

## THE CREEK (MUSCOGEE) HOMELAND SINCE 1907

*Douglas A. Hurt*

The Creek (Muscogee) Nation was forcibly removed from the Southeastern United States in the early nineteenth century. After dispossession and reimplantation of the survivors in Indian Territory, the Creek attempted to reform their society in the best possible manner. By the time of Oklahoma statehood in 1907 the Creek had shaped a new homeland in a ten-county area south of Tulsa. After Oklahoma statehood, some observers argued that the Creek assimilated into the dominant Anglo-American culture. Instead, Creek identity and the homeland have been primarily maintained through two institutions—ceremonial (stomp) grounds and Indian churches. This paper describes and documents the Creek (Muscogee) homeland. *Key Words:* *Creek Nation, Oklahoma, homelands.*

The Creek (Muscogee) Confederacy was forcibly removed from the southeastern United States to Indian Territory (present-day Oklahoma) beginning in 1828.<sup>1</sup> In part, the Creek were able to recreate and reshape their loosely organized Confederacy after removal until tribal dissolution and allotment in 1907. Then, some claimed, the Creek became assimilated into Euro-American culture and tribal towns (including ceremonial grounds and the town fire)—the basis of their social and ceremonial existence—lost their form and meaning (Debo 1941; Opler 1952; Opler 1972).

Overall, the continuation of clustered town settlement, common meeting areas, town squares, town officers, and rituals and celebrations have only partially withstood the forces of allotment, modernization, and an ever-homogenizing American popular culture. The traditional Creek population maintains its worldview through two institutions—ceremonial

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(stomp) grounds and Indian churches. Through these outlets and other forms, such as the centralized government of the Creek Nation, contemporary Creek are able to identify with other members of their ethnic group and shape a distinctive space.

### The Homeland Concept

Homelands are places where people have bonded with the landscape in an uncommon way. Since the early 1990s, geographers have regularly investigated the homeland concept. Nostrand (1992) was the first to develop the homeland concept in his book *The Hispano Homeland*. He delineated three elements to homelands: a people, a place, and an identity with place. His main idea was that homelands were places where residents had adjusted to their natural environment, modified their surroundings, and emotionally identified with the natural and cultural landscapes.

After receiving feedback from others, Nostrand and Estaville (1993) expanded the three elements to include five criteria for the delineation of a homeland: people, place, bonding with place, control of place, and time. These five elements have been used as the framework for the vast majority of homeland case studies, including those found in a 1993 special issue of *The Journal of Cultural Geography* and a book from The Johns Hopkins University Press edited by Nostrand and Estaville and titled *Homelands: A Geography of Culture and Place Across America*.

More than a dozen homelands in the United States have been described. They are categorized as either ethnic or self-conscious and either viable or moribund. The majority of U.S. homelands studied, to this point, have been ethnic. Examples include the Older Order Amish (Lamme and McDonald 1993; Lamme 2001), Louisiana French (Estaville 1993; Estaville 2001), Texas-Mexicans (Arreola 1993; Arreola 2001), and Hispanos (Nostrand 1992; Nostrand 1993; Nostrand 2001). Self-conscious homelands include the Anglo-Texan (Jordan 1993; Jordan-Bychkov 2001), Mormon (Bennion 2001), New England Yankee (Bowden 2001), and Upper Southern (Roark 2000) homelands. Although self-conscious

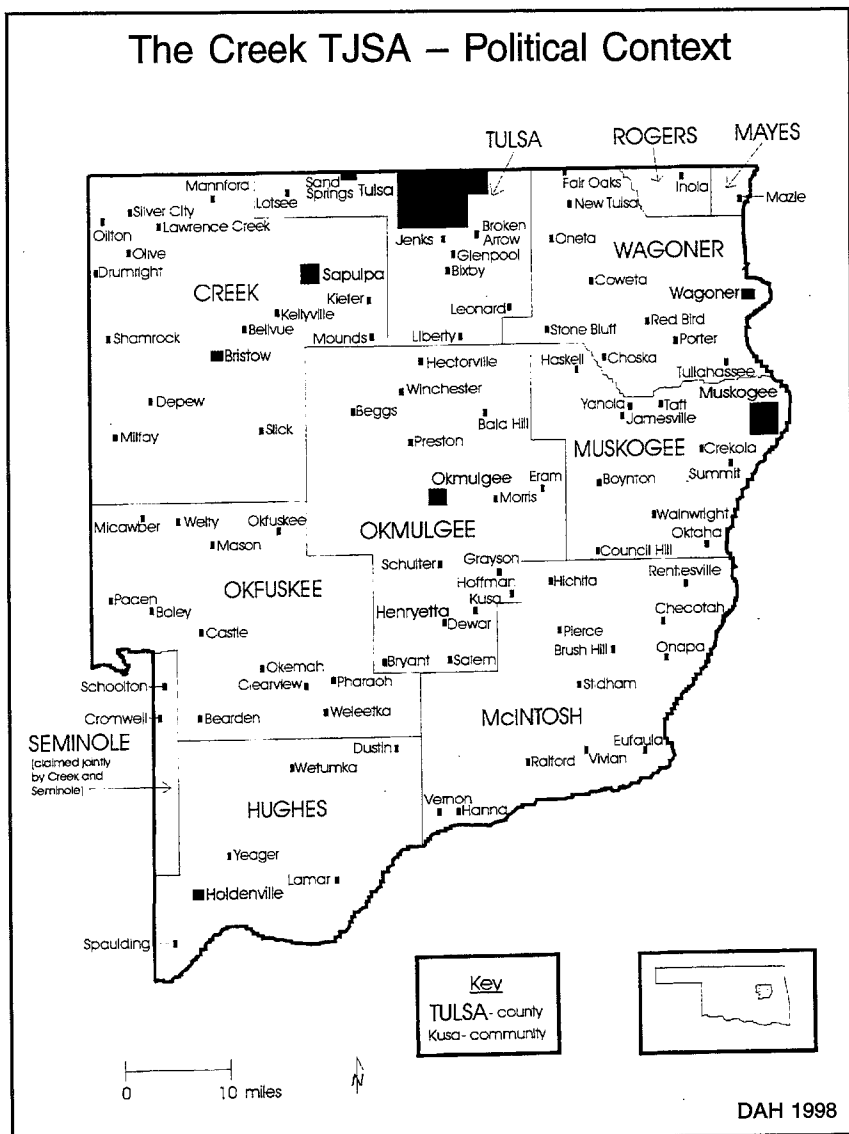
and viable homelands are justifiable, the focus to this point has been mainly on ethnically based and moribund studies.

