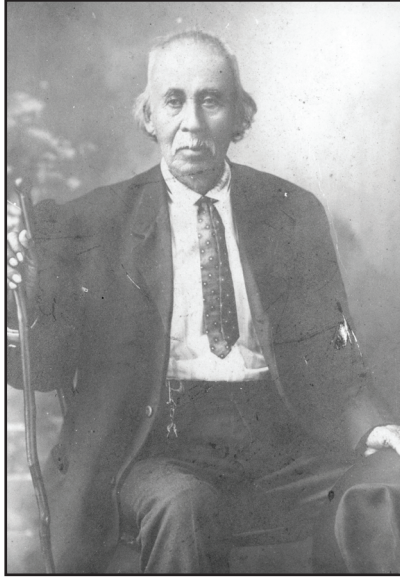


## **“I Can Come Into Your World But You Can’t Come Into Mine”: John Swanton and Southeastern Oral Narratives**



*By Brady DeSanti\**

Renowned anthropologist John Reed Swanton (1873–1953) is best known for his contributions to Native Southeast studies, where he combined several methodologies that included archaeology, anthropology, history, and linguistics. He was a pioneer in establishing the discipline of ethnohistory and his contributions remain indispensable reference points for scholars of the region. Reared in the Boasian school of thought, Swanton rejected both evolutionary and racial frameworks in which to evaluate Native cultures. He remained an exemplary anthropologist from the beginning of his professional career at the Bureau of American Ethnology in 1900 through his retirement in 1944.<sup>1</sup>

A major reason why Swanton’s work continues to prove useful to contemporary anthropologists is his extensive field work and collaborations with Native informants. A key aspect of anthropology in Swanton’s time and the present-day concerns the dynamics of the

individual dialogues that take place between anthropologists and Native people. These interactions provide an invaluable window into the ways in which the two parties interacted. At times, anthropologists and Native collaborators grasped the other's intentions. Just as often, however, the two parties held incompatible expectations and, as a result, misunderstand each other. For example, Swanton began his professional career in 1900 working with Haida storytellers in Haida Gwaii in British Columbia, Canada. He understood that the joint venture between the Bureau of American Ethnology and the American Museum of Natural History called for him to divide his time evenly between gathering artifacts for the museum and collecting cultural information. However, he quickly became enamored of Haida oral traditions, primarily mythological stories, leaving no real time for artifact collecting. As an admirer of art and mythology, Swanton took to collecting and transcribing Haida texts with an unparalleled enthusiasm amongst his peers. Over the course of his work, he came to appreciate the storytellers as much as he did the stories themselves. Swanton loved poetry and came to see Haida storytellers as creators in their own right, weavers of art through the telling of myths, stories, and songs.<sup>2</sup>

Given Swanton's recognition of how important individual Native contributions are in transmitting cultural knowledge, it is perplexing how often he overlooked or downplayed the intentions behind the individual narrative accounts he gathered from southeastern Native people. Many of the creation stories individuals from these communities shared with Swanton referenced the difficult circumstances they were currently facing or had undergone in the recent past, such as attacks on their cultures, removal, and alcoholism. Swanton frequently disregarded creation stories that included such material, as he felt they indicated cultural loss.<sup>3</sup>

As ahead of his time as Swanton was in regard to employing an interdisciplinary approach to the study of Native peoples, he did occasionally succumb to the prejudices that plagued many early anthropologists. One of the most pervasive pitfalls was the view that Native Americans living in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were destined for cultural extinction. As a result, Swanton and many other scholars practiced "salvage ethnography," concerning themselves with recording cultural practices that paralleled records from centuries prior. Any deviation from the historical record supposedly indicated cultural decline, not cultural perpetuation and adaptation.<sup>4</sup>

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Swanton worked during an era that posed many challenges to Native people. Government programs designed to coercively assimilate Indians, repeated attacks on tribal sovereignty, and continual land loss and encroachment into their territories by whites brought many tribes to the breaking point. This era also witnessed the professionalization of anthropology and a quest to collect as many tribal stories and traditions before Native people and their cultures disappeared forever, as policymakers predicted. During this period, many influential men and women involved in Indian affairs and policy programs predicted the inevitable extinction of Native Americans due to their supposed inferior racial makeup.<sup>5</sup>

The idea of “the Vanishing Indian” persists in some quarters of academia today, but a close examination of the facts reveals that Native population numbers at that time were actually increasing. The myth, however, helped fuel anthropologists’ insistence that only a limited window of opportunity existed to gather information and materials from Native people before it was too late. This helped investigators gain federal funding for expeditions and studies. For those who blamed inferior environments for Native cultural inferiority and declining numbers, the myth served their purposes as well. Policy reformers bent on rapidly assimilating Native people and rescuing them from their supposed downward demographic spiral benefited from perpetuating this fiction, as Washington continued to devote funding to their projects.<sup>6</sup>

Swanton mostly avoided the overt racism that characterized the work of many of his colleagues. And, whether or not he truly believed in the imminent extinction of Native peoples’ cultures, he faithfully recorded what his collaborators shared with him. In doing so, he provided future scholars and Native people with opportunities to learn from and critically examine indigenous southeastern oral traditions from a transformative time in North American anthropology. The rest of this paper looks at some examples of Swanton’s approaches and misinterpretations of southeastern, predominantly Muscogee (Creek), stories he collected during his career. Before doing so, however, it seems prudent to examine a contemporary encounter between a contemporary anthropologist and a descendent of one of Swanton’s most prized collaborators. Doing so helps illustrate important components to the collaborations that take place between Native people and non-Native scholars now and during Swanton’s career.

When anthropologist Ann Jordan and Muscogee medicine man David Lewis Jr. agreed to collaborate on a book in 2002 exploring the persistence of Muscogee religion, Jordan learned a lesson concerning

the sharp contrasts between Indian and non-Indian approaches to history. Lewis, great-grandson of the renowned Hitchiti Muscogee medicine man Jackson Lewis, said to her on several occasions that “you and I live in two different worlds and I can come into your world but you can’t come into mine.”<sup>7</sup> Jordan thought the statement’s meaning was obvious enough. Lewis was born and raised in a Muscogee culture predicated on spiritual and kinship obligations, whereas Jordan was a white anthropologist with a different cultural background. Unlike Jordan, Lewis’s circumstances presented him with a unique opportunity to become proficient in working in both Muscogee and white societies. Even when Jordan told Lewis what she thought he had meant, he refused to comment directly.<sup>8</sup> Instead, he told her the following story:

