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# Examining the Viability of Native American Stickball as a Comprehensive Indigenous Peace System

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# EXAMINING THE VIABILITY OF NATIVE AMERICAN STICKBALL AS A COMPREHENSIVE INDIGENOUS PEACE SYSTEM

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ANTHROPOLOGY OF PEACE AND HUMAN RIGHTS

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the viability of Native American stickball as a comprehensive peace system developed for the primary purpose of ameliorating hostilities, preventing war, and creating a landscape of peace. Originating as early as the 12th century, Native American stickball is recognized as the oldest field sport in North America. More than a game, stickball is steeped in symbolism and comprised of rich oral histories, elements of fictive kinship alliances, religious connotations, and other prosocial mechanisms designed to create and maintain peace. To determine how the interplay between these various components is adaptive through time, a three-phase research model was employed to address three specific research objectives. How was the institution of Native American stickball used in the past to facilitate or maintain peace? What is the role of peace processes within the institution as practiced today? How might stickball be employed in the future to create and maintain peace? Phase I involved a literary search that produced published oral histories and eye-witness accounts from the early colonial and historic periods and a complimentary assemblage of contemporary academic perceptions of peace and peace systems. Phase II entailed participant observation of stickball as it is practiced contemporarily and was accomplished through 1.5+ years of immersed fieldwork with several members of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI). In Phase III structured interviews were conducted with representatives from four federally recognized tribal entities. The results of this study demonstrate that although the

mechanisms of function can and do transform and adapt to changes within the sociopolitical environment, the practicality of Native American stickball's role as a peace system remains viable and dynamic. Stickball is also enjoying a renaissance in modern Southeastern Native American culture. This resurgence in popularity is growing at an unprecedented pace and stickball continues to operate as both an intertribal and intratribal peace system into the 21st century.

Keywords: Stickball, Fictive Kinship, Peace System, Oral History, Prosocial, Culture

# DEDICATION

It is with a grieving heart that I dedicate this study to my father, Edward Doyle Pearce, and my son, Thomas Jay Pearce. Neither of which lived to see this project through to completion. They were the two most important people in my life. My two most ardent supporters, they were always there to encourage me to believe in myself and the importance of what I was trying to accomplish. I hope that I made you proud. I love and miss you more with every passing day. You will never be forgotten.

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## INTRODUCTION

Touted by the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI) as the oldest field sport in North America, Native American stickball is a racket and ball field sport played between two competing teams on a rectangular playing field like that of modern football (Ben 2019: Choctaw Indian Fair). The field is divided by a center line and at each end there is a pole driven into the ground to act as a goal post. The objective is to strike the pole with the ball using only the racket. Each team consists of multiple offensive and defensive players. Although this number could be in the hundreds during historic times, the game is played with thirty players from each team on the field today (Afo 2019: Cultural Consultant; Catlin 2018:439; Hudson 1976:408-409; Swanton 1946:679).

Stickball, however, is much more than a simple game, and is comprised of a tradition that is said to have been established as early as the 12$^{th}$ century (Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse 2018). Although highly adaptive by design, the elementary mechanics of the game appear to be essentially unchanged and thus have been retained to a high degree for the past several hundred years (Blanchard 1991:27; Fisher 2002:11; Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse 2018; Swanton 1918:3,68; Vennum 1994:11,71). Therefore, stickball may be the oldest continuous Native American cultural tradition in existence. These assertions are substantiated by early French colonial documentation describing the fully developed practice of stickball play among several indigenous groups, including specific references to the Huron of New France in 1636 and the Creek and Choctaw of French

Louisiana in 1721 and 1729-1731 respectively (Blanchard 1991:27,28; Swanton 1918:3; Vennum 1994:11,71).

There are two closely related but distinct styles of Native American stickball (Culin 1975:562). Historically, except for minor regional variations, two rackets used in the Southeast and a single racket used in the Northeastern and Western regions, the game was essentially played in the same manner throughout the continent (Catlin 2018:439; Fisher 2002:12-13; Hudson 1967:408). This vast geographical area encompasses not only the Southeastern, Atlantic, and Great Lakes regions, but there is ample evidence that the game was played by the Dakota of the Great Plains and among the Salish and Chinook of the Pacific Northwest, as well as the Yokuts of central California (Culin 1975:562). George Catlin painted and described the "*Grand Ballgame*" among the Choctaw of Oklahoma in the 1830's (Catlin 2018:439) (See Figure 1).

*Figure 1. Stickball play by Oklahoma Choctaw. 1830's George Catlin (Wikimedia Commons, public domain. 2021)*


*Figure 2. North American Culture Areas (Wikimedia Commons, public domain. 2021)*

Interestingly, the only culture area in which this field sport is not recorded is that of the Southwest (Culin 1975:562) (See Figure 2).This lack of evidence for stickball within the Southwestern culture area of North America, coupled with multiple technical dissimilarities and the fact that stickball is a field sport as opposed to a court game, suggests that Native American stickball developed independently in North America, and therefore, is unrelated to the Mayan ballcourt game of Mesoamerica. Currently in North America, both single and double-racket versions are still viable and participation in each is on the rise today (Ben 2019: Choctaw Indian Fair; Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse 2018).

The single-racket version as practiced by the Iroquois and others of the Northern Great Lakes region has been fully appropriated and adopted by Western culture as the modern game of lacrosse (Fisher 2002:11; Hudson 1976:408). Lacrosse is not only the fastest growing intercollegiate sport in North America, but also the official summer sport of Canada (Hudson 1976:408; Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse 2018; Legislative Services Branch 2018). Alternately, the two-racket version, which most closely approximates the game as it was originally played in the Southeast, has been preserved by such Native American groups as the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI) as a form of maintaining traditional cultural identity (Barry 2018: Cultural Consultant; Ben 2019: Choctaw Indian Fair). This federally recognized Native American group currently hosts the Stickball World Series Championship at the annual Choctaw Indian Fair held each

July within the traditional Choctaw homeland of Pearl River, Mississippi. This Native American festival has been held each summer since its inception in 1949 and celebrates traditional Native American culture (Ben 2019: Choctaw Indian Fair).

The single-racket version is important in that the contemporary Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois) is using it as a platform for cultural revitalization and to foster international awareness and recognition of Native American cultural achievement (Iroquois National Lacrosse 2018) (See Figure 3). Officially recognized by the Federation of International Lacrosse (FIL), their men's professional team, the Iroquois Nationals, is the only Native American team authorized to play in international sporting competitions and is currently ranked third in the world by the FIL (Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse 2018; World Rankings 2019). This study, however, is primarily focused on the two-racket version as practiced by the five major Southeastern tribal entities: Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole. Additionally, special emphasis is placed on the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, as they have been instrumental in keeping the tradition viable into the present (Ben 2019: Choctaw Indian Fair; Culin 1975:562; Swanton 2001:148).

