"They Are Carried in Our Blood": Violence and Memory in the Nineteenth Century Cherokee Nation

Abstract
Throughout the nineteenth century, the Cherokees faced unequivocal levels of violence. They experienced unmatched terror at the hands of others and themselves. Death, destruction, and hatred ran rampant in the Cherokee Nation among its peoples and leaders. However, their traditions allowed them to maintain the strength and cohesiveness of their tribe throughout the worst of the violence they faced. Leaders worked to unify and renew the tribe following excessive violence. To determine the best course of action, leaders and peoples alike continuously turned to the past for guidance. The Cherokees’ ability to internalize violence and allow it be a renewing force, and to use memories to promote their future, enabled them to persist through one of the most turbulent periods in their history. Removal emphasized the schisms that already existed in the tribe and only heightened upon arrival in Indian Territory with the assassination of the Treaty Party. A seven-year civil war and forced peace agreement resulted in moving the tribe into their Golden Age of the 1850s. The American Civil War, though, returned violence to the nation resulting in two political parties representing the schisms in the postbellum period. Throughout these affairs, the Cherokees utilized their practice of making violence regenerative, commonly entering a time of prosperity following excessive violence. They also returned to their past to promote their future by implementing the practices of those before them. More importantly, though, is that these two elements propelled the other forward, creating a tribe that was able to contend with internal schisms, violence, external pressures, and changes throughout a century in an increasingly encroaching world. The Cherokees’ ability to internalize violence and maintain connections to those before them allowed them to conserve their strength and autonomy through removal, the Treaty Party assassination and resulting Civil War, the Golden Age, the United States Civil War, and rebuilding during the postbellum period. Although both important practices of the tribe, the ways in which violence and memory worked in tandem in Cherokee history reveal the reasons the tribe has endured for centuries in contention with surrounding powers.

URI
https://hdl.handle.net/11244/300022
Cherokee Nation Courthouse in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, mid-nineteenth century. Despite a Supreme Court ruling in their favor, many in the Cherokee Nation were forcibly relocated West, a migration known as the Trail of Tears or in Cherokee Nunna Daul Tsunny ("The Trail Where They Cried") and by another term Tlo Va Sa ("The Tragedy"): Then… there came the reign of terror. Much of what is known about pre-nineteenth century Cherokee history, culture, and society comes from the papers of American writer John Howard Payne. The Payne papers describe the memory Cherokee elders had of a traditional societal structure in which a "white" organization of elders represented the seven clans. Not quite a century ago, blood degree varied among Cherokee citizens from full blood to 1/256, but today the range is far greater—from full blood to 1/2048. This trend raises questions about the symbolic significance of blood and the degree to which blood connections can stretch and still carry a sense of legitimacy. CHAPTER TWO Blood, Culture, and Race: Cherokee Politics and Identity in the Eighteenth Century. (pp. 27-51). The activities of Euroamericans in the early nineteenth century ensured that Cherokee nationalism—and, by extension, racialism—would take hold. Between 1808 and 1835, Cherokees were increasingly confronted with U.S. expansion into their territory in the Southeast (McLoughlin 1986: 146–67).