When the time comes for me to go into the woods to fast for four days I’ve already made up my mind what years of my life I want to see. I go to the sacred ground or square and use the medicine I have prepared for this occasion. After I have finished all the things I was taught to do, I usually lean back and close my eyes and go back in time. I have gone back to the days I was being born. I have watched my mom push me out into this world as my grandmother received or delivered me and my dad standing close by their side with the medicine in his hand that was to be used on me. I watched as they gave me some medicine to drink and washed me down with another type of medicine to work on my motor system. I have gone back to the time I began to walk. This was a time of training in how to identify the medicine plants you are going to use the rest of your life for your people. You learn the type of flower and color of certain plants and whether they grow tall or stay close to the ground. You learn the type of bark on the tree and the shape of the leaves and their colors. I have watched myself as my grandmother or dad gave me a medicine root and have me smell and bite into the root so I would know what it tasted like. I have gone back to the days of initiations many times, for what reason I still don’t know. I could be the energy or power of the unknown that I witness on that day. I have gone back to the time when as a little boy I sat on my grandmother’s lap as she recited the medicine words that someday I would follow the footsteps of our great people who have gone before.<sup>9</sup>

Jordan, a gifted anthropologist and an astute observer and listener, realized Lewis intended to teach her something through this exchange. She needed further clarification and Lewis obliged her, commenting:



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*David Lewis Jr., medicine man and former Muscogee Council member holding book entitled Creek Indian Medicine Ways: The Enduring Power of Mvskoke Religion (21431. IN.FC4.6.2005.03, Mary Jane Warde Collection, OHS).*

So what I meant when I said we live in two worlds and I can come into yours but you can't step over into mine was these two realities. You cannot come into the reality of the medicine people. It is different from the reality of this world. And you will never know it. You will never know what that change of energy is like. But you didn't understand what I meant before. I didn't give you enough information to understand what I meant. You tried to figure out what I meant with what knowledge you had and you didn't know about this other world of mine. I am in your world but I can also live in my world that no person can come into.<sup>10</sup>

At last, the story's message was clear to Jordan. She came to realize that Native people have been and continue to be in control of the exchange of knowledge flowing from collaborator to anthropologist. No amount of academic training or sympathetic platitudes compensate for these experiences. Native people either can choose to correct outsider misunderstandings or ignore them. Without coming to grips with the fact that indigenous people retain control over what stories they



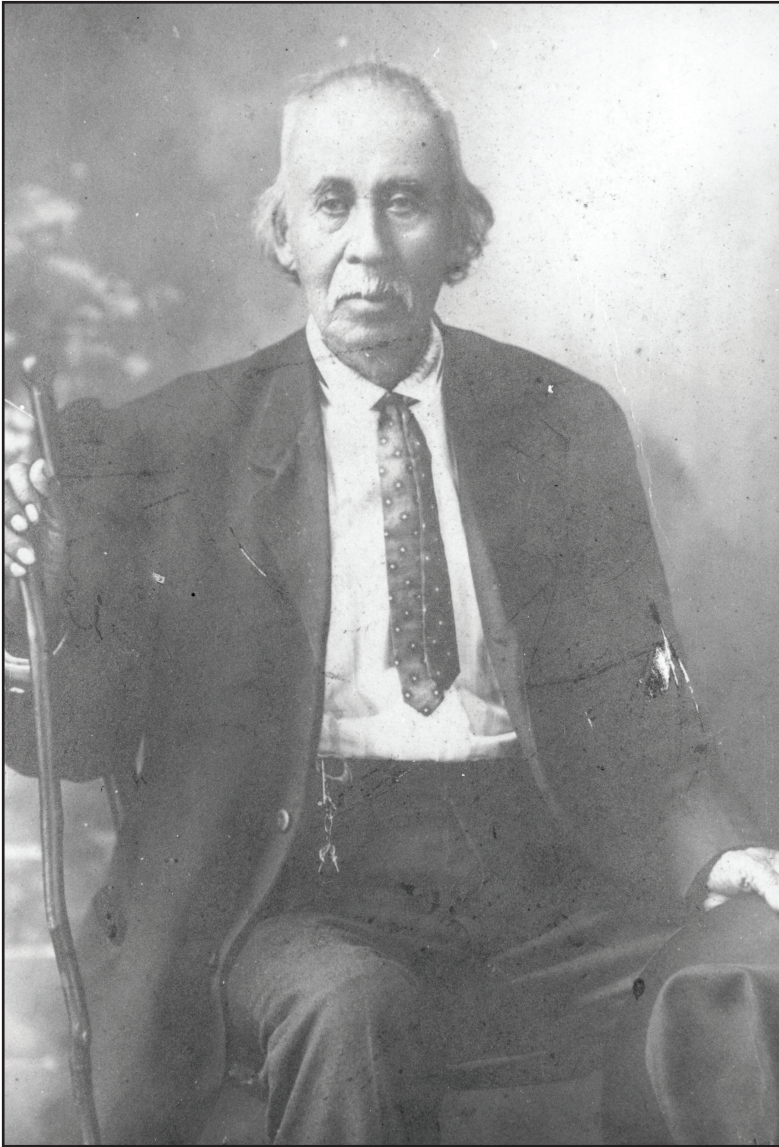
*David Lewis Jr. holding medicine sticks (21431.IN.FC4.6.2005.04, Mary Jane Warde Collection, OHS).*

reveal and in what manner they divulge them, scholars will continue to remain ignorant of the truly important questions to ask.<sup>11</sup>

Many Native people view their oral traditions as more than just historical accounts in accordance with Western understandings. They allow individual caretakers of these traditions to use them creatively as living media with which current hardships and realities can be dealt. Lewis's words highlight the gulf that exists between academic assumptions and the experiential realities of being a twenty-first-century Muscogee medicine person. Lewis also validates his role as a medicine person by placing himself within a long line of Muscogee technicians of the sacred by projecting himself backward in time, accounting for his birth and subsequent rearing in Muscogee religion. He uses this narrative tactic to comment on the impossibility of scholars to ever fully comprehend, even with extensive field work, what it means to be a Muscogee wielder of sacred power.