*Figure 3. Iroquois Nations Lacrosse Team. (Associated Press. 2019)*

The two-racket form of stickball is important in that it remains an almost exclusively Native American institution (Culin 1975:563) (See Figure 4). That is, this

*Figure 4. Mississippi Choctaw Stickball (Clarke County Democrat. 2019)*

version has not been adopted by western culture and is still practiced by many Native American groups in the Southeastern United States and beyond (Ben 2019: Choctaw Indian Fair). This claim was evidenced at the Stickball World Series held during the 70th annual Choctaw Indian Fair in Pearl River, Mississippi. At this fair there were approximately twenty-four teams representing not only each of the local communities of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, but also teams representing both the Chickasaw Nation, and Choctaw Nation from Oklahoma, as well as individual competitors from many other tribal entities (Afo 2019: Cultural Consultant; Personal Observation).

Each of the MBCI tribal communities organize multiple stickball teams by age and, sometimes, by gender. There are several divisions currently in existence in MBCI

tournament play. These include the 10-13 year-old Pushmataha division and 13-17 year-old Tulli Okchi Ishko youth division, both of which are organized in an egalitarian manner as co-ed teams. There is also one adult female division and two adult male divisions, with adult male divisions being subdivided into 18-34 and 35 and above age groups. The adult teams are gender based in all tournament games, it is only the youth divisions that are organized as co-ed. Beyond the teams fielded by each of the MBCI communities, the Chickasaw Nation and Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma have corresponding teams and divisions as well. Also, some other Native American entities, such as the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas, do not yet have the resources to field a complete team but instead play with Mississippi or Oklahoma teams. This speaks to the prosocial inclusiveness inherent within the institutional structure of Native American stickball.

**Peace Systems**

Perhaps the most significant function of Native American stickball is how it operates as both an intertribal and intratribal peace system (Fisher 2002:14,15; Howe 2014:79-80; Hudson 1976:225,236-237). Peace systems are comprised of neighboring societies that do not make war upon each other and that have created mechanisms and institutions to establish and maintain peaceful relations between members of that system (Fry 2012:880-881). Historically, the Southeastern United States was populated with potentially antagonistic competing cultural entities, including the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminole. There is much documentation to substantiate the hostilities between these various Southeastern tribal groups (Cushman 1962:135; Dye

2009:167; Halbert, Ball, and Owsley 1995:22,35; Hudson 1976:240-241; Penicaut and McWilliams 1998: 61,65,67,73,78,79,130; Swanton 1922:420). For example, according to some chroniclers such as Charles Hudson, "warfare was the 'beloved occupation' of Southeastern Indian men, and they could not imagine themselves without war. In 1725 the Cherokees were fighting the Creeks, Choctaws, Senecas, some northern Indians affiliated with the French, and probably the Chickasaws" (Hudson 1976:240-241). Hudson goes on to reiterate that when "Indian groups" became unfriendly towards one another, they often persisted that way for several years, citing that the Iroquois and Cherokee almost continuously raided one another (Hudson 1976: 241). In speaking of hostilities between the Choctaw and Creek Confederacy, John R. Swanton made this assessment in 1922: "the Choctaw were always one of the largest southern tribes, and they were more numerous than the Creeks even in the palmiest days of the latter. Although of the same linguistic stock, their customs, social organization, and even their physical characteristics were very different. They never seem to have been on a footing of friendship with the Creeks, and in fact fought them on equal terms during a long period" (Swanton 1922:420).

These animosities were not unknown to the colonial powers of France, England, or Spain. In fact, each of these powers took full advantage of these hostilities to leverage their own imperial interests. This may be inferred from the following account regarding the early survival of colonial French Louisiana recorded by the French marine André Pénicaut in 1703. In speaking of the continuous hostilities between the Choctaws and Chickasaws, Penicaut stated, "these two nations—our two neighbors and the most dreadful in all of Louisiana, since they can by joining forces put as many as sixteen

thousand warriors on the warpath—would have had the power to destroy our colony in its infancy; whereas, by the grace of God, and contrary to our intentions, the two nations remaining at war with one another, as it happened, we have always been at peace with them, especially with the Chactas, who are the more powerful of the two nations and the one living closer to Mobile" (Pénicaut and McWilliams 1998:78-79). Although less frequent, peace-making also is recorded in the historical record and, importantly, stickball is portrayed as a key contributor (Cox 2019:1; Fisher 2002:14-15; Halbert, Ball, and Owsley 1995:35-36; Hudson 1976:225,237).

The phenomena of Native American stickball traditionally have been examined from perspectives not necessarily consistent with peace systems. However, when collectively examined, the utility of stickball as such becomes readily apparent. In *Life Without War (2012)*, Douglas P. Fry details several common features inherent within both active and passive peace systems (Fry 2012:881). These features include, but are not limited to, mechanisms for intergroup conflict management, an overarching social identity, interdependence, interconnections among subgroups, overarching governance, and values, symbols, rituals, and ceremonies for the purpose of creating and maintaining peace (Fry 2012:881; Fry 2015:548; Sponsel 2016:6). Although no peace system is likely to always meet all these preconditions, some combination of each is necessary for the system to remain viable. Therefore, this study examines the viability of Native American stickball as a multifunctional indigenous peace system and proxy for violent aggression and war; past, present, and future.

**Biological Perspective**

Interestingly, peace systems and the necessity for peacemaking solutions are not unique solely to the species, *Homo sapiens*, but appear to be present in some form amongst all higher primate groups. In *Peacemaking among Primates*, primatologist Franz de Waal makes the case that both human and nonhuman primates are particularly adept in deescalating potentially dangerous situations (de Waal 1989:11-16). de Waal suggests that amongst primate groups, the concepts of peace and aggression are inherently inseparable and unstable, coexisting within a state of dynamic equilibrium, and that the interplay between the two can be manipulated to achieve a goal, whether peaceful or otherwise (de Waal 1989:27). Therefore, peace, or peaceful coexistence is dependent upon action of some kind. It is suggested here that existence within a constant state of aggression is neither desirable nor sustainable, therefore the need for mechanisms designed to achieve and maintain peace—peace systems—may be programed into our very existence.

de Waal takes the case of peacemaking complexity a step further, positing that reconciliatory behavior such as peacemaking must be measured against the real or perceived threat of violence (de Waal 1989:27). The greater the threat, the greater the need for reconciliatory action. In this dichotomy, conflict is inevitable, but unchecked violence is not (Sponsel 2016:6). In assessing this interdependence and noting that reconciliation is only possible after an infraction has been committed, de Waal appears to concede that peacemaking might also include certain non-lethal semi-aggressive processes or actions designed to achieve or maintain strategic equilibrium and or congenial relationships (de Waal 1989:15,16,22). This suggests that carefully managed

non-lethal ritualized aggression, such as that inherent to contests like stickball, may effectively increase the social bond between potential adversaries or adversarial groups by advancing the practice of reconciliation (Fry 2018:252).

