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Royal St. George's College

# The Young Researcher

2017 Volume 1 | Issue 1

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#### Recommended Citation

Goodin, M. (2017). Language revitalization and historical trauma: A historical analysis of the Chickasaw and Chikashshanompa'. *The Young Researcher*, 1(1), 5-15. Retrieved from <http://www.theyoungresearcher.com/papers/goodin.pdf>

ISSN: 2560-9815 (Print) 2560-9823 (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.theyoungresearcher.com>

# Language Revitalization and Historical Trauma: A Historical Analysis of the Chickasaw and Chikashshanompa'

Margaret Goodin

The Chickasaw experienced many difficulties that hampered their ability to survive as a culturally significant group of people. This paper seeks to examine the connection the Chickasaw have with their unique language and how this strong connection allowed for them to begin a revitalization process to overcome culture destroying hardships. A historical analysis provides a lens for examining the impact of Indian Removal and the boarding school era on the Chickasaw. This research illustrates that resilience and pride for their culture allowed for the language revitalization process to begin. Through this process the Chickasaw have maintained a vibrant culture. However, this research only touches on one aspect of cultural survival. To fully understand this issue it is advisable to analyze other cultural traits that have remained significant despite the historical trauma endured by the tribe.

*Keywords:* language, Chickasaw, Indian Removal, revitalization, historical trauma, survivance.

## Introduction

The loss of language and its impact on culture was one of the most critical of the many trials and tribulations experienced by Native American tribes in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. However, many tribes have overcome the difficulties that hindered their continuance. The story of the Chickasaw is one of great sorrow and loss, but also great pride in their heritage and strength as a Nation. This story is passed down from elders to the younger members of the tribe through their traditional language. The language, despite its importance, encountered unforeseen challenges that threatened its existence. This paper serves to highlight how interactions with the federal government would result in many negative implications for the tribe. Additionally, this paper attempts to analyze how the Chickasaw were able to maintain and revitalize their language despite the overwhelming push to rid

the Chickasaw Nation of their tribal characteristics. Because the United States was developing a primarily Eurocentric culture, the culture of Native peoples was frowned upon. Nevertheless, the ongoing spirit of Chickasaw pride has allowed for the continuance of their culture. For many reasons, the Chickasaw Nation was able to remain culturally significant and maintain their unique language through their strong sense of resilience in order to continue the traditions of their ancestors.

## Background

The Chickasaw Nation is one of the Five Civilized Tribes, which include the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Seminole, and Creek. Although the Chickasaw is the smallest tribe within this group, they are a thriving tribe that once occupied areas of Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and even small parts of

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Kentucky.<sup>1</sup> However, much of the research shows that the center of this civilization was primarily in Mississippi. Similar to many other tribes in the United States, Chickasaw men were hunters and protected the tribe from harm while the women took care of things around the home and tended to the gardens.<sup>2</sup>

The Chickasaw had lived in the Mississippi Valley area for many years before they came in contact with European settlers as early as the 16th century when the Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto came to explore the Mississippi Valley.<sup>3</sup> After the unconquerable Chickasaw had driven out the Spanish explorers they came in contact with new Europeans. A number of studies have shown that when the French and the English came to the Chickasaw homeland disputes arose between the Chickasaw, who allied with the English, and the Choctaw, who allied with the French.<sup>4</sup> The hostility that developed between the two allied forces ultimately erupted into attacks on the Chickasaw by the French and the Choctaw. The Chickasaw were able to defend themselves against the French and Choctaw alliance due to the large amount of firepower that was given to them by their English allies.<sup>5</sup> Despite the numerous raids on the Chickasaw Nation, they remained unscathed and “unconquered.”<sup>6</sup> The sense of unity and pride resulting from defending their tribe marks the resilience of the Chickasaw, which is a major theme discussed later on in this paper.