After nearly a decade of study, some gaps remain in the investigation of homelands. Many homelands, including those belonging to American Indians, remain to be studied. Excluding the Creek, only the Kiowa (Schnell 1994; Schnell 2000) and Navajo (Jett 2001) Nations have been investigated by geographers. Additionally, most homeland case studies concentrate on historical homelands or surmise that the contemporary homeland is in decline. Only a few present-day homelands, such as Hardwick's (1993; 2001) accounts of the California Central Valley Russians, seem to be increasing in vitality. More homeland case studies will promote an increased understanding of both the concept and how diverse American ethnic groups bond with their natural environments in distinctive ways.

### **The Homeland since 1907 Oklahoma Statehood**

The Oklahoma-centered Creek homeland closely corresponds to the post-removal settlement pattern of the Creek and the final reservation boundaries established in 1866 (Figure 1). For governmental purposes, Tribal Jurisdictional Statistical Areas (TJSAs) were established in the 1990 Census. The Census Bureau describes TJSAs as regions delineated by federally recognized tribes in Oklahoma without a reservation, for which the Census Bureau tabulated data (United States Department of Commerce 1990). In order to supplement the historical data, the Census Bureau undertook field work with the Oklahoma nations to assess the area in which certain tribes maintain jurisdiction over their members.

Today, Creek tribal towns continue to exist as active political and social units of the Creek Nation, although town spatial organization and social significance has changed since Oklahoma statehood (Opler 1952).<sup>2</sup> While the number of towns has decreased, the settlement area of town members has greatly expanded. Some town members continue to live in close proximity to their stomp ground although a significant number of younger Creek, searching for economic opportunity, have moved to larger urban places such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City on the periphery or outside



**Figure 1.** Contemporary Political Context of the Creek Homeland.

the nation. However, all town members maintain their traditional right to participate in ceremonies, hold offices, and participate in their town's decision making in general. Town members living outside of the immediate vicinity of the town do not see distance only as an obstacle; rather it presents benefits as well. Living outside of the homeland is a logical way to compete in the larger wage economy while still maintaining connections to their Creek heritage through their town.

Since statehood, former members of the Creek Confederacy have increased their autonomy within the Creek Nation. This trend maintains the tradition of voluntary association that characterized the Creek Confederacy in the Southeast. The Seminole and Yuchi have continued to maintain an identity that is partially separate from the Creek. Additionally, the Kialegee (located near Wetumka), the Alabama-Quassarte (located near Henryetta), and the Thlopthlocco (located near Okemah) tribal towns have responded to centrifugal forces by increasing their social or economic self-sufficiency. The Thlopthlocco tribal town has operated almost independently from the Creek Nation since the 1930s. The town runs its own smoke shop, bingo operation, and community center in order to maintain economic autonomy and more traditional cultural values (Fixico 1991) (Figure 2). The Kialegee, who received federal recognition as a separate tribe in 1942, recently announced that they are considering establishing a reservation and casino in Georgia. Although not all members of the tribe would relocate, the town fire would be returned to Georgia, thus re-centering the Kialegee sense of place (Osinski 1999).

These changes are a direct result of the radical alteration of the Creek political structure after Oklahoma statehood. Between the Curtis Act of 1898 (that dissolved tribal governments) and the Indian Reorganization Act (the Wheeler-Howard Act) of 1934 (which returned some power to tribal governments), the president of the United States appointed Creek principal chiefs and determined Creek political affairs (Debo 1940). To the federal and state governments, the Creek were not a viable community. Instead, officials manipulated a puppet government from Washington, D.C. The Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936 returned tribal self-govern-



**Figure 2.** The community center and smoke shop at Thlopthlocco tribal town. (DAH, June 1999)

ment to the Creek and other Oklahoma Indians, at least superficially, although the Bureau of Indian Affairs appointed Creek tribal executives between 1955 and 1970 due to what they labeled factionalism (Debo 1951; Moore 1994). The Indian Welfare Act also established federal charters to recognize tribal towns and increase their ability to purchase communal land and secure government loans (Moore 1994). The charters failed due to widespread distrust of the federal government, and only the Alabama-Quassarte, Kialegee, and Thlopthlocco towns applied for the recognition.

Generally, the Creek Nation government has been disorganized and only partially effective during Oklahoma statehood (Champagne 1992). Continued federal government interference has also characterized the era. The Bureau of Indian Affairs has manipulated elections and voter registration procedures in order to place Creek progressives in office (Holm 1985; Moore 1988). As in the past, the federal government has attempted to consolidate Creek political power with a limited number of leaders in order to effectively control tribal programs and policies. The post-statehood trend towards political centralization has been viewed by tribal town members as an intrusive effort to take away Creek land and rights (Moore 1988; Champagne 1992). Many Creek conservatives refuse to participate in Creek Nation politics, leaving that realm to the more progressive Creek. In particular, census-taking and surveying are viewed as thinly-veiled attempts at political and social coercion, based upon the historical examples

of removal and allotment (Opler 1952; Moore 1988).

