

# Acculturation Into the Creek Traditions: Growing in Depth and Breadth of Understanding Within the Environment

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This paper is in part, a reflective analysis of 15 years living with the state-recognized Florida Creek Indians of the Central Florida Muskogee Creek Tribe and the Pasco Band of Creek Indians, formally of Lacochee, FL and currently in Brooksville, FL, respectively. It addresses the power structures within tribal organizations. Selected Creek teaching stories are presented along with their layers of meaning. The oral tradition of transference of information will be described from the perspective of learning through hidden agendas. Non-western science teachings about the medicinal use of native plants will be used to support personal and professional growth. Taboos and group visions will be described. The process of acculturation will further be described through experiencing spirit dreams. The author was transformed in her depth and breadth of understanding of ecology as a function of this study.

*Keywords:* acculturation, cultural dreams, medicinal plants, oral history, symbolic interactionism

## Introduction

The easiest way to begin to learn about the Florida Creek people is through their histories. Starting from present day looking backwards, we learn that Florida's state recognized Creek people have been a culture of assimilation since the 1700s. Captivity was an ancient institution for the Creeks. It was also fluid. Captives could experience destinies ranging from torture to property to full adoption into the culture (Snyder, 2007). Many ancestors retreated to the safety of the Everglades when most families were forcibly moved to Oklahoma in the 1800's. They were called the red sticks and were the warring tribes. The Creeks in the Panhandle, the white sticks, signed a treaty with the American government. They became Christians. They learned the way of the white man. They passed a law within the many tribes there so that it was illegal to speak Muskogee under pain of death. They were considered as the peaceable tribes. Today, the white sticks seek their cultural beginnings and the red sticks teach white man traditional practices. Today, the red sticks assimilate up to 15% of others into their traditional culture.

This paper reflects acculturation into a red stick tribe from Peninsular Florida during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Tribal organization will be described. Creek teaching stories are presented with their multifaceted layers of meaning. They will represent the oral tradition transference of information and teaching through hidden agendas. Non-western science medicinal use of native plants information will be used to support personal and professional growth. The process of acculturation will be described as experiencing cultural dreams and a growing relationship between self and community.

## Methodology

Symbolic interactionism is a research strategy wherein the researcher faces the potential to become a part of the setting of the research. Once this time in data collection becomes apparent, it is time for the research to end. As a function of the social development within the culture, the author became a part of the research study concomitantly growing spiritually and knowledge of the meaning of cultural diversity.

Oral histories were taken from many elders. They spoke of their personal histories, cultural behaviors and upbringing. They described the difficulties they had in growing up in two worlds. No matter how prepared the questioner, due to the nature of the communities studied, more information was shared than was asked. The research was, therefore, open-ended.

## Results

### **The Oral Tradition: History and the Structure of the Florida Creek Indian Nation**

When learning in the Florida Creek Indian culture, you learn history, language, organizational structure and the concepts inherent in their cosmology all at the same time. Stanfield in Denzin and Lincoln (1994) indicated that indigenous paradigms and concepts of time, spirituality, space and personal interrelationships are different from that in the western world. It was found to be true in Creek culture. Sometimes, information is thrown at the learner all at one time. At other times, one may not hear anything unless a question is asked. There exists a duality of not questioning one's elders concomitant with the elders assessing the desire and ability to want to learn and absorb information based on willingness to question. The Florida Creek Indians were left in disarray as a result of governmental rulings.

The Creek and Cherokee wars coupled with President Andrew Jackson's decree that all native peoples were to be removed to west of the Mississippi leaving the Florida Creek people in disarray. In peninsular Florida, Creeks' wandering in the everglades often called themselves black as it was better to be black than Indian. The Creek people who lived in the Panhandle of Florida did so with a loss of culture and language abiding the US government's decree that they become Christians and speak English. Still some people in the panhandle practiced traditions in secret (Earl Hood, personal communication). In the early 20th century, Sam Blue, Micco of the Muscogee Creek Indians East of The Mississippi, was appointed to be Florida's Micanopy by the federal government. This is the manner in which Micanopy Blue became the Chief-over-Chiefs of Florida. Micanopy Blue served in this capacity for decades. Now that he has passed, the people will wait four years following his passing. The Miccos who were under his guidance and rule will vote in a new Micanopy. Several tribes, bands and clans were permitted to raise a fire to the Creator (create a traditional church) under his tutelage. It is said that the reason Sam Blue was appointed to be Florida's Micanopy was due in a large part to his role as a peace keeper in Taylor County, his knowledge of tradition and ability to bring people together. Micanopy Blue was a founding member of the third Creek Confederation of Florida, Inc. in 1995 (Website <http://www.corporationwiki.com/Florida/Bascom/the-creek-confederation-of-florida-inc-5705560.aspx> 10-22-10). However, due to irreconcilable philosophical differences between the Christianized people of the Panhandle and the traditional people of the peninsula, Micanopy Blue and his supporters sadly left this organization. The inability of these people to work side-by-side was prophesized by Micco Penwv Fayv years ago.