Almost one hundred years prior to Ann Jordan and David Lewis's encounter, John Swanton worked with David Lewis's great-grandfather Jackson Lewis. And, as with Jordan's experience with the younger Lewis, Swanton appreciated Jackson Lewis but often misunderstood him for similar reasons. This encounter took place

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*Jackson Lewis (20491.11, Oklahoma Historical Society Photograph Collection, OHS).*

early during Swanton's work in Oklahoma with the Muscogees and other communities that had been forcibly removed from their native southeastern homelands. From 1907 through his retirement on June 30, 1944, Swanton worked tirelessly to compile a massive body of Native cultural data from the Gulf Coast regions of the Southeast. His most significant body of work stemmed from working with the Muscogees and their four Oklahoman neighbors: the Seminoles, Cherokees, Choctaws, and Chickasaws. Collectively, they are known as the Five Civilized Tribes.<sup>12</sup> His trips to "Muscogee Country" took place in 1910, 1911, and 1912.<sup>13</sup>

His legacy in this regard is well established. Often the significance of an anthropologist's contributions takes decades after his or her death to be appreciated by members of the profession. Swanton's southeastern work, however, received recognition during his lifetime. For example, four years prior to his retirement the Bureau of American Ethnology published a series of papers discussing the historical development of American anthropology in Swanton's honor.<sup>14</sup> And just a year after his death in 1958, Swanton's good friend, William Fenton, acknowledged Swanton's encyclopedic collection of ethnological information on southeastern communities, commenting, "Mention of the area automatically brings to all of us the association of his name."<sup>15</sup>

Yet, despite such an impressive body of work, Swanton in many ways neglected the lessons he learned during his work with the Haida Indians at the start of his career. He collected hundreds of tribal creation accounts and other oral traditions, and observed many religious ceremonies firsthand. His faithful recording of the communications of his collaborators and his own observations of southeastern tribes remained as thorough as his previous work. However, he fell victim to an all-too-common anthropological shortcoming in interpreting Native American creation stories and other oral narratives: that their meanings are exclusively at the discretion of the storyteller and community involved. Just as David Lewis Jr. had done with Ann Jordan, Native persons choose what stories to reveal, how to tell them, and what to omit at any given time during encounters with anthropologists. Swanton was consumed with dissecting southeastern Indian accounts of their own histories in order to shed light on what he considered factual, missing out on one of the key points of Native historicity. Again, indigenous peoples determined factual truth and told that truth according to their own cultural protocols. Consequently, tribal critiques are often embodied within Native oral accounts and mythologies concerning real historical



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interactions with Euro-Americans as well as with other Native nations.<sup>16</sup>

The way in which indigenous peoples wielded oral traditions, while not unique to the time period Swanton worked in Oklahoma and the Mississippi Valley, seem to be most prevalent in the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries. Despite misinterpreting or devaluing this facet of Native oral traditions, Swanton's meticulous work ethic and gathering of information, particularly with the Muscogeans, proves immensely helpful in illustrating this theme. The folkloric and mythological fluidity from Native communities traditionally located in the American Southeast is particularly interwoven into their tumultuous experiences leading up to relocations into Indian Territory in the mid-1830s through statehood in 1907. The stories collected by Swanton, in part, seem to reference the negative aspects of white intrusion into their lives. However, one gropes in vain in any attempt to determine exactly when particular stories came into existence. More than likely, many additions or changes were simply added back into ancient narrative formats.

During the later decades of the nineteenth century into the first two decades of the twentieth, anthropologists strove to fashion as accurate a rendering of the Muscogean Confederacy's formation as possible. None of them enjoyed the success that Swanton did in this area. When he first arrived in Muscogean Country in 1907, Swanton made this one of his main goals. Between the years 1907 and 1912 he conducted several expeditions into Oklahoma, Texas, and nearby areas in an attempt to fashion a likely scenario for the formation and evolution of the confederacy by perusing old Indian agent and missionary records, as well as through interviews with elder tribespersons. Swanton hoped to make the most progress by gathering together traditional creation accounts from various informants.<sup>17</sup>

Swanton found that early Muscogean people possessed traditional creation stories to account for their arrival in their homelands of present-day Alabama. One such story has them migrating from the west to the east, crossing muddy rivers and overcoming many tribulations before arriving at their new home. Along the way, kinships with different groups were established through interactions along the journey.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, Swanton felt confident that the Muscogean Confederacy more than likely predated the arrival of Europeans, but continued to grow stronger with early contact until warfare and disease took their toll in diminishing it. But, as was customary for Swanton, he remained humble, commenting on his own historical reconstruction that "[o]f course, no claim of infallibility is made for this classification. The

connection of some of the tribes thus brought together is well known, while others are placed with them on rather slender circumstantial evidence."<sup>19</sup>

In the eighteenth century, the Muscogee Confederacy consisted of two divisions, the Lower Creek Towns which resided along the Flint and Chattahoochee Rivers, and the Upper Creek Towns spread out along the Coosa, Tallapoosa, and Alabama Rivers. In the first hundred years after European contact, the Muscogee Confederacy coalesced when the Muscogee and Hitchiti-speakers in these regions incorporated distinct communities, such as the Tuskegees, Alabamas, and Koasatis, Euchees, Arbekas, and later, some Natchez. Demonstrating the attractiveness of joining the confederacy for safety purposes, only the Alabamas, Koasatis, Hitchitees, and Tuskegees were of Muskogean linguistic stock. The others were either distantly related or spoke an Algonquian dialect.<sup>20</sup> The Seminoles, while linguistically Muskogean, broke away from the Muscogees in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and moved into present-day Florida. Though they maintained many traditional Muskogean stories and mythological traditions, the Seminoles, by the late eighteenth century, remained out of the purview of their nominal kinsmen when the Americans increased influence over the confederacy.<sup>21</sup>

Swanton's work in establishing the likely history of the Muscogee Confederacy remains an important contribution, but more recent scholarship demonstrates many shortcomings, too. One reason for this is that much of his concern with locating a perfect match between written records and oral accounts resulted in him refusing to appreciate Muscogee attempts to use some of those same stories to comment on recent historical episodes and current events of importance to them.<sup>22</sup> For instance, Swanton was confronted with an account of Muscogee origins that served the purpose of commenting on recent developments in their history, not just on confederacy beginnings.<sup>23</sup> In this case, the version told to Swanton reflects Muscogee memories of their horrific removal into Indian Territory, abolition of their governments, and the allotment process that ensued in the early twentieth century.