Government control of Creek internal affairs after Oklahoma statehood also facilitated the erosion of the tribal land base and increased outsider control of mineral resources (Debo 1940). Although the Creek have been able to maintain a more compact land base than have the other five tribes—effectively aiding social interaction—between 1907 and 1970 more than two million acres of allotted Creek land was sold to non-Indian interests (Moore 1994). These non-Creek parties removed more than \$50 billion in petroleum from the Creek Nation (Moore 1994). Abject poverty characterized Creek living conditions and few efforts were made to provide aid. Creek circumstances worsened to the point that even governmental officials lamented the “decreasing influence of the Creeks in the territory which was once theirs” and the “gradual pushing of the Creeks into the background economically, socially, and politically” (Opler 1972: 56).

Current tribal government is based upon the Creek Nation Constitution of 1979 that calls for the popular-vote election of an executive branch in the form of a principal and second chief. The constitution also provides for a legislative branch realized in the Creek National Council and a judicial branch in the form of a Supreme Court and District Court. The National Council is elected from eight districts with one representative per district plus an additional representative for each 1,000 inhabitants (Creek (Muscogee) Nation 2000). Currently there are 26 representatives.

The executive, legislative, and judicial branches of the Creek Nation have increasingly wielded power and influence over tribal members. Housing programs, assistance to children and the elderly, public works and construction projects, agricultural programs, and economic development ventures have increased in importance for a growing segment of Creek tribal members. The Creek Nation since 1970 has become a sizable bureaucracy (with a healthy system of political patronage) and maintains an annual budget of \$82 million employing 375 tribal members (Creek (Muscogee) Nation 2000). In addition to economic programs, the Nation has also increased its sponsorship of annual social events. The Creek Nation Festival and the Creek Council House Indian Art Market are the largest

events asserting Creek Nation identity and, like other large Indian powwows and ceremonies, they attempt to enhance local non-Indian acceptance of the Creek as a distinctive ethnic group (Roth 1992). A mix of elements of a county fair with traditional Creek culture, both seem to attract a great number of younger Creek and a significant number of outsiders (Figure 3).

As a reaction to persistent federal government interference and policy change, tribal towns have maintained a significant, if diminishing, influence. In 1937, Morris Opler determined that 44 Creek towns maintained their identities, 20 had a full roster of offices, and the total tribal town population was estimated at about 15,000 Creek (Opler 1952: 175).<sup>3</sup> In part, the continued significance of tribal towns and the revitalization of member participation in activities was a reaction to Oklahoma statehood. Towns continued to be active, organizing land acquisition programs and social service activities to support the needs of their members (Opler 1952; Opler 1972). Thus tribal town structure was not dismantled, but maintained by a significant segment of Creek society. Today 14 tribal towns (with memberships from several hundred to several thousand) maintain active ceremonial grounds. Creek towns are described as "rural core communities" due to their isolated nature, communal sharing of land and resources, maintenance of traditional religious practices, and primary speaking of Creek instead of English (Moore 1988: 164; Moore 1994).



Figure 3. Ball ground arbors at the 1999 Creek Nation Festival in Okmulgee. (DAH, June 1999)



In general, the Creek are divided into numerous cultural groups based on kinship, religious affiliation, tribal affiliation, (native) linguistic ability, incorporation into the Anglo community (usually reflected in economic status and employment), educational attainment, political activity, and geographic location. Statistical information shows that economic, educational, employment, and linguistic ability differ in rural and urban regions of the Creek Nation. Urban areas contain higher income levels, greater educational attainment, higher levels of employed persons, and more Creek who speak only English (Innis 1997).

Specifically, two present-day Creek social groups can be outlined. Their identities are organized around stomp grounds and churches. It is important to note that these social boundaries are somewhat fluid and individuals who identify themselves primarily in one category often participate, to varying degrees, in the other group. Certainly, further field work to investigate contemporary Creek identity and sense of place is warranted.

### **Contemporary Creek Social Groups**

For the Creek, as with many other American Indian communities, political units (federally recognized boundaries and associated funding) and cultural units (stomp grounds, community centers, churches) are not synonymous. The federally recognized political unit—the Creek Nation—is not viewed as a point of orientation for most tribal members. In part, this is because progressives who typically have not been members of traditional communities have dominated Creek national politics.

Since statehood Creek sense of community has been maintained through churches and ceremonial grounds functioning independently from each other and the centralized tribal government. Creek churches and ceremonial grounds act as nodes of social interaction throughout the homeland, as many Creek attempt to maintain some form of traditional community relationships while also operating in more mainstream American regional, national, or international economies.

Creek tribal town members remain a viable social unit with town ceremonial grounds (sometimes called stomp grounds) and ceremonies

(often called stomp dances) promoting social unity among this segment of the nation. Tribal town members are from extended families composed largely of the full-blood, Creek-speaking population. Although the political and social roles of tribal towns within the nation have diminished, they continue to be recognized by anthropologists as clan segments that function as ritual and political units which regularly provide mutual assistance to town members (Robbins 1976; Bell 1990).

Identity among the remaining 14 Creek tribal towns (three of the 14 stomp grounds are predominantly Yuchi) with active ceremonial grounds revolves around a series of weekend ceremonies held each year between March and November (Figure 4). The stomp grounds are located in rural areas and are purposefully surrounded by dense forest so they may be withdrawn from casual observers. They are usually centered on approximately ten acres on the private property of a member of the town and tend to move every 5 to 10 years (Walker 1981). Spatially, the stomp grounds resemble the historic, clustered tribal-town form. For example, both entities maintained a central ceremonial ground. Encircling the grounds were private homes in towns and arbors in present-day stomp grounds. Tribal towns and stomp grounds are both surrounded by forest, distinctly separating towns and grounds. Today, vegetation acts as a buffer from nearby roads and buildings in order to both increase privacy and to separate Creek ceremonial space from the non-Creek world (Walker 1981).

