AMERICAN LANDSCAPES

Landscapes of Ritual Performance in Eastern North America

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Continuity, resilience, and transformation in Choctaw ritual practice

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> The successes behind coalescence do not lie within a group's ability to create novel identities, but rather their ability to integrate and rework aspects of their previous lives. (Wright 2019, 83)

While employed at the Charles H. Nash Museum (Chucalissa Indian Village) in Memphis from 1970 to 1972, I had the good fortune to work with several traditional Choctaw families that had moved to west Tennessee from their homeland in east-central Mississippi. Employed at the museum/village as tour guides, they also sold traditional handmade crafts, including basketry, beadwork, and ceramics, as well as toy blowguns, drums, and feathered war clubs. Much of what I learned from them was not the result of formal ethnographic inquiry but rather from conversations about their daily lives, their immediate concerns, and their views of the world in which they lived and had known growing up in traditional Choctaw communities.

One of my interests at that time included learning the Choctaw language, so I inquired about the names of everything in sight and eventually I was able to use simple phrases. My efforts certainly fell short of even baby-talk, but it was a great joy to interact with them in their language. So, in this context I had the opportunity to "hang out"; I was soon more or less "accepted". In 1981 I returned to Memphis with an appointment at Memphis State University (now University of Memphis) and references to me in Choctaw shifted from *nahullo*, a derogatory term for non-Choctaws, to *alikchi*, which translates as doctor and had positive connotations.

I soon learned that the counter to an *alikchi* was a *hopaii*, which they translated into English as a malevolent ritual practitioner or witch, a powerful other-than-human being who could shape-shift and cause great personal harm and even death through spiritual means. *Hopaii* could transform into owls that flew about at night killing by magically inserting or shooting objects into the intended victim. Hearing an owl invariably elicited grave concern and identifications of the sound as coming from a witch. The cure for magical or spiritual illness entailed enlisting the services of an *alikchi* to ascertain who had caused the misfortune, as there are no accidents in the Choctaw traditional belief system. *Alikchis* and *hopaiis*

could also make inanimate objects come to life – acts of legerdemain, which has been documented for much of Indigenous North America. Rainmakers could also summon rain during times of drought.

While many of my academic colleagues thought Choctaw ritual practice to be largely gone, I found a rich and vibrant world of Indigenous beliefs that resembled the Mississippian people who had once lived at Chucalissa. Key Mississippian motifs found on Chucalissa ceramic vessels could be seen on contemporary Choctaw ritual paraphernalia and regalia. However, the Mississippian people who had once lived at Chucalissa are now known to have been Tunican speakers, rather than western Muskogean speakers, which include the Choctaw.

In this paper, I briefly discuss the continuity, resilience, and transformation of Choctaw ritual practice from the 16th through 20th centuries in their ancestral Mississippi homeland. I suggest the Choctaw (Chahta) homeland was comprised of resident as well as migrant polities that coalesced into Mississippi's north central hill country in the century between 1550 and 1650 and that they constituted intact chiefly polities, rather than the shattered remnants of Mississippian chiefdoms. Thus, I argue that Choctaw ritual institutions were resilient in the face of European contact, at least until the early 19th century. At that time sources of political power began to shift from elite legitimacy based on access to spiritual sources of power to ones based on capital and a European legal system.

The Choctaw coalescence and homeland

The 16th and 17th centuries witnessed *in situ* polities as well as an influx of distinct people into the upland hills of east-central Mississippi with the eventual confederation of these multiple polities (*oklas*) based on negotiations taking place over a century or more. These populations left their homelands to join polities already entrenched in the headwaters region, a process that lasted into the early 18th century (Galloway 2009, 355). The people who left their ancestral homelands in the late 16th and the first half of the 17th century appear to have migrated into what would become the Chahta homeland because of climate change rather than European diseases and internecine warfare associated with competition over European goods and enslaved people (Fig. 4.1). Various polities or amalgamated social groups may have been attracted to the relatively unused farmlands and rich hunting grounds in a former buffer zone or these "new" areas may have been their long-established hunting territories. Departed expatriates would have continued their connections with those who remained in the former homelands through alliances, marriages, and ritual practice. Regional upheavals, whether due to climate change, disease, or warfare, resulted in the coalescence of multiple polities; a process with a long tradition in the Mississippian world (Kowalewski 2006), but the establishment of overarching political mechanisms and ties would take many decades of compromise, concessions, and negotiation.

The reasons for moving from ancestral homelands and establishing new polity homelands are unknown but the introduction of European disease is frequently cited as a major contributor to migration and polity collapse (O'Brien 2002, 14).