Pertinent to the research surrounding Native Americans is the relationship that they developed not only with the European invaders, but also their relationship with the federal government after the formation of the United States. The federal government and Native American tribes developed a hostile attitude

towards one another that had detrimental consequences for Native peoples that have continued into the present. This hostile environment was caused by the large “cultural gap between the two groups [that] was too wide to inspire confidence and trust.”<sup>7</sup> Basically, Native peoples and the federal government had competing ideas on what they needed and wanted. The United States, at this point, was predominantly white and Christian and perceived itself to be civilized compared to Native Americans who were seen as savage and uncivilized peoples. Because of this, the federal government wanted to acculturate and assimilate Native peoples into American culture. This marked a major shift in the way of life of the tribes considering that the federal government would implement policies causing a great deal of harm to them in the years to come. Central to the implementation of policies that were aimed at erasing Native Americans was the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which is discussed in more detail throughout this paper.

### Historical Trauma

The policies imposed on Native American tribes manifested into the historical trauma that affected them in many negative ways. Historical trauma can be described as the “cumulative emotional and psychological wounding, over the lifespan and across generations, emanating from massive group trauma experiences.”<sup>8</sup> This definition is a crucial idea that is mentioned throughout the scholarly conversation surrounding Native American tribes and what they have endured. The Chickasaw experienced a great deal of historical trauma beginning with their relocation to

1 Brady Davis, Joseph Smith, and Brad R. Lieb. “Chisha’ Tállá’á’ and the Chickasaw Preserve.” *The Journal of Chickasaw History and Culture* 17, no. 1 (Spring, 2015): 30-41.

2 Monte Ross Lewis. “Chickasaw Removal: Betrayal Of The Beloved Warriors, 1794-1844.” Order No. 8208103, University of North Texas, 1981.

3 Ibid. 5.

4 Lewis, “Chickasaw Removal: Betrayal Of The Beloved Warriors, 1794-1844,” 5. Wendy St. Jean. “Trading Paths: Mapping Chickasaw History in the Eighteenth Century.” *American Indian Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (Summer, 2003): 758-780.

5 St. Jean., “Trading Paths: Mapping Chickasaw History in the Eighteenth Century,” 761.

6 Lewis, “Chickasaw Removal: Betrayal Of The Beloved Warriors, 1794-1844,” 6.

7 Vine Deloria Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle. *American Indians, American Justice* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 6.

8 Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart. “The Historical Trauma Response among Natives and Its Relationship with Substance Abuse,” *Journal of Psychoactive Drugs* 35, no. 1 (2003): 7.

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Indian Territory. Removal was a crucial component of the historical trauma experienced by the Chickasaw because they were being separated from the land their creator “granted them for their preservation and use.”<sup>9</sup> Another experience contributing to the trauma the tribe endured were the attacks on their language and identity. The Dawes Act 1887 called for the allotment of tribal lands in Indian Territory.<sup>10</sup> This policy required the creation of tribal rolls and, because the Dawes Commission was in charge of these tribal rolls, the Chickasaw “lost one of their most basic rights--the right to decide their own membership.”<sup>11</sup> Because this system was based on the amount of “Indian blood” one possessed, it became evident that the Chickasaw people were being judged based upon “how Chickasaw a person was.”<sup>12</sup> This set a precedent for non-Native people to judge the ethnic identity of Native peoples. Other attacks on the Chickasaw culture included the desire to get rid of the language the Chickasaw spoke to continue to force assimilation so they would fit into the predominantly European culture.

### Indian Removal

As noted previously, one of the biggest attacks on Chickasaw culture occurred in 1830 when the Chickasaw Indians, along with other tribes occupying lands east of the Mississippi, were subjected to the terms of the Indian Removal Act, which was implemented by President Andrew Jackson.<sup>13</sup> This Act called for the removal of all the tribes that occupied lands east of the Mississippi so that the land could be settled by European colonizers. The tribes would be moved to western lands that had been obtained by the United States with the Louisiana Purchase in the early 1800s.

This transfer to new lands caused a great deal of harm to tribes that occupied those lands. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 stated that:

it shall and may be lawful for the President of the United States to cause so much of any territory belonging to the United States, west of the river Mississippi...to which the Indian title has been extinguished...to be divided into a suitable number of districts, for the reception of such tribes or nations of Indians as may choose to exchange the lands where they now reside, and remove there.<sup>14</sup>

Importantly, the Act never directly stated that forced removal of Native American tribes was lawful, meaning that the forced removal of the tribes can be seen as an “abuse of presidential power”<sup>15</sup> on Andrew Jackson’s part. As a result of this abuse of power, the Chickasaw, as well as other tribes that occupied land in this area, experienced a great deal of loss that would result in a downward spiral for their culture.