**Anthropological Perspective**

The viability of non-lethal semi-aggressive contact sport as a behavior adaption for successful crises management is also supported from an anthropological perspective. In *The Evolutionary Logic of Human Peaceful Behavior* (2018), Douglas P. Fry refers to the dynamic interplay between peace and aggression as the peacefulness-aggressiveness continuum, whereas peaceful societies are those that have developed and practice effective management systems to abate conflict (Fry 2018:251). Fry acknowledges that one useful conflict management strategy is to channel potentially violent behavior by means of ritualized aggression, such as participation in physical contest or sport (Fry 2018:251-253). Fry suggests that such activity positively reinforces strained social bonds by creating a regulated process for the venting of emotion, restoration of honor, and allowing for winners and losers in an environment devoid of lethality (Fry 2018:249-253,261; de Waal 1989:15). Within this framework, this study interprets stickball as an important antithesis to war and a practical representation of a peace system comprised of multivariate components and layers of complexity (Fisher 2011:14,15; Fry 2009:5). Therefore, the institution of Native American stickball can be understood as a viable peace system in that it provides an ordered set of sociopolitical mechanisms designed to channel and mediate hostile violent aggression or war while facilitating prosocial interaction between potentially adversarial social groups (Cushman 1962:135; de Waal

1989:10-16,23,27; Fry 2009:5,6; Fry 2018:248-253,261; Halbert, Ball, and Owsley 1995:36; Hudson 1976:225; Sponsel 2016:6; Swanton 1946:675-681).

**Components of Peace: Direct, Structural, and Sociative Peace**

Generally, scholars of peace and peace systems define three different types of peace, along with two basic peace processes. Types of peace include direct peace, structural peace, and sociative peace, whereas peace processes include both negative and positive peace. As each of these concepts are central to this study, each are described in turn below. Direct peace is associated with negative-peace processes. A simplified definition of *negative peace* is that it infers that conflict is present and ongoing (Verbeek and Peters 2018:1,2). Therefore, direct peace involves several forms of action-oriented *peacemaking* processes. These actions may include direct intervention of conflict such as war or civil strife, various forms of conflict management strategies, crisis containment, policing and other peacemaking processes designed to initiate and establish peace (Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). Structural peace is associated with *positive peace* processes and refers to institutional structures embedded within societies and their institutions. Positive peace is defined as existing within a *post-conflict* environment (Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). Structure refers to any sort of institutional structure that exists within a culture or society and what those structures represent. Therefore, *structural peace* operationally refers to those cultural institutions that are designed and organized to facilitate and promote peaceful interaction (Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). Institutional structure within this study refers to the organizational structure of the MBCI Stickball World Series league and tournament play. Sociative peace, also associated with positive

peace processes, is a *post-conflict* cultural stabilizer and refers to mutually beneficial social interactions between and among diverse social or cultural groups (Verbeek 2018:297-300; Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). Note that conflict need not be present for positive *structural peace* or *sociative peace* mechanisms to function. In fact, this is the ideal state, as lack of conflict is the primary objective of peace systems.

**Little Brother of War**

Native American stickball is most often referred to as the "little brother of war" (Braund 2008:4; Fisher 2002:14; Galloway and Kidwell 2004:508; Hudson 1976:411; Vennum 1994:213). It is posited here that this designation is likely due to its *direct peace* function in that it appears to have developed as a viable alternative and proxy for actual war and lethal aggression (Fisher 2011:14-15). Therefore, it is argued that the primary functional purpose of stickball's development was to avert war and provide a mechanism for peaceful interaction among and between diverse social and cultural groups (Fisher 2002:14-15; Fry 2018:252; Howe 2014:78-80; Innes 2004:398; Swanton 2001:141). Built into the institution of stickball are multiple components that comprise a viable platform for creating and maintaining peace. These include serving as a setting for multicultural collaboration on multiple levels and providing a venue for trade, socialization, and cultural stability (de Waal 1989:22,27; Fisher 2011:14-15; Fry 2009:5; Fry 2015:547-548; Fry 2018:261; Galloway and Kidwell 2004:508-509). Therefore, the institution itself provides a base for the development of *structural peace* in that it represents components of peace at manifold levels of society, from the individual to that of nations.

Sociative peace functionality within the institution of Native American stickball is such that it generates an environment conducive to prosocial interaction between varied social groups (Fisher 2011:14-15; Fry 2015:548; Fry 2018:261). Prosocial behavior is the term applied to a large class of voluntary behaviors that share the mutual intent to benefit another and consist of any number of actions that an individual or group might employ to accomplish this goal (Dunfield and Kuhlmeier 2013:1). Such actions can include, but are not limited to, various forms of reconciliation, forgiveness, sharing, comforting, helping, and informing or cooperating (Dunfield and Kuhlmeier 2013:1; Fry 2018:250-251,261). Native American stickball maintains elements of all these behaviors and actions, and many more as well. Thus, the result is that Native American stickball demonstratively promotes the processes of peaceful socialization by assisting in the moving of people, ideas, and resources about the physical landscape within the boundaries of a prosocial context.

The physical attributes of stickball are as easily distinguishable and equally important as the social aspects. Stickball is a character builder in that it necessitates a high level of cooperative coordination during episodic tests of lengthy endurance due to the exhaustive and extreme physical challenges of the game (Culin 1975:600; Hudson 1976:411; Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse 2018; Vennum 1994:224-225). The net effect is that the participants—generally young men and women—are provided with a safety valve or prosocial mechanism in which they may peacefully expend excessive energy that might otherwise be expressed in displays of hostile behavior (Catlin 2018:439; Fisher 2011:15; Fry 2018:251; Hudson 1976:411; Swanton 1946:675-676). The social component correlate is such that there is also much communal value attached to these

displays that otherwise might be acquired through personal achievement on the battlefield (Fry 2018:253; Hudson 1976:411; Swanton 1946:676; Vennum 1994:213-215). Therefore, the champion of the ballgame becomes a surrogate for the victor of lethal combat within another context (Cushman 1962:130; Fry 2018:251; Hudson 1976:411). Stickball also provides a platform for the celebration of civic pride and triumph without the negative connotations associated with the risk of loss due to death or capture in war (Fisher 2011:14-15; Fry 2018:251; Hudson 1976:411; Swanton 1946:675- 676).

