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Review Essay

Exploring the Dynamics of Indian-Black Contact: A Review Essay

Susan A. Kenney

Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation. By Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 32. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977. 278 pp. \$15.95.

The Cherokee Freedmen: From Emancipation to American Citizenship. By Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 40. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978. 281 pp. \$18.95.

Africans and Creeks: From the Colonial Period to the Civil War. By Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 47. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979. 286 pp. \$22.50.

The Chickasaw Freedman: A People Without a Country. By Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr. Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, Number 54. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980. 248 pp. \$25.00.

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When the Great Spirit made man He took dust into His hand, mixed it, blew upon it, and there stood a white man. This sick and feeble being was not what the Great Spirit intended, and He was sorry. The Great Spirit began again and this time a black man stood before Him. He was more disappointed, for this man was black and ugly. On His third attempt, a red man appeared, and He was pleased. Saying that each must fulfill the duties to which they were suited, the Great Spirit offered boxes of tools necessary for their support. Although not His favorite, the white man was given first choice. Examining them all, the white man chose a box of pens, ink, paper, and all the things that white people use. The Great Spirit then told the black man that although he was the second-made, he could not have second choice. Turning to the red man, He smiled and said, "Come, my favorite, and make a choice." The red man chose a box of beaver traps, bows, arrows, and all the things used by Indians. Finally, the Great Spirit gave the black man the remaining box "full of hoes and axes—plainly showing that the black man was made to labor for both the white and the red man."¹

By defining the essence of each race's existence, this Seminole myth provides one example of how American Indians came to grips with a multiracial society. White and Black men in America challenged Indian cosmology and necessitated explanation. Indians had to gain some perspective to define the status of the different racial groups. This myth does precisely that. Both Whites and Blacks are perceived as mistakes, as less than human in the Great Spirit's scheme of the perfect man. The centrality of Seminole personhood is reasserted and the overall assessment reinforces their favored status as the people.

Unlike the Seminole, who emphasize interpersonal status in this account, historians discuss only the impersonal dimensions of the racial encounter. The Seminole asked *who* these strange outsiders might be, but until very recently the significance of their question largely escaped historical attention. Historians dealing with Indian-Black relations have concentrated on the institutional expressions of racial status. Usually, Indians and Blacks are viewed as passive victims of colonialism, slavery, and progress. Most studies concentrate on Indian reactions to white culture, especially in adopting Euroamerican forms of government and property, as though Indians had no concerns peculiar to themselves.²

While Indians had to develop means to deal with Black strangers among them, and the American model of chattel slavery was available, they were most concerned with preserving traditional

social order even in the midst of change. The range of meanings that Indians attached to slavery varied among tribal groups, places and times; for them, adaptation was very much an issue of personal status. Historians have long been aware, without understanding the implications, that intermarriage, alliance, and solidarity were choices that Indians and Blacks sometimes made. The penetrating *new* questions ask about the modifying effects of institutions and people's social behavior on each other. Indians and Blacks adapted slavery to meet their own purposes, and we need to see how social motives and institutional change were related.

Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr. has not written a social history of the Indian-Black experience. His concerns are about the institution of slavery (and the organizational void created by its abolition), rather than the social experimentation of Indian-Black relations. Littlefield's books are narrative histories interested in the political, economic, and legal techniques Indian people used to deal with slaves and freedmen. These are not culturally sensitive interpretations because they are little affected by the ethnohistorical developments of the last few decades. His characters often appear as one dimensional reactors set in the panorama of white dominated events. As a result, he focuses on the wranglings over Indians and Blacks that occur among white slaveholders, army officers, Indian agents, treaty commissioners and BIA officials rather than on Africans, Seminoles, Creeks, and Cherokee and Chickasaw freedmen we anticipate from his titles.