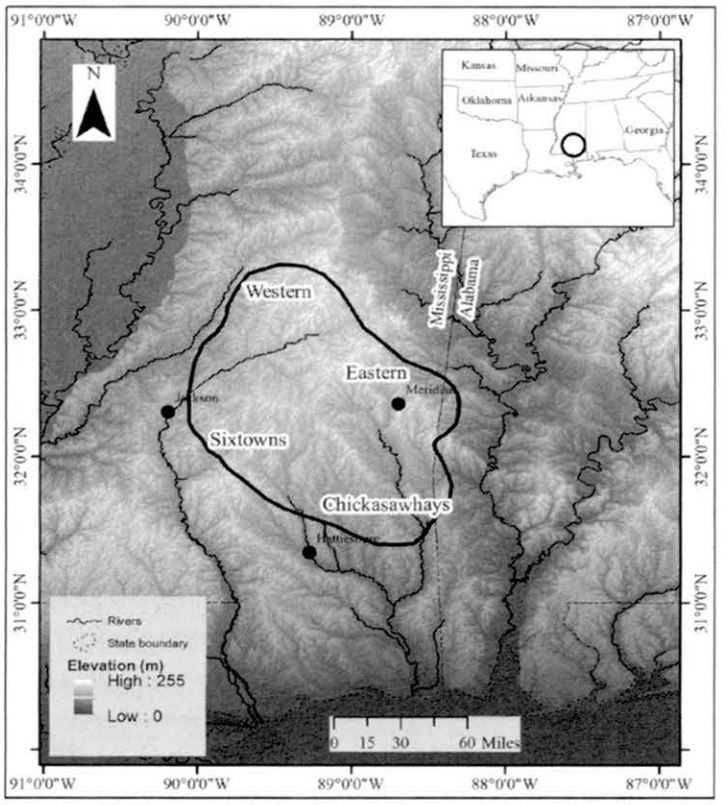

Fig. 4.1 Early Contact Period Choctaw Coalescence

For example, the mid-16th century Spanish expeditions led by Hernando de Soto and Tristan de Luna are often argued to have precipitated migrations that resulted in the formation of the Chahta homeland through the introduction of disease. The impact of European diseases (Ethridge *et al.* 2009) may not have taken place until after sustained contact with close ties with English, French, and Spanish colonists in the early 18th century. Instead of European disease giving rise to population collapse, climate change, especially megadroughts, appear to have plagued the region throughout much of the sixteenth century including an extended period of drought from *ca.* 1532 to 1599 (Figs 4.2 and 4.3).

Depopulation and migration due to slave raids are also unlikely to have precipitated major Chahta homeland population movements, as slaving on a commercial basis did not begin until late in the 17th century, which would not have provided the time necessary for pre-homeland Mississippian factions and polities to create an overarching identity and solidarity within the Chahta homeland. While slave raids by British-Chickasaw actors during the half century between the 1680s and the 1720s resulted in fortified towns that bordered the Chickasaw, population relocations away from the Chickasaw homeland, substantial population loss, and transformations in a warrior ethos, Chahta identity had already become established by the late seventeenth century, as the slave trade is beginning. Thus, slave raids were not a primary contributing factor for most people moving into the Chahta homeland.

Social transformations may have resulted from the pelt and skin trade with the Spanish to the southeast, but elites controlled the use of guns well into the 18th century, and a massive influx of guns did not take place until after 1763. When guns were first introduced to the Choctaw their supply remained limited and their use controlled by the chiefs, which continued and reinforced elite control over hunters and warriors. Until the mid-18th century Choctaws incorporated guns into the pre-existing political system in which chiefs maintained control over resources that were acquired through guns they loaned out in hunting and warfare (O'Brien 1998, 104–6). Chiefly control over guns meant that they kept the skins and best cuts of meat, while redistributing the rest of the carcass as a sign of their largess (Nathaniel Folsom cited in O'Brien 1998, 106). Finally, the system of economic practices, including the pelt and skin trade, was still intact beyond the middle of the 18th century (Galloway 2009, 354).

