

Research Notes

The Sauk and Mesquakie Cultural Resistance to Settler Colonialism

Yerleşimci Sömürgecilik Karşısında Sauk ve Mesquakie Yerlilerinin Kültürel Direnişi

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Abstract

This paper discusses two themes: "Place and belonging, ethnic, cultural and religious minorities," and "How does literature depict the struggle for recognition". It does so through an analysis of the actions of the Sauk and Mesquakie Indians living in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Iowa during the early nineteenth century, as they were seen by their white neighbors, and through the pages of Sauk leader Black Hawk's biography. The first such account dictated by an anti-American, unacculturated Native American. It relates the tribal annual round of fall hunting, spring maple sugar harvesting, and summer farming as the villagers used their local resources with traditional labor and ceremonies. In his autobiography, Black Hawk recounts the villagers' responses to a fraudulent treaty which stripped the tribes of their land, and their unsuccessful three decade-long struggle to overturn that document. He discusses their annual village ceremonies and relates their connections to a particular place. He expresses the Sauk determination to remain at their principal village because it was the site of their major cemetery and the religious rites related to their ancestors practices there. When several tribal leaders agreed to relocate west of the Mississippi River, conservative Sauks objected to abandoning the grave site. For the Mesquakie, the dispute focused more of the seizure of their traditional lead-mining lands in Iowa and Wisconsin which they claimed had never been surrendered to the United States. The existing literature demonstrates how the Indians' ideas about culture and place underlay their actions and brought ultimate tragedy.

Keywords: Indians, traditions, literature, culture, place.

Öz

Bu makale, iki tema üzerinde durmaktadır; bunlardan ilki etnik, kültürel ve dini azınlıklar bağlamında mekân ve aidiyet, ikincisi ise tanınma mücadelesinin edebiyatta nasıl yansıtıldığıdır. Bu amaçla, 19. Yüzyılın erken dönemlerinde Illinois, Wisconsin ve Iowa'da yaşayan Sauk ve Mesquakie yerlilerini, Sauk lideri Black Hawk'ın biyografisi üzerinden, beyaz komşularının gözüyle incelemektedir. Otobiografisinde Black Hawk, kabileleri topraklarından koparan hileli bir anlaşmaya köylülerin karşı duruşu ve bu anlaşmayı bozmak için otuz yıl boyunca verdikleri mücadeleyi aktarır. Köylerde her yıl yapılan kutlamaları ve bunların belirli mekânlarla bağlantılarını tartışır. Saukların, atalarının dini törenlerini gerçekleştirdikleri büyük mezarlığın bulunduğu yerde, kendi köylerinde kalma

konusundaki kararlılıklarını vurgular. Kabilenin birçok lideri Missisipi Nehri'nin batısına yerleşmeye karar verdiğinde, geleneklerine bağlı Sauklar mezar bölgesini terk etmeye karşı çıkmıştır. Mesquakie yerlileri için ise, tartışma daha çok aslında Birleşik Devletlere hiçbir zaman teslim olmadığını öne sürdükleri Iowa ve Wisconsin'deki kurşun madenciliği bölgelerine el konulması üzerinde odaklanmaktadır. İlgili alanyazın, Amerikan yerlilerinin kültür ve mekâna dair düşünme biçimlerinin eylemlerini nasıl etkilediği, bunun da kaçınılmaz olarak nitelenebilecek trajediye nasıl yol açtığını gözler önüne sermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Amerika Yerlileri, gelenekler, edebiyat, kültür, mekân.