The written account Swanton hoped to corroborate came from an anthropologist named Albert Gatschet in 1884. Gatschet worked with Ward Coachman, a man of Alabama descent. He gave Gatschet an account of his people's origins. The Alabama and Koasati stressed a creation narrative of the tribe emerging from a cave underground, whereas the early Muscogees experienced their creation as a migration from west to east.<sup>24</sup> The following is the story that Gatschet was told:

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Old Alabama men used to say that the Alabama came out of the ground near the Alabama River a little upstream from its junction with the [Tombigbee], close to Holsifa [Choctaw Bluff]. After they had come out, an owl hooted. They were scared and most of them went back into the ground. That is why the Alabama are few in number. The Alabama towns are Tawasa, Pawoki, Oktcaiyutci, Atauga, Hatcafa-ska [River Point, at the junction of the Coosa and Tallapoosa], and Wetumka.<sup>25</sup>

Swanton wanted to see if this account remained current among his collaborators in the early twentieth century. As luck would have it, he came across an Alabama woman in Texas knowledgeable in these matters. Aside from her rendering including the Koasatis emerging simultaneously with the Alabamas and leaving out entirely the mention of an owl, her version is helpful in demonstrating the malleability of Native creation accounts. She narrated:

At first they came out of the earth only during the night time, going down again when day came. Presently a white man came to the place, saw the tracks, and wanted to find the people. He went there several times, but could discover none of them above ground. By and by he decided upon a ruse, so he left a barrel of whiskey near the place where he saw the footsteps. When the Indians came out again to play they saw the barrel, and were curious about it, but at first no one would touch it. Finally, however, one man tasted of its contents, and presently he began to feel good and to sing and dance about. Then the others drank also and became so drunk that the white man was able to catch them. Afterward the Indians remained on the surface of the earth.<sup>26</sup>

Swanton expressed disappointment that the story was not a replication of Gatschet's recording. The fact that the account told to Swanton mentioned the appearance of whites struck him as a sign that the story was no longer remembered accurately. What Swanton overlooked was that the existence of another Alabamian emergence story indicated that the story changed for certain reasons. This version suggests an awareness of the consequences of whites upsetting their community.

Working about ten years after Swanton's death, anthropologist Howard Martin located an account almost identical to the one Swanton recorded. A difference lay in that the Cussetas, not the Koasatis, emerged alongside the Alabamas. More importantly, this version contained a





*Delegates to the annual Grand Council of tribes at Okmulgee, Indian Territory, c. 1875 (8828, Dr. C. W. Kirk Collection, OHS).*

longer ending: “Then the others drank also and became so drunk that the white man was able to catch them. After that the Alabamas and Coushattas had to stay on top of the earth and *were not allowed to go near the big cave* [emphasis mine].”<sup>27</sup> Granted, Martin’s account may or may not have predated the one told to Swanton and could have been the Native storyteller’s own personal editorial. However, Swanton’s account does mention whites and alcohol. This suggests the likelihood that his collaborator, the Alabama woman, was aware of this version. In any case, by delving deeper into the story’s history, it would have been interesting to see Swanton attempt to interpret this story on its own terms.

Along the same lines, Swanton’s work in Oklahoma also included encountering a Hitchiti migration account explaining how they arrived into the southeastern United States.<sup>28</sup> This version, told to Swanton by Jackson Lewis, again inserts whites into the foundational narrative of Muscogee beginnings to act as foils and adversaries. Within the story, the Hitchiti came to a place where the sea was frozen, crossed it, and traversed toward the east until they reached the Atlantic Ocean.

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Finding themselves blocked by the ocean and admiring the land near the shore, they decided to stay. The women and children helped construct beautiful rattles, and they contented themselves in their new land. Lewis continued:

[A]nd while they were there on the shore . . . people came across the water to visit them. These were the white people, and the Indians treated them hospitably, and at that time they were on very friendly terms with each other. The white people disappeared, however, and when they did so they left a keg of something which we now know was whisky. A cup was left with this, and the Indians began pouring whisky into this cup and smelling of it, all being much pleased with the odor. Some went so far as to drink a little. They became intoxicated and began to reel and stagger around and butt each other with their heads. Then the white people came back and the Indians began trading peltries, etc. . . . for things which the white people had.<sup>29</sup>

Surprisingly, an earlier telling recorded by Albert Gatschet around 1880 included many of the same details Lewis's version did, but left out the appearance of whites and their leaving of whiskey to befuddle the Indians, departing, and returning to further weaken them. Gatschet gave no reason for this or let on that he was aware of different versions of the Hitchiti migration narrative.<sup>30</sup>

Regarding Muscogee history and traditions, Jackson Lewis's service to Swanton cannot be overstated, and it is doubtful that Swanton would have been able to produce his classic account of Muscogee religion, *Creek Religion and Medicine*, without his assistance.<sup>31</sup> The two collaborated in 1911, just before Lewis died. As a sign of his admiration for Lewis, Swanton said things like "Jackson Lewis, a Hitchiti doctor who stood high in the estimation of both Indians and whites," and "Jackson Lewis whose evidence is always valuable." Swanton also referred to him as "Jackson Lewis, one of my oldest and best informants."<sup>32</sup>

Lewis's skills as a medicinal specialist and the ease with which he learned to walk in Indian and white worlds, despite not knowing English, stemmed from living a truly remarkable life before meeting Swanton. As a young boy, Lewis made the journey with his family during their forced relocation from Alabama into Indian Territory in the late 1830s. During this ordeal Lewis nearly drowned while crossing the Mississippi River. This experience resulted Lewis obtaining a reputation as a person of power. As he was drowning, Lewis grabbed a horse's tail in a desperate bid to keep from being swept away.

Onlookers gasped in horror as the horse nearly went under. However, someone noticed a small person appear and stand atop the horse's back, immediately calming it. This same unidentified person then recounted the little person directing the horse to safety along a nearby shore. Little people hold a place of importance in many southeastern tribal cultures and are seen as spiritual entities warranting respect. From then on, Lewis's name was changed to "Jock-O-Gee." "Gee" means little and the name, in part, recognized that the young Lewis won in his struggle against the mighty river. But there was more to this name change. Lewis's other great-grandson, Chester Scott, gave the following account of the ordeal based on family tradition:

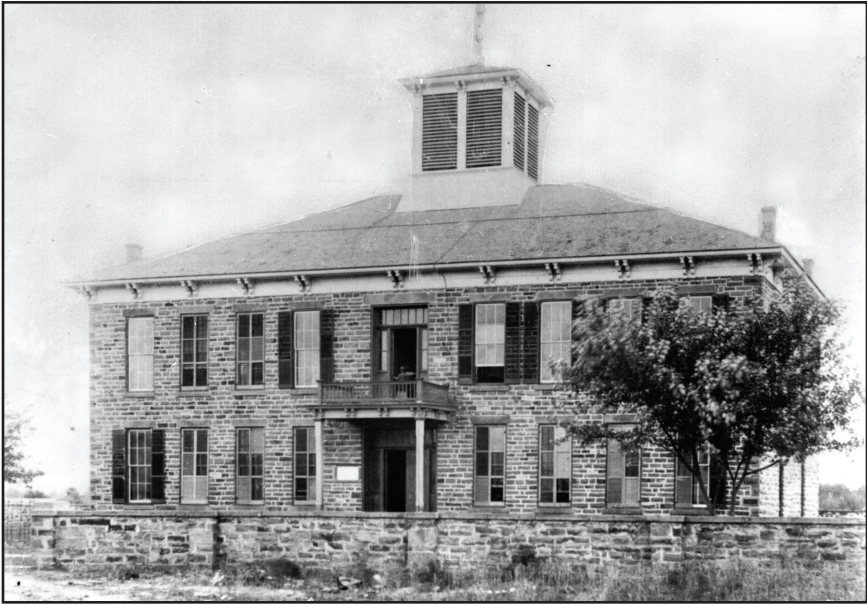
The name had a second unspoken but more powerful meaning. No one had seen the "little people" for at least four generations. Yet, it was clear that the mark of the Great Spirit and the "little people" were on Jock-O-Gee. No one dared to speak the river's name. "Gee" was as close as they dared to speak the full name of the "little people." The knowledge and protection by the "little people" reside with peace-makers. From the day the river was crossed, "they" were with Jock-O-Gee, teaching him how to doctor sick people in the new land with new herbs and plants.<sup>33</sup>

From then on, Lewis was on the road to becoming a holy man and doctor among his people.