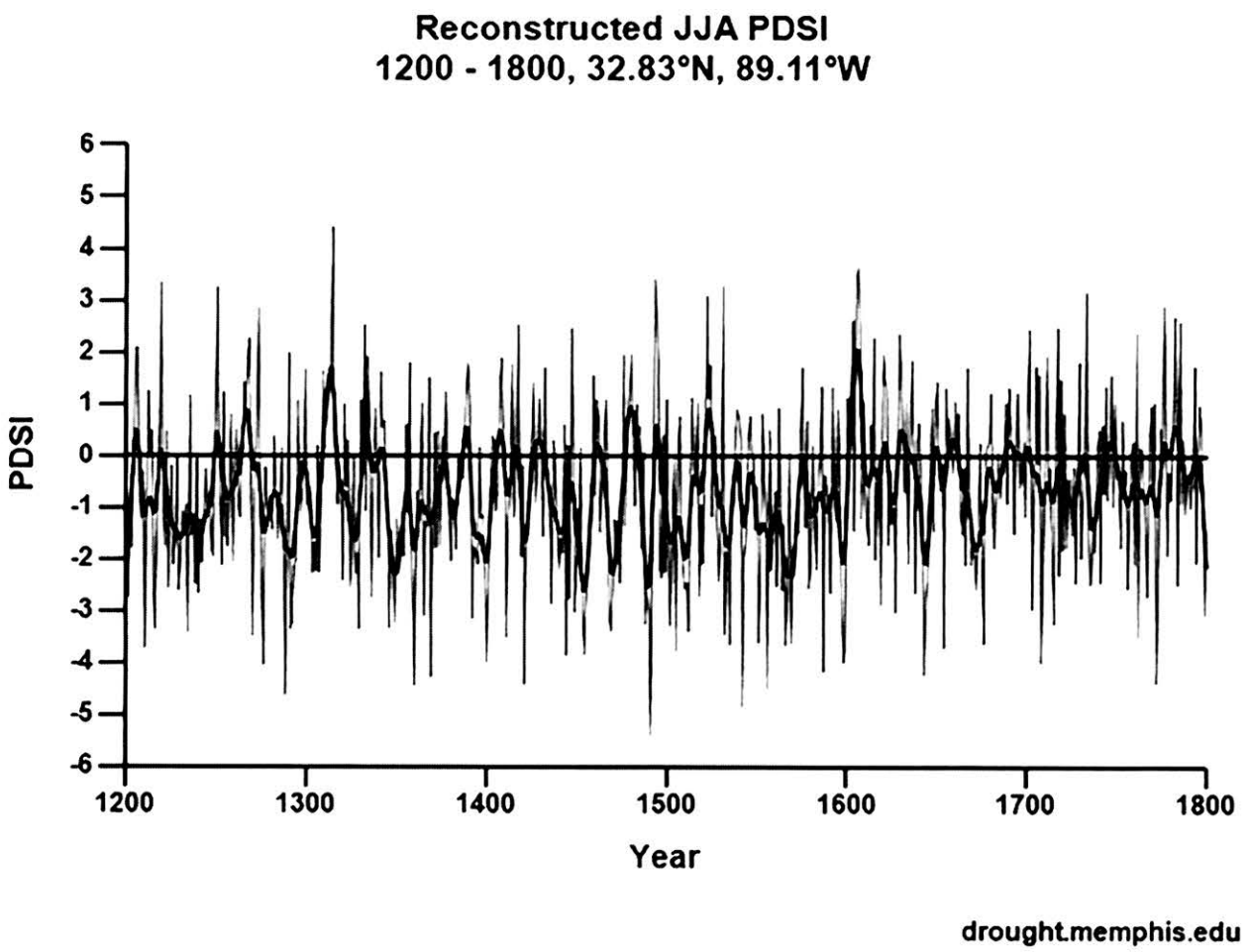

Fig. 4.2 Summer PDSI reconstruction of the grid point associated with the Choctaw homeland 1200–1800 CE. Individual years are plotted, and a 10-year cubic smoothing spline is plotted to enhance the decadal-scale variation

Transformations in political and ritual authority are evident in the Southeast in the late 17th century, including the demise of mound building after *ca.* 1600 (Smith 1991). The period from 1565 to 1600 included an end to palisade construction and the loss of the political authority once exhibited by powerful Mississippian chiefs. Europeans were told of the weakening authority and power of the civil chiefs throughout the region (Moore 1988), a process that may have been ongoing since the 16th century. However, political authority and dominance among the Mississippi hill country polities may have always been relatively heterarchical, based more on personal charisma and persuasion than on overt displays of coercion and threats.

A loosely shared identity of being Choctaw was never a simple, unitary social conception, nor is it today. Having formed to some extent by the late 17th century, Choctaw perceptions were and are based on several inter-related institutions, as well as formal status categories that identify an individual's social position based on age, gender, matriclan affiliation, matrilineage ties, and personal qualities, as well as membership and status within the community or *okla*. The ancestral *okla* was an autonomous political unit consisting of farmsteads, hamlets, and villages, governed by a civil chief and a war chief. The civil chief, chosen from a prestigious matrilineage, presided over a town council of "beloved men". However, political power resided in the chief's matrilineage and maternal genealogical linkages. An anonymous French writer characterized Choctaw politics as an "ill-disciplined government", as a chief's power "is absolute only so far as he knows how to make use of his authority" (Swanton 1918, 54). While the power of chiefs appears to have been waning in the early 19th century, it may never have been especially strong among the small Mississippian hill country chiefly polities.

Choctaw political divisions were composed of multiple *oklas* that may have maintained their identity until their demise. It seems that among the smaller *oklas* that moved into the homeland, over time the more dominant polities apparently consolidated or incorporated them within their political orbit, resulting in larger administrative units and the extinction of the less powerful *okla*. While this process may have been a result of European contact, chiefly polities in general exhibit processes of amalgamation, with smaller polities eventually being cobbled within a larger polity. While the divisions contained multiple *oklas*, each one still possessed varying degrees of sovereignty (Blitz 1985, 112–15). The primary administrative and ceremonial center was the largest town in each division, led by a high-ranking chief in concert with a governing town council, which convened during deliberations at the council house. The council included chiefs and subchiefs, as well as high-ranking ritual practitioners and esteemed warriors whose status was based on genealogical ranking and success in warfare.

Chiefs resided in the primary center, which also included cemeteries, the chief's warehouse, the chunkey and stickball fields, and the council house. The chief's "precinct" within the town was as much a venue for administrative decisions, as it was for conducting ceremonies and rituals, especially those associated with diplomacy, feasting, gift-giving, and warfare. A division's secondary centers, comprised of numerous hamlets and farmsteads, were governed by lower ranking elites (Lee 2003, 57). Hamlet-level leaders were chosen from a local senior ranking matrilineage, while farmstead leadership generally resided with the eldest male of the local dominant matrilineage. The secondary centers may have been separate *oklas* at some point in the past but had been absorbed by larger and more dominant *oklas*. The matriclans, matrilineages, moieties, and *oklas* were ranked and characterized as red and white, senior and junior (O'Brien 2002, 17). Each moiety, *Inholata* and *Imoklasha*, had ritual and social responsibilities with the Choctaw villages (Galloway 2006, 363).

The ancestors of the Choctaw settled on the headwaters of three different watersheds in east-central Mississippi: Chickasawhay, Pearl, and Sucarnoochee. These were river systems with which they were already associated and familiar and their movement into these areas may have been only a relatively short distance. While the ancestral homeland is usually thought of as three districts or divisions (Eastern, Southern, and Western), they are sometimes considered as four areas, with the Southern division being divided into Chickasawah and Sixtowns districts (Galloway 1995, 353–4). These headwater areas of migration destinations represent a long process of movement into different watersheds occupied at varying times by distinctly different people, who interacted with one another, but despite their loosely shared culture, constituted political factions within the confederacy (Galloway 1982a).