It is important to note, however, that the Chickasaw removal did not occur right when the Indian Removal Act was enacted. It was not until the Treaty of Pontotoc in 1832 that the Chickasaw officially ceded all of their lands to the federal government.<sup>16</sup> The reason for the delay in the removal of the Chickasaw was because they had no desire to leave behind lands that meant so much to them culturally and spiritually.<sup>17</sup> Many Native American tribes have strong connections with the lands they occupy because they have sacred value. This value derives from the idea that the Chickasaw were put in the places they were for a reason as defined within their creation stories. Because the land contributed to a major part of Chickasaw culture, their separation

9 Blue Clark. “Chickasaw Colonization in Oklahoma.” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 54 (1976): 44-59. Accessed November 13, 2016: 49.

10 “Dawes Act (1887).” [www.ourdocuments.gov](http://www.ourdocuments.gov). November 27, 2015.

11 Amanda J. Cobb. *Listening to Our Grandmothers’ Stories: The Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females, 1852-1949* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 69.

12 *Ibid.*, 71.

13 Kari A. B. Chew. “Family at the Heart of Chickasaw Language Reclamation.” *The American Indian Quarterly* 39, no. 2 (04, 2015): 154.

14 “Indian Removal Act: Primary Documents of American History.” Library of Congress. Accessed Dec. 6, 2016

15 Alfred A. Cave. “Abuse of Power: Andrew Jackson and the Indian Removal Act of 1830.” *The Historian* 65, no. 6 (2003): 1330-1353. Accessed November 13, 2016: 1332.

16 Jon T. Kilpinen. “The Supreme Court’s Role in Choctaw and Chickasaw Dispossession\*.” *Geographical Review* 94, no. 4 (10, 2004): 484-501.

17 Clark, “Chickasaw Colonization in Oklahoma,” 49.

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from this land was a critical blow to their physical and emotional survivance. Cultural survivance, as it is used here, can be defined as “moving beyond basic survival in the face of overwhelming cultural genocide” to promote revitalization of a culture.<sup>18</sup> This term was developed by Gerald Vizenor in 1999 to characterize the way indigenous peoples struggled to persevere amidst the push toward a predominantly white culture under colonialism.<sup>19</sup>

Another reason for the Chickasaw wanting to stay where they were was due to not having been offered land of sufficient value to justify leaving their homeland. Nevertheless, they agreed to do so when they were offered the western portion of the land that the Choctaw lived on in Indian Territory or in what is now present day Oklahoma.<sup>20</sup> The Chickasaw relocated to Indian Territory in 1837 in a trek that was known as the “Chickasaw Trail of Tears.”<sup>21</sup> Because of the trauma that removal imposed on the Chickasaw, small parts of their culture began to dissipate as they lost ties to parts of their traditional culture that had defined them as unique peoples for so many years. Once the Chickasaw tribe arrived in Oklahoma they encountered unforeseen difficulties that continued the harm caused by removal. As indicated previously, these difficulties included encountering resistance to their language and their way of life.

### Boarding Schools and Language

An issue of great importance when studying the Chickasaw is looking into the boarding school era and its effect on the tribe. When the Chickasaw arrived in Indian Territory they created their own boarding schools. One such school was known as the Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Women, which was run by the Chickasaws with the help of mis-

sionaries.<sup>22</sup> Tribal control of the school represented an extreme act of “self-determination” despite living in an era when the federal government had been attempting to rid the United States of Native American cultures while also “threatening their sovereignty.”<sup>23</sup> The notion of Chickasaws running their own schools illustrates how they were trying to better themselves because they knew that being literate would not only make living in Indian Territory much easier but would also help with their survival as a unique group within the United States.<sup>24</sup> Despite this attempt by the Chickasaw to make living in Indian Territory easier, they faced much greater problems as the federal government continued the push toward erasing Native American culture by taking over their schools. This culminated in a direct attack on the Chickasaw language resulting in a huge cultural shift.