Lewis also made a living in Indian Territory as a blacksmith and served in the Civil War, resulting in many stories being told about his exploits as member of the Creek Volunteers, fighting for the Confederate States of America. These accounts of his bravery and near-death escapes during fierce fighting resulted in another name change, "Lahta Yahola," which was a traditional Creek name earned through battle. His grandson, David Lewis Sr., once discussed Jackson Lewis's prowess as a person of great power in an interview with the *Muskogee Daily Phoenix*, stating, "My grandfather, Jackson Lewis, was able to predict storms and cure all kinds of ailments. . . . I learned a lot from him. I listened well to his words. He told me not to smoke or drink. It would hurt my brain and I could not understand the little folk and be able to cure sickness."<sup>34</sup>

With direct access to such a knowledgeable steward of Muscogee traditions, why did Swanton fail to appreciate the adaptability of Native oral traditions to meet multiple purposes, one being to provide commentary on issues significant to a community's history since being first documented by whites? Part of the problem was that Swanton

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*Creek Council House, Okmulgee, Indian Territory, c. 1890 (5136.3, That Man Stone Collection, OHS).*

suffered a kind of tunnel vision. He and other anthropologists held expectations of what a “real” Indian was supposed to be. Fixed in their minds was the “noble redman” garbed in buckskin and war paint, tirelessly practicing the ways of his ancestors since time immemorial. The rest of the world’s cultures, including Swanton’s own, could change over time and still be viewed as the same tradition, but Native Americans were expected to remain the same over centuries’ worth of time. The fact that Lewis converted to Christianity while retaining status as a respected medicine man in his community seemed to be lost on Swanton, too.

Swanton and many other anthropologists from the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century often insisted on viewing Native communities as static entities. Anthropologists refused to admit that Native cultures could change over time and retain their distinctive tribal identities simultaneously. The idea that Native communities existed in pristine and unchanged conditions prior to European contact that could be reconstructed by contemporary anthropologists is known as the “ethnographic present.” Swanton and his fellow scholars, despite a sizeable amount of scholarship that testified to the contrary, expected to locate unspoiled, “pure” indigenous traditions. Failure to appreciate



that Native cultures, like all cultures, exist in constant states of transition resulted in anthropologists devaluing contemporary Native people for not resembling an artificial construct of what their ancestors were supposedly like.<sup>35</sup>

One reason for Swanton's failure to fully understand oral traditions is likely the nature of the interactions between Lewis and himself offsetting Swanton's skepticism of their individual testimonies. For instance, the personal dynamic between the two men allowed Swanton to temporarily suspend judgment regarding Jackson's status as a Christian whose lifestyle resembled that of many other early-twentieth-century non-Indians. But, these experiences with someone that contradicted his immediate outlook did not translate into a new approach in general to the dynamic nature of Native cultures as embodied in their oral traditions. As the following accounts taken from Swanton's additional work with southeastern communities demonstrate, the theoretical methodology in which he had trained proved problematic in fully appreciating possible meanings behind these stories other than as signs of cultural decline.

In one instance Swanton recorded another Alabama story that conveyed further the consternation Oklahoma Native people felt toward dishonest whites who cheated them out of money. Entitled "Money-Spitter," the tale opens with a parentless girl living with her grandmother. One day while going to round up some hogs and carrying bread made of chaff, she encountered two old women. They asked her what she was carrying, and after telling them, said that she was out "hunting for hogs." Promising to help her in this pursuit, they started off together until they came across some hogs. When one ran away, the girl pursued it until she became so tired that she started coughing. She continued to do so until her coughing fit produced a nickel, followed by a dime, and then a quarter. During this time, she continued to grow increasingly tired from trying to round up the hogs while coughing. She finally arrived back home but continued to cough, eventually spitting up a whole trunk of money. Seeing the sick girl and the fair amount of silver she had produced, "the white people . . . liked what the girl coughed up and got it." Another version, more than likely told by the same narrator because Swanton included it within the same heading, states that the girl coughed up frogs instead of coins, and makes no mention of white people stealing from her.<sup>36</sup>

Again, how should the above stories be evaluated? It is not at all clear if these tales were developed in close temporal proximity to their recording or if they predated the barrage of American anthropologists onto reservations. Regardless, Native individuals clearly possessed

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the ability to share multiple versions of similar stories. The emphasis each one placed on whites duplicitously encouraging drunkenness in order to cheat Native people out of their belongings does reflect the real life circumstances Oklahoma tribes experienced at the turn of the twentieth century, and it is to these circumstances one should turn to best account for the reasons Muscogee narratives changed in the manner they did.

Furthermore, after passage of the Dawes Act in 1887, ten years passed before allotment arrived at the doorsteps of the Five Civilized Tribes. Representatives from each nation attempted to ward off land distribution, which had already devastated the Iowa and relocated Winnebago tribes. Attempts to create an entirely Native American state ultimately failed, paving the way for Congress to abolish all Native governments through passage of the Curtis Act in 1898.<sup>37</sup> As with removal, a façade of Native approval for allotment was needed. The ensuing orgy of “dirty tricks” aimed at gaining Native acceptance is legendary, and led to several violent resistance movements to maintain sovereignty. Using alcohol to sway Native people to submit to land redistribution and pitting mixed-blood citizens against their full-blood kinspersons were just a few of the less than honorable means used by representatives of the federal government. While perhaps oversimplifying the situation, one Cherokee said of this process:

The Indian people don't want their allotments . . . but at the same time some of them take them, for they [whites] force them into it. . . . The white man can come among us and give us whiskey and get us drunk and he can get us to do anything . . . they would send half-breeds around . . . and hunt the names down of the full-bloods without their consent, and they would take the names down and present them before the Dawes Commission . . . and take an oath on it . . . [then, the full-bloods] would find a certificate of allotment sent to them at the post office.<sup>38</sup>