Today, there is little formal communication between the white sticks or peaceable Creeks of the Panhandle and the red sticks or warriors of the Peninsula. When a Micanopy is reelected, he will be responsible for

traditional teachings, overseeing the establishment of new tribal grounds, giving permission for the people to raise a fire to the Creator and wisely negotiate differences. A tribe is recognized when the Micanopy gives them a sacred fire. This often takes many years of testing the heart of the people. The Micanopy's election will be performed in the traditional manner of election by the chiefs or Miccos. This will serve to keep the oral tradition alive and the traditional church and the knowledge held by the elders safe and available to American native people.

At the turn of the 21st century, several Miccos lead tribes, bands or clans. These men and women were elected by their tribal members to be the principal servant of the people. It is his/her role to protect the church from harm, protect the people from harm and be the lead listener on issues concerning tribal members. The Micco follows the will of the people. The power structure of tribal membership puts the person with the most responsibility and love at the bottom of the tier.

Next to the Micco stands the Et'ske Cu'ko (Et-ski Cu-ko) or tribal mother. She is the keeper of the people. It is through her love that the tribe, band or clan stays together. She teaches propriety among members and visitors. She teaches traditional women's crafts. She assists new clan mothers how to care for her clan members. The tribal mother is the second lowest servant to the people, just above the Micco. She is responsible to all the people. The clan mothers are responsible to their clan members. She, along with a male clan elder, teaches clan traditions to girls and boys respectively.

The creek people live in a matrilineal society. Parents must marry outside their clans. When a child is born to a woman, he becomes a member of her clan. If it is a girl child, her aunts will teach and guide her; if a boy child, his uncles will teach and guide him. In this way, there is never any ill will towards ones parents. When there is an issue that requires tribal vote, all married men must go to their clan mothers to discuss the issue and the group votes as per the clan mother.

One other aspect of tribal life is the strength of the medicine maker or Hillis y Haga (said hill-is-hiya). This is defined as "goes with medicine". He is responsible to know women's medicine, ceremonial medicine and spiritual medicine. The Micco is often taught ceremonial medicine. These men along with elder women teach the tribal mother and the clan mothers women's medicine. They in turn teach their clan members, both men and women. The medicine maker will also select and teach a young man of his choice how to be a medicine maker. Anything that is eaten or used to aid in illness is considered the medicine and a gift from the Creator.

### **The Oral Tradition: Teaching Stories**

The two brothers' fishing story is a tale told by the Creek and Seminole people (Website <http://www.sacred-texts.com/nam/se/mtsi/mtsi025.htm>, 12-17-10). This is as the author was taught. Two brothers went on a fishing trip. They spent all day trying to gather fish for food, but, alas, they caught nothing. On their long trek back to the village, the oldest brother noticed a fish, standing atop a decaying tree stump. He indicated this to his little brother. Though both boys were very hungry from their day outside, the little brother did not want to join his big brother in catching nor eating the fish on the stump! Yet, the older and wiser brother grabbed the fish off of the stump, built a fire and ate the fish. Before little brother's eyes, big brother turned into a rattlesnake. The two brothers proceeded home to their village eating everything in sight. Little brother told the Micco what had happened.

The big brother lived at the village for a spell, until he had eaten all of their food stores. Then the Micco made a decision. He directed to the older-snake-brother: "go yonder to the big lake. There you will find all the food you need. We can no longer feed you here". Thus, the sad, snake-brother ate his way to Lake Okeechobee.

The “s” shaped train he left behind formed Florida’s Kissimmee River. To this day, neither Creek nor Seminole will kill a snake he sees. If on the village grounds, it will be shooed to a place away from the people, so as to cause neither any harm. This is because the snake is humankind’s brother.

On the surface, this lesson teaches respect for all animals. It teaches how the life-giving Kissimmee River was formed. It teaches that all beings are brothers. The hidden agenda teaches one to obey his/her instincts as things are not always what they appear to be. If a situation looks wrong, it probably is. We learn to protect our brothers so that sometimes, you have to do something for the benefit of the tribe that makes you sad, but the elders will direct you towards safety. We need to protect our brothers as all nature that is sacred.

