

Estelusti Marginality: A Qualitative Examination of the Black Seminole

by

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Abstract

Approximately four years ago, I began collecting interview data with Black Seminoles/Estelusti in Oklahoma. My research focused on how the Black Seminoles negotiated their marginal status within the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma and with non-freedman Blacks. Using Weisberger's (1992) marginality construct, I found that the Estelusti most often employed 'poise' to manage their state of 'double ambivalence'. This study further explored the issue of Black Seminole marginality after their reintegration into the cultural group in 2003. My findings, while different in specifics, were generally consistent with those found a few years earlier. The Black Seminoles still appear to experience significant marginality and are not fully accepted by the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma.

Introduction

African Americans have always maintained a marginal status position in the United States and across the Diaspora. In many studies of Black status, the focus has been in the areas of socioeconomic status and residential segregation (e.g., Massey and Denton, 1993; Oliver and Shapiro, 2006; and Shapiro, 2004). On the other hand, a substantial number of studies have devoted attention to the racial status of blacks vis-à-vis other groups, particularly whites (Anderson, 2001; Diop, 1974; and Karenga, 2002).

The present study examined the marginality, i.e., state of “double ambivalence”, experienced by the Estelusti or Black Seminoles within the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma (Robertson, 2006, p. 33). Weisberger’s (1992) construct of marginality was employed in this re-examination of Black Seminole ethnic group “double ambivalence” as used in Robertson’s (2006) original work on Black Seminole marginality. Finally, the Black Seminoles or Estelusti, who are comprised of individuals of both mixed Seminole and African American, i.e., Black, ancestry (and those people of African ancestry who came to live among them) that today are scattered throughout Oklahoma and Florida (Robertson, 2002). They became official members of the Seminole ethnic group upon the signing of the U.S.-Seminole treaty of 1866 (Mulroy, 1993; Robertson, 2002, 2006; and Twyman, 1999).

Review of Literature

The review of literature examined antecedents to the marginal status of the Black Seminoles. Through a socio-historical investigation of the plight of Blacks with some traceable ancestry in the Seminole ethnic group, the following events were selected in this study of Black Seminole marginality: allotment, Jim Crow, enslavement, money, and ethnic group expulsion and reintegration.

Allotment Period

Senator Henry Dawes created the Dawes Commission via the Dawes Severalty Act of 1887 (Bateman, 1991; Foreman, 1942). The commission mandated the allotment of lands in severalty to Indians on various reservations and to extend the protection of the laws of the United States to the Indian territories (Perdue and Green, 2001). The Seminoles commenced their enrollment process on December 16, 1897 and closed their rolls on December 31, 1899 (Mulroy, 2007). The final rolls included “1,890 Seminoles by blood, 248 Newborn Seminoles, 857 freedmen, 129 Newborn freedmen, for a grand total of 3,124 citizens” (Mulroy, 2007, p. 299).

The commission gave each Seminole and Black Seminole 120 acres, with forty acres designated as nontaxable (Mulroy, 2007). Notwithstanding the fact that the commission did not initially call for separate rolls, Mulroy (2007, p. 296) states “the commissioners soon found it expedient to create two Seminole rolls, one for Indians by blood: and one for freedmen.”

The Dawes Commission was the first official governmental mechanism/agency that provided legal designations as to who “was” and who “was not” an Indian. Therefore, it laid the foundation for the determination of eligibility for Bureau of Indian Affairs programs and for social definitions of racial heritage among the Seminoles and the Black Seminoles/Seminole Freedmen that would become more salient among future generations (Bateman, 1991). Perdue and Green (2001, p. 118) argue that the ethnic group rolls created by the commission “reflected the racial thinking of the turn-of-the-century Americans. The ethnic group rolls carefully categorized the racial composition of each citizen.” Along with this, it can be seen as at least partly responsible for the development of a “social pretext” wherein the Seminoles could view themselves as separate from the Freedmen through its creation of separate rolls for each group (Saito, 2000).