Introduction

During the early nineteenth century, American Indians resisted US policies and actions repeatedly. Some, like the Cherokee, organized a nation state and used the Supreme Court to oppose American actions. A few used defensive war to protect themselves. Others relied on more traditional methods such as negotiation, and when that failed turned to village shamans who offered religious leadership to support resistance. When those efforts failed, many groups fled moving across the Mississippi or into Canada. Other groups remained in their traditional homelands and tried to ignore the neighboring pioneers. The Sauk and Mesquakie of Illinois and Iowa represented the latter group while they resisted assaults on their tribal culture, economy, and sovereignty. Between 1800 and 1830, they blocked white miners' efforts to take their valuable lead lands, resisted pioneers squatting on their village farmland, ignored federal moves to undermine their cultural practices, and rejected government demands that they halt their trading relations with the British operating from Canada. Despite being internally divided between those who cooperated with the US, and others who demanded that they continue long-established cultural practices, both struggled to retain their homeland and cultural identity. This paper examines the Indians' motivations and tactics as they opposed the settlers and their government.

The Black Hawk War illustrated the vast gaps in cultural practices and attitudes separating the indigenous people from the invading Anglo-Americans moving into the tribes' territory after 1800. This discussion considers four basic issues that help explain what occurred to the villagers' physical and cultural environments in the decades that followed. First, it looks at patterns of native resource use as a cause of environmental degradation. Second, it considers inter-tribal relations leading to conflict. Third, it examines American attitudes and policies. Fourth, it analyzes the intra-tribal divisions that destroyed tribal solidarity and contributed to the war that followed. My central thesis is that destruction of the tribal natural resource base, conflict with tribal neighbors, the invasion of their homeland by American pioneers, and bitter intra-tribal debates over sovereignty and cultural survival led to both physical destruction and forced removal.

Tribal Homelands and Intertribal Relations

By the 1760s, the Sauk and Mesquakie people occupied land in the upper Mississippi River Valley. Their villages stood on its banks or near to that stream in northwestern Illinois, where they utilized the local resources fully. They mined the plentiful surface deposits of lead existing near present Galena, Illinois and Dubuque, Iowa which the leaders sold to white businessmen. The villages stood on well-watered, fertile land, and they raised large crops of corn, beans, and other vegetables. The Mississippi and nearby streams provided a ready supply of fish, clams, and crabs. Nearby hardwood forests provided maple syrup for sugar as well as nuts and berries. Each autumn the villages broke into small groups and moved west beyond the Mississippi to hunt big game and trap fur bearers for the hides they bartered with the traders. Clearly, by 1800, the local environment appears to have provided the tribal people a balanced economy (Stout 251-53; Hagan 3-14).

The situation of intertribal relations was problematic. Their hunting and trapping in the same places for decades threatened the animal populations. It also placed them in direct competition with nearby tribes and increased habitat destruction. As Sauk and Mesquakie sought game in Iowa, they met Dakota Sioux coming south from Minnesota into the same area repeatedly. Although technically at peace, the young men clashed with their rivals, increasing possibilities for open warfare. All three groups also faced resistance from the Iowa Otoe and other bands who objected to the outsiders' killing their game (Wallace 1-51; Hagan 17-18; Jackson 47-51).

White Aggressions

All of the Sauk and Mesquakie early experiences with the Americans proved negative. During the American War for Independence, a frontier militia force invaded their country and burned several Sauk villages. As the Spanish left St. Louis in 1804 Black Hawk stated what appears to have been a popular Sauk fear when he reported that "the Americans were coming to take possession of the town [St. Louis] and country" (Jackson 51). Although rival tribal hunters had threatened the Sauk and Mesquakie economic base, ever-increasing numbers of white pioneers posed a more serious menace to the Indians' society. In this case, lead miners began the assault on the native homeland and environment before white farmers arrived. During the late 1780s, several Mesquakie chiefs had leased some of their lead lands in northeastern Iowa to Julien Dubuque with the understanding that the lease ended if Dubuque died or left the area. Despite that agreement, he got title to the mining lands from Spanish authorities at St. Louis. When he died in 1810 his heirs sold his presumed rights to several Americans. They hired sixty men and sent them up the Mississippi to reopen mining. The Mesquakies and Sauks objected heatedly, intercepted the miners' boats, and threatened to kill the intruders. That forced Indian Agent Nicholas Boilvin to negotiate a settlement. He persuaded the Indians to allow Dubuque's heirs to sell his mining equipment. Once the Americans left, the Indians burned the buildings at the mining site and threatened "never to give up their land until all were dead" (Nichols 43-44; Boilvin qtd. in Hagan 44).

