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I. Introduction

In the spring of 1995, when I began conducting anthropological field research among members of my own tribal nation, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, I was struck by the extent to which formal membership (or citizenship) in our tribe had become a measure of Choctaw belonging.¹ Citizenship in the Choctaw Nation, one of the most populous Indian tribes in the United States, was creating boundaries that were significantly affecting the lives of Choctaws living within tribal boundaries. Tribal leaders were enforcing a tribal order in which only tribal citizens were deemed entitled to participate in formal tribal affairs, gain access to tribal resources, and attend certain tribal social events. Choctaw citizens were sharing a set of experiences, such as voting in tribal elections and participating in tribal programs, that were separating them from Choctaws who were not enrolled and that were encouraging both the enrolled and the unenrolled to view enrolled Choctaws as somehow “more Choctaw.” During my field research, almost every time I engaged in conversation with a Choctaw whom I did not know (both enrolled and unenrolled Choctaws) I was asked whether I was enrolled.

Fortunately for me, the answer was yes. For elected and grassroots Choctaw leaders, my status as an enrolled tribal member meant first and foremost that I was a voter. For tribal bureaucrats, it meant not only that I was a voter but also that I was formally integrated into the Choctaw polity—that I was a Choctaw citizen—and that I was a shareholder in what might be described as the tribal corporation. For Choctaw citizens, it meant that I shared with them formal ties of tribal citizenship that bound

us together in a seemingly inextricable way. It also meant that there was a point at which my claims to being Choctaw were unassailable. For unenrolled Choctaws, my status as a Choctaw citizen meant that I likely questioned the legitimacy of their Choctaw identity (which, more often than not, was not the case). For many of the unenrolled, it also meant that I likely naturalized the boundaries that defined the Choctaw citizenry, that is, I did not see these boundaries for what they were and are: as sociopolitical constructions. This, too, was not the case.

During the early days of my seventeen months of field research, I was struck not only by how often I was asked the question of whether I was enrolled but also by how often Choctaws living in the Choctaw Nation asked this question of one another. For example, only a few days after I arrived at the farmhouse of a friend with whom I lived during the first part of my research, my friend received a visit from the tribe's director of agriculture, Randy Bailey. From a big wingback chair in the family's brown-paneled living room, Mr. Bailey, an enrolled Choctaw, told my friend—who also happened to be an enrolled Choctaw—that for health reasons she and her family should no longer use the pond behind their house as their principal water supply. As my friend began expressing concerns about her family's health and the fact that she could not afford to fix the problem, Mr. Bailey interrupted her. "Don't worry," he said. "We [the tribal government] have a program for Choctaws where we'll lay pipe through their land out to the road, where we can [then] hook 'em up to the [local water supply]." Pausing for a moment, he then unclasped his hands, leaned forward in his chair, and asked pointedly, "Are you enrolled?" Only enrolled Choctaws were eligible for this program, as is the case for most present-day Choctaw tribal programs.

In its preoccupation with the boundaries that define Choctaw citizenship, the Choctaw Nation that I encountered in the mid-1990s hardly resembled the Choctaw Nation of my youth. I was reared in Oklahoma, specifically in Oklahoma City. I was born in the mid-1960s, at a time when "the enrolled"—or, as they were sometimes termed, "the enrollees"—meant those Choctaws whose names were listed on the Dawes (Allotment) Rolls of 1906. By the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and by many Choctaws, all Choctaws born after the rolls were "closed" during the first decade of the twentieth century were termed "the unenrolled." When I was a young child, the Choctaw tribal government was tiny, had little power and few

resources, and was headed by a chief whom we Choctaws were not legally entitled to select ourselves. From 1906 to 1970, each of the principal leaders of the Five “Civilized” Tribes, a category of tribes that includes the Choctaws, were appointed by the U.S. president. Furthermore, during the first four years of my life, the Choctaw tribe was slated for the termination of its trust relationship with the federal government. Until the Choctaw termination law was repealed one day before it was scheduled to take effect on August 25, 1970, we Choctaws faced a future in which, in federal terms, our tribe would no longer exist as a tribe. In those days, acts of self-identification as Choctaw were celebrated by other Choctaws as acts of resistance against federal, state, and local pressures to assimilate into the larger, non-Indian society.