The Dawes Commission in 1896 began conducting an ethnic group census in preparation for allotments (Saito, 2000). The commission was responsible for negotiation with the “five civilized tribes” and establishing census rolls to ensure efficient allotment of reservation lands (Mulroy, 1993; Saito, 2000). The commission separated individuals on the basis of blood quantum. More specifically, the rolls designated blood quantum as “3/4 or more Indian blood,” “one-half to three quarters,” “one half,” “less than one half,” “black,” and “white” (Foreman, 1942). The final commission count listed a total 101,526 men women and children that qualified as ethnic group citizens, eligible to receive an allotment (Foreman 1942). Specifically, 37,187 people were identified with a quantum of one half or more, 23,405 were blacks (formerly enslaved persons of Native Americans and their children), and the remaining 40,934 were designated as having under one half Indian blood (Foreman, 1942).

By 1897, the Seminoles reached an agreement with the commission and established their first ethnic group roll (Bateman, 1991). Regarding freedman status, two important points require mentioning. First, on the initial Seminole tribal roll (completed in 1897) there were the names of 2,826 Seminoles, of which, 830 were Black Seminoles (Bateman, 1991). Second, the rolls were separated in 1906 into categories of “Freedmen” and “Seminoles by blood” (Saito, 2000, p.14). The Freedmen category included family surnames like Abraham, Cudjo, Dindy, Primus, and Sandy, yet it did not include a blood quantum whereas the Seminoles did (Saito, 2000). This major distinction would be a basis for the future disenfranchisement of the Black Seminoles by way of not being able to participate in BIA services and in being considered “non-ethnic group members.”

Jim Crow

The creation of Jim Crow statutes became a part of the social fabric of Oklahoma upon the granting of statehood. As a result, the enactment segregation-based social policies (e.g., black codes) dealt another blow to black status within the minds of freedmen Seminoles. The separate but equal doctrine put forth in *Plessy vs. Ferguson of (1896)*, coupled with the racism inherent in the South, made times worse for blacks, including Black Seminoles. Moreover, the Oklahoma land rush of the late nineteenth century (which led to the influx of land-hungry whites) and the granting of statehood to Oklahoma on November 16, 1907, strained the Freedmen-Seminole relationship in several ways. First, the Seminole Freedmen/Black Seminoles were viewed as “black” and the Seminoles were categorized as “white.” This opened the door for the acceptance of the “Eurocentric” view of blacks as “biological inferiors” (Bateman, 1991). Next, land allotments introduced both groups to the concept of private land ownership and capitalism. Third, statehood and the discovery of oil allowed whites to capitalize on both groups’ inherent lack of education and business acumen regarding land management, subsequently allowing them to be “duped” out of their land by opportunistic whites (Bateman, 1991). Also, the separation of the two groups hastened the coming together of the Freedmen with African-Americans because of “their collective struggle” against racism and discrimination (Lawuyi, 1990).

Black Seminole Enslavement

Black Seminole enslavement differed greatly from that practiced by the other civilized ethnic groups (Katz, 1997; Porter et al., 1996; and Twyman, 1999). Divergences notwithstanding, Black Seminole enslavement requires examination because it is an indelible component to the development of an understanding of the numerous statuses occupied by the Black Seminoles/Estleusti within the contemporary Native American stratification system. Therefore, in the relationship between Seminole enslavement of Blacks and changing Black status, primary attention is devoted to the periods during and after removal (approximately 1838-1843) to Indian territory and up to the signing of the U.S.-Seminole Treaty in 1866. Why? For it was during the aforementioned time frame that the groundwork was laid for the contemporary views held by many, if not a majority, of Seminole ethnic group members toward the Estelusti. Case in point, Seminole Indian scholar Susan Miller expresses the following views of Black Seminoles:

Although their Maroon forebearers were indigenous people, today’s Freedmen (Black Seminoles) are aligning themselves as a people of a nation-state in the familiar colonial project of plundering a tribal nation. They cannot be indigenous Maroons and assimilated Americans, however, so their indigenous identity is at play in this transaction.

From an American Indian studies perspective, the Freedmen retain the indigenous status of their African forebearers, and therefore, the United States owes them recognition as an indigenous people. They would be true to their ancestors' heroic assertions of freedom not by plundering a North American tribe/ethnic group but by demanding the nation-to-nation relationship with the United States that the North American tribes/ethnic groups "enjoy." (Miller, 2005, p. 44).