Littlefield does establish the importance of intertribal and intra-tribal variation in Indian reactions to slavery but he does not go beyond surface data. He shows that Black slavery among the Seminoles and the Creeks was quite different. In Florida, the Seminoles became so dependent on Blacks as skilled agriculturalists, English-speaking interpreters, and military allies, that a uniquely benign form of Black slavery evolved. Displaying a remarkable degree of independence, these bondsmen maintained separate towns and fields, owned livestock, carried guns, and acquired status as military and town leaders. Littlefield concludes that Seminole slavery was basically a moderate tributary system. He argues, to the contrary, that early Creek slavery did not duplicate Black servitude among the Seminoles mainly because they did not depend on Blacks as interpreters and military allies. The presence of many English-speaking mixed bloods and a different military situation precluded any need for alliance.³

These military and economic variations may be the result of more subtle social imperatives than Littlefield notes. Peter H. Wood's *Black Majority* ably demonstrates the wealth of information limited sources can produce when examined in innovative ways. His chapter on the impact of frontier conditions on the inter-relationship between Blacks and Whites in colonial South Carolina presents a set of questions Littlefield might have utilized to good effect. Wood argues that frontier conditions have a leveling effect on status. When there is little economic differentiation between master and slave in housing, clothing, and food, when both master and slave must perform physical labor to secure a subsistence livelihood, when masters and slaves arm themselves to protect livestock from wild animals and themselves from hostile enemies, the commonality of life rather than the artificiality of imposed status holds sway.⁴ Littlefield does not explore the many ways Indians and Blacks tested each others' humanity.

Wood examines frontier situations in which Whites aspired to accumulate and achieve wealth. Once visible marks of status emerged in the form of the big house, manufactured cloth, and imported foodstuffs, the rough equality of frontier days disappeared. Was this the progression for Creek, Choctaw, Cherokee and Chickasaw slave relations? The Seminoles, who through cultural bias or historical conditions, or both, never created an acquisitive economic system in pre-removal Florida. They did not have the wealth to create visible economic distinctions between themselves and their slaves. Given their different circumstances, it may be that the attitudes of slaveholding Creeks toward property, status, and power altered their daily contact with Blacks. Creek slavery resembles the social severity of the Southern white pattern in ways Seminole slavery never did.

The existence, degree and manifestation of racism among Indians is a fundamental issue, but Littlefield underestimates the psychological and social factors in the adaptation. He is not alone. Many studies think that laws index racism on a sliding scale: the more repressive the slave code, the more racist the society. Rudi Halliburton, for example, cites the comprehensive Cherokee slave code as strong evidence that they "may have exhibited the strongest color prejudice of any Indians."⁵ Unfortunately, he does not temper his analysis with the details of actual enforcement and practice. Mitigating factors such as kinship often tempered racist attitudes. Littlefield uses the same criteria when he asserts that racial prejudice

existed among the Creeks and became more pronounced in post removal days, especially among the Lower Creeks. He cites laws prohibiting intermarriage and inheritance rights of the offspring of Indian-Black unions but he also presents other, contradictory evidence. Littlefield notes an 1859 law that conferred citizenship on persons "of not more than half African blood, if their mother were Creek."⁶ Apparently, the Creeks did not completely abandon the old matrilineal kinship rules despite racial prejudice. Personal status and acceptance as one of the "people" traditionally depended on clan membership. An examination of clan influence over Indian-Black offspring could offer insights about the impact of Black slavery on core values.

The role of traditional values in mediating Indian attitudes about Blacks is obscured by Littlefield's acceptance of a distorted interpretation of the relationship. William G. McLoughlin argues that Indians could avoid "total degradation" only by maintaining themselves in a position above Blacks.⁷ McLoughlin's argument places the Indian in a position between Whites and Blacks reminiscent of the traditional interpretation of racism among poor Southern Whites. Submerged economically, poor Whites redeemed self-respect by evaluating status on a racial scale.⁸ In McLoughlin's view, the technologically inferior Indian acknowledged powerlessness vis-a-vis Whites, but bolstered self-respect by creating an even more powerless category defining Blacks at the bottom. McLoughlin, and Littlefield, assess power and status in terms of White values rather than Indian realities.