The most serious threat to Sauk land and home grew out of an 1804 incident in which four young Sauks attacked one of the Quivre River settlements in Missouri. They killed three pioneers “in a most barbarous manner” leaving the mutilated corpses “with their scalps taken off” (Cattle qtd. in Carter 62; Bruff qtd. in in Carter 76-80). Tribal leaders, fearing American reprisals, hurried to St. Louis where they admitted that their warriors had carried out the attack. They tried to settle the matter in the usual Indian manner by making payments to the victims’ families to “cover the blood”. Frontier whites rejected this customary Indian “apology,” and local authorities worked hard to dissuade the angry pioneers not to retaliate. Having admitted that their men had murdered the whites, the chiefs explained truthfully that they lacked any authority to surrender the attackers (Cattle qtd. in Carter 57-58). Here again, tribal practice differed widely from that of the whites. The latter would have arrested and incarcerated the accused, and officials refused to believe that Indian leaders lacked the authority to give them the attackers.

Facing American threats of military action, the Sauk tribal council decided to send a small delegation back to St. Louis to negotiate a settlement. They took one of the guilty young men along and the whites promptly imprisoned him. The chiefs saw their duty as getting him released and keeping peace with the Americans. They reached St. Louis just as Indiana Territorial Governor William Henry Harrison arrived there.

William Henry Harrison and the Treaty of 1804

William Henry Harrison set out to acquire the visitors’ land. During the next several weeks he negotiated a treaty with them. The minor chiefs had no tribal authority to sell any land, but when the talks ended they had ceded all Sauk tribal territory east of the Mississippi River to the US. Despite signing the land cession, the Sauk visitors claimed they had never meant to surrender their homeland (Nichols 28-29; Hagan 17-25).

In payment for all of their homeland in Illinois, the US gave the Sauks a one-time payment of \$2,234.50 and an annuity of \$1,000. The treaty of 1804, conducted in secret, with a few minor chiefs not authorized to make any such agreement, was one of the two most crucial events in the tribes’ history and the source of almost all later difficulties between the Sauk, Mesquakie, and the US. It appears that at the time, few if any, tribal leaders realized the treaty’s significance, or had any understanding of its provisions. One clause stated that “as long as the lands which are now ceded to the United States remain their property, the Indians belonging to the said tribes, shall enjoy the privilege of living and hunting on them” (Kappler 54-56; Wallace 19-20). However, US policy sought to sell the frontier areas to pioneers, at which point the government no longer owned the land and the Indians would lose their right to occupy it. Sauk leaders who rejected the treaty, argued repeatedly that they understood the clause to mean that as long as the land remained a part of the US the Indians could use it. As for the intra-tribal rivalries, we can see the War of 1812 had a major impact on Sauk society. Black Hawk joined the British and led many of the men off to fight against the Americans.

Black Hawk and Keokuk

During his absence a rumored attack on Saukenuk gave young Keokuk a chance to become the tribal war leader. After the fighting ended and Black Hawk returned, the two men competed with each other, and the more articulate Keokuk seized that position. Their competition helped create major divisions in the two tribes as gradually Keokuk came to lead perhaps two thirds of the Sauk and a few Mesquakie. Persuaded that the villagers' only hope for survival was cooperation with American frontier officials, he urged them to move west across the Mississippi into Iowa. Black Hawk and a minority of the chiefs objected to this repeatedly (Nichols 76-77, 86, 92, 95).

