

Of One Mind and Of One Government: The Rise and Fall of the Creek Nation in the Early Republic

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Review

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Kokomoor, Kevin. *Of One Mind and Of One Government: The Rise and Fall of the Creek Nation in the Early Republic.* University of Nebraska Press, 2019 \$80.00 ISBN 9780803295872

In his first book, *Of One Mind and Of One Government: The Rise and Fall of the Creek Nation in the Early Republic*, historian Kevin Kokomoor examines the development of a Creek “nation” between the outset of the American Revolution and the War of 1812. His central argument is that the crisis of U.S. expansion spawned a Creek “nation-state” (19). The administrative unit of this polity was the National Council, which oversaw Creek domestic affairs with “coercive legal authority” (19). In his view, the Creek nation-state represented a departure from long-established “cultural and political traditions,” such as community leadership, local decision-making, and the custom of clan retaliation (19). These traditions had favored clan and town autonomy and were “supposed to bind communities together as a people” (20).

Customs anchored in localism, however, proved “weak and ineffectual” against state and federal authorities’ incessant demands that Creek headmen pay debts, police hunters, punish wrongdoers, and ultimately cede land to the State of Georgia (20). As a result, Creeks invested in the nation-state, a framework of governance that relies on coercion to build unity and enforce law among peoples sharing common interests. As Kokomoor explains convincingly, the Creek nation-state embodied Creek attempts to maintain peace with the Americans, on one hand, and remain on ancestral lands, on the other hand. Sensitive to Native agency, moreover, he contends that Creeks reinvented their political system “largely on their own cultural and political terms” (27, 28).

Based on careful research in British, U.S., and Spanish records, Kokomoor identifies the “internal and external threats” that shaped American Indian livelihood and, in particular, spurred Creek Indian nation-building in the post-revolutionary era (19). While some like Steven Hahn

trace the genesis of a Creek nation to British expansion in the colonial era, Kokomoor positions the “long Revolutionary era [as] a place of equal importance” in Creek nationalization (19). Like their federal counterparts to the east, Creek leaders constructed a nation-state, one that “searched for” security and stability between Creeks and land-hungry settlers (21). In the end, the Creek Nation was “a truly revolutionary experiment in political modernization” for American Indians in eighteenth-century eastern North America (34).

Kokomoor is right to suggest that the scholarship on modernity and the nation-state typically involves peoples of European descent in the Atlantic World. In placing Indians on par with whites, he excavates the active and creative ways in which Native peoples adopted the tools of nation-building to preserve land and champion sovereignty. Creeks sought a “political nationalism” that encompassed “hierarchical government structures,” “a land policy,” and “even a fiscal policy” (23, 25). “These institutions,” Kokomoor contends, “are consistent with state formation in even the most conventional Western European traditions” (25).

Of One Mind and Of One Government is divided into three parts. In Part One, “The End of Creek Country,” Kokomoor describes how the American Revolution generated support in Creek country for a nation-state. While some Creeks became “American partisans” who cultivated ties with rebel Georgia, many others maintained a trading alliance with Britain and called for greater unity to reinforce Anglo-Creek ties (69). Like Joshua Haynes’s recent study of the Creek-Georgia frontier, Kokomoor shows how the *métis* headman of Little Tallassee, Alexander McGillivray, postured as a national leader and sought a “cohesive Creek voice” among headmen and commoners (81). Kokomoor covers familiar ground, though, as he tracks McGillivray’s impact on Creek politics in the 1780s and early 1790s. For the common plot points of McGillivray’s career, one should look to Kathleen DuVal’s *Independence Lost* (2015) or the older but still relevant works from John W. Caughey, Michael D. Green, William S. Coker, and Thomas D. Watson. Still, Kokomoor reminds historians that in the absence of crisis, Creeks retreated to the “individual interests and political partisanship” that typified Creek politics earlier in the century (135).

Kokomoor develops his analysis of the fluctuation between Creek unity and division in Part Two, “Building a Creek Nation.” The three chapters in this section are the heart of the book. Here, he recovers evidence illustrating the ways in which Upper and Lower Creek headmen engineered a National Council that “consolidated jurisdiction in the hands of a new

administrative and coercive entity” (215). In several cases, this body curbed horse theft, flogged wrongdoers, and executed warriors for killing whites; as well, it expelled American traders who abused their position and created tensions with Creek hunters. According to the tenets of nation-building and U.S.-Creek peace, town leaders “were now required to oversee an institutionalized system of corporal punishment” (247). Like Claudio Saunt in *New Order of Things* (1999), Kokomoor argues that “coercive, disciplinary authority” supplanted “mediation” and “persuasion” formerly associated with community leadership (247). Yet the Council’s strong-armed measures helped stabilize U.S.-Creek relations and proved that Creeks could adhere to what federal officials, such as Agent James Seagrove, called “good neighborhood” (183, 196).

In Part Three, “The Fate of the Creek Nation,” Kokomoor narrates the origin and duration of the Creek War of 1813-1814. Although he rehearses the scholarship on this cataclysmic event, he nonetheless conducts a careful examination of U.S. Agent Benjamin Hawkins’ correspondence with state and federal authorities. From that analysis emerges the “turbulent undercurrents of anger” harbored by Creeks towards the National Council (338). Following a rash of unpopular executions, which stripped clans of their traditional right of punishment, civil war erupted between the Red Sticks and the Council. As the Red Sticks smashed the Council’s legitimacy, southern states seized the opportunity to invade Creek country. State as well as federal soldiers leveled towns, killed hundreds, and produced famine among survivors. Regrettably, the “Creek Nation after 1815 was a shadow of its former self” (387).

In *Of One Mind and Of One Government*, Kokomoor has advanced the scholarship on Creek Indian history and the history of indigenous nationalism in remarkable ways, especially by drawing parallels between the U.S. nation-state in its infancy and a fledgling Creek one. Still, this author is not convinced that a Creek nation-state came to fruition in the Early Republic. Kokomoor hedges the argument in most chapters, pointing up numerous examples of community leaders, warriors, and other individuals who defied the National Council and hewed to localist business as usual. It is not clear, for example, whether the Council had become “a legitimate political entity” by the early 1800s, when Lower Creeks and some Upper Creeks ignored Council decisions or when Cusseta warriors assassinated Hopoie Mico (also known as Singer) of Hickory Ground, a Council Speaker alleged to have been the most influential headman in the nation at the time (288). As Kokomoor points out, however, just “because the National Council ... did not

work for everyone ... or because not every Creek completely trusted it does not make the Creek Nation fictional—it makes it even more real” (33).

Overall, Kokomoor presents a fine synthesis of Creek political history during a transformative era in the American South. His evidence and argument will provoke thoughtful debate among scholars of the Southern Indians and indigenous political history in the coming years. Furthermore, this book would make for useful reading in graduate seminars, including American Indian history, the Early Republic, historical methods, and a political science course that emphasizes non-Western perspectives.

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