**Purpose of Study**

The express goal of this study is an empathetic attempt to accurately understand and interpret Native American institutions as they relate to peace and peace systems (Fry 2015:548, Sponsel 2016:6). The intended purpose is to demonstrate the complexities of Native American cultural achievement within the framework of structural peace, sociative peace, and direct peace as defined above. Within this context, peace is operationally defined as a series of behavioral systems and processes by which entities check aggressiveness, negate structural violence, and create and maintain the conditions necessary for mutually beneficial social interaction (Verbeek and Peters 2018:23; Sponsel 2016:6). Stickball is one such behavioral system developed by Native Americans and practiced since ancient times (Culin 1975:563; Cushman 1962:123; Galloway and Kidwell 2004:508-509; Swanton 2001:140-141). This study examines how the integrative sport of Native American stickball meets and exceeds these standards by assimilating the three components of peace: *direct peace, structural peace,* and *sociative peace,* within a single complex system. Therefore, research was targeted to three specific areas:

- How was the institution of Native American stickball used in the past to facilitate or maintain peace?
- What is the role of peace processes within the institution as practiced today?
- How might stickball be employed in the future to create and maintain peace?

This thesis follows a traditional organizational approach to address the above research questions. Chapter 2 will provide contextual background information about the history and idiosyncrasies of stickball as a Native American social institution designed to initiate and maintain peaceful coexistence. Research methods are introduced and defined in Chapter 3, including subsections on participant observation and structured interviews. Results are stated in Chapter 4. Conclusions are presented in Chapter 5.

# CHAPTER 2

# HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Although the origin of stickball is rather obscure and lost to time, multiple Native American oral histories place it in the very distant past. There are two slightly different Native American stickball traditions. A single-stick version is practiced by the Iroquois and others from the Great Lakes region, and a double-stick version as played by the Choctaw and other Southeastern tribal groups. With the exception of the American Southwest, it is thought by some that this most popular of all Native American games was played in one form or another variously by nearly all indigenous peoples of North America (Culin 1975:562).

In the Northeastern tradition, inception dates are claimed to correlate with the establishment of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Iroquois League), and range from August 31, 1142, to 1451, to 1536, or some unspecified date between 1425-1550 (Dennis 1993:64; Fisher 2011:12; Iroquois National Lacrosse 2018; Mann and Fields 1997:105-163). Often depicted as the *Medicine Game*, stickball is said to have been a gift of the Great Creator given to the ancient Iroquois prophet, Deganawidah, for the purpose of healing the land (Culin 1975:563; Fisher 1994:17-18; Swanton 1946:679; Vennum 1994:27-29). Deganawidah, also known as the great peacemaker, is generally credited with establishment of the Iroquois League of Peace, otherwise known as the original (historical) Iroquois League or Haudenosaunee Confederacy (Dennis 1993:64; Mann and Fields 1997:105-163).

That is one tradition. Several Southeastern tribes also claim to be the originators of the institution (Barry and George 2019: Cultural Consultants). Not the least of which are the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, who also retain credible claims to have originated the game. This parallel origin account also states that stickball was a gift of the Great Creator for the same purpose; to heal the land and unify the people (Barry 2019; Cultural Consultant; Culin 1975:563; Fisher 2002:14-18). This Southeastern traditional claim has been preserved in historical accounts where stickball is often referred to as the ancient, or great, "Choctaw ball game" (Culin 1975:598-599; Swanton 2001:138,148). The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians often depict stickball as the "Granddaddy of all ball games," noting that it is the oldest field sport in North America and the original version of lacrosse (Blanchard 1991:26; Choctaw Indian Fair 2018). One thing is certain, stickball predates any meaningful colonial contact and is therefore a uniquely Native American institution (Blanchard 1981:24; Culin 1975:569; Fisher 2011:11-16; Hudson 1976:225,237; Vennum 1994:213).

The first recorded instances of fully developed stickball play were made by French colonials. The Huron were observed playing in New France (Eastern Canada) about 1636-1639, then the Creek and Choctaw were observed playing in French Louisiana (Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, etc.) in 1729-1731 (Blanchard 1981:26-28). This 100-year discrepancy, however, is not evidence to support development of stickball in the Northeastern culture area, but roughly correlates with initial French colonial presence in either region of North America. Quite simply, the French were in the Great Lakes region several decades before discovering the mouth of the Mississippi and the subsequent colonial establishment of French Louisiana in 1698-1699 (Pénicaut and

McWilliams 1988:9). Therefore, it should be no surprise that the earliest historical records of stickball would originate from the Eastern Great Lakes region.

Universally misunderstood and maligned by the French Jesuits and colonists that first witnessed the institution, stickball was commonly depicted as a blood sport perpetuated by half-naked heathen savages (Fisher 2002;18). Luckily for them, the game was, and is, a form of a Native American peace system. Otherwise, these initial European observers might not have lived to record anything, as most stickball games were originally played between potentially adversarial groups as a substitute for lethal violence (Fisher 2002:13). Independent of which date one wishes to choose for the origin of stickball, this conception of stickball development as a peace system may be considered accurate for several reasons.

If one chooses the earlier date of A.D. 1142, it roughly coincides with the apex of the Mississippian phase of North American cultural development. This time is important in that it correlates with the transition from hunter gatherer societies to an agriculturally based sedentary economy relying heavily on the production of maize (Dennis 1993:50; Dye 2009:97; Fisher 2002;11). The Mississippian stage also denotes a time of restructured cultural organization associated with the rise of powerful complex chiefdoms (Dye 2009:97-100). Intensive agricultural production requires the possession or ownership of vast ranges of territory (Fisher 2002;11-12). Agriculture changes the landscape and stresses the carrying capacity of the land as well. Within this cultural environment, territories must be protected from competing groups, therefore conflicts over land use and access can arise (Dennis 1993:50-52; Dye 2009:97-99; Fisher 2002;11-

12). Hence, the concurrent development of a comprehensive peace system serves as a counterbalance to such conflict.

Were one to choose either of the later dates between A.D. 1425-1550 for stickball origination, it makes even more sense, as the need for a viable peace system was paramount during the post-Mississippian era (Blanchard 1981:28; Blitz 1995:135; Dennis:1993:65). The Mississippi Choctaw are commonly regarded as a remnant of the widespread Mississippian cultural tradition that ended between A.D. 1200 – 1400 in various areas of North America (Blanchard 1981;23; Blitz 1995:138). The widespread collapse of Mississippian chiefdoms during this time disrupted cultural interaction by severing trade, familial, and social networks (Blitz 1995:135-138; Dennis 1993:65). As will be discussed below, stickball can serve to mitigate many of these challenges (Blanchard 1981:28-29; Fisher 2002:14-15). For example, trade networks can be mended due to the nature of gambling on the outcome of stickball play (Hudson 1976:124-125). One group wins today, while another wins the next week (Catlin 2018:440). Additionally, social networks can be created and expanded due to the social interaction before and after ball play, thus, leading to new familial ties (Catlin 2018;441; Fisher 2002:13-17; Hudson 1976:124-125).