The cultural shift was due to the Chickasaw language (Chikashshanompa<sup>25</sup>) being seen as a detriment to the survival of the tribe in Indian Territory by both the Chickasaw and the federal government. After struggling with financial disparities, the Chickasaw-run boarding school was taken over by Protestant missionaries who promoted the idea that “English was superior to Indigenous languages.”<sup>25</sup> As mentioned previously, this was one of the biggest hardships that the Chickasaw encountered in Indian Territory. Importantly, forbidding the use of indigenous languages is a critical facet of acculturation and assimilation because of the role it plays in cultural erasure. The damaging effects of not being able to speak their traditional language at school or at home are clearly illustrated in the following personal accounts from members of the Chickasaw tribe. One example is from an elder who stated “[w]hen I was young I wasn’t allowed to speak the Chickasaw language even in my own home. That was forbidden. When

18 Chew. “Family at the Heart of Chickasaw Language Reclamation,” 161.

19 Gerald Robert Vizenor. *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*. Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994.

20 John Michael Paul. “Collective and Collected Memories: The Construction and Maintenance of Chickasaw Identity.” Order No. 3094071, Oklahoma State University, 2003.

21 Christopher John Aducci. “Itti’at Akka’ Wáyya’Ahookya Ikkobaffo (Trees Bend, but Don’t Break): Chickasaw Family Stories of Historical Trauma and Resilience Across the Generations.” Order No. 3567217, Kansas State University, 2013.

22 Cobb. *Listening to Our Grandmothers’ Stories*, 52.

23 Kari A. B. Chew. “Chikashshanompa’ Ilanompola’chi.” *The Journal of Chickasaw History and Culture* (Fall, 2014): 26-29: 29.

24 Cobb. *Listening to Our Grandmothers’ Stories*, 6.

25 Chew. “Family at the Heart of Chickasaw Language Reclamation,” 242.

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you went to school you [were] forbidden to speak any other language beside English.”<sup>26</sup> Another elder expressed a similar sentiment explaining that “[y]ou had to speak English. They really tried to lose it. Even though we were an Indian school, they tried their best to get rid of all the Indian aspects. They were trying to modernize us.”<sup>27</sup>

The belief in the superiority of English over traditional tribal languages was not the only reason for the Chickasaw language falling out of popularity among the Nation’s people. A recurring theme throughout the literature expressed how learning English would make the members of the tribe better off politically, economically, and socially.<sup>28</sup> This idea spread throughout much of the tribe causing many members to become bilingual, which severely disrupted the passing down of Chikashshanompa’ while also making many Chickasaw children English speakers only.<sup>29</sup> Another reason the Chickasaw lost control of their boarding schools was the desire of white settlers to exert influence over all areas of Native life that they possibly could. This occurred as the federal government continued to promote policies that completely took away Indian lands so settlers could move onto those lands once occupied by tribes.

This push came in full force in 1898 with the passage of the Curtis Act, which sought to bring tribal governments to an end.<sup>30</sup> In 1906 the Chickasaw lost complete control of their boarding schools and finally realized they were fighting “a battle they had no hope of winning.”<sup>31</sup> Once tribal governments had been eliminated and boarding schools were controlled by missionaries and the federal government, full assimilation and acculturation seemed imminent. The fact that some boarding schools, such as the Carlisle

Indian Boarding school, adopted the mantra “kill the Indian, save the man”<sup>32</sup> speaks to this issue. This continued to cultivate the idea that Native Americans were inferior to the white population while also explaining why the European society sought to destroy everything Native Americans had built as culturally significant bodies of people. Hence, a common theme acknowledged among many researchers examining the boarding school era is that the federally-run boarding schools represented the creation and maintenance of a “white supremacist settler society.”<sup>33</sup> This form of Eurocentric society continues to cause difficulties for Native Americans and hampers their ability to survive even today.

