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COMMENTARY

## Some Notes on Political Theory and American Indian Values: The Case of the Muscogee Creeks

**JOYOTPAUL (JOY) CHAUDHURI**

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The study of American Indian tribal politics and intergovernmental relations still remains quite marginalized in political science. Some law schools are better than others in their Indian law course offerings. Historians contribute to what is termed *Indian history*, though much of that bypasses Indian perspectives on history. In keeping with its early interests in tribes and aboriginals, anthropology has a larger literature on American Indians than most disciplines. Under the anthropological umbrella, archaeology, kinship studies, and linguistics come closer than other academic investigations to a philosophical analysis of Indian values that takes Indian thinking seriously. In spite of a considerable literature on Indian worldview, including John G. Neihardt's *Black Elk Speaks*, Paul Radin's *Autobiography of A Winnebago*, and Leo W. Simmons's *Sun Chief: The Autobiography of a Hopi Indian*, few attempt to capture the inner worlds of Indian life.

### LITERARY BACKGROUNDS

Precise meanings for the term *culture* are problematic and, like many such broad labels, give rise to epistemological debates. Half a century ago anthropologists often lived with the ideas that "culture is an abstraction from behavior

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or with material artifacts such as tools, containers, works of art, and other artifacts that people make and use.”<sup>1</sup> Early on, Alfred Kroeber thought anthropologists distinct in that they looked at culture as a whole rather than through isolated abstractions of economic, juridical, political, or social aspects.<sup>2</sup>

However, after listing varying elements of culture, anthropologists often end up reducing their windows into one or more variables. Thus Leslie White sees four major “components of cultural systems: technological, sociological, ideological, and sentimental or attitudinal.”<sup>3</sup> White goes on to argue, “the fact that these four cultural categories are interrelated, that each is related to the other three, does not mean that their respective roles in the cultural process are equal, for they are not. The technological factor is the basic one; all others are dependent upon it. Furthermore, the technological factor determines, in a general way at least, the form and content of the social, philosophic, and sentimental sections.”<sup>4</sup>

A different philosophical perspective was offered by F. S. C. Northrop: “In short, a single culture is not made up of five independent economic, political, legal, religious and aesthetic assumptions but of a single set of assumptions of which the economic, political, legal, religious and aesthetic are parts. This single set of assumptions is the philosophy of a given normative culture.”<sup>5</sup> Philosophical analysis of tribal values is indeed quite rare.

The theoretical anthropologist David Bidney echoed Northrop’s point in large part when he stated, “The analysis of the metacultural postulates of a given culture, whether deductively inferred or intuitively conceived, is essentially a philosophical, or meta-anthropological science as is the collecting of empirical data. To appreciate properly the philosophy of life and *Weltanschauung* which serve as leitmotifs for a given culture requires some measure of philosophical discipline and insight, which necessitates that there be professionally trained philosophers working in the social sciences as well as philosophically-minded social scientists.”<sup>6</sup> Bidney’s critique remains relevant in the study of American Indian traditions.

A noted pioneer in the study of Navajo culture, Clyde Kluckhohn pointed out:

In sum, the way of life that is handed down as the social heritage of every people does more than supply a set of skills for making a living and a set of blueprints for human relations. Each different way of life makes its own assumptions about the ends and purposes of human existence, about ways by which knowledge may be obtained, about the organization of the pigeonholes in which each sense datum is filed, about what human beings have a right to expect from each other and the gods, about what constitutes fulfillment or frustration.<sup>7</sup>

There are two separate issues under discussion here. The first is the methods used to study ideas, values, and mind in a culture. The second involves the relationship of the values to behavior. However, debates remain somewhat abstract in the light of an important operational set of tasks. This systematic

unraveling of seeing the connective links and then analyzing values is no simple matter with American Indian peoples, who live largely without a written tradition and with a strong dominant culture, which at various times has endangered their very existence, surrounding them.

#### ELEMENTS OF A VALUE SYSTEM

A complete set of values, or metaphysics, contains key elements, including (1) a theory of knowledge; (2) a basic model of nature; (3) a theory of origins, the universe, and human society; (4) a set of normative standards, often broadly labeled as justice; (5) a conception of authority and an interrelated system of ethics; (6) an outline of major social functions and an appropriate structure for dealing with them; (7) a way of conflict resolution, internal and external; (8) a conception of health and well-being; and (8) a way of linking essential values to form a worldview.