Each town hosts several stomp dances a year, including a green-corn ceremony. Stomp dances provide the best opportunity for members of other towns to interact and promote tribal unity. Even long-distance, out-of-state visitors to stomp dances are common, pulled by the opportunity for fellowship with family and friends. Social interaction is encouraged by the maintenance of camps, family housing and social centers maintained in a ring around the town fire and square ground. Visitors from other towns and tribes are encouraged to attend stomp dances, creating a reciprocal pan-Indian social network of traditionals (Robbins 1976; Walker 1981; Bell 1990; Jackson 1998).

The town fire (*poca*) remains an important signifier of tribal town life

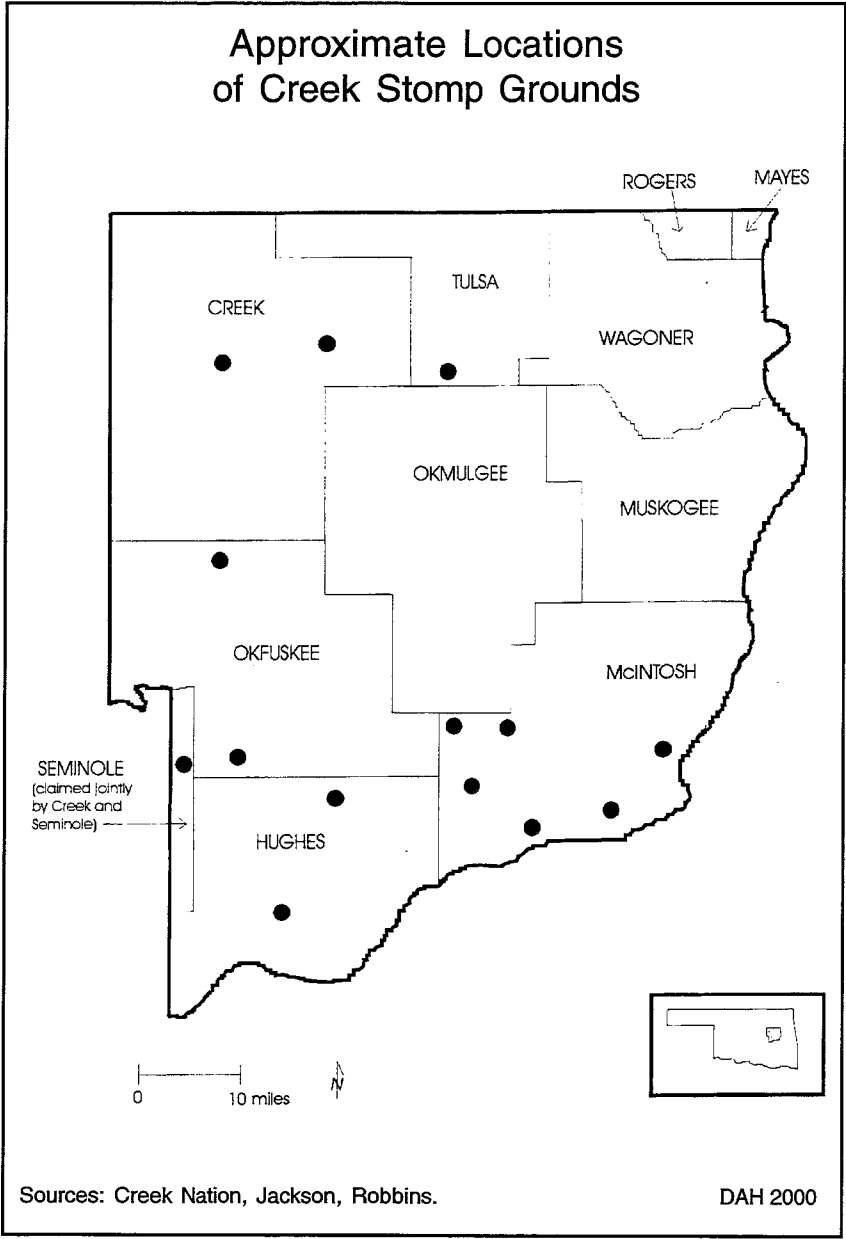


Figure 4. Contemporary Creek stomp grounds.

and promotes unity among the Creek. The town fire connects males in particular to their town and the larger history of the Creek, especially the removal process in which town fires were carried from their southeastern hearths in order to maintain the sanctity of the tribal towns (Bell 1990). Lighting or extinguishing the ceremonial fire remains a key duty of the male leadership of the town. The fire is called *poca*, or grandfather, and is addressed with respect, like the relationship one would have with an honored elder. Fires that are not respected or left unattended are believed to continue to burn underground, becoming dangerous to the town members if they are not "killed" and the medicine buried with the fire removed (Walker 1981; Bell 1990).

Fluency in the Creek language, or Muskogee, is another characteristic of the membership in the stomp-ground community and is second only to blood quantum for distinguishing membership in the stomp-ground group. One cannot participate fully in stomp dances without language proficiency. Full-blood Thomas Yahola notes "at these ceremonial grounds the language is still spoken, everything is in Muskogee. So we're still functioning. We're a little proud of keeping up our tradition" (Yahola 1995: 9). Because language is an essential aspect of the stomp ground community, Creek-speakers view the English-only speaking Creek mixed-bloods much as they do a non-Creek—outsiders regardless of their political position, social heritage, or economic status.

