

Racism and the Cherokee Nation



Written by William Loren Katz

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A member of the Black Chickasaw Freedmen's Association.

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As President Bill Clinton and others arrived in Selma, Alabama for the 42nd anniversary of the "Bloody Sunday" march that prodded Congress to pass the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Cherokee Nation chose a lower road. It voted overwhelmingly for an amendment to their constitution that revokes citizenship rights for 2,800 members because their ancestors included people of African descent.

Marilyn Vann, president of the Descendants of Freedmen of the Five Civilized Tribes, has long fought racism from both governmental officials and indigenous figures. In this instance, she claims, Cherokee leaders misled voters by insisting "freedmen don't have Indian blood," "the freedmen were forced on the tribe," "the freedmen do not have a treaty right to citizenship," "the people have never voted on citizenship provisions in the history of the tribe," and "the amendment will create an all Indian tribe." Cherokee voters were also influenced by the racist charge "that the freedmen if not ejected, would use up all of the tribal service monies."

The design of the amendment, Vann points out, is patently discriminatory. It removes membership from descendants of enrolled African Cherokees whose documentation of Indian ancestry was affirmed by the Dawes Commission more

than a century ago as well as those without documentation of Indian ancestry. On the other hand it accepts Cherokee members with white blood or even people whose ancestors are listed as "adopted whites."

This development comes at a moment of re-examination of African and Indian alliances that followed 1492. Governor Nicolas de Ovando of Hispaniola arrived in the Americas in 1502 with a Spanish armada that carried the first enslaved Africans. Within a year, Ovando wrote to King Ferdinand that the Africans "fled to the Indians and never could be captured." To the fury of Europeans, Native Americans, the first people enslaved in the New World, accepted African runaways. Indians saw no reason to face the invasion alone.

In their maroon colonies beyond the European settlements that dotted the coastlines of the Americas, each group contributed invaluable skills. As victims of the triangular trade, Africans brought their unique experience of European intentions, weapons, and diplomacy. Native American villages offered runaways a safe haven for families and a base for operations, and allowed the two peoples to forge the first "rainbow coalition." So ubiquitous were maroon communities that a French scholar called them "the gangrene of colonial society." Seeing these alternative societies as a threat to their hegemony, Europeans repeatedly deployed search and destroy armies.

British colonial officials in what is now the United States required Indian Nations to sign treaties promising the return of Black runaways. (There is no record of any fugitives being returned!) To keep Native American villages from becoming an escape hatch, officials from Florida to Canada offered Indians staggering rewards for runaways. And to that same end, British traders introduced African slavery to the Five Nations -- the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks and Seminoles. Once these Nations adopted European-style dress, Christianity and African bondage, they were called "The Five Civilized Tribes." In Florida where the terrain permitted guerilla warfare, African Seminoles played a commanding role in a resistance that at times tied up half of the U.S. Army, held the U.S. military forces at bay from 1816 to 1858, took 1500 U.S. military lives, and cost Congress \$30,000,000.

By Nat Turner's slave rebellion of 1831, southern planters, frantic that leaks in their labor system would have explosive consequences, joined with whites seeking valuable Indian land, to demand removal of the Five Nations. President Martin Van Buren had 7,000 U.S. troops drive 60,000 Indians, including black members, to distant Oklahoma. Thousands perished on this "Trail of Tears," Cherokees of both lineages comforted one other.

Even before they reached Oklahoma African bondage dominated the social, political and economic life of the Five Nations, and created the class and racial divisions evident today. A minority of Cherokees with white blood owned slaves, claimed a superior status and rose to leadership. "Pure Indian blood" Cherokees, the majority, became "inferior." African Cherokees, slave and free, were relegated to the lowest rung. However in the 1850s Heinrich Mollhausen, a

noted German artist, visited the Indian Territory and described a form of bondage unlike any southern plantation:

These slaves receive from the Indian masters more Christian treatment than among the Christian whites. The traveler may seek in vain for any other difference between master and servant than such as nature had made in the physical characteristics of the races; and the Negro is regarded as a companion and helper, to whom thanks and kindness are due when he exerts himself for the welfare of the household.

In 1860 Cherokees in Oklahoma owned 2,511 slaves, and at the outset of the Civil War, Cherokee leaders, pressured by pro-slavery Indian Agents and virtually surrounded by Confederate armies, agreed to support the Confederacy. However, Opothle Yahola, a Creek chief and pacifist, was able to lead 7,600 people -- including half of the Seminole Nation, Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks and others, to Union lines in Kansas. By April 1862 the young men of this multicultural exodus had joined the Union Army and helped free slaves in Missouri.

The defeat of the Confederacy allowed U.S. officials to scrap its Indian treaties. Whites who had forced African slavery on Indians now demanded Indians accept Lincoln's "new birth of freedom." The Seminoles, who had long treated their African members as allies rather than slaves, embraced equality. Cherokees followed. African Cherokees soon ran barbershops, blacksmith shops, general stores and restaurants or became ferryboat operators, cotton-gin managers, teachers and postmasters. O.S. Fox, editor of the *Cherokee Afro-American* was enthusiastic:

The opportunities for our people in that country far surpassed any of the kind possessed by our people in the U.S. . . . It is nonsense for any Afro-American to emigrate to Africa or anywhere else if he can make a living in the Indian Territory.

In 1879 African Cherokees, petitioning for full equality, based their appeal on a shared history:

The Cherokee nation is our country; there we were born and reared; there are our homes made by the sweat of our brows; there are our wives and children, whom we love as dearly as though we were born with red, instead of black skins. There we intend to live and defend our natural rights, as guaranteed by the treaties and laws of the United States, by every legitimate and lawful means.

How ironic and sad that people of African Cherokee lineage still have to fight for natural rights being denied them by the New World's first victims of virulent bigotry, imported by the European invaders.

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