**Objects of War and Peace**

Stickball is unique in that it appears to have been specifically developed as a viable surrogate for actual war. This assessment is bolstered by the equipment similarities between stickball rackets and their antithesis, the war club (Fisher 2002:12). Although Native Americans fought with spears, darts, and the bow and arrow, there was no greater

symbol of war in North America than the war club (Hudson 1976:245). The French called them *head-breakers*. According to Andre Pénicaut, every Native American person, both men and women, carried one or more on their person (Pénicaut and McWilliams 1988:6,125,179). There are many styles of indigenous war clubs, this study will focus on two of the most common types, as they are closely associated with stickball rackets.

**Eastern Woodlands War Club**

The Eastern Woodlands war club type was common among the Algonquian and Iroquoian speaking tribes of the Great Lakes region and the Eastern seaboard (Vennum 1994: xi). Although styles vary, this two-handed club is often fashioned from a tree root-ball and takes the shape of a serpent eating a large spherical egg (Hudson 1976:245). Some, including the Iroquois, have suggested that this ball section represents a human head and that this motif can be interpreted as a symbolic representation for the taking of life (Vennum 1994: xiii). See Figures 5 and 6 for visual comparison of Eastern Woodlands type of war club and two-handed Ojibwe lacrosse or stickball racket.

*Figure 5. Eastern Woodlands War Clubs. (Facebook. Photo courtesy of Corey Boise 2021)*

*Figure 6. Ojibwe Lacrosse Racket. (Ontario Heritage Trust. 2021).*

As may be readily assessed, these two items are very similar in design (Fisher 2002:12; Vennum 1994: xii-xiii;195). Both share a similar profile, the handle curved

slightly forward with a circular appendage at the top front end. Each is designed to be used independently. Each is intended to be wielded by both hands, and they are roughly the same size and shape. Both are designed to be used in a type of physical confrontation. However, note that within the lacrosse racket, the egg, or ball, has been removed (See Figure 6). This is significant as it implies the elimination of the lethal portion of the club, a symbolic representation of life held in the balance, and that this item is intended for peace, not war (Barry 2019: Cultural Consultant; Vennum 1994: xii; xiii).

**Choctaw Rabbitstick**

The Choctaw rabbitstick is another typical war club design found in the Southeast, especially amongst the Choctaw, as the name implies. The Choctaw rabbitstick is a form of indigenous non-returning boomerang and bludgeon used primarily for hunting small to medium sized game, such as rabbits or even deer (Afo 2019: Cultural Consultant). Seemingly primitive, yet highly efficient, the hunting stick likely ranks amongst the earliest of hunting implements (Reed 2019:1). The Choctaw rabbitstick is also a very deadly war club type (Hudson 1976:245; Jackson 2019: Cultural Consultant; Pénicaut and McWilliams 1988:179). Choctaw rabbitsticks are generally about 18 inches long and made from a 2.5 to 3.5 diameter American hickory sapling. They are fashioned by whittling away about ¾ of the bottom end, creating a handle at one end, and a maul head at the other (Reed 2020: YouTube).

Choctaw rabbitsticks are designed to be used in pairs and are generally wielded with one in each hand, much like the Choctaw stickball rackets that closely resemble them (Caleb 2019: Cultural Consultant). When thrown correctly, the initial rabbitstick

spins horizontally in a circular motion until striking its target (Afo 2019: Cultural Consultant; Dave 2019: Cultural Consultant). The second rabbitstick may also be thrown if the first one fails to strike, otherwise it may be used as a bludgeon to further incapacitate the intended target. Much like the Choctaw stickball racket they are akin to, one may be slightly longer or thicker than the other (Dave 2019: Cultural Consultant). See Figures 7 and 8 for comparison between Choctaw rabbitsticks and Choctaw stickball rackets. Note the similarity to the Northeastern lacrosse racket, whereas the lethal portion of the Choctaw stickball racket has also been symbolically removed, therefore denoting it as an instrument to be used for peace (Vennum 1994: xi-xiv).

*Figure 7. Pair of Choctaw Rabbitsticks (Wikimedia Commons. Public domain. 2021).*

*Figure 8. Pair of Choctaw Stickball Rackets (Wikimedia Commons. Public domain. 2021)*

## Spiritual Implications

Stickball being a gift from the Great Creator, there are spiritual connotations to be considered as well. Barry, a Native American cultural consultant instrumental to the production of this study, explained his understanding of indigenous spiritual belief in the following way. To summarize, he states that some Native Americans believe that everything has a living spirit and therefore must be respected. This includes animals, plants, and even inanimate objects such as mountains and rivers. He states that he believes there is a constant dynamic interaction between the spirit world and the natural world, where all things are held together in the context of a great circle of life. When all is well, the spirit and natural realms exist in perfect harmony, however, if something is

removed or happens to fall out of place, the circle becomes unstable. To regain equilibrium, that item must be replaced. The value or type of replacement item is not an issue, it is the act itself that is important. This dual concept of respect and reciprocity permeates throughout Native American culture (Barry 2019: Cultural Consultant).

Stickball play is the embodiment of this interaction between the spirit and natural worlds and pays homage to this complex collaboration (Fisher 2002:14-15). To summarize Barry's description, when one plays stickball, they are playing in the presence of the Great Creator. He is watching; therefore, they are paying respect by playing stickball in exchange for the gift that they were given. Barry also stated that when one plays stickball, their ancestors come down from the spirit world to observe the game. He says that in this way the living honor their ancestors as well, a reverent theme deeply instilled in his interpretation of Native American belief (Barry 2019: Cultural Consultant).