I left Oklahoma to attend college in 1984, one year after our tribe ratified the first Choctaw tribal constitution in more than a century. This document expressed, reinforced, and facilitated an intensive period of Choctaw tribal nation building. Against the background of the formal restoration by Congress during the previous decade of our right to select our own leaders, Choctaw leaders reorganized and dramatically expanded the executive branch of our tribal government. They also amplified and redistributed the powers of the tribal executive among two sets of formal political institutions that were formally created in and by the 1983 constitution—the legislative and judicial branches of our tribal government. At the same time, tribal leaders hardened the boundaries around the Choctaw citizenry by defining criteria for tribal citizenship, which were enshrined in our new constitution, and by initiating and carrying out a large-scale issuance of tribal membership cards. Tribal citizenship was limited to those listed as “Choctaw by blood” on the Dawes Rolls of 1906 and to those who could document lineal descent from at least one ancestor listed on these rolls. (The 1906 rolls, it should be pointed out, captured most, but certainly not all, Choctaws who were maintaining Choctaw tribal relations at the turn of the twentieth century.)

With the new tribal political order shaping virtually all aspects of Choctaw social and political life, for me there was simply no question of what I, as an anthropologist, was there to do: I was to document the building of the new order and explore its social, political, and economic consequences. My ability to carry out this work was greatly enhanced by the fact that my status as a Choctaw opened many doors. It was also enhanced by the

fact that I had spent the eleven years that preceded my fieldwork living outside Oklahoma. Though I had returned to Oklahoma many times during this period to visit friends and family, my extended absence gave me a certain amount of distance from the transformations and processes that were unfolding in and around the Choctaw Nation, a distance that, I believe, significantly broadened the set of phenomena that I was able to notice and observe. Much of the time I spent away, of course, was spent preparing for the field research that I knew I wanted to conduct among my tribe. While in graduate school at Harvard University, I received formal training as an anthropologist, conducted coursework in and served as a Teaching Fellow for the Department of Government, reviewed the literature about the Choctaws, and read about other tribes. In addition, during and after graduate school I spent sixteen months working as a cultural anthropologist at the BIA in Washington DC. At the BIA I learned much about the complex articulations between Indian tribes and larger legal and political structures. I also learned much about what was happening throughout Indian country, especially as regards the tribal nation building that was taking place on reservations and tribal trust lands across the country. This perspective is especially apparent in chapters 4 through 6, which explore the consequences of the late-twentieth-century period of Choctaw nation building.

The story of the Choctaws' creation of a new political order in the late twentieth century is a story that must be placed in the larger context of the history of our tribe. This is not only because our history is central to our sense of ourselves as a people and critical to understanding who the Choctaws are in the early-twenty-first century but also because it was at least the third time in our history that our tribe experienced a massive rupture followed by a dramatic rebirth. As I chronicle in chapter 2, in the 1500s the ancestors of the modern Choctaw Nation survived the complete disintegration of the great Mississippian chiefdoms of which they were then a part, chiefdoms that dominated the interior of what is now the American Southeast. After likely migrating from their former homes, at the turn of the seventeenth century Choctaws incorporated remnants of other Indian peoples and founded the modern Choctaw tribe. By the mid-1700s the Choctaws had become the premier agriculturalists in what is now the American Southeast. The Choctaw language operated as the lingua franca for most of the region, and, together with only one or

two other tribes, the Choctaws held the balance of power in the Southeast. During this period the tribe maintained a cultural distinctiveness that set them apart from other Indian and non-Indian populations in the area, a cultural distinctiveness that was eroded significantly during subsequent periods of Choctaw history.