Of the 48,000 enrolled tribal members, it is estimated that as many as 30,000 Creek are members of tribal towns. Approximately 8,000 to 10,000 Creek are bilingual (Creek and English) speakers. Of the total enrollment, full-bloods comprise about 2,000 members (McKinley 1976: 157-159; Bell 1990: 341; Yahola 1995: 14; Moore 1998: 183). Thus, the stomp ground community comprises an unknown, but relatively small number of Creek, based upon language and full-blood status as likely, but not definitive, indicators of participation in the stomp-dance community.

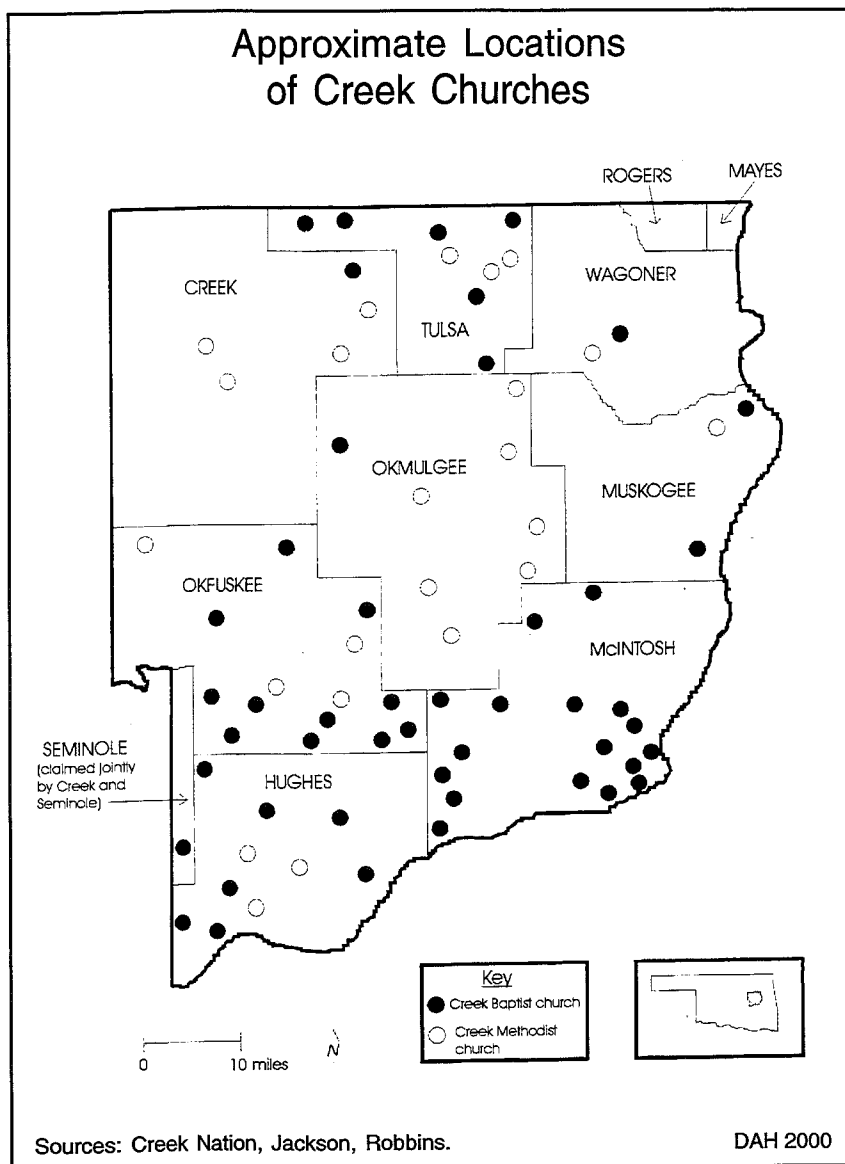
The stomp-ground community continues to house the remaining vestige of traditional Creek beliefs that once included most of the nation participating in tribal town organization, ceremonial life, matrilineal kinship,

and matrilineal residence. Participation in the stomp-dance community reinforces group distinctiveness, reminds the Creek of the activities and beliefs of their ancestors, and attempts to modify the social behavior of the participants to conform to group standards. Recently, stomp dances have increased in popularity among tribal members who are not active in the stomp-ground community. Typically, non-ceremonial stomp dances are held indoors and serve as competitions and fundraisers, particularly in the winter. The homogenization of stomp dances and the removal of the ceremonial context have angered some Creek traditionalists who view these trends as demeaning to their beliefs. In particular, the proposed construction of an indoor Creek Nation stomp-dance facility not associated with a tribal town has received much criticism from the traditional Creek community.

Some Creek tribal towns have evolved into rural communities centered on an Indian church. Like schools, churches are elements of the Indian landscape that were introduced by Americans. However, instead of being signifiers of Euro-American culture, the social interaction at Indian churches reinforces Creek identity due to unique services and opportunities for social interaction. The buildings themselves have become markers of Creek space instead of symbols of the dominant culture.

Some researchers contend that while there may be some overlap, "church people" are usually not participants in the stomp-dance community and vice-versa (Robbins 1976; Hadley 1987). However, many Creek have an overlapping identity in which they participate in portions of both the stomp-dance and the church worlds. The amount of participation varies greatly due to individual beliefs and some people make a total break with stomp dancing after their conversion to Christianity. The worldviews of most Creek allow them to take part in at least some activities at both the ceremonial grounds and churches. However, there is some evidence that increasing church membership of stomp-ground participants reduces the regularity in which ceremonial activities are performed.<sup>4</sup>

Approximately 60 to 65 traditional Creek churches are active today. Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominational affiliations are the most common (Moore 1988; Yahola 1995) (Figure 5). In particular, the