Characteristics of coalescence observed for the Choctaw polities that moved into the homeland include collective leadership, especially councils and council houses; establishment of migration narratives that de-emphasize justifications of social hierarchies; increased defense, including fortifications; changes in trade and production that placed new demands on labor, especially that of women; linguistic alterity, often seen as dialectical differences; maintenance of ethnic boundaries;

movement to familiar, but new areas for settlement; and multi-ethnic populations. In addition, coalescence also involves increases in corporate kin groups, "including greater emphasis on moieties, unilineal (often matrilineal) descent groups, clan systems; sodalities; rituals of intensification; sports events" (Kowalewski 2006, 117). Balance among these institutions is sought between the authority and legitimacy of privileged matrilineages and an emerging ethos of collective and universalizing ideologies, with social trends that downplay personalized leadership and centralized hierarchical authority. Ritual sodalities, for example, are more likely to flourish in regions that are ethnically diverse because of migration (Ware 2014, 114) and serve to link elites among migrant polities.

Refugee groups that left their homelands appear to have joined "a 'native' core population already living on the headwaters of the Pearl River" (Galloway 2009, 333). These Upper Pearl River people may have been the original Mississippian population to which migrating polities coalesced, eventually forming the Chahta homeland. Thus, an early and ancestral polity came to be known as the Western Division or *Okla Falaya*. These polities maintained close alliances and relations with groups to the north and west, especially the neighboring Chakchiuma and Chickasaw. By 1650 areas of the Black Belt, immediately to the north of the Upper Pearl drainage, appear to have been largely abandoned, with the Chickasaw moving north (Ethridge 2010, 74–5). Other groups may have joined the *Okla Falaya*, especially in light of the 16th century drought.

The Eastern Division, known as the *Okla Tannap* or *Ahepat* people, is comprised of several groups or polities that settled in the late 16th century along the northeastern portion of the homeland just east of the *Okla Falaya* villages on the southwestern tributaries of the Tombigbee River (Noxubee and the Sucarnoochee rivers). The Eastern Division maintained alliance relations with polities to the east, including the Alabama and Concha (Galloway 1995). They appear to have originated from the Apafalaya province, which had been visited by both the de Soto and Luna expeditions. A province of five towns, the Apafalaya polity was located on the Lower Black Warrior River and had buffer zones separating the province from the Chicasa to the northwest and Mabila to the southeast (Ethridge *et al.* 2009, 178).

The *Okla Tannap* people may have left their Black Warrior River homeland because of the Spanish presence but it is more likely that they left as a result of an ongoing drought, or perhaps a combination of both external factors. The de Soto expedition visited the polity in 1540 and, in 1542, the worst drought between 1000 and 2000 CE took place (Fig. 4.3). The Luna expedition visited the polity in 1560 and its 1500 colonists quickly exhausted the food supply (Priestley 1928). The years 1569 and 1587 were especially severe drought years within the megadrought with 17 of those years resulting in crop failures. Established PDSI (Palmer Drought Severity Index) values above +4 and below −2 are enrolled as a proxy for horticultural downturns and storage shortfalls (Meeks and Anderson 2013). While early colonial period Mississippian polities expressed resilience through varying modes as multiple scales of adjustments to extreme droughts, people react to droughts differently across space and through time, based on the articulation of political efficacy, ritual practice, and social actors.

People entered the southern portion of the Chahta homeland after the *Okla Falaya* and *Okla Tannap* division polities were in place. As is the case with the northern portion of the homeland, the southern area is sometimes further divided into two divisions. The Chickasawhas Division comprised people from southwestern Alabama, perhaps from polities located on the Lower Tombigbee River and the delta formed by the Mobile and Tensaw rivers, and continued alliances with those polities remaining in southwestern Alabama. They moved up the Chickasawha River sometime in the early to mid-17th century into the southeastern section of the Chahta homeland, occupying the central and southern drainage of the Chickasawha River to the south of the Eastern division polities. They may have settled on lands they had used as hunting territories for some time, thus claiming the land through prior usufruct rights (Galloway 1995, 353).

Recent ceramic analysis suggests these Chickasawhay polities brought vessels with them from southwestern Alabama (Wright 2019, 75–8); the vessels serving to maintain social boundaries among distinct social groups. Social cohesion was promoted through the integration and reconfiguration of pre-existing practices and traditions of multiple polities and their matrilineages. The heterogenous composition of ceramics suggest the presence of social boundaries consistent with those expected in a coalescent society. Recent radiocarbon dates and ceramic analysis suggest the 1650–1685 fits well with the earliest 17th-century written references to a confederated group of polities whose identity at some