In the following quote, Miller (2005) seems content in referring to the Black Seminoles as a group that is trying to plunder the Seminole Nation and who would be best served by seeking reparations from the United States government along with the status of a sovereign nation.

The major time period in which Black enslavement by the Seminoles began to change and Black status within the group took a nosedive was the 1840s (Littlefield, 1977; Mulroy, 1984). During this era, the Seminoles were removed to Indian Territory (covering parts of Oklahoma, Kansas and Arkansas) and were back under Creek ethnic rule. The toll that this change of residence to territory West of the Mississippi had on Freedmen (Black Seminole) status can be best understood by examining the collective impact of this phenomenon on several treaties, namely the Treaties of Fort Moultrie Creek (1823), Payne's Landing (1832), and the Indian Removal Act (1830).

The Treaty of Fort Moultrie Creek was signed on September 18, 1823, at a location just South of Saint Augustine, Florida (Kappler, 1904). The treaty is important in any delineation of Black Seminole status because the judgment fund disbursement was designated for members of the Seminole Nation as it existed in 1823. Further, the treaty could be viewed as the first official recognition by the U.S. government of the Seminoles as a nation independent from the Creeks (Opala, 1981; Twyman, 1999). As a result of this treaty, the government granted reservations to chiefs Neamathla, Mulatto King, Emaathlochee, Enchonetta, Blunt, and Micco (Kappler, 1904, p. 2). These major Seminole leaders ceded all of their claims to Florida except for a reservation on the Apalachicola (Mulroy, 1984). Most importantly, in regards to the status of Seminole freedmen, the Seminoles claimed the Blacks already among them as chattel and agreed to apprehend subsequent runaways (Covington, 1993; Porter et al., 1996). Further evidence of the relative importance of Blacks was the fact that Neamathla, principal Seminole spokesman, refused to enumerate the number of Blacks (roughly 800) living among them (Porter et al., 1996). He did not even list in the census the main Black Seminole town (Peliklakaha), (Porter et al., 1996, p. 28).

Finally, this treaty proved disastrous for the Seminoles in the following ways: 1) the food was inadequate in the designated area; and 2) the land was not arable. This resulted in the Seminoles trading black slaves for food and other provisions. So many Blacks were traded, in fact, that by 1826, only an estimated twenty remained (Porter et al., 1996, p. 25).

Conversely, the Seminole Freedmen, in many ways, were unlike other southern enslaved Blacks in that they were allowed to become successful entrepreneurs within their own separate communities on land that they cultivated (Opala, 1981; Porter et al., 1996). A contradictory line of reasoning suggests that throughout the relationship with the Seminoles, there always existed factions among the Seminoles that owned Blacks as chattel. For instance, some Freedmen were enslaved by Seminoles after the signing of the Treaty of Fort Moultrie Creek (1823). Others were enslaved during removal (1838-1843), whereas some were enslaved during their stay in Creek territory (1840s-1850s), and directly before and after the signing of the Seminole Treaty of 1866 (Bateman, 1990; Katz, 1997; Littlefield, 1977; Mulroy, 1993, 1984; Sattler, 1987). Therefore, I put forth the premise that it should not come as a surprise that there are still factions among the Seminoles who see Blacks as inferiors. Certainly, it cannot be said succinctly that all Seminoles feel this way. Then again, even those who do not share such sentiment stand by idly and allow the freedmen to be the unwilling recipients of racist and discriminatory treatment.

Money and Discrimination

A major cause of the differences in standing between the Seminoles and the Freedmen is money. The Seminoles have a storied legacy of separating themselves from Blacks when money and land are at stake. This legacy extends as far back as the Tripartite and Seminole-Creek treaties of 1845 and 1856, respectively (Mulroy, 1984). In each of these treaties, the government granted the Seminoles land and monies to establish schools and churches, and in each instance the Seminoles tried to oust Black members from the ethnic group (Mulroy, 1984). Additionally, a more contemporary illustration of the relationship between money, status, and separating themselves from Blacks can be seen by examining the events prior to and after the implementation of the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 (Bateman, 1990; Healey, 1995).

