggressive Osage tribe was already settled there. The Muskogee (Creek) had inadequate clothing for the cold and death from pneumonia and were ready to flee to the Texas-Louisiana border, where distant relatives were (Debo, 1941:108). The climate in northeastern Oklahoma is much colder compared to southeast Texas, a fact that Chief Yahola would have been concerned with, considering that after the Treaty at Indian Springs, the tribe was relocated on foot in the wintertime. Snow and frigid temperatures resulted in pneumonia, and unclean river water caused disease from mosquitoes in the summertime (108). The harsh climate and lack of supplies made the displacement particularly deadly.

### 5. Mexican Texas

At the time of removal, Chief Yahola was leading the Muskogee (Creek), and an effort was made in 1834 to relocate to Mexican Texas, where tribal peoples, such as the Cherokee and the culturally and linguistically related Alabama Coushatta tribe, were living in small numbers (Muckleroy, 240). The Muskogee (Creek) tried to purchase land north of Nacogdoches in Mexican Texas, but the Cherokee and American settlers prevented this from happening (240). The events around this land purchase are critical to understanding why more Native Americans did not settle in Texas. For this, it is important to consider the sociopolitical climate in Mexican Texas and the control over it by white men from Georgia. There were 220 Cherokee in the county of Nacogdoches, far more than Muskogee (Creek) (240). When the acting governor discovered that many Muskogee (Creeks) were arranging to purchase land from settlers, he declared it “criminal and unpardonable.” He sought the names of the settlers involved (Muckleroy, 259).

Until the Texas Revolution, the Alabama Coushatta and Cherokees resided along the eastern border of Mexican Texas. Still, they would experience some changes under the presidency of Mirabeau Lamar (1798-1859 died). He had a

policy of expulsion for Native Americans in the Republic of Texas and wanted to discourage the Alabama Coushatta from aligning with more aggressive tribes (Hook, 32). Lamar was born in Georgia and experienced President Andrew Jackson's removal policies before relocating to Mexican Texas.

Lamar's expulsion policy contrasts with the first President of Texas, Sam Houston, who was married to a Cherokee wife and had a long history of cooperation with and fondness for Cherokees while growing up in Tennessee. Sam Houston wanted the Creeks to support the Texans, while the Mexicans tried to enlist them against them, but the Creeks remained neutral (Debo, 1941:134). Native Americans living on the border between French Louisiana and Mexican Texas were considered a buffer by the Mexican government.

The Texas Revolution was a microcosm of the southeastern United States between 1812 and 1814. Native Americans were unable to maintain tribal land, while white men were able to acquire more land. Had the Muskogee (Creek) been able to relocate as a large tribal group into Mexican Texas, the cultural landscape in Texas would have been changed. Currently, the State of Texas depends on property taxes and oil taxation, so preventing reservations has allowed state officials to maintain control over wealth.

## 6. Conclusion

The cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead, who studied cultural evolution in tribal peoples, described her *theory of culture contact* – in which two peoples of different levels or types of culture met and one, against the will of the other, forced its way of life on the culture-contacted people, using persuasion, political power, bribery, economic sanctions, expressed contempt. Opprobrium forces the other people to

accept a way of life essentially alien, incompatible, and unwelcome to them (Mead, 1956). She documented how some societies are more agreeable in their modernization, but this was not the case during the nineteenth century for Native Americans. Mead describes how when people of a different culture fail to accept the opportunities offered to them, to become “like” the members of another culture, it could be because part of the pattern has been denied. They cannot hope to attain full status as members of the group that determines lines of identification, full potential, or constriction of its members (1956:444).

Ultimately, the number of Native Americans would decline over the ten years of the Republic of Texas (1836-1846) through famine, disease, and three years of Lamar's expulsion policy (Muckleroy, 242). Two federal policies, allotment and termination, limited tribes' ability to protect land and resources (O'brien and Talamantez, 33). The allotment policies and termination gave small parcels of land to tribal people but 640-acre parcels to EuroAmerican settlers through the Homestead Acts (O'brien and Talamantez, 34).

Firstly, the loss of land in the American southeast was facilitated by aspects of tribal culture, specifically intermarriage and sororal polygyny. Intermarriage with European White men offered initial economic benefits, but subsequently, it was detrimental to tribes when biracial offspring became aligned with the American federal government. As state governments replaced tribal culture, subsequent economic suffering persisted. The indigenous American Indian population had already been reduced from 12.5 million in 1500 to fewer than 250,000 by the beginning of the twentieth century (Fiske-Rusciano, 134). The average life expectancy of a reservation-based Native American man is 45 years old, and for women, 48 years old (135).

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