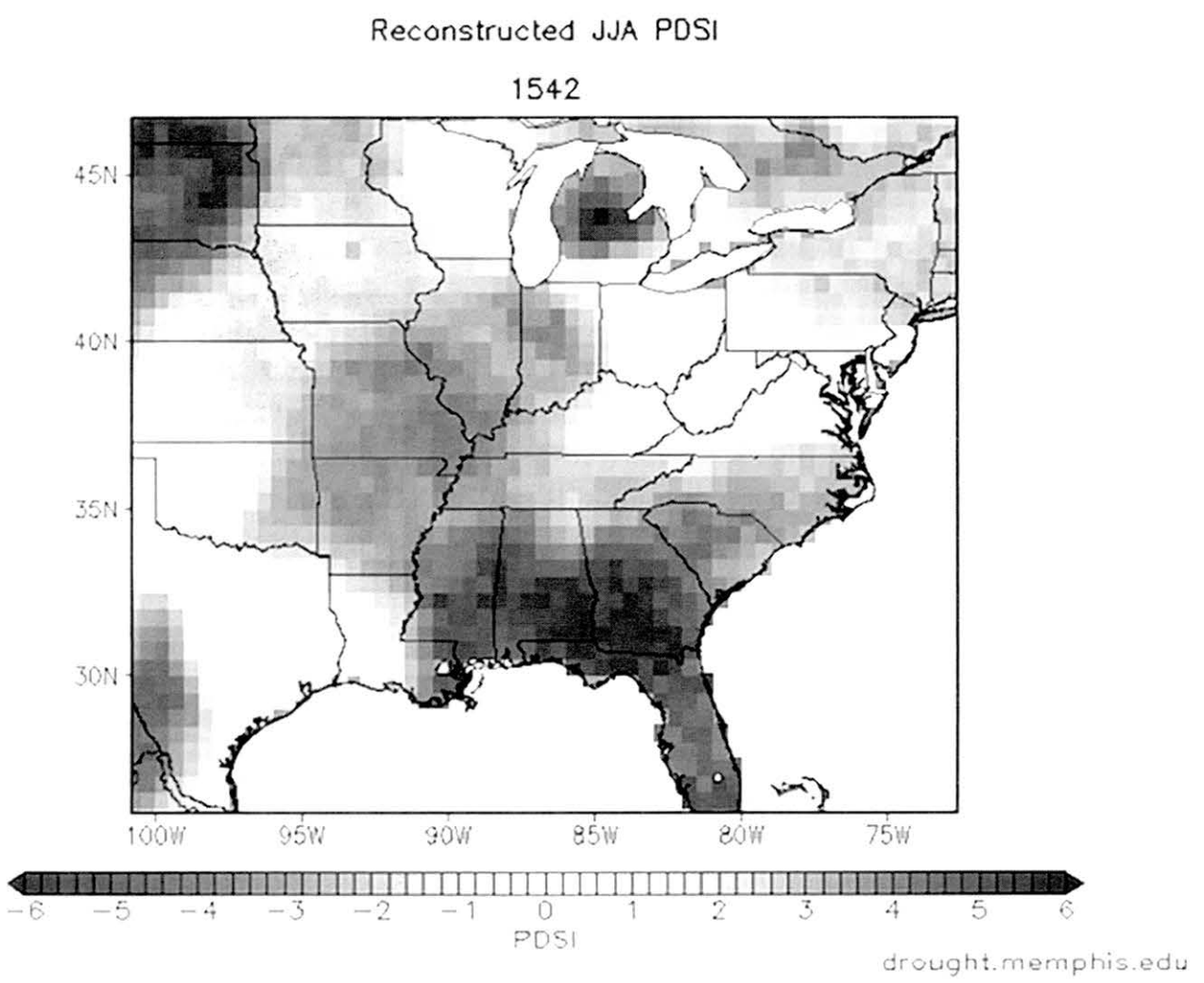

Fig. 4.3 Composite map representing average summer PDSI conditions of the Choctaw homeland and surrounding region for 1542. Data from Cook *et al.* (2010)

level was that of the Chahtas (Little *et al.* 2020, 248–9). On the southwestern section of the Southern Division, additional polities also arrived in the mid-17th century, settling on the upper headwaters of the Leaf and the western branches of the Pascagoula.

The regional coalescence model has been questioned by Aubra Lee (2003, 39), who argues that the Chahta homeland resulted from a "long term *in situ* development rather than a recently coalesced group of disparate immigrants". According to Lee's model, the Chahta homeland was occupied by Mississippian people during the Late Mississippian/early colonial period and was comprised of numerous, small, chiefly polities throughout the Mississippi hill country. The decline of large regional polities in the mid-16th century created power vacuums that allowed less complex regional polities to become increasingly powerful. Finally, the various *in situ oklas*, as component groups of the Chahta homeland, retained conservative political, ritual, and social practices; thus, the matrilineages/noble houses may have been relatively intact during the confederation process. Thus, rather than collapse, the Choctaw sociopolitical organization was "modified incrementally as a result of intense pressure from the Euroamericans" with the greatest change in government taking place in the early 19th century (Lee 2003, 277).

As the *oklas* were composed of multiple matrilineages of varying ranks and sizes, movement of the polities or allied matrilineages (noble houses) into the Chahta homeland or *in situ* confederation took place over a century or so, with different kin and sodality groups moving at different times and to varying locales. In cases where migration took place, people likely moved along rivers and prairie corridors from the original homelands into new landscapes perhaps due to climate change rather than European disease or warfare. These population movements or *in situ* polity consolidation eventually resulted in several divisions located on different watersheds with well-defined identities, indicating polity resilience and transformation. The divisions were relatively late creations and included multiple *oklas*, which were consolidated, as more powerful *oklas* gained ascendancy or sovereignty over the others (Halbert 1901, 379). Social connections linked earlier homelands, in those cases of polity movement, as evidenced by continued contacts with their former communities, perhaps for a time as a kind of circular migration from new homelands to ancestral homelands and back again. An unknown number of groups may have been resident in the homeland as Mississippian chiefly polities, while others may have moved only a short distance as intact polities or matrilineage noble houses. The 16th century droughts between 1532 and 1599 may have been more impactful than Spanish expeditions suggesting the polities were not migrating shattered remnants. As people moved into the Chahta homeland their continued separate identities suggest the mechanisms for confederation had been undergoing council decisions and negotiations for some time.

While political, ritual, and social institutions were transplanted from earlier homelands, conservative as well as novel transformations enhanced peaceful interactions, to dampen contestations over domains and resources, and to negotiate common concerns, conflicts, and interests. However, there is a lack of evidence

that the proto-Chahta of the late 16th and early 17th century were radically transformed; they were not "violently undermined, either through outright physical annihilation, disease, and enslavement, or profound socioeconomic and political changes wrought by the inauguration of the early modern world-system" (Benvenuto 2014, 220). Instead, coalescence is now seen as "a normal feature of the human condition" (Cable 2020, 247), that characterized Mississippian polities for centuries. Rather than considering the political divisions of the 18th century and their constituent *oklas* as sociopolitical remnants of refugee groups, a more nuanced interpretation suggests that the proto-Chahta were comprised of an interacting matrix of matrilineages functioning as noble houses capable of biological and social reproduction that moved from one ancestral land to a place that was already familiar and well-known.