Many Sauks rejected the 1804 treaty, vowing to "do without food and live on roots rather than part with their lands" before signing any other papers. By 1829, as the US tried to push the last of the villagers across the Mississippi, Black Hawk and Keokuk quarreled openly about the future of their people. Keokuk chose to keep his followers in Iowa while Black Hawk insisted stubbornly that true Sauks would remain in Illinois to protect their ancestors' graves. He denounced his rival as "a coward, and no brave, to abandon his village to be occupied by strangers". He rejected leaving the village as "cowardly" and reminded his listeners that the graves nearby "contained the bones of many friends and relatives" (Hagan 127-129).

In 1831 when Black Hawk and the dissidents, now called the British Band, insisted on returning to Saukenuk, General Edmund Gaines demanded that they move west permanently. Again Black Hawk objected, telling the General that his followers were "unanimous in their desire to remain in their old fields, they wish to harvest their corn and will do so peacefully". When Gaines questioned their motivations, Black Hawk responded that their ancestors "have left their bones in our fields, and there I will remain and leave my bones with theirs". Despite those brave words, once the General threatened to drive the Indians across the Mississippi by force, the leaders agreed, and within days they had moved to Iowa. Despite their promise to remain west of the Mississippi, in April 1832 the British Band took the second critical action in these events.

Black Hawk War and Battle of Bad Axe

It recrossed the Mississippi, moving up the Rock River to their former land. Their "invasion" of Illinois brought demands from the State's governor John Reynolds that the Indians be driven west, his mobilizing the state militia, and the US Army's sending troops north from St. Louis. These forces chased the Indians across northern Illinois and southern Wisconsin until the August 2, 1832 battle at the Bad Axe River destroyed most of the British Band.

Of the approximately 1,800 people who dared to enter Illinois that spring fewer than 500 survived (see Jung, *The Black Hawk War of 1832*; and Hall, *Uncommon Defense: Indian Allies in the Black Hawk War*. Both give the most up-to-date discussions of this conflict.). They had returned east, hoping to avoid war and have the chance to raise their crops in peace, but their desperate gamble became a disaster. The move followed a difficult winter, demands by the women that they

return to their well-tilled fields in Illinois, and rumors that the whites intended to castrate the men and breed the women with Blacks. Their economic base had collapsed when they lost the lead mines, their trading partnership with the British, and access to useable land. American demands for peaceable behavior had struck at the heart of clan and village social customs, while their divided leadership offered no effective way for dealing with the Americans. Lured by thoughts of home, and strong cultural ties to their village, they ignored the advice of most tribal leaders and the threats of American civil officials and army officers. Their feelings of betrayal by tribal chiefs, of having been cheated by the Americans, and nostalgia for their homes brought disaster that summer.

Conclusion

The Black Hawk war resulted from differing tactics Sauk and Mesquakie chiefs used in dealing with the invading Americans during the early nineteenth century. The Sauk and Mesquakie ideas of place had developed from their effective uses of the natural resources available to them in the upper Mississippi Valley. Their villages served as the sites for traditional cultural ceremonies that held their societies together and reinforced their tribal self-identification. The arrival of American pioneers during the early nineteenth century threatened their economic activities, their social customs, even their existence as indigenous societies. The settlers and their government seized tribal land and overran their lead mines. Federal negotiators tried to end Sauk and Mesquakie trading connections, and to disrupt and halt Indian customs such as blood revenge against traditional enemies. Those actions weakened the authority of village chiefs, and endangered customary raiding and warfare practices. As the chiefs tried to persuade the villagers to accept these attacks on their cultural practices they angered many and the controversy over how to deal with the invading whites split both tribes. The dispute led the two sides to use differing tactics. The majority accepted the need to abandon their homes and to build new villages west of the Mississippi River, but a minority refused to do so and stumbled into war. That accidental conflict brought disaster. The US destroyed most of the belligerents, and shortly after the war ended it punished those who had remained at peace by taking nearly a third of their land in Iowa. Clearly, the forces of settler colonialism dictated the course of events, the subjugation of these tribes, and furthered their cultural disintegration.

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