### **The Oral Tradition, Cosmology: Blending Ecological, Spiritual and Cultural Ways of Knowing**

Once the elders deemed you were a part of the people, they would begin to take you out into the woods and teach you the ways of the Creator through nature study. Elders speak of the beauty of flowers in bloom if it is spring; leaves and bark in the summer and fall; and how to collect medicine plants for the long winter’s sleep. They will speak of the relationship among animals, illness and cure. They will tell the story of their inexorably intertwined medicine.

Once man could talk with the animals and they were equal. Then man offended the deer. The deer spirit gave man the first disease. The first medicine concomitantly came from the deer spirit. Animals teach us how to care for our sick. During the springtime, the antlers of the male deer bud. One can watch as the deer rub their heads against trees to break through their hide covering the protruding buds. Once antlers are grown, deer wrack their heads against trees to remove the velvet. And how do you think the deer feels? He has a headache. If we follow the movement of the deer through its habitat, we can see that it walks to the river area and eats white willow. One might ask, “How did the deer know what to eat?”. The traditional Creek answer is that the Creator taught the deer how to be a deer; the Creator taught him! The headache is called *eco aledga* (said, ee-cho a-lee-ja) or caused by the deer. Originally, the deer taught the Florida Creek Indians this medicine.

When we have the headache, humankind can drink a tea made from the bark and/or root of the willow. The willow has salicin in it, which is a precursor to aspirin. Some of us even go to the pharmacy to buy aspirin in a bottle. Salicin was historically used as an analgesic. In the 21st century, Creeks use Salicin from willow for ceremony and headaches. Though this knowledge is a part of women’s medicine, the willow is held in the highest esteem by the people. From this teaching, we learn that all knowledge comes from the Creator.

Another traditional medicine, a women’s medicine, is bear medicine. We only need to watch bear behavior to learn about its habitat, eating habits and bear sickness and *nokuse aledga* (said, no-kus a-lee-ja) or caused by the bear. Bear medicine can be used by humankind. In the summer, a main food source of the Florida black bear is the blackberry. When we examine bear scat, we see that it is formed by bunches of seeds in larger clumps. The unseen part of the elimination is water. Therefore, bear sickness is common diarrhea! Too many berries and all come out in the end. It is interesting to note that blackberry roots act just like *Imodium™* (an anti-diarrheal medication commonly used in the USA). Therefore, the animal that gives the sickness also provides the cure. These stories are often told around the campfire by the medicine maker, *hillis y gaga* or an elder with permission to talk about medicine. They are intertwined with tales of first hunts with a particular animal or injuries that occurred and how the injuries were treated.

### **Traditional Medicine and Western Science**

To the Creek, everything is medicine and a gift from the Creator to the people. Colloquially, Sage is a

natural source of estrogen, the saw palmetto is prostate medicine, and leaves from the fox grape are traditionally used for baldness. Dog fennel is dried and placed into a cotton pouch. The pouch is used to dust the body and clothes with dog fennel powder. Dog fennel is a mosquito repellent Western science teaches that in the family Asteraceae, several of the daisies are medicinal plants. Selected plants are:

*Solidago odora* var. *chapmanii* (Gray) Cronquist or Goldenrod can be used in several ways. The leaves are aromatic, carminative, diaphoretic and a stimulant. Elders suggest that we disguise this bad tasting medicine, making it taste like mint. It is used to treat kidney stones. It causes the kidney tubules to dilate and to secrete mucous. The mucous covers the hooks on the kidney stones. These then flow through the dilated tubules with the free flow of urine.

*Bidens mitis* (Michaux) Sherff or Beggar Ticks is used for throat irritations. The root is an emmenagogue and expectorant. An emmenagogue is a drug that hastens menstrual flow. This is female medicine.

*Gnaphalium obtusifolium* L. or Sweet everlasting an astringent used for irritations of the mouth and throat, bruises, skin irritations and wounds.

*Liatrix spicata* (L.) Willdenow or Blazing Star is the most commonly called Blazing Star or Gay Feather or Rattlesnake Master. The root is a diuretic, tonic and stimulant, used for sore throats and snake bites. In the case of a snake bite or bee sting, one only needs to bite the root in half and eat half immediately. Chew the other half and place it on the snake bite or bee sting.