Migrant polities in the Chahta homeland in the late 16th century would have witnessed competition among landowning, kin-based, corporate groups that validated their rank by dominating key community rituals. Polities at the initial chain of migration would have formed the founding descent groups, allowing control over a community's prime farmland and hunting grounds, which provided an edge in social competition and placement at the apex of regional social networks. Ritual institutions would have maintained deep roots in Mississippian ritual traditions rather than experiencing sharp breaks with past institutions, especially medicine lodges/ritual sodalities. The decrease in the movement of exotics and sacra witnessed in the 16th and 17th centuries is consistent with the decline of ritual sodalities (*sensu* Ware 2014, 137).

With the Choctaw population estimated to have included some 28,000 people in 1685 (Wood 2006, 97), the period of coalescence over the past century was hardly one of "radical collapse and transformation of proto-Choctaw groups" (Benvenuto 2014, 210), or of one cobbled together from the shattered remnants of early contact period Mississippian polities. Chahta population declines are more likely to have taken place from the shatter zone effects of slaving, trading, and accelerated warfare that began in the 1680s but, even then, the Choctaws were on the border of the shatter zone (Galloway 2009, 359). It is more likely that multi-decadel droughts prompted populations to leave their homelands, which would account for existing political, ritual, and social institutions remaining relatively intact. While whole polities may have migrated as functioning *oklas*, ritual and social cleavage planes for population movements would have taken place as multiple, connected matrilineages and social houses, thus allowing for continued political, ritual, and social reproduction upon arrival of those entering new locations. The resilience of the Mississippian polity/Chahta *okla* is such that while the polity may move to another location, the polity name stays firm, and that larger groupings beyond the *okla* level are temporary at best (Lankford 1981, 54). Choctaw ranked *oklas* were conceived as part of a red/white dualism (Blitz 1985) and such ranked dualities resulted from older *oklas* being considered ancient, established, and pure, and thus higher ranked and symbolically "white". Red *oklas* were those that arrived later, and thus were considered alien, external, foreign, and lower ranked (Hudson 1976, 237).

Eighteenth century Choctaw ritual practice

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries the most comprehensive level of Choctaw political organization consisted of the various divisions and *oklas* joined together in an informal, loosely structured confederacy (Blitz 1985, 12). By the beginning of the 18th century, the Chahta homeland population stood at approximately 21,000 people residing in some 50 administrative centers and villages (Wood 2006, 96–9). The drop in population from the 1685 estimate may stem from British-Chickasaw attacks and slave raids, rather than disease or droughts, as climate generally improved in the seventeenth century. An ethnic identity of being "Chahta" was in existence by the time of first contact with the English and French and the ongoing mechanisms that promoted such an identity would have been operative for some time (Galloway 2009, 335–6). The first mention of the Chahta as an identity for a group of people appears in 1675 (Wenhold 1936) and recognition of their organization into a multi-ethnic confederacy was noted in 1702 (Galloway 1982b). But ethnos identity at the *oklas* level held fast despite mechanisms to bind separate and independent *oklas* at division and confederacy levels.

Social boundaries distinguishing migrant groups were becoming more permeable, although differences in ethnicity, identity, and speech exhibit social resilience. For example, dialectical differences among Mississippi Choctaw communities still exist, as do gender and generational distinctions in speech. *Okla* affiliation and identification is characterized by differences in dialect, dress, and other types of social behavior (Blitz 1985, 13), which reached back to Mississippian times. Henry Halbert (1893, 146) noted in the late 19th century that there were words peculiar to the Six Towns Choctaws, which were never heard among Choctaws of other localities. The Six Town people were also distinguished from other Choctaws by their practice of mouth tattooing (Swanton 1931, 57).

The earliest accounts of Choctaw ritual practice reveal a rich shamanic complex, with beliefs in guardian spirits, conjuring, magical healing, legerdemain, prognostication, and witchcraft. An anonymous French eyewitness (Swanton 1918), perhaps writing in the early 18th century, is the earliest account of Choctaw ritual practice. The author notes that skills among the "jugglers" includes invoking or conjuring the "devil". These "doctors" "have much to fear when they undertake the case of a sick person who is a chief, for if he dies after they have conjured, the doctor's relatives say that he has bewitched the patient, and if the doctor escapes after he has been condemned to death, they say that he had bewitched him and that fate has erred; so in all ways he runs the risk of being killed" (Swanton 1918, 61–2). Choctaw doctors heal the sick by conjuring their (personal) spirit to ascertain if the sick person will get well. They bleed the patient through an incision made with a piece of flint and place a horn cup over the incisions until it is full of blood. To identify the person who has "thrown a spell" over the patient and caused the illness or misfortune, the doctor places some bison wool or piece of wood in the bottom of the cup and then shows the "charm" to the patient as evidence of sorcery or witchcraft. The identity of the culprit could then be ascertained, and punishment meted out.

The "Anonymous Relation" cites three examples where "these jugglers speak to the devil". In the first case, the practice of legerdemain and supplicating guardian spirits by chiefs is described. Fine Teeth, chief of the Naniabas, could

not find his tobacco, which had been placed in a chest for safekeeping. Fine Teeth dressed and applied paint to himself "as if he were going to a dance". He then went to an open space a gunshot distant from the house. He filled his pipe and lit it, and then smoked it with many "gesticulations, as if he were disputing with someone". Then he "gave it to someone else to smoke, without, however, our seeing anyone, except that he held his pipe at a distance from himself, and the smoke came out in puffs as if someone smoked it". He then returned and told the Frenchmen that he knew who had stolen the tobacco. When Fine Teeth found the accused, he demanded the return of his tobacco, explaining to the thief under what circumstances it had been taken. The thief admitted his crime and returned the tobacco to Fine Teeth.