A contemporary example of discrimination, which was perpetrated by both the BIA and the Seminole Nation is the denial of Freedmen participation in monetary disbursements. The primary case has its origins in the 1950s. It was in 1950 and 1951 that the Seminole Nation of Oklahoma filed claims for lands in Florida ceded to the United States in the treaties of Fort Moultrie Creek and Payne's Landing (Gardne, 2001, p. 1 Saito, 2000, p. 14). The Seminole Nation was awarded \$16 million in 1976 by the Indian Claims Commission, which was placed in a trust. In 1990, Congress passed an act that allowed for the distribution of the funds with interest. By 1991 (when the money was disbursed) the amount had grown to \$56 million, 75% going to the Seminoles of Oklahoma, 25% to the Seminoles of Florida, and none to the Freedmen (McCabe, 1999; Gardne, 2001).

Interestingly, vis-à-vis the aforementioned is "that the Seminole Nation as existed in 1823 clearly included the Black Seminoles" (Saito, 2000, p. 114). The Black Seminoles were one of the principal reasons that the U.S. government took land from the Seminoles (Saito, 2000).

The justification typically given for not allowing the Freedmen to participate in judgment fund programs offered by both the BIA (Bureau of Indian Affairs) and the Seminoles is that at the time land was ceded in the Treaties of Payne's Landing (1832) and Fort Moultrie Creek (1823) the Freedmen were being enslaved and did not own any land (McCabe, 1999). I argue that not allowing the Freedmen participation in settlement funds is discriminatory because of the following reasons drawn from my socio-historical analysis. First, the Estelusti were the source of opposition to the U.S. government during the first and second Seminole Wars (Porter et al., 1996; Twyman, 1999). I surmise that the concessions made by the government, in the form of treaties, were in response to threat and presence of the Freedmen. It is plausible that these precautions would not have been made otherwise; 2) in the treaty of Payne's Landing (1832) it states that negotiators (Black Seminoles) Abraham and Cudjo were promised \$200 each for land that they cultivated (Kappler, 1904). This provides some question to their status as enslaved persons in the traditional sense (Opala, 1981).

The Seminole opposition to the participation of the Freedmen in the judgment fund distribution can be narrowed to five points (Bateman, 1990). First, the ancestors of the Freedmen were enslaved and owned no lands in Florida, and thus their descendants are not entitled to anything. Second, the Freedmen were not made citizens of the Seminole Nation until 1866. Third (which is very interesting), is that the other Indian Nations do not do anything for nor do they include their Freedmen as members, "so why should we?" Fourth, the Seminole Nation does not understand why the Estelusti have not used the influence of the Congressional Black Caucus to help the entire ethnic group. To add, the Seminoles wanted the Black Seminoles to decide whether or not they were going to be either "Black" or "Indian", but not both.

This explanation is most perplexing because the Freedmen have never been fully accepted by the Seminole Nation in order to qualify them to make such a decision. Fifth, the Seminole Nation perceived that the Freedmen taking their case to Washington (to the Congressional Black Caucus) as threatening, which they did not appreciate. Consequently, an additional area of concern was that by granting the Freedmen full membership, the Seminole Nation would reduce the number of Indians eligible for per capita payments and benefits (Bateman, 1991). This belief is held onto despite the explication by the Freedmen that they would only desire 1/7 of the monetary amount being awarded would correspond to the two Freedmen bands (of a total of 14), (McCabe, 1999).

Ethnic Group Expulsion and Reintegration

The most blatant and salient instance of discrimination by the Seminoles against the Freedmen involved expelling (i.e., kicking) them from the group on July 1, 2000 (Gardne, 2001; Sharpe, 2002). This act was initiated by a tribal constitutional referendum wherein nine questions were voted on and approved. Three of the voted on questions would disenfranchise the Freedmen who were made citizens in the U.S.-Seminole-Treaty of 1866. This act was in violation of Article 13 Seminole constitution and section 1302 of the Indian Civil Rights Act. Article 13 of the Seminole Constitution provides that the “constitution may only be amended by a majority vote of the qualified voters” (Sharpe, 2002, p. 2). However the amendments were illegal because they did not include the freedmen votes (who have always had tribal council voting privileges).