## Method

In order to gain a better understanding of how the Chickasaw were able to maintain a unique culture despite their trauma, conducting a historical analysis of the tribe was crucial. Choosing an aspect of the Chickasaw culture in which there was continuity and maintenance was important for my research and, ultimately, lead me to research surrounding the Chickasaw language.

A similar study was conducted by Dr. Amanda Cobb<sup>34</sup> who looked at the boarding school era. Specifically, she looked at the Bloomfield Academy for Chickasaw Females and compiled stories from the women who attended while also discussing what happened historically. Cobb’s study was a good model because it used historical analysis as well as providing information useful for my own research. Overall, her study gave my study a starting point and provided

26 Aducci. “Itti’at Akka’ WáyyaAhookya Ikkobaffo (Trees Bend, but Don’t Break), 66.

27 Ibid, 66.

28 Chew. “Chikashshanompa’ Ilanompoláchi.” Jenny L. Davis. “Language Affiliation and Ethnolinguistic Identity in Chickasaw Language Revitalization.” *Language & Communication* 47, (03, 2016): 100. Ivan Camille Ozbolt. *Community Perspectives, Language Ideologies, and Learner Motivation in Chickasaw Language Programs*. PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 2014.

29 Davis. “Chisha’ Tállá’a’ and the Chickasaw Preserve.”, 102.

30 Cobb. *Listening to Our Grandmothers’ Stories*, 115.

31 Cobb. *Listening to Our Grandmothers’ Stories*, 67.

32 Lindsay Peterson. “Kill the Indian, Save the Man,” *Americanization through Education: Richard Henry Pratt’s Legacy*. Master’s thesis, Colby College, 2013. 1-104: 86.

33 Michelle Malathi Iyengar. “Not Mere Abstractions: Language Policies and Language Ideologies in U.S. Settler Colonialism.” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 3, no. 2, 33-59. Accessed November 6, 2016: 36.

34 Cobb. *Listening to Our Grandmothers’ Stories*

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direction for determining what sources I would need to answer my research question pertaining to the significance of language to Chickasaw survivance.

Considering the fact that my research was qualitative, it was imperative for me to gather primary documents that would help shape my research. For the purposes of my study, this meant looking into the Indian Removal Act of 1830, which allowed me to understand when the issue with the loss of Chickasaw culture first arose. I also spent time looking through other treaties and acts, such as the Curtis Act and the Dawes Act.<sup>35</sup> In addition to consulting these primary documents, I looked through firsthand accounts of members of the Chickasaw Nation who spoke the Chickasaw language or had been around other people who spoke the language. These accounts were an integral part of my research for several reasons. They allowed me to understand not only the historical context surrounding the loss of language and its impact on culture, but also how members of the tribe felt about revitalizing their language to assure the persistence of their culture. Such a focus was crucial for my research since it provided a unique perspective that could not be found in secondary sources with their broader analysis of the historical situation surrounding the Chickasaw.

After gathering several sources that analyzed firsthand accounts, I examined sources that analyzed historical trauma and the boarding school era. This allowed me to connect the firsthand accounts with the bulk of the research on my topic. The purpose of my study was to continue the larger discussion on the Chickasaw and their culture and explain *how* they were able to maintain such a unique language and preserve their culture despite the attacks and trauma imposed on them.

Sources critical to this research were accessed using tools from Norman High School and the University of Oklahoma. The information was important in elucidating the relationship that the Chickasaw Nation developed with Europeans and the federal government and how interactions impacted Chickasaw culture. Most of my primary documents came from academic search engines, such as EBSCO and

ProQuest, as well as books that were gathered from the Western History Collection at the University. Usage of databases, such as EBSCO and ProQuest, allowed for scholarly peer-reviewed information to be collected with great ease. Because my research was historical, it was inevitable that there would be some amount of bias present within the research. However, the use of academic search engines allowed for the collection of sources that looked at my topic from multiple perspectives, which provided some balance albeit not eliminating bias altogether. Bias was very important to recognize because historical research often comes from a western perspective, thus sources that offer dissenting opinions, including Native voices, are needed to create a broader understanding of cultural survivance.