For a while officials attempted to impede fraudulent land acquisitions at the hands of whites through instituting a twenty-year moratorium for Native people attaining fee simple title to their land. In the meantime the federal government assumed the role of overseer of Indian allotments and the mineral resources that lay beneath the land. In 1906 the government passed the Burke Act, which allowed the Bureau of Indian Affairs to determine an individual's competency in handling his or her own property transactions. Oklahoma Indians witnessed widespread abuses of this new legislation through the use of

fake wills used as stand-ins for deceased Indians and fraudulent deeds written up for individuals who had never lived. But appointment of non-Indian shysters as “guardians” for orphaned Indian children awaiting an inheritance from their parents proved to be the most destructive tactic used to separate individuals from their land.<sup>39</sup>

Swanton was no fool and must have realized the toll these events took on the communities he encountered. However, by his lack of commentary he gives the impression of expecting his collaborators to put on hold their current tribulations when telling him stories. He seemed to have overlooked that the sense of Native people’s despair and hopelessness during the period leading up to Oklahoma statehood in 1907 most definitely informed the kinds of stories Muscogee Indians told him and other anthropologists. These sentiments often found their way into the narratives they told. How could the legacy of allotment, dissolution of tribal governments, and fraudulent schemes to cheat Native people out of what little land and income they possessed not have contributed to certain myths being told? The structures and contents of the myths may have been old, but the particular contexts in which they were conveyed to scholars during an extremely tumultuous time certainly were not. For instance, another version of the Money-Spitter tale does contain elements that seem to evoke the general imagery of this pattern of land theft, especially regarding Native Americans turning on each other and the consequences of the Burke Act. The narrator stated that:

The white men heard of that first girl who spit out money, came to the place where she lived, and tried to get hold of her. At first the old woman did not want to let them have her, but they kept on teasing until they overcame her with their entreaties and she gave her to them. Then they took her and went on and shut her up in a house. They brought all kinds of things to her. Then she sat down inside of the house and spit out money. But the old woman had nothing.<sup>40</sup>

Another origin story told to Swanton contains synopses of the Alabamas’ arrival into their traditional homeland of Alabama and Georgia and some of the difficulties they encountered with other tribes and Europeans. Beginning with the Alabamas’ journey across a large body of water, the story related how they settled down near a river, violently warred with the Choctaws, and then made peace with them. At some point, a man determined to go westward and took a sizable body of tribesmen with him. They reached a white blacksmith,

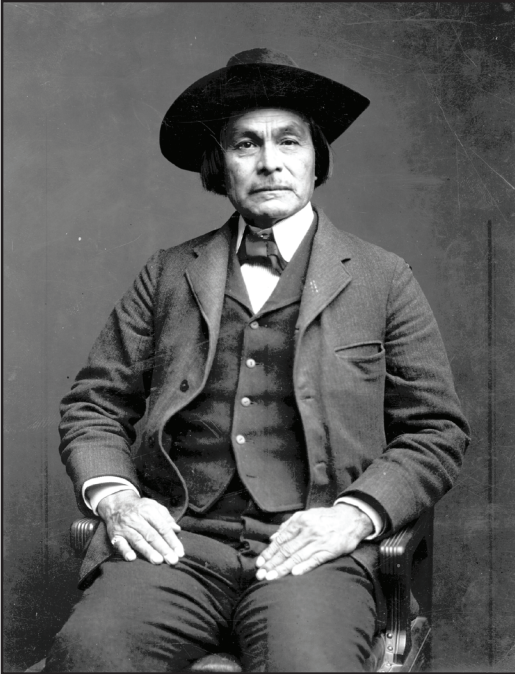


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who supplied the Native people with tools in exchange for deer meat and gave them some whiskey. Some of the Indians got drunk while others resisted and took their friends back along the river. The story continued, "The white people came from the other side of the ocean long after the Alabama had crossed and tried to buy land from them. They would get the Native people drunk, and when they had become sober they would find bags of money hung to their necks in payment for land. It was after they had sold their lands in this way that they came westward." The story ends with a brief mention of the US-Mexico War of 1846–48.<sup>41</sup>

Two other creation narratives echo the one above. One, a Yuchi account of other tribes' formation and a leader's journey to receive the creator's message, was recorded by anthropologist Frank Speck. In it, the storyteller recounted how the Shawnees originated in the sky, some of the Muscogeans from the ground, and the Yuchis from the sun. After mingling with each other, the various Indian nations of the earth decided to remain separate peoples and to go their separate ways. When a Yuchi leader died and passed into the afterworld, Gohantone (creator being) informed him that while the land was supposed to belong to the Indians forever, the recently arrived whites would overwhelm them. They would increase until almost all the Indians would die, and "times would be terrible." After his counsel with the creator, the dead chief sprang back to life and told a council of Choctaws, Muscogeans, and Yuchis of the coming crisis. The narrator of this story then ended the story rather ominously, saying, "So the thing is coming to pass as Gohantone said it would."<sup>42</sup>

While not a creation story per se, Swanton recorded a description of the founding of the Coweta and Tuckabatchee alliance. Swanton's collaborator, after reading about the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, sought out an elder to further elaborate on the origin of humanity. He told Swanton that long ago, two Coweta men came from the northwest. After running and leaping through the air, somehow more Cowetas came into existence. Then, everyone noticed lightning in the distance across some mountains in the south. Following it, the Cowetas came across the Tuckabatchees, who came from the sky. After arriving together in the Southeast, they saw a great flock of people, known as the Nokfilagi (whites) or "people of the foam drift," emerge from the sea and begin fighting with and stealing from the Indians. At first the Indians successfully repelled them, but the whites were so devious that the Indians had to make treaties with them and give up more and more land.<sup>43</sup> A different version Swanton collected described the



*Chitto Harjo, also known as Crazy Snake (3905, W. P. Campbell Collection, OHS).*

Tuckabatchee and Liwahali alliance in similar detail, but omitted completely any mention of Europeans arriving and stealing land.<sup>44</sup>

The forced removal of many southeastern tribes into Indian Territory resulted in terrible suffering and caused tension within these communities. Unfortunately, circumstances remained strained and filled with further conflict, as political pressure to confer statehood on Oklahoma and the introduction of the allotment policy entered the displaced southeastern communities. Historians commonly posit the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 as the last Indian War, not only overlooking the nature and circumstances of the “battle,” but also neglecting minor uprisings that occurred in Indian Territory into the twentieth century.<sup>45</sup> A Muscogee named Chitto Harjo (“Crazy Snake”) almost single-handedly led a small revolt against the dissolution of Indian tribal governments and the allotment of communal land holdings. The Crazy Snake Revolt, along with similar tribal movements such as that of a Cherokee secret society known as the Keetoowahs or “Nighthawks” led by Redbird Smith, galvanized many Native grievances into a united front against attacks on tribal sovereignty.<sup>46</sup>

While these resistances ultimately failed, they are more representative of an end to armed Native conflict with the United

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*Creek Sam (18474.7.1, Archie Sam Collection, OHS).*



States than Wounded Knee. Oklahoma movements in the early twentieth century were devoid of strong messianic and apocalyptic undertones, but they nonetheless sought a similar outcome, albeit through nonsupernatural means. This is most obvious through stories told to Swanton and other anthropologists.