In October 2003 the Bureau of Indian Affairs issued a memorandum welcoming the Black Seminoles back into the ethnic group (Bentley, 2003). However, at this writing, the Black Seminoles are no better off in terms of receiving monetary disbursements than they were at the time they were expelled from the ethnic group. In other words, the Black Seminoles still cannot participate in the judgment fund monetary disbursements, medical/clothing assistance, and CDIB (Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood). Thus, the operative questions becomes: Will the Black Seminoles be viewed as complete equals vis-à-vis the Seminoles? Second, will the Black Seminoles a significant part of the ethnic group decision making apparatus? Thirdly, will this ruling bolster the claims of Blacks who were enslaved by other Native American ethnic groups (e.g., Chickasaw, Cherokee, and Choctaw)?

Methodology

Subjects

I conducted sixteen in-depth interviews with card-holding Black Seminoles from October 2006 through July 2007. By card-holding, I am referring to Black Seminoles who actually held a Seminole Freedman identification card. The card entitles its holder participation in some federally funded benefits (e.g., burial assistance, disaster relief) and ethnic group voting privileges. Most importantly, it designates the holder as a descendant of someone who was on the original freedman roll. Respondents were chosen via convenience sampling. Convenience sampling relies on subjects that are nearby or easily accessible. I was able to obtain respondents by contacting participants in my previous study, Robertson (2006), and asking some of them if they knew of any other Black Seminoles who would be willing to participate.

Data

I interviewed sixteen Black Seminoles over a nine month period. Each interview ranged from one to three hours, with the average interview lasting approximately an hour and thirty minutes. Despite, the fact that I interviewed sixteen subjects, only ten respondents provided information that would fit within Weisberger's (1992) marginality schemata.

Obstacles during the collection of data were: 1) not being completely trusted by some of the potential respondents; 2) in-depth interviewing is a highly subjective endeavor, thus accuracy of data was mediated by my skill at conducting interviews; and 3) the non-generalizability of a small, purposive/convenience sample. Additionally, a major problem with analyzing documents was my potential bias.

Setting

Numerous locations were utilized to obtain the interviews from the Black Seminoles. Twelve of the interviews were conducted in the respondents' homes. However, one interview was conducted at a restaurant, another at the respondents' place of employment, and another at a coffee shop.

The data were analyzed using content analysis according to the schemata explicated in Berg (2007). Berg (2007, p. 134) contends that content analysis is "the most obvious way to analyze interview data." In the present study, I employed latent content analysis. Latent content analysis allows one to discern the "deep structural meaning conveyed by the message" (Berg, 2007, p. 308). Therefore, content analysis is used to delineate several marginality response patterns emanating from the myriad of dilemmas encountered by the Estelust (e.g., ethnic group expulsion, money, and discrimination). Marginality was examined using the sociological construct presented by Weisberger (1992).

Constructing Marginality Among the Black Seminoles

This section focused on the ways in which the current sample of Black Seminoles alleviated their “double ambivalence” (Weisberger, 1992, p. 46). Therefore, the interview responses of the Black Seminole participants were analyzed using the dimensions of Weisberger’s (1992) marginality schemata: return, assimilation, poise, and transcendence.

Return

According to Weisberger (1992), return posits that the marginal individual makes a conscientious decision to come back to their original cultural group after a less than ideal experience with a foreign cultural group. The following responses capture the essence of return,

I do not participate (in the Seminole Nation) because of the problems associated with our full acceptance. They, the Seminoles, will only accept us if they have to. It is too difficult for them to accept us. However, the ethnic group is composed of other racial groups (e.g., whites, Asians). I was at a meeting and a young Cherokee Nation member said he “could not understand why his people would not fully accept Blacks when they have accepted other races.” They used to say that the white man speaks with a forked tongue, now the Indian speaks with a forked tongue.ⁱ

There are several ways in which the aforementioned statement is indicative of the desire to return. First, the Black Seminole says that he “no longer participates” in Seminole Nation ethnic group activities because of not receive full acceptance. Thus, the logical conclusion that can be gleaned from such a response is a desire to return to one’s indigenous Black cultural group. Secondly, the respondent suggests that the Seminoles accepts members of other races (e.g., white, Latino, and Asian) which tends to mirror the larger societal racial stratification system in which other non-whites are more readily accepted by whites than Blacks (Anderson, 1994; Karenga, 1998). Finally, the yearning to return is firmly cemented when the Black Seminole states that the “Indian speaks with a forked tongue” and there is no more honest in their dealings with Blacks than the larger white population.