In the overview presented in chapter 2 of Choctaw culture, history, and society through 1970, I also address the massive leveling of the Choctaw past and the tribal institution building that occurred during the tribe's nineteenth-century history. In 1830 the Choctaws became the first tribe to experience the mass removal of their entire tribe by the U.S. government. The Choctaws were relocated from parts of present-day Mississippi and Alabama to Indian Territory, now Oklahoma, on what is popularly termed the Trail of Tears. This massive rupture devastated the Choctaw people. However, almost immediately upon the resettlement of the first party of Choctaws relocated under the terms of the removal treaty, Choctaw leaders launched a period of intensive tribal nation building and re-birth, creating, among other things, an elaborate set of new formal political institutions in their new home.

For living Choctaws, the success of the Choctaw nation building of the nineteenth century provided and continues to provide much of the inspiration for the nation-building efforts of the late twentieth century. By 1857, less than three decades after the signing of the Choctaw removal treaty, the Choctaws had installed a principal chief to head the tribal government's executive branch, which consisted of tribal, district, and county levels of government, and built a bicameral legislative branch, which consisted of an upper house of delegates based on district representation and a lower house of delegates based on population. A system of county, circuit, and supreme courts comprised the tribal judiciary, dozens of neighborhood schools and more than a half-dozen tribal academies defined a Choctaw-controlled school system, and tribal police, who were called "lighthorse," helped maintain order. This new nineteenth-century political order, like the new political order of the late twentieth century, drew and enforced rigid boundaries around a tribal citizenry, maintaining a set of formal criteria that defined who was and was not a citizen of the tribe. Less than a century after it was built, this political order was almost entirely dismantled by the U.S. government. In an attempt to dissolve the tribe, in 1906 the U.S. government destroyed most of the tribe's formal political structures, stripped the tribal government of much of its

powers, and initiated a process of decollectivizing Choctaw tribal assets, a process that, fortunately for the Choctaws, was never completed. Although at no point following this rupture did the Choctaws cease to hold at least some land and monies in common or lose formal recognition of the position of tribal chief, the 1906 razing of Choctaw tribal structures and institutions was extraordinarily far-reaching, as will be seen, and shaped the context for the late-twentieth-century rebuilding that is the focus of this book.

Larger questions about the nature of nation-building projects informed my investigation of the late-twentieth-century rebuilding of my tribe. Broadly structuring my inquiry into Choctaw nation building was a theoretical debate about whether new orders “are erected, like coral reefs, without conscious design” (Sait 1938: 16; see also Leach 1954: 8); or whether their authorship can be discerned (Herzfeld 1992: 67) and characterized as an artifact of political process (Libecap 1989). I began with the working assumptions that the new order was the product of the political actions of certain individuals instead of a creation of the society as a whole, and that political negotiations and processes had shaped the production of the new structures, institutions, and arrangements that together made up the new order. Aware that the vast majority of Choctaws recognized then chief Hollis Roberts as both the founder and architect of the new order, one of the central goals of this part of my research was to critically evaluate this claim.

In seeking to uncover the origins of the new order and document its unfolding, I also drew upon the theoretical insight of anthropology and political science that nationalism plays a central role in nation-building efforts, regardless of whether these efforts are defined by the goal of replacing an existing order or the goal of initiating processes of political centralization. Building upon this work and ethnographies about nationalism, I resolved to explore ethnographically the question of what type of site nationalism emerges from. Anthropologists Stanley Tambiah and Michael Herzfeld provided two different models of the production sites of nationalisms. In an ethnography documenting a large-scale political upheaval in his native Sri Lanka, Tambiah traces the first articulations of the modern variant of Sinhalese nationalism to “militant, chauvinist, and demagogic [Buddhist] monks” (1986: 83). He explains part of the process by which these ideas have been both disseminated and revised in

terms of these monks organizing themselves into a corporate group, mobilizing “lay supporters,” and forming coalitions. According to Tambiah, through these and other political actions, Sinhalese nationalism progressively leaked into the political arenas of the Sri Lankan state. In contrast, in an ethnography about nationalist ideologies in Greece, Michael Herzfeld (1992) implies that the work of creating and recreating nationalisms is done not at the periphery of power but rather at its core. Herzfeld argues that elected leaders and their staff construct representations and select icons that they have co-opted from local communities in order to, among other things, calibrate personal and local identities to constructions of “national character.” Had Choctaw nationalism emerged from within or outside of the then weak (but still important) Choctaw “state”?