## Discussion

The concept of cultural survivance is not unique to the Chickasaw. Rather, it is a recurring theme throughout many Native American tribes. The Chickasaw Nation is one of many tribes that exhibit the traits of cultural survivance in a country where their culture was deemed unacceptable and frowned upon by many. But even in the face of Indian Removal and the boarding school era, the Chickasaw have maintained a unique culture that was aided by the revitalization of their language and the creation of programs to help it grow. The majority of the research supports the claim that the Chickasaw have a unique culture today, but there is a lack of information regarding how this maintenance took place during a shift toward a white settler society.

Recall that cultural survivance means more than surviving; rather it speaks to overcoming issues such as forced acculturation and assimilation in order to preserve and revitalize a culture.<sup>36</sup> This is relevant when discussing the Chickasaw because, before being uprooted and moved to Indian Territory, they defined themselves as “fierce defenders of their homeland” and believed that they were “unconquered peoples.”<sup>37</sup> This idea illustrates the massive amount of resilience

35 “Dawes Act (1887).” Cobb. *Listening to Our Grandmothers’ Stories*. 115.

36 See note 18 referring to cultural survivance as defined by Gerald Vizenor.

37 *St. Jean Remaining Chickasaw in Indian Territory*, 1.

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that is present among the Chickasaw people. Defending their culture and revitalizing their language shows how the Chickasaw were able to maintain their culture. Though resilience has been a common theme throughout much of the research, the connection between it and the ability of the Chickasaw to revitalize their unique language has not been made. But in order to understand how the Chickasaw were able to revitalize their language against daunting odds, this connection must be made.

Because of the trauma that was forced upon the Chickasaw Nation by Indian Removal and the boarding school era, the disappearance of culture became a threat that loomed above them. However, despite the threat of disappearance, the Chickasaw exerted a strong sense of pride and familial strength in order to move past the detrimental effects of the aforementioned issues. There have been many studies conducted that serve to analyze the state of the Chickasaw culture. One such study involved interviews of members of the Chickasaw Nation who said that despite the attacks made by “mainstream U.S. culture” that were intended to wreak havoc on their tribe, their “pride in their heritage” has not diminished.<sup>38</sup> Pride in their culture is not something that is entirely unique to the Chickasaw, much like the concept of cultural survivance is not unique to them. However, the significance of their resilience and pride does not stem from its uniqueness. Rather it is highlighted by the fact that despite their experiences, they have maintained a bustling culture and made it known that their people have been here for generations and they are going to continue to uphold the values of their traditional culture.<sup>39</sup> They have remained a culturally significant body through their resilience and resistance against the white culture being thrust upon them.

The resilient nature of the Chickasaw goes hand and hand with their identity and how they choose to define themselves and their culture. Their culture stems primarily from their unique language,

Chikashshanompa'. As mentioned earlier, the boarding school era posed a very large threat to the language because Chickasaw boarding schools were being taken over by European missionaries. This meant that the predominance of English as a first language would take over. This is something that cannot be ignored when looking at the Chickasaw Nation because “language is the vortex from which the Chickasaw culture evolves” and taking that away could cause the identity of the tribe to disappear with it.<sup>40</sup> Since the Chickasaw had been moved to a land that was completely foreign to them, language was one thing that remained constant. Unfortunately, this was slowly being taken from them as well.

Overcoming the idea that their language and culture was inferior to that of the Europeans was difficult for the Chickasaw because they no longer had as much control over their lives as they had in their homeland. During this time, it became evident to elders that their people were beginning to “[cover] themselves with the security blanket of modern life created by European settlers” in order to have prosperity in the future that they now believed came from speaking English.<sup>41</sup> The elders and ancestors of the tribe, upon whom the descendants rely, were becoming disheartened and frightened with the disappearance of their language and identity as an individual nation that was once separate from that of the European settlers.