In the family convolvulaceae, the morning glory or *Ipomoea indica* (Burman f. Merriam) is used as an irritant, cathartic and to clear the bowels. The entire plant of *rubus cuneifolius* (Pursh), or sand blackberry, a member of the rosaceae family, is used as a tonic and astringent. Its root treat diarrhea; berries treat constipation. This is a very strong medicine. Often one only has to look at a plant to know which part of the body it treats. If the roots are hairy and fine, the plant is usually a nervine, and treats the nervous system. Other parts of a plant also serve as treatment indicators. In the family Euphorbiaceae, "*Stylingia sylvatica*" L., or Queen's delight addresses the needs of the reproductive system. It has a yellow flower growing on an inflorescence to about "4" in length (Website <http://www.floridasnature.com/florida%20trees6.htm>, 12-18-10). The fruit is a two- to three- sided round pod found at the base of the inflorescence. The root is a purge, alterative and for treatment of diabetes. After birth, it is for sore back, head ache and kidneys. It is for venereal diseases and irregular periods. It may facilitate male erections. This is considered female medicine.

### **Acculturation**

In Denzin and Lincoln (1994), Morse indicated that: "At the acculturation stage of my research, I needed to withdraw from my research". He stated that the assimilation of the researcher into the culture is a progressive process. At the time when the researcher has been assimilated into the culture, he/she can be viewed as a part of the setting. Data collection becomes difficult. The process of acculturation into the Creek culture included experiencing changes in day-to-day behaviors and by experiencing cultural dreams. Never before had the author collected plants for medicinal use. The teaching is that if you gather medicine in a proper and respectful manner, you will know it. Once medicine had been gathered from a cedar tree in Alabama, on the way to a pow-wow (gathering of Indian people), a catharsis with all-that-is was experienced. Being over taken by deep, uncontrollable sobs necessitated the need to pull the car over to the side of the road until the crying stopped. The author felt cleansed, happy, and a part of everything alive, stone, plant, animal and spirit.

Each year clan fires and the ceremonial fire are buried and new fires started in clan squares and the ceremonial

square during the Green Corn Ceremony. One time, to save the “living coals” of Turtle Clan, the author was directed in her dream to gather some coals in a leather pouch, bury the rest in the sand and move the clan to another tribe/location. A loggerhead turtle lead the author from Georgia to home in Florida through the rain.

When the author’s husband and she got to the Village, it was pouring. She followed the directions from her dream, ending in visiting the ceremonial grounds of the tribe. While therein, she faced each direction starting with facing east. After meditation, she moved around the square counter-clockwise. On the author’s third stop, she was joined by spirit people, Creek elders who once lived. All said that men looked like pencil sketches except for one elder who wore traditional dress and was in full color. That elder directed one of the younger men to speak with her. The words were: “Take what is yours and leave this place. Go to another. We will remedy this area as best we can. It is not for you to worry about”. When this has been done, the author has not set foot on those grounds in seven years.

One day the tribe was directed to gather in the square for a meeting. We were all directed how to collect medicine from plants. These directions were of course only for those who had never before collected plants. When each member had had the chance to thank the Creator for providing the plant to humans and thank the plant for giving its life so a person could pass her kidney stones. The medicine maker asked each tribal member individually how they felt when talking to a plant. There were two memorable statements made. One elder said that the first time he collected plants for medicine at the request of the medicine maker, he was terrified he would do something wrong and hurt the tribal members. Another elder said, “what right do I have to kill a plant so that a human can live?”. This is not only a provocative statement, it also demonstrates the depth to which culture, spiritual practices and, in the case of this individual, science enters into thought processes. From the Creek perspective, humankind is at the center of and beneath all other species. It takes from the Earth Mother, but does it ever give back?

### **Conclusion and Educational Implications**

Simple stories have deep meaning. The layers of meaning of the two brothers’ story are repeated time and time again. When humankind came to Earth, all the animals assisted in his/her care. They attempted to serve humans by bringing them fire as they had no hides. It was the spider that succeeded in the endeavor. The smallest of animals was the most powerful. If you treat the earth properly, it will provide for you in many ways. This is the story of the Corn Mother who provides us with sustenance, dress, rope, etc.. Before this study, the author viewed plants and flowers for aesthetic reasons only. Now, the intertwined life cycles of plants and animals are viewed from a heart-felt if not spiritual worldview. Humankind has a responsibility to behave in a sustainable manner towards all-that-is. The western science world view provides information, and the Creek traditions provide rationale. We are responsible to each other and every life form, mineral, spiritual and biological.

Understanding the Muskogee language naming system is from the perspective of plant function. For example, western science calls poison ivy, or “*Toxicodendron radicans*” L.. The Creek refer to poison ivy as “Big Itch” or *Toskv Lakko* (said DOHS-guh lah-GO).