I coupled my interest in pursuing the origins of late-twentieth-century Choctaw nationalism with an interest in critically inspecting its foundations. Specifically, I was interested in how the Choctaws had made sense of their history in the context of the upheavals of political centralization and bureaucratization. What type of narrative of Choctaw nationhood had fueled the rebuilding that I aimed to document? Had Choctaw leaders, following Arapahoe leaders, cleverly redefined discontinuities as continuities (Fowler 1982) and thus foregrounded the timelessness of the Choctaw polity; or had the new order been constructed as a break from the past? The Choctaw tribal newspapers that I was receiving and conversations with friends and family strongly suggested that the new order was being framed as a break from the past. However, as with other preconceptions that I had of what had been going on in the Choctaw Nation, especially during my absence, I resolved to base my findings on ethnographic research, setting aside as much as possible my assumptions about who the Choctaws were and are.

Some of the literature on nation making suggested that the Choctaws may have foregrounded constructions of their nation as timeless during the age of tribal nation building. Benedict Anderson (1991) and Ernest Gellner (1983) treat such constructions as a virtual requirement of nation building. The socially ascribed timeless character or quality of the nation is part of the “magic of nationalism,” Anderson explains: the nation is made to “loom out of an immemorial past” and “glide into a limitless future” (1991: 11–12). Hobsbawm and Ranger also note the pervasiveness of group identities that are fashioned as timeless, arguing that groups and nations often use “traditions,” which claim to be ancient but

which may, in fact, be new or invented, to establish “continuity with a suitable historic past” (1983: 1). They explain that, in the context of “the constant change and innovation of the modern world” there is a need for people to “structure at least some parts of social life . . . as unchanging and invariant” (p. 2). Nash adds that group members find constructions of their group identity in terms of continuity and timelessness attractive because they “give an aura of authority, legitimacy, and rightness to cultural beliefs and practices” (1989: 14). Such constructions help naturalize and legitimize the group not only for group members but also for those located outside group boundaries.

In contrast to these theorists, Samir Amin (1997) describes the “concepts of nationhood” that have been deployed by the world’s nations during the modern era as “diverse.” He points out, for example, that instead of “the myth of seamless historical continuity” used by Germany and other nations, the French embrace a very different kind of nationalism, a nationalism that is structured around a narrative of rupture and rebirth. He explains that, after the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century, the French adopted a founding “myth of the social contract as the foundation of the nation-state, or of a state or nation existing only by that contract” (p. 9). Thompson (1962) implicitly supports this characterization of French concepts of nationhood, describing the myriad ways by which early postrevolution French leaders foregrounded the event of the birth of their nation and emphasized a leveling of the past. French leaders developed a new system of weights and measures that came to be known as the metric system, devised a new system of measuring time that was based on a ten-day week, and created a “new hierarchy of saints and festivals” (Thompson 1962: ix). Though French nationalism is undoubtedly the archetype of the rupture-and-rebirth narrative of nationhood, British nationalism is also grounded in “the myth of a revolutionary upheaval that dispenses with the past,” as Amin points out (1997: 10). In addition, in Africa, there exist surprisingly few nations that have constructed their nation in terms of continuity and timelessness. Most Senegalese, for example, see the nation of Senegal as having been built in the mid-nineteenth century, and many treat a single man, Louis Faidherbe, as the architect of the new order. As I prepared for my research, I treated the two primary possibilities presented in the literature—a foregrounding of continuity, and an emphasis on discontinuity—as equally feasible for the Choctaw case.