**Oral History**

Stickball enjoys a rich heritage in numerous Native American oral histories. Often shrouded in mysticism, Native American oral histories bear a striking resemblance to Viking sagas in that they present elements of mystery, riddle, poetry, enigma, and history within a single example. Considered sacred, these tales generally convey some profound truth or life lesson in morality. One such oral history about the origin and purpose of stickball development is universal among many Native American Tribes, Bands, and Nations. This the ancient ball game between the birds and the terrestrial animals, a symbolic depiction of interaction between the Spirit or Upper World (birds) and Natural

or Under World (animals) (Hudson 1976:163-164). There is very important contextual information imbedded within this oral history; therefore, it is transcribed exactly as recorded verbatim in the mid-18th century by James Adair, an Irish American trader that spent 40 years in virtual isolation living amongst the various Southeastern Native American tribes:

> *The Ball Game of the Birds and the Animals. Once the animals challenged the birds to a great ballplay, and the birds accepted. The leaders made the arrangements and fixed the day, and when the time came both parties met at the place for the ball dance, the animals on a smooth grassy bottom near the river and the birds in the treetops over by the ridge. The captain of the animals was the Bear, who was so strong and heavy that he could pull down anyone that got in his way. All along the road to the ball ground he was tossing up great logs to show his strength and boasting of what he would do to the birds when the game began. The Terrapin, too—not the little one we have now, but the great original Terrapin—was with the animals. His shell was so hard that the heaviest blow could not hurt him, and he kept rising up on his hind legs and dropping heavily again to the ground, bragging that this was the way that he would crush any bird that tried to take the ball from him. Then there was the deer, who could outrun every other animal. Altogether it was a fine company.*
>
> *The Birds had the Eagle for their captain, with the Hawk and the great Tlanuwa, all swift and strong of flight, but still they were a little afraid of the animals. The dance was over and they were all pruning their*

*feathers up in the trees and waiting for the captain to give the word when here came two little things hardly larger than field mice climbing up the tree in which sat perched the bird captain. At last they reached the top, and creeping along the limb to where the Eagle captain sat they asked to be allowed to join in the game. The captain looked at them, and seeing that they were four-footed, he asked why they did not go to the animals, where they belonged. The little things said that they had, but the animals had made fun of them and driven them off because they were so small. Then the bird captain pitied them and wanted to take them.*

*But how could they join the birds when they had no wings? The Eagle, the Hawk, and the others consulted, and at last it was decided to make some wings for the little fellows. They tried for a long time to think of something that might do, until someone happened to remember the drum they had all used in the dance. The head was of ground-hog skin and maybe they could cut off a corner and make wings of it. So they took two pieces of leather from the drum head and cut them into shape for wings, and stretched them with cane splints and fastened them on to the forelegs of one of the small animals, and in this way came Tlameha, the Bat. They threw the ball to him and told him to catch it, and by the way he circled and dodged about, keeping the ball always in the air and never letting it fall to the ground, the birds soon saw that he would be one of their best men.*

*Now they wanted to fix the other little animal, but they had used up all their leather to make wings for the Bat, and there was no time to send for more. Somebody said that they might do it by stretching his skin, so two large birds took hold from opposite sides with their strong bills, and by pulling at his fur for several minutes they managed to stretch the skin on each side between the fore and hind feet, until they had Tewa, the Flying Squirrel. To try him the bird captain threw up the ball, when the Flying Squirrel sprang off the limb after it, caught it in his teeth and carried it through the air to another tree nearly across the bottom.*

*When they were all ready the signal was given and the game began, but almost at the first toss the Flying Squirrel caught the ball and carried it up to a tree, from which he threw it to the birds, who kept it in the air for some time until it dropped. The Bear rushed to get it, but the Martin darted after it and threw it to the Bat, who was flying near the ground, and by his dodging and doubling kept it out of the way of even the Deer, until he finally threw it in between the posts and won the game for the birds.*

*The Bear and Terrapin, who had boasted of what they would do, never got a chance to even touch the ball. For saving the ball when it dropped, the birds afterwards gave the Martin a gourd in which to build his nest, and he still has it."* (Hudson 1976:163-165)

Although some variations omit the Martin and its contribution, the Squirrel and Bat are always mentioned together, playing prominent (and often interchangeable) roles

in all versions (Howe 2006:78-79). Also, some adaptations have the Bat and Squirrel playing for the animals instead of the birds, however, it is not important which team they played for. What matters is that an intentional social exception was made and that they were included into a larger group that they did not necessarily belong to (Howe 2006:79). This is symbolic of deliberate inclusiveness and the establishment of an overarching identity. Douglas P. Fry, a recognized expert on peace processes, refers to this kinship arrangement as, "expanding the 'Us' to include the 'Them,'" asserting this interdependency to be a key tenant of any viable peace system (Fry 2009:7,11,12; Fry 2015:546,548-549; Douglas P. Fry 2018: Personal Correspondence).

Far from being just a fanciful story, the oral history presented above provides a symbolic lesson and blueprint for moral behavior. Stickball games are known for being accompanied by incessantly loud drumming, the rhythm of which closely resembles the sound of war-drums. In fact, the drums that are associated with stickball play are not the large ceremonial drums so prevalent at contemporary Native American social gatherings, but are small hand-held drums that can be played while marching or on the move. Since the drum in the oral history provided only a marginal amount of useable leather, it is understood that the drum described within the story is a small marching drum. Therefore, it is interpreted here that the birds symbolically dismantled their *war-drum* to accommodate and include the two little creatures.

**Social Organization**

It should be noted that within many Southeastern Native American traditions social organization reflects this delicate balance between peace and war. For not only

were chiefs or clans organized in this bicameral manner, but entire villages and nations often were also divided along the lines of red and white. These colors represent the two competing moieties in Native American kinship division. The moiety system is a dual form of social organization common amongst Native American societies (See Figure 9).

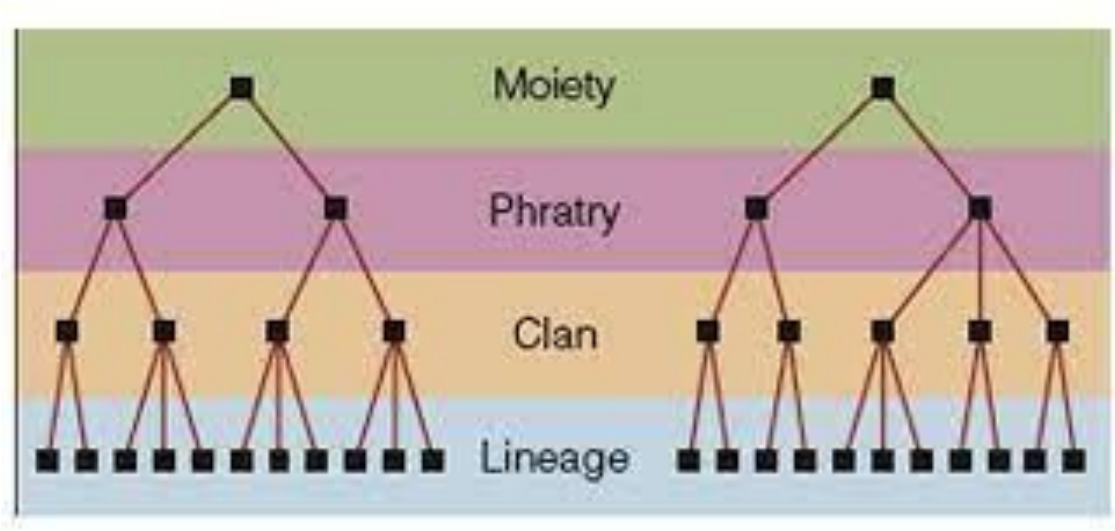


*Figure 9. The Moiety System of Native American Descent. (Nanopdf. Public domain. 2021)*