It is doubtful that slavery and racism touched all southeastern Indian societies in such a fundamental way. Littlefield himself documents that less than two per cent of the Creeks owned any slaves in 1860. Theda Perdue, in her study of Cherokee slavery, puts the number of slaveowning families at less than eight per cent in the same year. At that date, slightly over one-fourth of Southern White families held slaves.⁹ Non-slaveholding Indians were in the vast majority in these tribes, and they may not have been aspiring capitalists seeking wealth and status through slave ownership.

Variations in the practice of slavery within a particular tribe provide a yardstick with which to measure degrees of acculturation. Littlefield and Perdue prove that the majority of Creek and Cherokee slaveholders were mixed bloods, active in their centralized national tribal governments. Realizing the need for police power and effective government to maintain order in a chattel slave soci-

ety, these men gradually introduced a slave code whose restrictions became more severe.¹⁰ But major discrepancies occurred between these laws and their enforcement at the local level by individuals. There was much leeway in regards to permitting slaves access to Christian instruction, the bearing of arms, cohabitation with Indians, and ownership of property.¹¹

Littlefield suggests the significance of regional variations within tribal groups as one factor affecting rates of cultural adaptation. He tells us that the Lower Creeks were more interested in Black repression. Among the Upper Creeks, where old subsistence patterns persisted, fewer slaves were held, and intermarriage was more common. The Lower Creeks, who quickly dispersed to individual farms, felt a need to control their labor force.¹² Littlefield notes these variations in law and practice but then emphasizes the most thoroughly acculturated individuals who are the most articulate and visible in the sources. In the process, we learn little about the non-slaveholding Indians' reactions.

How Indians internalized the political and economic changes adopted with slavery is a crucial issue. We need to know how the institution, and its related economic and police structures, interacted with the traditional value system with its emphasis on reciprocity and harmony. Slave labor helped spur a rising economic individualism. Valuable housing and improvements visibly manifested social distinctions and impersonal status rankings. Evidence points to a more rapid dispersal of communal settlements in areas with larger slave populations. Did these scattered farms alter the old social controls which maintained harmony by talk and example? Did authority of the old over the young decrease as new criteria for status emerged? What effect did slave labor have on female status when they no longer were the main agricultural producers? The social impact of a market economy, chattel slavery, and new technology created basic social relationships which were not Indian in nature. The crux of the historical problem is not simply a question of recognizing change, but exploring the way such change affected value systems and social behavior.

In short, Littlefield has not availed himself of recent advances in the art of ethnohistorical research. If he had utilized techniques of cultural analysis explored in recent Afro-American and American Indian studies, his books would have been tremendously improved. Studies of Black American history have moved from a preoccupation with the institutional dimensions of slavery and segregation

towards a fuller analysis of the attitudes, strategies, and self-consciousness that forged a unique Black identity. The questions these studies generate provide a needed focus for reconstructing the Black experience among Indian groups, a level of analysis which is still unexplored.

Afro-Americanists show us that Black resistance manifested itself many ways, extending from the subtle nuances of naming patterns, through a range of non-violent actions including work slowdowns, feigning illness, theft, and running away, to more overt and violent acts such as arson, property destruction, and insurrection.¹³ Recent studies of Black community formation also stress the centrality of kinship ties and religion. Family structure offers us one level at which to assess the nature of support networks.¹⁴ These were probably much different for Seminole Blacks living in separate, unified towns than for Creek and Cherokee Blacks who were scattered among masters who rarely held as many as twenty slaves. Spiritual orientations that helped slaves and freedmen make sense of their lives can explain much about Black identity and self-esteem.¹⁵ Littlefield comments on the presence of Black preachers.¹⁶ Did they express the Pauline idea of obedience, or the Old Testament themes of exodus and weakness overcoming strength? An assessment of Black participation in Indian ceremonies and religious practices would also suggest the extent to which Blacks were Indianized.