In the second example, the French are curious regarding the chief's ritual skills and they ask him to "make" the Otter dance.

> He took his tobacco-pouch which was an otter skin in which he kept his pipe and his tobacco, which he threw into the middle of an open place where the people were assembled to judge of his skill; after he had uttered a number of badly articulated words and thrown himself repeatedly into the fire, from which he came out in a perspiration, and without being burned, this skin [otter bundle] was seen to swell out, fill with flesh, and come to life, and to run between the legs of the Frenchmen, some of whom in the company having carressed [*sic*] it and felt of it, found that it was like a true otter. When each one was satisfied it returned to the same place where it had come to life and was seen to diminish in size and return to the form which it had before.

In the third example, the author describes Choctaw beliefs in prognostication:

> When we were surrounded by the Spaniards in Dauphin island, and were expecting help from France from day to day, we wished to know whether it was on the point of arriving, which could only be known by means of the savages whom we had with us. They were then made to conjure, and having done this they reported that five vessels would come the next day, three of which were large and two smaller, that they were loaded with soldiers, that one of the little ones would not arrive as soon as the others, because it was separated and was still a long way off, but that all would have arrived the next day toward evening. This actually took place, for the next day at eight in the morning the first vessel was discovered, and about three or four in the afternoon four anchored at Dauphin island, but the fifth did not come in until the next day.

These examples of chiefly ritual efficacy are seated in communication with tutelaries, healing, legerdemain, and prognostication.

The early 18th-century French eyewitness account documents chiefly ritual practice, which includes conjuring, beliefs in guardian spirits, feasting, magical healing, legerdemain or juggling, prognostication, purification, and witchcraft. Chiefs administered medicine, probably the Black Drink, which was taken for purification through vomiting (Emerson 2018). Purification was also achieved through sweat lodges, which were being employed in the late 20th century. They believed in the Afterworld everyone performs the same acts as in this world. Chiefs had separate charnel houses from commoners. The "medicine-man" provided warriors with libations of the herbal medicines which they rubbed on themselves for courage and strength (Swanton 1918, 61–3).

Ritual practices and social institutions promoted interregional cooperation among individuals and dampened intercommunity conflict and violence. Strategic matrilineal marriages, as well as cross-cutting ritual sodalities, may have been responsible for linkages among strong noble houses and for fostering connections among powerful families, which helped unite communities and villages. The resilience of Mississippian ritual practice, rather than being radically transformed, maintained key features from their Mississippian ancestors. Choctaw political authority was embedded in the ritual practices of diplomacy, feasting, gifting, and warfare, especially in the 18th century. Ritual practitioner agency continued into the 19th century but became transformed through changes in sources of power.

Choctaw ritual practice in the 19th and 20th centuries

By the early 19th century a deepening split within Choctaw society found traditionally minded pursuers of spiritual power increasingly excluded from elite positions of power (O'Brien 2002, 106). With this divide, chiefly ritual practice may have been divorced or marginalized from noble houses; ritual sodalities also may have undergone a rapid demise as ritual practitioners suffered status loss. However, people still sought the help of those who possessed spiritual skills, such as doctoring, ferreting out witches, herbalism, and rainmaking. Descriptions of traditional ritual practitioners were recorded by missionaries in the 19th century, often documenting the knowledge of older Choctaws who remembered the ritual practices of the late 18th century. The modern terms for three ritual specialists, *alikchi*, *hopaii*, and *istahollo* represent the resilience of these older conceptions of power and ritual and suggest the degree of conservatism for Mississippian ritual agency, practice, and ethos.

Cyrus Byington, a missionary who began work with the Choctaws in 1821, compiled a dictionary which is helpful in defining ritual terms and recognizing ritual agency and practice in the late 18th to mid-19th centuries. About the time Byington was compiling his dictionary, healing or providing herbal curatives were being severed from chiefly affiliations and functions. Byington (1915, 38) identifies an *alikchi* as one who administers medicine and attends to the sick; the term is often translated as "doctor". The use of the sweat lodge for purification was still in existence, as Byington notes for the treatment of rheumatism: "the patient shuts himself up in a hot house, strips himself naked, makes a fire, and lies there and sweats freely. He then takes a fragment of a bottle and scarifies himself. After this he goes to a creek and bathes and anoints his body with oil". Horatio Cushman (1899, 258–60) also describes curing through the sweat lodge as being overseen by the *alikchi*, and notes that if the patient died the *alikchi* readily found a cause for his inefficacy to effect a cure, which involved identifying and killing someone as the witch who caused the death, illness, or misfortune (Swanton 1932, 416).

The use of *alikchi* as a moniker for a spiritual healer is still in use today. The Little People are often the ones who "call" an individual to become an *alikchi* (Blanchard 1981, 150). *Alikchis* are highly respected and although they often assume an impoverished appearance to demonstrate their rejection of material values, they charge fees to cure the injured and sick, and prepare amulets, including personal

medicine bundles. A contemporary Mississippi Choctaw *alikchi*, James Johnson, explains, "Basically, you test where the pain is. You feel the pain and you close your eyes and just kind of observe it. At that time is when you see through your visions the cause of the pain." Johnson was trained by his grandfather and hopes to hand down the tradition to his grandchildren (Knispel 2011).