#### RESOURCE PERSON(S)

Describing and analyzing a tribe's value system using the above criteria is not an easy matter. The time and discipline involved go beyond average scholarly time constraints and single disciplinary limitations. A good background in comparative philosophy helps sort out meaning, epistemology, and distinctions between empirical, normative, and prescriptive statements. A substantial understanding of the tribe's culture, history, and language is also useful. The tripod of philosophy, sociopolitical theory, and anthropology provides the tacit knowledge about tribal values. Language presents an important barrier between the resource persons and the analysts. The tribal resource person(s), if young and/or assimilated, may not know the old language and the analyst can easily miss the context and nuances of what is being said. In addition, the analyst(s) must be aware of the pitfalls of projecting their own values onto the observed, which would potentially distort investigative explication.

#### ELDERS: TRIBAL SOURCES

Core sets of values can show up to varying degrees in a traditional group. Variations can be due to the nature of socialization, personality, and region. In trying to get at the core values of a tribe, consistencies are likely to appear most strongly among traditional elders. These are the treasures, the very people who are becoming increasingly rare given the dominant economic and social forces at work.

Many ethical and practical issues arise in dealing with elders. Ethically, there is the old problem of regarding them as informants rather than primary authors, which in fact they are, with a deep understanding of their ways. There is also the issue of sharing and returning the gift to tribes and its elders. Practically, issues of linguistic and analytical skills and confidence acquisition from the elders are crucial.

In a recently published Muscogee study by myself and Jean Chaudhuri,<sup>8</sup> my wife, the teaming of a full-blood, Muscogee-speaking Creek traditional, and an outsider with complimentary and additional analytical skills and tacit knowledge of the tribe was indeed helpful. Many resource persons in previous studies were reticent, deliberately under-informative, and even misleading in their comments to other casual investigators. It is important to develop a relationship of sacred trust, which includes integrity and accuracy in representing ideas, to ensure that the tribal community is not adversely affected by the results.

### APPROACH

Based on participation, language skills, interviews, and available literature, an investigator must first create a deductively formulated model of the value system. After building a coherent model of interrelated values, it helps to ensure or validate that indeed the model is likely to be true. One way of accomplishing this is to develop implications from the model and see whether the operational meanings are confirmed. In my study of the Creek value system, I validated my findings several times after modeling the value structure.

I questioned well-grounded traditional people about specific postulated values. For example, the late Willie Lena was the major source of information for Jim Howard in his work on Seminole medicine and magic.<sup>9</sup> In a special visit on his front porch not too long before he died, we confirmed our understanding of Muskogee Creek magic and transformations with his independent opinions as an Oklahoma Seminole.

My wife and I also visited the late Tony Hill, *micco*, or chief, of Aslanabi traditional grounds. The gender balance among the major spirits was deductively worked out on the basis of earlier and historical sources when we met with Micco Hill. He confirmed that the overarching reality of Ibofanga, the ultimate spirit, was gender neutral, a synthesis of the male sun and wind and the female earth and water spirits and energies.

We also deduced that the fundamental elements in the Creek worldview were fire, earth, air, and water, and that the synthesis of these four elements was an important key to the Creek world. Given the fundamental importance of the stomp dance, the four elements by implication would have to be involved. We visited Micco Thompson of Hickory Ground and presented him with our analysis: the four elements are represented in the center of the stomp ground, their fusion in the preparation of the ceremonial fire, and their symbolic and ritual fusion in the actual stomp dance. He was greatly surprised that we understood and confirmed our understanding. I also visited with Amos McNac, the traditional speaker of the Nuyaka traditional grounds, and reconfirmed our understanding of the traditional non-Christian meaning of the key ethical terms that we used in the discussion of values.

### VALUE INTERPRETATIONS

Validation of the key aspects of a model contributes to its trustworthiness but can be an endless process. To separate the validation from the model-

building, the sources should be different from those used during the earlier stage of inquiry.

There is indeed an integrated set of values in the traditional Creek world. It appears in the form of a long story with chapters and sections analogous to a big tree with branches, stems, leaves, flowers, and fruit. The nature of the long story is such that it allows sections to be added and expanded without destroying the main story lines. Similarly, the primary clan-formation legend with wind, bear, deer, bird, and other key clans was sometimes augmented by new clans that were created as new groups—each with their own unique stories that did not contradict the legend of the original clans—joined the confederacy. Regional variations in the clan stories abound, with more alligator and panther stories in Florida, for instance, than in Oklahoma and other areas. But the stories keep the fundamental political values intact. There are no hierarchical distinctions among the clans, and matrilineal primacy, without ignoring the paternal links, is maintained.