Two different respondents lamented,

They really do not want the Freedmen (Black Seminoles) in the Seminole Nation.ⁱⁱ

They do not want us to get any benefits. They do not want us in the Nation (Seminole Nation).ⁱⁱⁱ

The second and third responses prove to be succinct examples of return. The second response asserts that the Seminoles do not want the Black Seminoles as equal members. The aforementioned is evidenced by the fact that the Seminoles expelled the Black members illegally in 2000 and only allowed them back into the Seminole Nation in 2003, with no change in status, so that the government would restore their ethnic group programs (Bentley, 2003; Miller, 2005).

Assimilation

Assimilation refers to the immersion into the cultural milieu of another group. In terms of Weisberger's (1992) marginality schemata, assimilation entails an individual discarding indigenous cultural standards and adopting those of another group. Responses that were deemed as following under the rubric of assimilation were those which articulated a strong interest in aligning oneself with the Seminole Nation and indentifying with aspects of Seminole culture. The following statements delineate significant assimilation,

The dominant culture is white culture, we are the subculture, and there is not much communication because of the allocation of money.^{iv}

My parents had more Indian ways than black ways. For instance, we ate a lot of traditional (Native American) foods: (1) fry bread; (2) grape dumplings; (3) sofkee, which is similar to hominy; and (4) wild onions. My parents also used medicinal herbs, such as calamus root for stomach aches. You pull up the calamus root and steep it up and drink it. Or, you can chew on the dry root. Another root is called mulligan. It is a thick leaf that you boil and place your foot in and it will reduce swelling.^v

My mother used to tell me in the past that Blacks and Indians used to live and work together. They used to speak Indian language. My mother would say things in Seminole all the time.^{vi}

As previously noted, the above responses are keen examples of assimilation. The subjects, in order to gauge the extent of their assimilation, were asked to describe the similarities between the two groups. Thus, it was assumed that if the participants were required to critically examine the cultural practices of both groups side by side, then answers indicating assimilation would be obtained.

The second respondent displayed an inordinate amount of assimilation. For example, an excessive degree of cultural immersion is discernible when the respondent posited that her parents had more “Indian ways” than African/Black ways. Such a statement lead one to believe that she was disavowing herself of any ancestral cultural connection with Africa and identifying with Native Americans. Evidence of a non-African cultural identification was further entrenched when she continued to mention the medicinal herbs used by Native Americans and not point out any of the contributions that people of African descent made to the Seminole culture, such as, rice cultivation, house building, and herding cattle (Opala, 1981; Robertson, 2002).

The first and third responses to this dimension of marginality did not demonstrate as much cultural immersion as the second, but nevertheless, showed a significant amount between them. The initial respondent used the pronoun “we” in describing both groups and how they were viewed by the dominant white culture. Such a comment presupposes that the two divergent groups are “one”, reflecting substantial assimilation. On the other hand, the third respondent relies on the fact of the use of Seminole language in the home to display a modicum of assimilation. In other words, the stress on how Indian/Native American language were used in the home as opposed to a dialect that represents a hybrid of the two groups (e.g., Gullah) or an African tongue is highly instructive.

Poise

Weisberger (1992) contends that poise represent a state position of cultural ambivalence. Further, it could be posited that poise, of the four dimension, is the clearest conceptualization of marginality. Poise can be gleaned from the following Black Seminole responses when asked to comment on what it meant to be a Black Seminole and how did he become aware of the Seminole side of his ancestry.