These questions are simply suggestive. Only the surface characteristics of Indian-Black relations have been explored to date. The appearance of books by Littlefield, Perdue, and Halliburton in the last five years point to a renewed interest in the field, and a recognition of the influence of distinct tribal traditions and experience on race relations. Littlefield claims that the limited nature of his sources precludes a more detailed analysis of the personal dimensions of Indian-Black interaction.¹⁷ In fact, his failure to ask culturally significant questions is more limiting than his sources. Theda Perdue's work demonstrates that the personal dynamics of the contact situation can be reconstructed from the types of materials Littlefield found culturally barren. She asks how values influenced Cherokee perceptions of Blacks, and recognizes that changes in slave institutions also affected their values. Obviously, much work remains to be done.

NOTES

1. This is a summation of a myth attributed to the Seminole Chief Nea-Mathla in 1825 reprinted in William G. McLoughlin, "Red Indians, Black Slavery and White Racism: America's Slaveholding Indians," *American Quarterly* 26 (October 1974): 384-85.

2. The most important studies on Indian-Black relations are Annie Heloise Abel, *The Slaveholding Indians*, 3 vols. (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1919, 1925); Laurence Foster, *Negro Indian Relationships in the Southeast* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1935); and a series of articles by Kenneth M. Porter appearing in the *Journal of Negro History* between 1932 and 1948, and conveniently reprinted in *The Negro on the American Frontier*, edited by William Loren Katz (New York: Arno Press and New York Times, 1971).

3. Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *Africans and Creeks* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1979), pp. 26-51.

4. Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1974), pp. 95-130.

5. R. Halliburton, Jr., *Red Over Black* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), p. 142.

6. Littlefield, *Africans and Creeks*, pp. 85, 145.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 146; McLoughlin, "Red Indians, Black Slavery and White Racism", esp. pp. 378-79. McLoughlin's article responds to an earlier argument about white influence on Indian racial prejudice by William S. Willis, "Divide and Rule: Red, White, and Black in the Southeast," *Journal of Negro History* 48 (July 1963): 157-76.

8. See Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), pp. 293-387, for an analysis of the causes and ramifications of this racial, rather than class, orientation.

9. Littlefield, *Africans and Creeks*, p. 255; Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979), p. 158, n. 25.

10. Littlefield, *Africans and Creeks*, pp. 143, 233, 235; Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society*, pp. 56-57; Douglas C. Wilms, "Cherokee Indian Land Use in Georgia, 1800-1838" (Ph.D. diss., University of Georgia, 1974), p. 18.

11. Littlefield, *Africans and Creeks*, pp. 151, 154; Littlefield, *Africans and Seminoles* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1977), pp. 130, 140-41.

12. Littlefield, *Africans and Creeks*, pp. 37, 84-85, 136; Littlefield, *The Chickasaw Freedmen* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), p. 16; Wilms, "Cherokee Indian Land Use," chapter 4, provides an assessment of internal variation among the Cherokee.

13. Kenneth M. Stampp, *The Peculiar Institution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), esp. pp. 86-140; Wood, *Black Majority*; Eugene D. Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972).

14. Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976); Allan Kulikoff, "The Beginnings of the Afro-American Family in Maryland," in *The American Family in Social-Historical Perspective*, ed., Michael Gordon (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978); John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 77-103; Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 443-534.

15. Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977); Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, pp. 159-284.

16. Daniel F. Littlefield, Jr., *The Cherokee Freedmen* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1978), pp. 58-61 and Littlefield, *The Chickasaw Freedman*, pp. 89-92, describe the importance of Christian churches as social outlets. For an examination of the efforts of the African Methodist Episcopal Church to provide educational opportunities for Chickasaw Blacks, see Littlefield, *The Chickasaw Freedmen*, pp. 112-34.

17. *Ibid.*, xii.