After statehood, most tribes in the new state of Oklahoma seemed to endure the drastic alterations to their lives with equal amounts of resignation and nostalgia for earlier, less troublesome times before removal. Swanton recorded an example of this demeanor through a story told to him by the son of Creek Sam, a Natchez elder. Like he did with Jackson Lewis, Swanton appreciated listening to Creek Sam share his stories and felt his testimony to be reliable. The story is quite lengthy, but the parts that spoke to many Muscogees living in Oklahoma held that two brothers were questioning their father as to the proper medicines he used to hunt animals. At first he withheld the information, letting the boys guess at the concoctions to attract game. The boys followed their father to a large mountain whereupon he opened a door and took out a deer. When they were sure that he was gone, the boys jumped down and threw open the door to the mountain:

Then deer, turkey, and all kinds of creatures began running out, and the boys began shooting at them, but they made no impression. . . . Their father heard them, ran back, and shut the gate. Then he told them there were just a few things left inside. He said, "You can now go your way. You have let out all the game we had to live on. I had this game for my own use. Now you may get on as best you can. I am going back." After their father had started off the larger boy began thinking over what had happened, and made something to follow his father . . . this is called a wagus [chunk stone]. . . . The thing followed their father and when it had overtaken him struck him first on the heel and then on the knee. He looked around in surprise, stood still for a time, and then went back to his boys, and said "I am sorry for you, but you have wasted what we had to live on. We cannot live any more on that, and we will go westward."<sup>47</sup>

This story, like many oral traditions, could reference circumstances that predate contact with Europeans. Another possibility is that it references the gradual depletion of game animals through both Indian and white overhunting in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the Southeast. A decline in using the proper medicines and maintaining appropriate kinship ties with game animals during the deerskin trade also seems to be referenced here, with the boys' inappropriate action. But Creek Sam looked at the last part of this story with a measure of cautious enthusiasm, interpreting it to mean that the "Natchez had been obliged to migrate westward to the place they now occupy, but that as some animals were left in the mountain some hope was still left for the Natchez."<sup>48</sup> This narrator also left out violent eschatological predictions in deriving a particular meaning from the tale. Surely a case can be made that this story Swanton recorded is illustrative of individuals stoically enduring current calamities by comforting themselves with positive reinterpretations of old storylines.

These particular stories and origin tales obviously included bitter remembrances of removal and resource depletion as well as other calamities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Natchez story likely references problems encountered before removal, but unfortunately, a consistent pattern of Native dispossession carried on further into allotment and Oklahoma statehood. In order to grasp the significance of these stories and their contents, one should keep in mind the fact that the Muscogeans and other southern tribes, like all North American Indian communities, possessed within their individual

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communities a plethora of the same basic story outlines, some that made mention of European arrival and some that did not.

Swanton's career coincided with the professionalization of anthropology. He was tasked in part with acquiring Native stories and traditions to see how closely they paralleled earlier recordings. Most anthropologists during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries faithfully recorded traditions told to them by Native storytellers, but devalued ones that showed variation, seeing such alterations as signs of cultural decline. This reinforced the predictions of many policy makers and anthropologists themselves. Despite his meticulous recording of southeastern tribal traditions, Swanton dismissed those stories that provided commentary on recent hardships, or ones that took place decades ago but continued to impact present communities.

Anthropologists in the early twentieth century viewed these inclusions as recent modifications devoid of any substantial worth in furnishing useful cultural data. From Native viewpoints, however, it bears repeating that the crux of the matter is not whether a particular version was ancient or recent. The fact that informants had access to multiple editions and choices as to which one seemed most appropriate at a given time is crucial. Also, Indians did not just sit around discussing and debating at length which versions should or should not be relayed to anthropologists. Rather, stories that showed a fair amount of internal tinkering demonstrated a common ethos of southeastern Native orality. Like so many of their activities and belief systems, storytelling was a participatory action, and storytellers were expected not only to recount traditional narratives, but also to act as editorialists as well.

The storyteller in these cases often used a particular story to fit the circumstances of the moment. While Swanton and others faithfully recorded such stories, they failed to appreciate this unique dimension to oral storytelling. By summarily dismissing these tales because they included details after the contact period with Europeans, scholars missed out on golden opportunities to witness another truism about indigenous peoples. Instead of merely encountering a people out of time, anthropologists stumbled across a people adapting and reacting to present realities with an arsenal of sacred traditions alive with relevance for modern scenarios.<sup>49</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> A major component of the Boasian school of thought called for a rejection of evaluating indigenous cultures in the United States along racial lines. His method, later adopted and applied by his students, also rejected categorizing cultures within evolutionary, hierarchical frameworks, where many non-Western cultures were identified as existing at the “barbarian” or “savage” stages of development. For an in-depth examination of Franz Boas’s work and influence on the professionalization of anthropology, see George Stocking Jr., *A Franz Boas Reader: The Shaping of American Anthropology, 1883–1911* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 184–85. See also Robert Bringham, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and Their World* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 13, 182–84.

<sup>3</sup> John R. Swanton, “Social and Religious Beliefs and Usages of the Chickasaw Indians,” in *Forty-fourth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1928), 170, 190.

<sup>4</sup> Salvage ethnography remained the working methodology for late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century anthropologists, who were tasked with recording what remained of Native cultural traditions, with the expectation that indigenous populations would soon be assimilated in accordance with United States policy during that era. Scholars during this time period became preoccupied with comparing earlier recorded traditions with what they observed, viewing any change as a sign of cultural decline. For further reading, see David Hurst Thomas, *Skull Wars: Kennewick Man, Archaeologists, and the Battle for Native American Identity* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> United States federal policy toward tribes shifted from warfare to coerced assimilation in the late nineteenth century. This developed alongside a widely held assumption that the Native American population was rapidly declining, necessitating their acclimation to the dominant American culture or eventual extinction. While it is true that the Native population in 1900 was around 237,000, their populations continued to increase from that time period through the twentieth century. Policy makers ignored this development and maintained destructive federal assimilationist policies through the 1960s. For further reading, see Brian Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> For the best treatment on this subject, see Dippie, *The Vanishing American*, 126–27.

