26. THE FIVE TRIBES OF THE SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES

Essay by *Michael D. Green*

The concept of the "Five Civilized Tribes" has been an important interpretive tool for students of the history of Indian Territory and Oklahoma. But it is an ethnocentric idea that is no longer meaningful. When the Europeans first began to explore and occupy North America, they were impressed by their discoveries that American Indians looked and lived much differently than did the European newcomers. As they tried to describe and categorize Native people, they used terms and ideas that reflected these obvious differences, but the standard by which they measured the differences was their own appearance and manner of living. It was easy, perhaps natural, for the Europeans to conclude that the differences were actually failures and that Native cultures were thus inferior to their own. From these conclusions came terms such as "savage" and "civilized": Europeans defined themselves as civilized and Indians as uncivilized or savage.

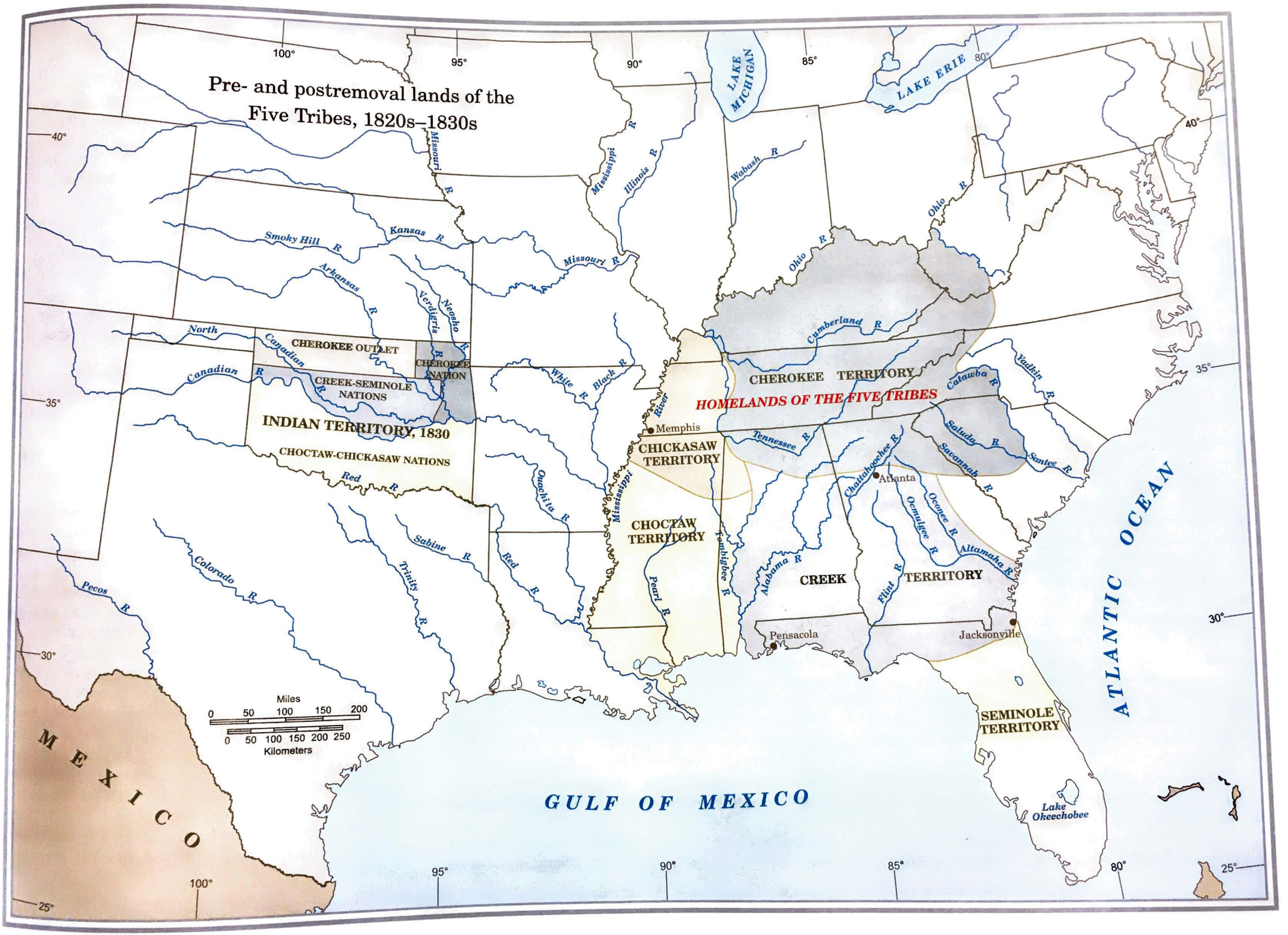
However, many Europeans and Anglo-Americans believed that the Indians could be guided from their savage condition to civilization. Some emphasized education and training, others believed that the goal could be achieved only through God's grace, and most thought that some combination of the two would be necessary, but—by whatever means—these would-be civilizers agreed that American Indians were not intellectually inferior and thus not doomed by race to remain forever uncivilized. Beginning in the early seventeenth century, for example, English colonists in Virginia developed a plan for the education of Native youths. Other plans followed, and by the end of the eighteenth century, some religious groups had established organized systems for missionary outreach. The U.S. government supported these efforts and encouraged the formation of additional civilizing agencies; beginning in 1819, Congress appropriated a $10,000 annual subsidy for Indian missions.