The best practice of ecology is none. Creeks believe that the earth created by the “Giver of Breath” or *Heseketemese* (said, He sa-key-ta-ma-see) provides all of our needs, as all beings are a part of a cycle. These are profound thoughts. We necessarily live within our ecosystem and interact therein. We depend on each other for survival, plant, animal and human alike. We seek food, water, shelter and space as does all wildlife. However, the human impact on the health and stability of the biosphere is greater than all other animals. It is

also greater in a negative manner. From an evolutionary point of view, the time, since humans have interacted on the planet or Earth Mother, has not been long enough for Earth's biochemistry to counteract the results of our actions (Bogan, 1992). It takes place in the natural world. A simple example of this is the life cycle of the common squirrel, *Sciurus carolinensis* L.. They eat nuts, acorns, etc.. They take from the earth just as humankind does. However, when the squirrel dies, its body is recycled back to the Earth Mother through the decomposition process. The squirrel returns nutrients and energy to the ecosystem. In America, most humans do not do this. Creek people ask, "What would the Earth be like if all humankind recycled its bodies back to the Earth Mother?". Might this result in a huge carbon sink, reducing greenhouse gases? Nutrients would be liberated to Earth so that plant material could grow and feed animal-kind at the primary consumer level.

The ability to know about the natural world should be primary concepts taught from the curriculum of both public and private educational institutions. Being able to intuitively sense one's relationship with the beings, with whom the world is shared, is imperative. Only through developing a sense of place can both knowledge and feelings be developed and interconnected. This means that school should not be held only in the school house, but also within the natural environment. As in most cultures, Creek children learn from adult modeling. They hear the teaching stories from the time they were born. They view the world from a perspective that is different from the Euro-American student. The differences are: Creek children see the world holistically while westernized children view the world from a linear and/or production oriented worldview. Creek children are a part of their natural environment while other children see themselves more and more apart from the natural environment, which makes it difficult for them to develop a sense of place.

Diversity education is a necessary and important process in American education in a global society. The Great Schools Staff contend that students can learn from peers from different cultures. Determining best practice pedagogical strategies that facilitate cultural responsiveness is difficult. Multicultural education can be viewed as a political movement, social justice and the relationship between power and privilege and requires the elimination of all inequalities (Gorski, 2008). A systems approach to district change is imperative. In colleges of education, some teach from the assimilationist perspective, or, how to succeed in our culture. Some teach from an interpersonal, communication, harmony and respect worldview.

Lauen Wakau-Villagomez (2003) used the symbol of the native American medicine wheel to teach literature, which is a valuable teaching tool to Wakau-Villagomez. Students see issues from multiple perspectives as a function of the quadrant through which they choose to view the class. Students call the wheel a wheel of diversity as it crosses time and culture. It has meaning for a diverse group of people. Teachers need to be open to their students. They need to get to know their students in school and at home. If this is not done, teacher and student will become estranged from each other (Fish, 2008). Unfortunately, America's treatment of Native Americans during the 19th century (Milligan, 2002; Hansman, Spencer, Grant, & Jackson, 1999) may or may not have been compensated for by our post-WWI (World War I) open immigration policies. Only time will tell if these new minds will be used to enhance America as they should. The barriers to accepting the benefits diverse cultural groups can provide America may be hampered by our racist past. Certainly now, the American Indian cultures are trying to reclaim their cultures, languages and ways of knowing the world, despite of the continued development and proliferation of industrial production (Lyons, 1997).

One Creek Elder taught that if you are not teaching what you believe, you are teaching a lie. Teacher educators and professors of sustainability education alike should consider the benefits of befriending local area native peoples. This will not only broaden perspectives on their relationships with the earth, but also will

provide them with experiential applications for their students. Of course, there is nothing like a field trip to listen to a medicine maker in his natural environment of the forest!

Mvto (Ma-doh), thanks to the Giver of Breath for this knowledge. Thanks to the elders for their permission to teach the lessons they deemed me worthy to learn that:

CEME WENAGE (said, chimmy when-aug-gy)  
 CEME GETHLADA (said, chimmy gee-thla-da)  
 You live, you learn.  
 CEME ENOKAJEDA (said, chimmy en-auch-ca-ja-da)  
 CEME GETHLAD (said, chimmy gee-thla-da)  
 You love, you learn.  
 CEME PASUDGE (said, chimmy pa-sud-gee)  
 CEME GETHLADA (said, chimmy gee-thla-da)  
 You die, you learn.  
 CEME PASUDGE (said, chimmy pa-sud-gee)  
 CEME WENAGE (said, chimmy when-aug-gy)  
 You die, you live.

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