The Creek and other Southeastern Tribes, such as the Choctaw, were especially distinguished for establishing their society in this manner (Braund 2008:6-7; Galloway and Kidwell 2004:508; Galloway 2006:346). Red towns were war-towns and white towns were peace-towns (Walker 2004:382). The birds and animals also symbolically represent Native American kinship clans. Warrior clans are denoted by the color red, as red is the color of blood and is associated with war (Braund 2008:7; Vennum 1994:215). Note that the Bear Clan is universally associated as a warrior clan, therefore, the leader of the Bear Clan is considered a War Chief (Walker 2004:382). White clans are associated with peace (Walker 2004:382). The Eagle Clan is a medicine or peace clan, denoted by the color white. This is where the term “Medicine Man” comes from. In some Native American tribes, such as the Kickapoo, it was only these medicine men from the Eagle

Clan that were entrusted with the crafting of the Towa, or stickball ball (Vennum 1994:74) A *Medicine Man* is an ancient term commonly used to signify a distinguished spiritual leader said to possess powerful medicine. The word medicine has a slightly different meaning here than it does in Western culture. Barry, a Native American cultural consultant and elder of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians explains that the term *medicine* references anything that possesses great power, especially spiritual power, and that this medicine can be called upon to affect the outcome of some situation or circumstance. That is another reason that stickball is sometimes referred to as the "Medicine Game," for stickball is powerful medicine for the prevention of war. (Barry 2018: Cultural Consultant).

The head of the Eagle Clan is generally a spiritual leader, or *peace chief* that wields roughly the same amount of power and sway as a *war chief* but operates within a very different and often opposing capacity (Walker 2004:382). This dual form of social organization functions as a cultural check and balance system. Note that within the oral history, the birds were said to be a *little afraid*. Presumably, that is because war is a frightening proposition. As a response, they acted tactfully by showing tolerance and empathy towards the small creatures which ultimately changed the outcome of the situation. This suggests that the compassionate nature of stickball can symbolically represent medicine for the affliction of war. The last paragraph of the story relates that the "Bear and the Terrapin never even got a chance to touch the ball," a probable metaphor for life (Hudson 1976; 163-165). This is a figurative assertation that stickball can be considered powerful medicine to successfully prevent war and the mayhem it is associated with. Interestingly, it is the spiritual leaders, or medicine men, that are often

described as officiating stickball ball games in historical literature (Blanchard 1981:29-30; Galloway and Kidwell 2004:508; Vennum 1994:76). This further suggests that the titles *Medicine Man* and *Peace Chief* were synonymous and often used interchangeably.

**Fictive Kinship**

Another form of social organization utilized extensively by Southeastern Native American Tribes was the fictive kinship alliance. Fictive kinship is established by formally adopting a member of one competing group into another. This practice is demonstrative of Fry's peace system conception of "expanding the 'Us' to include the 'Them'' (Fry 2015:546). Evidence suggests that the Choctaw took this concept of fictive kinship very seriously, often using the process to establish diplomacy, expand socio-political networks, and to solidify and maintain peaceful relations between potentially antagonistic parties (Galloway 2006:358; Howe 2014:79-80).

One important example of this practice is evidenced by the Fani Mingo/Miko institution. This is a very ancient tradition employed by the Choctaw and Chickasaw Tribes to maintain peaceful relations (Galloway 2006:358-363; Howe 2014;79). Note that this institution closely correlates to the oral history of the birds and the animals. The word *fani* in both the Choctaw and Chickasaw languages translates as *squirrel*. Mingo and Miko are respectively the Chickasaw and Choctaw words for "Chief". Therefore, a Fani Mingo, or Fani Miko, translates as "Squirrel Chief" (Howe 2014;79). Thus, the Fani Mingo is a white, or *peace chief* (Galloway 2006:358-363). The *fani mingo* process operates as an institution within an institution. Functional characteristics of Native American social institutions can be confusing and difficult to conceptualize in Western

culture (Galloway 2006:345). Therefore, LeAnne Howe, a tribal historian and member of the Choctaw Nation, describes the fani mingo institution as follows:

> *In the historic southeast there are many examples of Choctaw traveling on diplomatic missions on behalf of our tribe. Fictive kin is a term used by scholars to describe kinship that is from neither blood ties nor marriage. The Choctaws have a very old and prominent Fani Mingo/Miko (squirrel chief) institution that serves as a kind of cultural template for diplomacy. Fani Mingo/Miko, often an adopted outsider, must 'play' as hard for the opposing team as he does for his 'home' team, just as Bat and Squirrel played for their adopted team. In other words, he (or she) must advocate for the tribe or town he is not a member of. The story of the animals and birds shows us how to make diplomatic relations with other tribes and foreigners, those different from ourselves, which aids in our survival.*
>
> (Howe 2014:79-80)

Howe further states that, "this story of the animals and birds has always been thought to be about Southeastern stickball" (Howe 2014:78). Therefore, Howe makes it clear that the Fani Mingo is a stickball champion when she states that he must *play* for the opposing team (read Tribe or Nation), then supports this rendition of Choctaw oral history with the following excerpt by Southeastern archaeologist Patricia Galloway:

> *These first explorers found native institutions in place for dealing with formal intertribal communication. In the early eighteenth century the fani mingo institution served this purpose among the Chickasaw and Choctaws; tribes would adopt an advocate within a neighboring tribe, and*

> *his duty would be to argue in favor of what became in a sense his adopted tribe whenever war threatened to break out. Under other names such an institution may have been widespread as a means of dealing with intertribal relations throughout the Southeast, connected with the fictive kinship mechanisms of the calumet ceremony*. (Howe 2014:80)

Each of these descriptions of the *fani mingo* institution are further supported by a letter written in 1708 by Thomas Nairne, in which he describes the Chickasaw Fani Mingo (Squirrel Chief):

> *The Chicasaws Yassaws and other people of these parts have one pretty rational Establishment that is that any fameily of a nation who pleases usually chuse a protector or friend out of another fameily. He thus chose is generally some growing man of Esteem in the Warrs, they who chuse & owne him for the head or Chief of their Fameily, pay him severall little devoirs as visiting him with a present upon their returnes from hunting saluting him by the name of Chief. Then he is to protect that Fameily and take care of it's concerns equally with those of his own. Thus likewise Two nations at peace, each chuse these protectors in the other, usually send them presents. His bussiness is to make up all Breaches between the 2 nations, to keep the pipes of peace by which at first they contracted Friendship, to divert the Warriors from any design against the people they protect, and Pacify them by carrying them the Eagle pipe to smoak out of, and if after all, ar unable to oppose the stream, are to send the people*