<sup>7</sup> David Lewis Jr. seems comfortable referring to himself as Hitchiti and Muscogee Creek interchangeably, as the two communities are closely linked culturally and linguistically. However, his own father preferred the Hitchiti designation. David Lewis Jr. and Ann Jordan, *Creek Indian Medicine Ways: The Enduring Power of Muskoke Religion* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), xviii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii–xix.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, xx.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>12</sup> The term refers to these communities’ early contact with whites. Because they adopted some customs of whites, such as the English language and elements of Christianity, their southern non-Indian neighbors felt they were more civilized than other Ameri-



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can Indian tribes. However, these five large and complex tribes retained their Native identities while adopting elements from neighboring whites that proved useful. This characteristic was not always acknowledged or appreciated by whites in the Southeast.

<sup>13</sup> Lianne Burke, Chronological Summary of the Activities of John R. Swanton (1970), 1–9, National Anthropological Archives, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

<sup>14</sup> William N. Fenton, “The Work of John Reed Swanton,” *Essays in Historical Anthropology of North America: Published in Honor of John R. Swanton in Celebration of His Fortieth Year with the Smithsonian Institution* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1940).

<sup>15</sup> William N. Fenton, “John Reed Swanton, 1873–1958,” *American Anthropologist* 61 (August 1959): 663.

<sup>16</sup> While the following example comes from a different tribal context, consider a Three Affiliated Tribes’ (in North Dakota) version of a creation account, told by John Brave, a member of the Mandan. Unfortunately, it is not entirely clear when this story was told, but it more than likely comes from the early twentieth century. Brave stated that when God made “white man’s cattle,” the horns were so crooked and bent out of shape they had to walk “funny.” God said, “Save those strange animals for later, for now I’ll make buffalo for the Indians.” Clearly this rendering was meant to convey a moral judgment on the animals Europeans brought with them across the ocean. It is a fact that in many instances, tribes struggled to keep domesticated livestock from eating their crops and other food supplies. Another telling by John Brave consisted of both God and “Lone Man” finding red-headed maggots in a wolf body. Neither one wanted to take credit for such an abominable sight, so the man threw them across the lake. “In the days to come,” Lone Man spoke, “they’ll have intelligence.” From here, the narrator continued, “When you see white men, some of whom have red heads, they are descendants of those maggots. And today these white men are very intelligent, as it was promised. Today they are doing everything which seems impossible.” On this point historian Peter Nabokov speculates that John Brave may be commenting directly on the construction of the Garrison Dam along the middle Missouri River. Here the storyteller is accounting for the origin and consequences that white immigration have held for his people. It again not only demonstrates the fluidity of Indian myths, but also their power to provide a sense of emotional and psychological control over current difficulties, even if only through a story. See Peter Nabokov, *A Forest of Time: American Indian Ways of History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 94–95.

<sup>17</sup> John R. Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians and Their Neighbors* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1922; repr., Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians*, 191–93. See also Angie Debo, *The Road to Disappearance: A History of The Creek Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 3. Debo was among the first scholars to rely on Swanton’s work as a primary reference in charting Creek and other southeastern tribal histories.

<sup>19</sup> Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians*, 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 203–15; Debo, *The Road to Disappearance*, 4–5.

<sup>21</sup> Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians*, 398–404.

<sup>22</sup> For an excellent reexamination and correction of Swanton’s work in this area, see Thomas Pluckhahn and Robbie Ethridge, *Light on the Path: The Anthropology and History of the Southeast Indians* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> Albert Gatschet, interview with Ward Coachman, quoted in Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians*, 192.

<sup>24</sup> Common throughout the American Southwest and Mexico, emergence cosmogonies are said to be related to horticultural food production. See Ake Hultkrantz, *Native Religions of North America: The Power of Visions and Fertility* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1987), 18.



<sup>25</sup> Albert Gatschet interview in Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians*, 192.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>27</sup> Howard Martin, "Folktales of the Alabama-Coushatta Indians," in *Mexican Border Ballads and Other Lore*, ed. by Mody C. Boatright (Dallas, TX: Southern Methodist University Press, 1967), 66. Emphasis mine.

<sup>28</sup> Migration accounts often are understood as creation accounts for some southeastern tribes, as the journey is a creative understanding of how the community came together and developed a sense of identity over time.

<sup>29</sup> Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians*, 172–73.

<sup>30</sup> Albert Gatschet, *A Migration Legend of the Creek Indians, With a Linguistic, Historic and Ethnographic Introduction* (1884; repr., New York: AMS Press, 1968). Reproduced in Bill Grantham, *Creation Myths of the Creek Indians* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 135–36.

<sup>31</sup> See John Swanton, *Creek Religion and Medicine* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), originally published as John Swanton, *Religious Beliefs and Medicinal Practices of the Creek Indians* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1924/1925). Lewis and his expertise are cited numerous times in this work.

<sup>32</sup> John Swanton, "Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy," *Bureau of American Ethnology Annual Report* 42 (1928): 23–472, 436.

<sup>33</sup> Lewis and Jordan, *Creek Indian Medicine Ways*, 25–26.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>35</sup> For another excellent example of the ethnographic present at work, see Thomas Biolsi, "The Anthropological Construction of 'Indians': Haviland Scudder Mekeel and the Search for the Primitive in Lakota Country," in *Indians and Anthropologists: Vine Deloria Jr. and the Critique of Anthropology*, ed. by Thomas Biolsi (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), 136–59.

<sup>36</sup> John Swanton, *Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1929), 163–64.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Nabokov, *Native American Testimony: A Chronicle of Indian-White Relations from Prophecy to the Present 1492–2000* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 257.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Nabokov, *Native American Testimony*, 258.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 259–60.

<sup>40</sup> Swanton, *Myths and Tales*, 213.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 119–21.

<sup>42</sup> Frank Speck, *Ethnology of the Yuchi Indians* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1909; repr. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc., 1979), 143.

<sup>43</sup> John Swanton, *Social Organization and Social Usages of the Indians of the Creek Confederacy* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1928), 68.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>45</sup> The massacre of more than one hundred Lakota tribespersons, most of which were women and children, resulted from the federal government mistaking the Sioux version of the Ghost Dance for an insurrection.

<sup>46</sup> Nabokov, *Native American Testimony*, 257–58.

<sup>47</sup> Swanton, *Myths and Tales*, 222–26.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> For more examination of the way oral traditions and intercultural discourses have been approached and interpreted, see Jon Blommaert, *Discourse* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005).