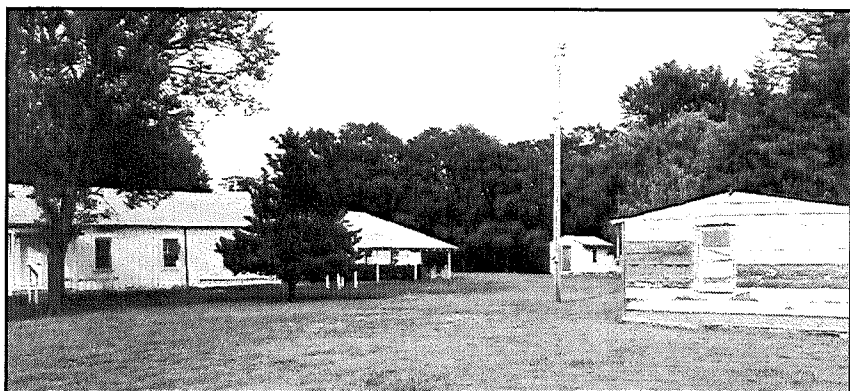


**Figure 5.** Contemporary Creek churches.

more numerous Baptist churches are rural and more traditional in nature while Methodist churches, more numerous in the north of the homeland away from the core, are more urban and progressive. Indian churches offer regular, unique social interaction for the Creek, with services in the Creek language, the singing of Creek hymns, and regular opportunities for fellowship. This holds true even if the membership rolls are pan-Indian in nature. For example, a community of Yuchi living southeast of Sapulpa formed Pickett Chapel United Methodist Church and services and singing were held in Euchee. Today, Pickett Chapel has a multi-ethnic congregation with Yuchi, Creek, Choctaw, Pawnee, Kiowa, White, and Eskimo-Japanese members. Services are now in English, but hymns are sung in English, Euchee, Creek, and the tribal languages of other members such as Kiowa.

Christian camp meetings played key roles in the historical development of churches as social nodes. Also called “Fourth Sunday” meetings since they were typically held once a month, the weekend gatherings (usually held Wednesday through Sunday) brought the host congregation and other surrounding churches together in fellowship. Church families constructed camps (often small wooden buildings) in a circle around the church. In layout, the camps were similar to the stomp grounds whose central square had surrounding brush arbors (Figure 6). Although a declining number of churches maintain active camps, the “Fourth Sunday” tradition continues with congregations gathering for a special dinner, service, or program once a month. On the other Sundays, members often visit a nearby church that is hosting a “Fourth Sunday” event.

Within the homeland, gradations of Creek identity exist. The southern half and northwestern corner (home to the Yuchi community) of the TJSA contain most of the traditional elements of Creek identity—such as stomp grounds and churches—and constitute the core of the homeland (Debo 1951; McKinley 1976; Shumway and Jackson 1995; Yahola 1995). With the expansion of transportation systems, it is not necessary for traditional Creek to work and live in the same town. For example, one tribal town member lives in Wetumka and commutes to work in Tulsa in order to “live where the people live at. In our area [the Creek Nation], Okmulgee



**Figure 6.** Grave Creek Indian Methodist Church near Hitichita. The church, at the left of the picture, is surrounded by camps used during the “Fourth Sunday” meetings. (DAH, September 1999)



**Figure 7.** Council Oak Park in Tulsa. The site was the original Locapoka tribal town ceremonial ground after removal. The Creek Nation has recently added a large sign identifying the park. The council oak is the tallest tree at the left-center of the image. (DAH, October 1998)



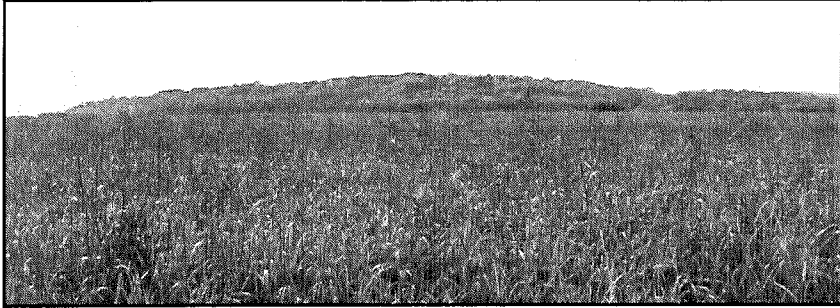


Figure 8. Council Hill in Okmulgee County. (DAH, September 1999)

is about half-way. When you go to Okmulgee and go south, that is where all the tradition and culture is. When you go north, go kind of toward Tulsa, then it kind of diminishes. That is the reason I stayed in my home area” (Yahola 1995: 12).

As tribal rolls have rapidly increased and Creek individuals have been drawn to cities outside of the Creek Nation, the number of Creek living outside of the homeland has increased. In one context, this post-World War II migration of Creek out of the homeland has provided a reference point to historical removal from the Southeast, integrating present-day individuals into the larger Creek historical narrative. Many Creek citizens residing in Tulsa, Oklahoma City or other urban areas lying outside the Creek Nation (including southern California) are tied to the Nation by continued regular participation in their stomp-ground or church community. They are aided by the flexible nature of Creek identity that allows townspeople to transport their identity from place to place instead of requiring members to live in close proximity to the tribal town.

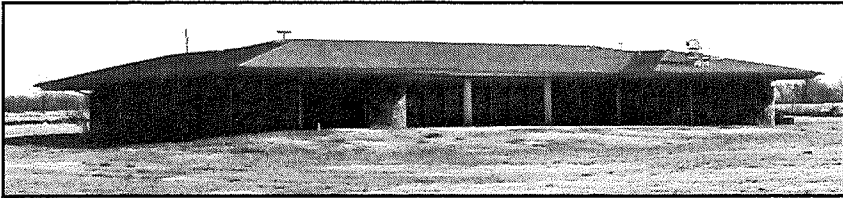
### Landscape Expressions

Creek landscape expressions, like their identity, can be characterized as quiet or subtle. House types, farm patterns and crops, and other traditional markers of ethnic space are often not used by Native peoples to express their ethnicity in the landscape. Instead, the landscape itself becomes a marker. Creek examples include the old oak tree at the former

Locapoka tribal town stomp ground in Tulsa (Figure 7) and the noticeable hill rising above surrounding plains at High Spring (Council Hill) in Okmulgee County that was the first Creek council ground in Indian Territory (Figure 8). Additionally, the Creek have chosen to organize much of their visible cultural elements in subtle ways. This is a direct response to being a colonized people operating within the values of a dominant Anglo-American popular culture whose landscapes tend to overwhelm older ethnic landscape layers.