Black Seminoles share two cultures, both worlds, Black and Indian, and he cannot deny either. He is proud of both. I was introduced to my ancestry when I was a child, both the Freedman and Seminole, the groups were closer in those days. The Freedmen (Black Seminoles) had to take them (Seminoles) to court to show that they deserved the same benefits that Seminoles were receiving.^{vii}

During the Trail of Tears in Florida, the Seminoles and Seminole Freedmen (Black Seminoles) were seen and treated as equals, just as Indians. However, somewhere down the line the government got involved and separated the two groups. They (the government) got involved and took some Black roll numbers and gave them to whites.^{viii}

Poise can be discerned in each of the above responses. In the first response, the interviewee comments on how prior to government intervention, the two groups had a culturally symbiotic relationship. The participant goes on to elucidate that the Freedmen, i.e., the Black Seminoles, had to subsequently take the Seminole Nation to court to receive benefits (e.g., disbursement fund monies) for which they were entitled. The next response exemplifies the marginality inherent in poise in two ways. Foremost, the respondent alleged that the groups shared the same culture. While available research offerings (e.g., Mulroy, 2007; Opala, 1981) show that this is partially true, with each group sharing similar foods and some rituals, the Black Seminoles, for the most part, maintained separate living quarters (Mulroy, 2007; Robertson, 2006). The second portion of the retort asserts that the government separated the two groups. Once again, this is partly true. In 1906, the government created separate ethnic group rolls for Seminoles and Seminole Freedman (Black Seminoles), (Bateman, 1991; Robertson, 2006). However, prior to the separation of the rolls, the Seminoles attempted to expel its Black members: 1) after the second Seminole war; 2) during the 1850s; and finally 3) after the Civil War and prior to the signing of the Treaty of 1866 (Littelfield, 1981; Mulroy, 1984; and Robertson, 2006). The second comment points to the supposed “togetherness” of the two groups. For, instance during the infamous Trail of Tears and the government facilitating dissension and marginal Black Seminole status by allegedly giving Black Seminole roll numbers to white Seminoles. At the same time, it is not the author’s place to indict the government of the suspected offense, it deserves mentioning that the United States government perpetrated many overt and clandestine acts against its Black citizens (Karenga, 2002). Therefore, the supposed covert action is not beyond the realm of possibility. Moreover, in regards to poise, it is worth noting that Black Seminoles, as well as, Black Cherokees, Chickasaws, Choctaws, and Creeks maintained the seemingly marginal status of enslaved travelers along the infamous Trail of Tears during the removal period (Durant and Moliere, 1999; Robertson, 2002; and Twyman, 1999).

Transcendence

As discovered in previous work (Robertson, 2006) on this topic, transcendence was the least discernible marginality response pattern among the Black Seminoles. Transcendence entails the marginal individual creating a new cultural group to step beyond the paradox of two competing cultures. Nevertheless, most of the Black Seminoles, when rejected by the Seminoles, appeared to make a decision to go back to their indigenous Black culture group. Thus, in my analysis of the aforesaid marginality response pattern, I present statements from the subjects from which the potential for transcendence can be inferred.

Most Blacks do not know who the Black Seminoles are. I have to tell them about our history.^{ix} I rarely tell them (other Blacks) about being a Black Seminole. I feel that they would not know the significance of it.^x

They (the Seminoles) did not acknowledge anything since the 1970s. I had an uncle who was a part of the council (governing body), and he had a valid vote. But after he died in the 1970s, they no longer recognized the vote of the Freedmen (Black Seminoles). I am not sure if any of the Freedmen are on the board (ethnic group council) now, if they are, they do not have a vote, and the chief never acknowledges their votes.^{xi}

The following responses show potential for transcendence in several ways. Chiefly, all of the responses reach back to a pattern of thought similar to that which was presented in Lawuyi's (1985, 1990) demarcation of "state raised" versus "native" Blacks. Lawuyi (1990) explicated that before state imposed segregation in Oklahoma, Black Seminoles viewed themselves as "natives" and non-Seminole Blacks as "state-raised." The "natives" moniker meant that Black Seminoles saw themselves as superior to non-Seminole Blacks because they were not enslaved in a manner similar to which non-Seminole Blacks endured and were not, in essence, controlled by the state. In each of the documented responses, the participant concedes a lack of acceptance by Seminoles and a lack of comprehension of what it means to be a Black Seminole by non-Seminole Blacks. The discernible lack of complete acceptance by both groups serves as the foundation for creation a new hybrid culture. Secondly, the responses from interviews ten and thirteen, elucidate the fact that many non-Seminole Blacks do not very much about Black Seminole culture which it makes it unwise to assume that they truly belong to both groups. Moreover, the final response suggests that votes of Black Seminoles have never been full acknowledged by Seminole chiefs and would points to a lack of total inclusion, thus laying the groundwork for transcendence.