Continuing to expand on the identity and language of the Chickasaw, it is of utmost importance to recognize that because a written form of their language did not exist, everything about the tribe was passed down through oral transmission from elders to the youth of the tribe.<sup>42</sup> If the traditional language was lost, much of the information about the tribe could not be passed down to the younger generations, meaning oral traditions could not be carried on. Essentially, the existence of the Chickasaw culture as a whole was on the verge of diminishing. However,

38 Zermarie Deacon, PhD., Joy Pendley PhD., Waymon R. Hinson PhD., and Joshua D. Hinson M.A. “Chokka-Chaffa’ Kilimpi’, Chikash-shiyaakni’ Kilimpi’: Strong Family, Strong Nation.” *American Indian and Alaska Native Mental Health Research (Online)* 18, no. 2 (2011): 41-63.

39 Mark Francis. “Preservation through Education.” *The Journal of Chickasaw History and Culture* 12, no. 2 (Spring, 2010): 52-61.

40 Ibid, 54.

41 Ibid, 53.

42 Arrell M. Gibson. “Chickasaw Ethnography: An Ethnohistorical Reconstruction.” *Ethnohistory* 18, no. 2 (1971): 99-118.

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this brings back the idea of resilience and the ability of the tribe to continue speaking the language in spite of the overwhelming push to leave it behind and speak English. This, in more ways than one, illustrates an incredible act of resistance against conforming to the beliefs of the European settlers.<sup>43</sup> This continues to highlight the connection between the resilience of the tribe and their unique language while also introducing the important influence that the beliefs of the elders have on the tribe and its continuance. Due to the importance of language to Chickasaw identity, recognizing the need to continue speaking their Native language would prove to be a major turning point in terms of language preservation. Specifically, tribal members realized the importance of keeping their language alive as a means for assuring the continuance of a vibrant culture.

This realization helped spark the revitalization process and thus helped save the unique identity of the Chickasaw. This marked a major shift in the lives of many of the Chickasaw as they became aware that as the number of traditional speakers decreased there was a simultaneous decrease in their cultural presence. The Chickasaw Nation discussed how in 1994 it became evident that there were less than 1,000 people who spoke the Chickasaw language fluently and today that number is significantly lower, standing at only 75 speakers, all of whom are elders.<sup>44</sup> This is something that could not be ignored by the Chickasaw because, as mentioned previously, the Chickasaw language is central to their identity and must be maintained if future speakers of the language will exist to pass on the stories of the ancestors. These frightening numbers spawned the process of language revitalization throughout the Chickasaw Nation.

While not a formal recognition of the need for language revitalization programs, in 1973 the first Chickasaw dictionary was published after the Chickasaw governor, James Overton, realized his people believed that Chikashshanompa' had little value or

significance in today's society.<sup>45</sup> These views had been present since the boarding school era when speaking of the Chickasaw language was strongly discouraged. While the creation of the Chickasaw dictionary represented a major step in the right direction for the revitalization and maintenance of their unique language, it was not the only way the Chickasaw sought to revitalize their language. Over the years the Chickasaw created programs that would aid the process of language revitalization. However, the need to expedite this process became even more pressing with the recognition of the extensive loss of Native speakers in 1994 as indicated previously. In 2007, the tribe created the Chickasaw Language Revitalization Program that offers a master-apprentice program in which a non-fluent speaker is paired with a fluent speaker who helps them learn how to speak the traditional Chickasaw language.<sup>46</sup> This was a step in the right direction for the Chickasaw because it has allowed for the creation of more fluent speakers of the language. The Revitalization Program also provides a program known as Chipota Chikashshanompoli or "Youth Speaking Chickasaw," which teaches children to speak their language through traditional means such as song.<sup>47</sup> This program is very beneficial for the tribe because it allows for the continuance of the Chickasaw culture into future generations. The final revitalization tool open to the Chickasaw Nation is Rosetta Stone, which was made available to the tribe in 2016.<sup>48</sup> These programs allow for members of the Chickasaw Nation to have a stronger connection to their tribe through Chikashshanompa'.

In addition to the programs offered to members of the Chickasaw Nation, there are programs and tools that non-members of the Chickasaw Nation can use as well. The Chickasaw Nation has created the "Chickasaw Language Basics app" that teaches the Chickasaw language and provides songs and videos that are available to anyone via download or internet access.<sup>49</sup> Having an app that is open to the public is

43 Chew. "Chikashshanompa' Ilanompol'achi," 26.

44 "Language." Language: Chickasaw Nation. February 3, 2016. Accessed March 13, 2017.