Yet one can only assume that some landscape signatures should be visible to the outside observer when traveling through a homeland even if they do not resemble the typical American built landscape characterized by David Lowenthal as “exaggerated, vehement, powerful, [and] unpredictable” (Lowenthal 1968: 71). While tribal towns and ceremonial grounds are often hidden aspects of the Creek landscape, visible elements include Creek Nation structures such as the tribal headquarters complex in Okmulgee, the Creek Travel Plaza, bingo facilities, community centers, and privately and tribally owned smoke shops. In addition to their social function, Creek churches also serve as landscape markers.<sup>5</sup>

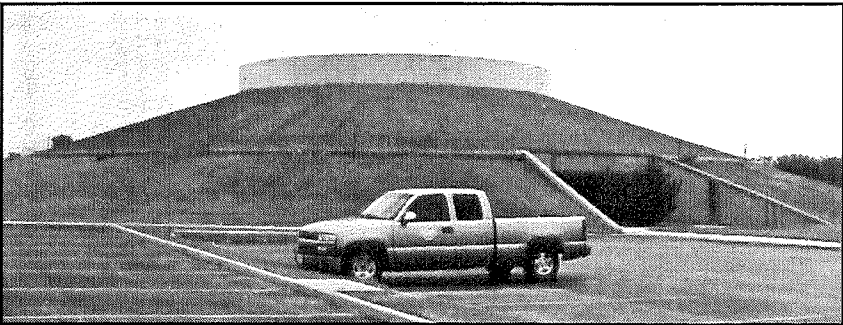
The Creek Nation has expanded its influence upon the built environment since the 1970s, increasing the number of tribally owned buildings and tribally sponsored construction projects. Tribally owned land and facilities are dispersed throughout the Creek Nation. Creek Community centers are located in Tulsa, Bristow, Eufaula, Okemah, Okmulgee, Checotah, and Sapulpa and serve as secular social nodes by hosting dances and powwows, craft shows, and other regular celebrations (Figure 9). Okmulgee serves as the cultural capital for the nation. The tribal headquarters complex, Creek Nation omniplex and rodeo grounds, and the Creek Nation Travel Plaza—called the “most visible sign of [recent Creek economic] improvement” by Principal Chief Perry Bear—are clustered on the northern outskirts of Okmulgee on U.S. 75 (Anonymous 1999: 4; O’Brien 1986) (Figure 10). The tribal headquarters complex provides all services administered by the Creek Nation bureaucracy, including financial, human development, community services, and tribal affairs programs



**Figure 9.** Tulsa Creek Indian Community Center. (DAH, December 1999)



**Figure 10.** The Creek Nation Travel Plaza on U.S. 75 in Okmulgee. (DAH, September 1999)



**Figure 11.** The mound building at the Creek Nation tribal headquarters. The building houses the communication department, council offices, gaming, judicial, and vehicle registration offices. The structure was designed to resemble a Mississippian-cultural earthen mound. (DAH, September 1999)

(Figure 11). Also, the Creek Council House Museum, listed on the National Register of Historic Sites and designated as a National Historic Landmark, sits on the square in downtown Okmulgee and is advertised throughout Oklahoma as a tourist destination (Figure 12).

Tribally owned gaming facilities are also spread throughout the nation. Six bingo facilities (which also include gaming machines) are owned by the Creek Nation and operate in conspicuous locations in Tulsa, Okmulgee, Muskogee, Bristow, Eufaula, and Checotah (Figure 13). A significant number of tribal and non-tribal gamblers frequent the bingo facilities, and informal parking lot surveys typically yield a variety of state and tribal license plates. Gaming revenues supplement the tribal income as all gaming profits are required to go to tribal welfare projects.

Indian churches and private or tribal smoke shops typically indicate clustered Creek settlement (Bays 1996). In particular, smoke shops, as retail outlets, occupy visible space, often along major transportation arteries. Tribally run smoke shops tend to be located in close proximity to other tribal lands. Privately owned smoke shops are usually close to established Indian communities. For example, the Duck Creek smoke shop, located south of Glenpool on U.S. 75, is on the margin of an area with a significant number of Yuchi families (Figure 14). Indian churches also signify areas of long-settled Creek communities because many churches have maintained relatively static locations since after the Civil War.

The most ubiquitous tribal landscape expression is the Muscogee (Creek) Nation license plate (Figure 15). The Creek introduced these mobile signifiers of tribal space and ethnic identification in the early 1990s and now several thousand automobiles are registered. Only enrolled tribal residents living within the boundaries of the Creek Nation are eligible to purchase tribal license plates. Thus, Creek license plates are found on vehicles whose owners live within the Creek Nation boundaries, with the exception of residents living temporarily outside the Nation due to education or work requirements. License plates effectively mark Creek space and also distinguish tribal members from other residents of the state who are unable to purchase tribal tags.