Hopaii, on the other hand, were seen as augurs, priests, prophets, or seers, who often served as military or war leaders (Byington 1915, 165). Their role as prophets in the 18th century was crucial to attacks on an enemy and for controlling the destiny of a battle from afar, which demonstrated their spiritual powers (O'Brien 2002, 29). Hereditary claims, as well as conducting and scheduling feasts and rituals, laid the foundation for elite status that began to change in the early 19th century. Distinctions between a *hopaii* as a prophet and as a witch began to fade, or at least the perceptions of the *hopaii* became increasingly negative during that century.

A person who has the power to heal also has the power to destroy and that power to destroy could be deployed by a prophet as well as a witch. As Annemarie Shimony (1961, 267) notes, "whoever is close to Indian medicine is close to witchcraft". In 1829 the Choctaw passed a law allowing a person accused of witchcraft the benefit of a trial (Debo 1972, 46–7). Laws concerning murder promulgated in 1834 specifically included killing a suspected witch (Debo 1972, 177). As late as 1884, a Mississippi Choctaw woman accused of witchcraft was secretly executed through the process of customary law (Halbert 1896, 536). Witchcraft accusations typically take place when inexplicable coincidences happened (Allan 1985, 26), but they may be used to remove political rivels. Witches are often employed in ballgames to place curses on individual players, to hex equipment, and to fix games (Blanchard 1981, 155–63). The social logic of witchcraft centers on the idea that a witch's lifespan and power are gained at the expense of others, thus being elderly may be construed as an indication or proof of witchcraft practice. *Ishtahullos* may also bewitch, but they more generally perform miracles, especially legerdemain (Byington 1915, 202), enforce moral standards, and promote spiritual definitions of power (O'Brien 1998, 195). They mediate between people and supernatural forces, control the weather, foretell future events, and give good or ill success to any undertaking (O'Brien 2002, 106). What Europeans referred to as conjurers, "medicine men", and rainmakers were generally considered by the Choctaw as *ishtahullos*, as were those who conjured, solicited rain, and supplicated personal guardian spirits for health, help, and power. Although they typically possessed high rank within the Choctaw community, the appellation might also serve as a general term for anyone through whom spirits make themselves manifest and who, being endowed with "occult" power, could perform miracles. James Adair (Williams 1930, 48) noted for the 18th century that both men and women could be *ishtahullos*.

Ishtahullo refers to "whatever excites surprise, and also any thing which they conceive to possess some occult or superior power. Hence it is the name they give to witches" (Wright 1828, 179). As a method of public censure, *ishtahullos* had the ability to expose witches through the help of their guardian spirits but they could also practice witchcraft (O'Brien 2002, 76). Throughout the 19th century people believed *ishtahullos* could ferret out and identify witches, who would then be punished with death or starvation. Gideon Lincecum (1906, 454) noted that it was the custom in the mid-19th century for an *ishtahullo* to accompany and conjure for

war parties. As members of war parties, *ishtahullos* urged warriors to victory with tales of valor, but they were forbidden to spill blood (O'Brien 2002, 36).

The concept of *ishtahullo* implies mystical powers manifested in "dreams, in thunder and lightning, eclipses, meteors, comets" and other supernatural events and things in nature or the transcendental actions of humans (Kidwell 1995, 7). As is the case with the *alikchi*, when an *ishtahullo* as a rainmaker failed to produce rain, they attributed their lack of success to the "shortcomings of the people" (Braund 1999, 86). Rainmakers sometimes joined forces with other *ishtahullos* if a drought was particularly serious, perhaps reflecting the organization of earlier medicine lodges or ritual sodalities. To acquire supernatural favor, they danced around a tree that had been struck by lightning, sang songs, and made spiritual medicine from sacred plants (O'Brien 1998, 195).

In the first half of the 19th century rainmakers were known to kill their competitors through accusations of witchcraft. Rainmakers enjoyed a reputation for success well into the 19th century (O'Brien 2002, 107). In the 1960s the Choctaw at Chucalissa were called upon by the City of Memphis to terminate a summer drought, which ended once the ritual had been performed. By the late 20th century the major ritual roles of the past had been narrowed to include only spiritual doctors (*alikchi*) and witches (*hopaii*) (Blanchard 1981, 156). Choctaw religion and ritual, in addition to genealogical connections and success in warfare, operated as a social field in which people legitimized elite authority, interests, and rulership. The inter-relationship of politics and religion involved connections with other-than-human beings and performances that activated these entanglements.

Conclusion

Choctaw ritual agency, practice, and themes are deeply rooted in Mississippian political, religious, and social practice. The endurance and resilience of pre-contact ritual traditions, challenge claims of radical collapse and transformation in the mid-16th and 17th centuries. Highlighting the resilience of Indigenous belief systems brings into sharper focus the conservativeness and resilience of religious traditions, the endurance of ritual agency, and the continuation of multi-level matrices of regional political, ritual, and social practices. The Choctaw case study demonstrates both the "ever-changing and never-changing" aspects of ritual practice, while also providing insights into the resilience of Mississippian cosmology and religious beliefs.

Despite major transformations in the Choctaw belief system, ritual practice based on Mississippian cosmological concepts continues, although it has become increasingly secretive, having gone underground. The process of ritual submergence is well-documented throughout the world in the 18th century with the onslaught of European colonialism, ethnocentrism, and hubris (Flaherty 1992). The Choctaw people, as Mississippian descendants, retain core features of ancient political, ritual, and social practices that continue to present. Rather than the tattered remnants of former chiefly polities that suffered a catastrophic collapse, Choctaw ritual practice reveals resilience coupled with transformation throughout their lived experiences in the Chahta homeland.

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