#### CORE VALUES

No identifiable single author of the Creek value system exists, for many tribal and traditional societies are not preoccupied with crediting primary authorship. The basis of the Creek creation story and hence its value system begins with explanations for major natural events and observational facts. Underlying the myth are what the Creek consider the four basic building blocks of nature and life: fire, air, earth, and water. Intertwined with these elements are various balanced gender identities, predominantly male or female. The sun is mostly fire and male, as are various forms of wind (air). The earth and water are female. All of nature involves specific couplings and syntheses of the basic elements as well as male and female forms. The elements and the genders are composed of varying forms of energy, coupled to create an ultimate genderless superball of energy, the source of it all the ultimate spirit, Ibofanga. The male sun and wind and female earth and water are Ibofanga's assistants, each with separate functions according to their nature.<sup>10</sup>

The primary creation myth deals with the beginning of the cosmos, including the sun, moon, and stars, and tries to account for eclipses and earthquakes. Natural phenomena provide the basis for values such as religion, authority structure, and aesthetics. Even the construction of the roundhouse, where major deliberations traditionally took place, involves a synthesis of the male solar and female earth principles, as the round womb of the structure is open to the energy of the rising sun.

The coupling of contrasting yet complimentary male/female energies pervades all aspects of creation. Human life begins with an evolution among nature's creatures, beginning with the stirring of life deep in the water and emerging with the turtle who rises into wind and sunlight to form the earth. In this process the human clans are born with unique animal functions, expressing the fraternity of living things. The clans provide and supervise the responsibilities for specific functions relating to nature (wind), healing and medicine (bear), and conservation of the animal and plant worlds (deer).

From primal energy, various dualisms arise that must be reconciled to achieve continued harmony. This takes work and effort, evidenced in the creation of the social contract. One long legend describes the relationship between red sticks and white sticks (groups) and the war that follows; it is finally resolved with a social contract and the formation of society with complimentary equality of the clans, genders, and temperaments. A decision-making system keeps it together. The lack of caste hierarchies and the broad participation in deliberations builds equality. Equality also shows in attempts at confederation among tribal groups: the Hitchitis, Alibamus, the Euchees, and others.

The blending of the four elements through the ultimate macroscopic energy of Ibofanga is institutionalized in the setting, construction, and details of the central Creek square and the related stomp grounds. The four directions are institutionalized in the arrangements of the beds, or ramadas, around the sacred fire. The blending of geometries—the square and the circle—are evidenced in the *talwa*, or township centers, and the arrangement of the houses and the stickball fields around it.

The synthesis of the dualist forces can be seen in gender relations. Men and women are equals but have different energies. Perfect man and perfect woman come together in a marriage relationship and struggle to make it work. Women's and men's songs are always balanced and both are needed in community activities. Each walks a unique and separate path to knowledge, yet both forms of knowledge are needed in the community.

Leadership also involves the blending of dual chemistries between the peace leaders and the war leaders. In medicine, too, the blending of different energies in the right proportions makes for good medicine. Imbalances created poisons. Tobacco in the right place and time can act as a binder in some medications; using the plant for pleasure turns it into poison.

Then there is the world of magic and the trickeries of nature. At the hearth of the community is consensus, reason, and law; the edges of the community are where nature's silliness may thrive. The rabbit represents the absurdities in nature and in many stories the rabbit dances just at the edge to steal fire or cause dissension.

The proper Creek form of government is confederation, where members are treated as equals and consensus is more important than majoritarian factionalism. This implies a pluralist rather than a monistic conception of sovereignty.

From the creation to the details of administration, the same worldview persists in the Muscogee Creek universe. Political theorists have studied the system of authority, obligation, community rights, property, and justice in ancient and traditional Athenian society. A form of perhaps unintentional parochialism has created a barrier between the concerns of political theory and the worlds of the American Indians.

## NOTES

This paper was presented at an Indian Policy Network panel at the American Political Science Association's annual meeting in 2000.

1. Ralph L. Beals and Harry Hoijer, eds., *An Introduction to Anthropology* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1959), 223.

2. Alfred L. Kroeber, *Anthropology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1948), 12.

3. Leslie White, *The Evolution of Culture* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1959), 18.

4. *Ibid.*, 19.

5. F. S. C. Northrop, *The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities* (New York: Meridian Books, 1947), 275.

6. David Bidney, *Theoretical Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), 168–169.

7. Clyde Kluckhohn, "The Philosophy of the Navaho Indians," in *Ideological Differences and World Order*, ed. F. S. C. Northrop (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), 358–359.

8. Jean and Joyotpaul Chaudhuri, *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks* (Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center, 2001).

9. James Howard, *Oklahoma Seminoles: Medicine, Magic and Religion* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984).

10. For a full discussion of Creek values and history, see Chaudhuri, *Sacred Path*.