**Figure 12.** The Creek Nation Council House and Museum in Okmulgee. (DAH, September 1999)



**Figure 13.** Creek Nation Muscogee Bingo on U.S. 69 south of Muskogee. (DAH, June 1997)



Figure 14. Duck Creek Smoke Shop on U.S. 75 in Okmulgee County. (DAH, December 1999)

Signs associated with roads and automobiles also contribute to a heightened regional identity. The Oklahoma Historical Society and other private organizations have placed approximately a dozen roadside historical markers and monuments throughout the Creek Nation. The markers explain diverse topics from the Creek role in Indian Territory Civil War battles to the Creek Council House and capitol in Okmulgee to the life of Creek poet Alexander Posey (Harris 1966; Wright et al. 1976). While historical markers are not pivotal aspects of Creek identity, to those unfamiliar with the area they reinforce the fact that the historical narrative of the region is ultimately linked to the Creek experience. While outsider recognition of Creek ethnic space in Oklahoma does not directly contribute to Creek identity, it does aid in the recognition of a homeland. Externally generated roadside historical markers may seem like trivial landscape elements, but they serve to mark space in direct terms that “outsiders” can read and recognize.

Although Creek landscape signatures may appear to be limited compared to other robust (and often artificially created) ethnic expressions found in the United States, it is important to remember that ethnic groups such as the Creek may resort to less visible strategies to maintain their cultural life. Ceremonies, church services, and formal and informal social gatherings do much more to maintain Creek identity than do visible cultural elements that often focus on tribal enterprises operated by the Creek Nation. Creek landscape expressions only supplement the non-public cultural behavior that is the key to maintaining a sense of Creek community in Oklahoma.



Figure 15. Muscogee (Creek) Nation tribal license plate. (DAH, June 1999)

### The Future

The future of the Creek homeland is uncertain. While tribal enrollment numbers grow and the Creek Nation increases business operations and associated revenues, the number of Creek holding traditional ceremonial or church-based worldviews is apparently declining. Also, younger tribal members—now comprising a significant segment of the tribe due to high fertility rates—maintain diverse interests and are increasingly involved in the dominant American cultural and economic realms instead of focusing solely on Creek culture and history. Spatially, the homeland has the potential to become fragmented if Confederacy members such as the Yuchi choose to withdraw fully or partially from the Nation and focus on developing a separate identity or attempt to re-center their existence in the southeastern United States, as in case of the Kialegee.

To combat cultural erosion, several programs have recently been created to aid in the maintenance of a Creek worldview. In particular, language training has received attention from the Creek and Yuchi, in order to combat the endangered status of the Creek and Euchee languages. The Creek Nation opened a \$1.1 million child-development center in Okmulgee

in July 1998 in order to teach Creek children customs and history, including Creek language training and regular visits by tribal storytellers.

The Yuchi are focusing their efforts to maintain their language through a program sponsored by several members of Pickett Chapel United Methodist Church. Two weekly held language classes—one for children and the other for adults—were begun in the early 1990s with the intent to increase the number of Yuchi speakers from the current number of eight to 12 fluent speakers. As part of their language training, the children planted a garden behind Pickett Chapel in the summer of 1999, and in addition to learning Yuchi words for crops and farm implements they discussed tribal methods of agricultural planting and the importance of corn and other crops to the Yuchi worldview (Gugliotta 1998). For the Yuchi, language is a method to maintain tribal identity and reinforce historical and contemporary differences between the Yuchi and the remainder of the Creek Confederacy and Nation.

The future of the Creek homeland will be linked directly to the ability of the Creek to shape and re-create their culture and social traditions in the manner they best see fit. Ceremonial grounds and Creek churches will play a large role in this process. However, cultures, identity, and social relations are not static, nor will they be in the future. If the Creek can maintain a community with a sense of a shared past and hope for a common future rooted in eastern Oklahoma, then the homeland will continue to be viable ethnic space. Certainly increasing the tribal land base and fostering economic growth and jobs within the Nation would act as additional centripetal forces. If the unifying elements of community and place are discarded, the homeland will likely devolve into an ethnic substrate and the Creek community will struggle to remain a united people centered in place. If nothing else, the historical record illustrates the ability of the Creek to adapt to an almost constantly changing geopolitical situation that is often removed from their direct control. Community and sense of place remain powerful tools in a people's ability to maintain and shape ethnic space.



## Notes

1. Any study of the Creek (Muscogee) Nation is instantly confronted with questions of language use. In historical and contemporary eras, Creek use of the terms as self-identification varied and many Creek use "Creek" and "Muscogee" interchangeably—such as the official national name, the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. This article uses the word "Creek" instead of "Muscogee," "Muskogee," or "Mvskoke" as the Euro-American construct "Creek" and outsider interpretations of the Creek Confederacy dictated much of the political and social history of the Creek from European contact to the present-day. Additionally, most Mvskoke citizens tend to self-identify as "Creek." In no way does the use of "Creek" for this project attempt to illegitimatize other possible descriptors of the Mvskoke people or downplay the ethnocentric nature of the term "Creek."

2. All observations in this article not explicitly cited are based upon field work in the Creek Nation from fall 1996 to spring 2000. All interpretations and descriptions are strictly my own and any misinterpretations are solely mine and not those of my informants.

3. Morris Opler was hired by the federal government in the 1930s as assistant anthropologist in the Office of Indian Affairs. His duties included counting tribal towns and their members because the federal government believed tribal towns to be nearly extinct and the Creek to be "tribeless farmers scattered among white agriculturalists." See Opler 1972: 5.

4. For written interpretations of the degree of stomp ground-church people interaction see Barnett 1937: 377; Lewis 1937: 17; Tiger 1937: 73; Polk 1970: 549; Tiger 1970: 2-3; and Watson n.d.: 505.

5. For a discussion of the creation and survival of ethnic impresses and landscapes see Conzen 1990: 239-241. Zelinsky warns against relying only on visible landscape evidence when attempting to "read" ethnic landscapes in the United States. See Zelinsky 1997: 157-161. For a Creek example of a hidden landscape impress see the interviewer's comments for Haynie 1970.

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