Missionaries and other Americans differed on the definition of civilization, at least in detail, but certain broad attributes seemed clear. Civilized Indian societies should be patterned after Anglo-American rural society in which the men were farmers and stock raisers and the women cooked, cleaned the house, wove cloth, and made clothes. They should live in houses as families, work their own land, attend a Christian church, and send their children to school. They should, in other words, be as much like Anglo-Americans in their appearance, way of life, and manner of belief as possible.

When the Indian nations of the U.S. Southeast were removed to the West in the 1820s and 1830s, they had been closely exposed to Anglo-American culture for a century and a half, and their cultures had changed dramatically. Already agriculturalists, they had become important in an international market economy by virtue of their trade in deerskins and slaves in exchange for manufactured goods. Prolonged contact with traders, including widespread intermarriage, introduced European culture in the most personal and intimate ways into Indian communities. Missionaries with schools and churches simply made decades of intercultural contact more formal and systematic. The immigrants to Indian Territory had by no means ceased to be Indians, but they were very different from what their ancestors had been, and the changes had made them more like Anglo-Americans. According to nineteenth-century thinking, they were becoming civilized. They were also very different from the nomadic, buffalo-hunting, teepee-dwelling Indians encountered on the plains. Anglo-Americans, still measuring Indian cultures by the standard of their own, continued to believe that the Southeastern refugees needed civilizing, but to distinguish them from the Plains Indians, the government began to refer to them as civilized. Thus, after removal, the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles became the "Five Civilized Tribes" of Indian Territory.

The problem with using such ethnocentric terminology is that it perpetuates the idea that there is only one civilization—that of Anglo-America—and those societies that do not embrace Anglo-American culture are therefore not civilized. Scholars now realize that concepts such as "civilized" and "savage" are relative, not absolute. They cannot describe the people to whom they are applied; they can only describe the attitudes and biases of the people who use them.

The Trail of Tears, *by Jerome Tiger. (Oklahoma Indian Art Gallery, courtesy of Peggy Tiger)*


Pre- and postremoval lands of the Five Tribes, 1820s–1830s
HOMELANDS OF THE FIVE TRIBES
CHEROKEE OUTLET
CHEROKEE NATION
CREEK-SEMINOLE NATIONS
INDIAN TERRITORY, 1830
CHOCTAW-CHICKASAW NATIONS
CHEROKEE TERRITORY
CHICKASAW TERRITORY
CHOCTAW TERRITORY
CREEK TERRITORY
SEMINOLE TERRITORY
LAKE MICHIGAN
LAKE ERIE
GULF OF MEXICO
ATLANTIC OCEAN
MEXICO
Memphis
Atlanta
Pensacola
Jacksonville
Lake Okeechobee
Missouri R
Mississippi R
Illinois R
Wabash R
Ohio R
Smoky Hill R
Kansas R
Arkansas R
Verdigris R
Neosho R
North Canadian R
Canadian R
White R
Black R
Red R
Ouachita R
Sabine R
Trinity R
Colorado R
Pecos R
Cumberland R
Tennessee R
Chattahoochee R
Ocmulgee R
Oconee R
Altamaha R
Alabama R
Tombigbee R
Pearl R
Flint R
Catawba R
Yadkin R
Saluda R
Savannah R
Santee R
Miles
0 50 100 150 200
0 50 100 150 200 250
Kilometers
100°
95°
90°
85°
80°
40°
35°
30°
25°