45 Chew. "Chikashshanompa' Ilanompol'achi," 28.

46 "Language." Language: Chickasaw Nation.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

important for the Chickasaw because it allows even those who are not part of the Chickasaw Nation to see the value and significance of the culture.

The creation of these programs and revitalization all stem from the resilience of the tribe and their desire to remain significant. People have acknowledged that “the fact that the tribe still has speakers and is trying so hard to preserve its language is inspirational and testifies to the resilience of the Chickasaws.”<sup>50</sup> This idea is something that rings true for many members of the Chickasaw Nation because, despite the hardships that their ancestors may have endured, they have overcome those difficulties and revitalized a flourishing culture through their resiliency. They believe that they have a responsibility to defend the nation and culture that their ancestors died protecting and it is important to make sure that their culture survives well into the future.<sup>51</sup>

## Limitations and Future Directions

Understanding the unique connection between language and identity, and Chickasaw resilience was not an easy task. This was because many sources discussed the Chickasaw in relation to other Nations, especially those that mentioned Indian Removal. The Chickasaw, as well as many other Native American tribes in the United States, tend to be grouped together and not looked at separately. This made finding sources solely about the trauma the Chickasaw endured difficult. In addition, some of the sources that could have been beneficial to this research could only be accessed if purchased.

Another limitation within this research is the fact that it was based solely upon written information that was used to make connections about certain ideas, such as the importance of cultural diversity within the Eurocentric society. While this alleviated some of the bias within the research, sources that highlight the cultural presence of the Chickasaw tend to be slightly biased toward the Native Americans and do not excuse the actions of the federal government. Additionally, it is important to recognize personal bias.

Because the researcher is Native American, it is important not to let personal passion for the topic stand in the way. It was imperative that this bias was kept to a minimum throughout the paper.

Nevertheless, this paper serves to add to the ongoing and fruitful conversation surrounding the Chickasaw and their unique culture. Although mentioned throughout much of the research, the connection between the revitalization of their language despite trauma is not explicit. In order to continue this discussion, it is recommended that researchers analyze the continuance of other cultural traits that contribute to the Chickasaw identity. It could also be beneficial for future researchers to attempt to interview tribal members so that the researcher can gain personal accounts for their study. Continuing this conversation will help to highlight the unique culture that the Chickasaw exhibit and the important role they play in preserving the history of the United States.

The implications of this research are that it can open dialogue and encourage others to think about the many ways diverse cultures have helped shape the United States and make it the nation that it is today. Opening up dialogue on this topic could allow for more people to desire to preserve and learn about the Native cultures that make up the United States. This would help to highlight the idea that the United States is dynamic and ever changing based on complex interactions between many different cultural backgrounds.

## Conclusion

Research on the Chickasaw and their language highlighted unique connections that are somewhat ignored throughout much of the literature. This paper served to shed some light on how the Chickasaw have maintained their language despite the constant effort of the federal government to eradicate it. Much of what is discussed about Native Americans does not highlight their significant contribution to the culture of the United States today. The purpose of this research was to add to the ongoing conversation surrounding the Chickasaw Nation and their strength

50 Ozbolt. *Community Perspectives, Language Ideologies, and Learner Motivation in Chickasaw Language Programs*. 117.

51 Paul. “Collective and Collected Memories: The Construction and Maintenance of Chickasaw Identity,” 144.

as a tribe. The revitalization programs started by the tribe have allowed them to take small steps in the right direction toward showing that their presence should not be ignored. Language is only one of many cultural traits that is significant to the identity of the tribe. In order to continue this conversation other cultural traits must be examined. The issues surrounding the Chickasaw Nation are also important to recognize because Native American tribes have helped shape the cultural landscape of the United States and it is imperative that it be preserved. As a final note, despite the tribulations that the Chickasaw have encountered, their resilience and strength has not skipped a beat and will only continue to grow as the tribal members, as well as others, continue to uplift their culture and continue to define not only their Nation, but that of the United States as well.

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