Summary and Discussion

Weisberger's typology was useful in constructing discourse on the cultural ambiguity of the Black Seminoles in both studies (previous and current). As alluded to in the prior work, the discipline of sociology has noted devoted much attention to this aspect of the African experience.

In my earlier work on Black Seminole marginality, racism was viewed as the primary cause for the participants who chose to return to their Black roots. The aforesaid desire gained saliency when the participants were subjected to disparaging comments when the inquired about their eligibility to receive monetary benefits. In the present study, the desire to return was fomented by statements reflecting the readiness of the Seminoles to accept non-Black members into the cultural group and their unwillingness to share any of the monetary disbursements.

Poise was displayed in my initial work by respondents that failed to acknowledge their African ancestry while simultaneously paying homage to their Seminole ancestry. In this study, cultural ambivalence was demonstrated by proclamations of a symbiotic relationship by the two groups prior to government intervention. Thus, the respondents did not appear to give a cultural group preeminence over the other in the contemporary work.

Transcendence was the only response pattern not clearly discernible in both studies. Responses in both works only allowed for the need to transcend to be inferred. Interestingly enough, transcendence was gleaned from statements in both projects to be illustrative of a complete lack of acceptance by both groups.

The demographics of the respondents were not documented in the primary work on this topic. In spite of this, in the present-day work, the demographic characteristics of the Black Seminoles were duly noted. The respondents ranged in age from their early twenties to their mid-eighties; all had at least completed high with some college (one had a graduate degree); ranged in income from 20K-60K; and five were females and four were males. It deserves to be mentioned that a few of the Black Seminoles did not care to reveal their incomes or their ages.

Data collection in Robertson (2006) took place five years prior to the collection of data in the current work, yet it was still determined that the Black Seminoles are a marginal cultural group. As a way of negotiating their marginal status, many Black Seminoles withdrew from participation in the Seminole Nation altogether. Conversely, a small minority are steadfast in their efforts to achieve full acceptance (Mulroy, 2007; Robertson, 2006).

The Black Seminoles were issued CDIB (Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood Cards) in September 2003 (Bentley, 2003). However, this ruling did not mean an end to Black inequality nor marginality. The Black Seminoles are still ineligible for disbursement fund monies are administered by the Seminoles themselves and are only available to those who are designated as having at least one-eighth Native American ancestry (Mulroy, 2007). Thus, the Black Seminoles became eligible, as a result of the 2003 decision, "to receive burial assistance, disaster relief, assistance to needy families, and child protective services from the BIA) (Mulroy, 2007, p. 320).

This study leaves a number of areas that warrant further exploration. First, what role does Black Seminole enslavement, despite the fact that it was not exactly the same as southern chattel enslavement, play as factor of the unwillingness of the Seminoles to grant its relatively small number of Black members full inclusion? What do the Black Seminoles know about the earlier efforts of the Seminoles to oust Black members (e.g., after the second Seminole and Civil wars and during the 1850s) as possible precipitators of existing treatment? Finally, how can African-centered scholarship link the plight of the Black Seminoles to the larger struggles for Black liberation and reparations in the United States, Africa, and across the Diaspora?

Notes

- i. Interview #12 with author, Oklahoma City, Ok., 5/26/07.
- ii. Interview #6 with author, Oklahoma City, Ok., 11/6/2006.
- iii. Interview #7 with author, Oklahoma City, Ok., 11/8/2006
- iv. Interview # 10 with author, Oklahoma City, Ok., 12/20/06.
- v. Interview # 13 with author, Oklahoma City, Ok., 5/27/07.
- vi. Interview #14 with author, Oklahoma City, Ok., 5/28/07.
- vii. Interview # 15 with author, Oklahoma City, OK., 7/11/2007.
- viii. Interview # 3 with author, Oklahoma City, OK., 10/19/2006.
- ix. Interview # 10 with author, Oklahoma City, Ok., 10/20/2006.
- x. Interview #13 with author, Oklahoma City, Ok., 5/27/07.
- xi. Interview #5 with author, second contact, Oklahoma City, Ok., 7/18/2007.

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