The final set of questions that helped frame my inquiries into how, specifically, the Choctaws rebuilt their tribe derived from the historical reality that the social, political, and economic rearrangements that were taking place in the Choctaw Nation during the late twentieth century were occurring at a time when tribes all over the United States were also undertaking intensive institution building, hardening the boundaries around their memberships, and vigorously pursuing tribal economic development. The Choctaws were exploiting legal and political openings for tribal rebuilding and empowerment that were created by the emergence of supralocal social movements such as the American Indian Movement (AIM), shifts in U.S. Indian policy, and the rearrangements of neoliberal economics. Documenting Choctaw rebuilding thus required that I identify the openings that the Choctaws were exploiting and explore how, specifically, these openings were being exploited.

The results of my investigation into the process by which our tribe was rebuilt are presented primarily in chapter 3. Anthropologist Orin Starn is right to point out that if history is understood as a process, determining “an originating moment or person for any turn of events” is “tricky,” but that it is critical not “to deny altogether the role of individual decisions and motivating forces” (1999: 65). Interviews and archival research that I conducted strongly suggested that, although many Choctaws played important roles in creating the movement that resulted in Choctaw nation building, the origins of the initial social movement had much to do with the political actions of a single individual, a then young, working-class Choctaw full-blood named Charles Brown who, surprisingly, lived outside the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma City. In 1969 Brown spearheaded a movement to repeal the Choctaw termination legislation, a movement that swept through the Choctaw Nation—to borrow an analogy used by Smith and Warrior to describe the Indian movement—“like a hurricane” (Smith and Warrior 1996). The Choctaw nationalism that developed as part of this movement was produced outside the then tiny tribal “state” and explicitly challenged, as will be seen, the view of Choctaw history defined by and at the core of formal Choctaw political power and leadership. From sites in the periphery, Choctaws embraced a narrative of Choctaw nationhood that constructed their nation as timeless, and like the Sri Lankan case as described by Tambiah, this narrative of nationhood soon leaked into the Choctaw tribal “state.” Through informal and formal tribal political processes, Choctaws negotiated their ideas about nation building and nationhood, instigated processes of reconstituting the

tribe, and carried out an ambitious program of tribal nation building. After the passage of the 1983 constitution, the large-scale issuance of tribal membership cards, and the reestablishment of relations of citizenship that formally linked Choctaws to one another and to the reconstituted tribal government, then chief Hollis Roberts revised the narrative of Choctaw nationalism. To legitimize his leadership in the context of the tribe's re-instituted democratic electoral process, Roberts promoted a narrative of the rupture and rebirth of Choctaw nationhood. This narrative, which frames the tribe's reconstitution as a birth, dates its founding to 1983, and treats Roberts as the founding father, is one of many foundation stories that "conceal mixed origins" (Starn 1999: 67) and is a story that is discussed in some detail in chapter 4. This chapter, which describes and analyzes a tribal election that was won by Roberts and that took place during my research, is revealing not only of the content and character of this foundation story but also of its widespread public acceptance among Choctaws at the time of my fieldwork. After I had conducted my fieldwork, Roberts was imprisoned for sex crimes, and his assistant chief, Greg Pyle, became chief, a transformation that, among other things, prompted another revision of the narrative of Choctaw nationhood. In the context of widespread public condemnation of Roberts by Choctaws (and the circulation of rumors among the tribal citizenry that Roberts's victims had covered his portrait in the Choctaw tribal capitol), Choctaw chief Greg Pyle promoted a construction of Choctaw nationhood as timeless and leveled Roberts's stature as founding father.² Recent Choctaw history suggests, among other things, that the materials out of which leaders produce the ideas and icons that legitimize and express the nation are sufficiently flexible and polysemous that they can be selected, assembled, and deployed in different ways and with different meanings at different points in time. In addition, such deployments, as the Choctaw case shows, are not fixed, but are best understood as claims that are negotiated and renegotiated, institutionalized and reinstitutionalized, over time.

In addition to tracing the history of the tribe's late-twentieth-century rebuilding, I pursued an exploration of the social, political, and economic consequences of the new order. Analytically, I defined three sets of relations as key: the relations of citizenship that bind together enrolled Choctaws, the relations that formally link Choctaw citizens to the tribal government, and the relations of diplomacy that create interfaces between the tribal government, on the one hand, and the Oklahoma state and U.S.