*private intelligence to provide for their own safety*. (Galloway 2006:359-361)

It is notable that both Galloway and Nairne associate the Fani Mingo with possession of the calumet. This is significant in that it confirms Fani Mingo's position as a peace chief or ambassador. Although beyond the scope of this study, a brief description of the calumet and calumet ceremony is warranted as it is relevant. The calumet is a long decorative tobacco smoking pipe historically identified as a *peace pipe* (Brown 2006:372; Dye 2009:132-133; Pénicaut and McWilliams 1988:5). In *The Calumet Ceremony in the Southeast as Observed Archaeologically* (2006), Ian W. Brown indicates that there were several functions associated with the calumet. There were two types of calumets, a red one used for war council and a white one used for initiating peace (Brown 2006:372,380). This is significant as it correlates with the red and white kinship decent moieties discussed above.

The calumet's function as a *peace pipe* is of particular significance to this study, and in fact *structural peace* and *sociative peace* appears to have been its primary functions. The calumet was often used as a type of diplomatic passport when traveling through unknown territory. Brown states that French traders and explorers often carried a calumet with them to be used for this purpose (Brown 2006:381). When encountering a potentially hostile situation, they would immediately present the calumet, which operated as a type of symbolic armor. Brown notes that neglecting to possess a calumet could be costly, as the La Salle expedition discovered in 1679. Brown explains that the French explorer and some of his men confiscated stores of corn from what they mistakenly thought to be a deserted village (Brown 2006:381). The inhabitants, becoming very irate,

caught them, and would likely have ended the explorer's career if not for the opportune arrival of someone with a calumet, thus saving the day. This encounter impressed the French explorers so much that they seldom failed to have a calumet with them at all times after the encounter (Brown 2006:381).

The most important function of the calumet, when used in conjunction with the calumet ceremony, was to initiate a temporary state of peace between potential adversaries (Brown 2006:377). A sort of parley, the calumet ceremony was used to establish a temporary truce between cultural groups. Early French literature describes the calumet ceremony as a three-day event that entailed singing and dancing, feasting and diplomacy, oration, and the symbolic forgiveness of grievances (Pénicaut and McWilliams 1988:5-7). A prime example of the calumet ceremony was recorded during the initial encounter of Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, founder of French Louisiana, with five Southeastern Native American tribes in 1698. The following is a summary of the encounter as described in *Fleur de Lys and Calumet; Being the Pénicaut Narrative of French Adventure in Louisiana* (1988), by Andre Pénicaut, a French Marine and shipwright that witnessed the meeting: The chiefs of five nations; the "Pascagoulas, Capinans, Chicachas, Passacolas, and Biloxi," came singing in a ceremonious manner to the French fort and presented a calumet to the commander, M. d'Iberville and his officers. After formally smoking the pipe after the custom of the natives, these chiefs rubbed white chalk on the Frenchmen's faces to mark the honor (Brown 2006:381; Pénicaut and McWilliams 1988:5-9). Pénicaut describes the entire ceremony as lasting three days, in which there was much feasting and formal interaction. Thus, peaceful relations were initially established between the French and several Southeastern tribes.

There are three important points here. (1) Diplomatic relations were established via the presentation of a calumet, (2) the Natives honored the establishment of peace with the French by painting their faces white, the Native American color for peace, and (3) the calumet was presented by one of the five chiefs of each visiting nation (Pénicaut and McWilliams 1988:5-9). This implies that the possessor and presenter of the calumet was a peace chief, as the sole mission of the encounter was to establish peaceful relations with the French strangers. This has important implications, as Nairne's 1708 letter indicates that the Fani Mingo he described "carried the calumet," that was first used to establish peace (Galloway 2006:359-361). This validates the Fani Mingo as a peace chief. Furthermore, Brown asserts that the calumet ceremony also established a symbolic fictive kinship between Europeans and Native American leaders (fani mingo), further signifying that the calumet ceremony and stickball play were used collectively for peaceful purposes, the former to establish peace, and the later to maintain peace (Brown 2006:379).

**Choctaw Corner**

Stickball's primary capacity as originally used by Native American tribes was to settle disputes and prevent war. The following is a historical account of stickball games being used to settle a longstanding land possession dispute between the Creek Confederacy and Choctaw Nation in 1805, thus averting eminent war between two of the most powerful and antagonistic tribal entities in the Southeast. The account is taken from, *The Creek War of 1813 and 1814*, by H.S. Halbert and T. H. Ball, as originally published in 1895 (Ball and Halbert 1995:36). The area of contention was the eastern watershed

along the Black Warrior and Tombigbee Rivers in Alabama. This is an enormous area of prime real estate suitable for hunting and agriculture that stretches from the modern cities of Tuscaloosa in the north, to Mobile at the southern end, a distance of approximately 100 miles. Being about 20 miles in average width, the total land area of the disputed region encompasses approximately 2,000 square miles of fertile bottomland.

In the Fall of 1805, the Choctaws had ceded 5,000,000 acres of land to the United States government, including the land of the watershed that the Creek Confederacy also claimed as their own (Ball and Halbert 1995:36-37). However, instead of going to war over the disputed territory, after much deliberation between the two opposing Native American Nations, it was decided that ownership should be decided by a game of stickball. A game was then played by the men of each tribe, and the Choctaw won (Ball and Halbert 1995:36). The Creeks, however, were not satisfied with the outcome and threatened war anyway. As a solution, the Choctaw proposed that the women should play to settle the contention (Ball and Halbert 1995:36; Cox 2019:1). A second game was played and the Choctaw won again. In this way, the land dispute between the Choctaw Tribe and the Creek Confederacy was laid to rest (Ball and Halbert 1995:36; Cox 2019:1). This land area was surveyed with the assistance of the Creek and Choctaw in 1808, with delegates from each tribe, and a post denoting the boundary was erected in what is now Clarke County, Alabama (Ball and Halbert 1995:36). This place became known as Choctaw Corner, and a United States historical landmark now resides near the boundary post (Cox 2019:1; Ball and Halbert 1995:36). See Figures 10 and 11 for Choctaw corner historical markers.


*Figure 10. Original Choctaw Corner Post Location. (Twitter. Public domain. 2021)*


*Figure 11. Choctaw Corner Historical Landmark. (ruralalabama.org. Public Domain. 2021)*

Although it has not been addressed to this point, it must be noted that peace systems, just like many other systems, do not always work. That is because peace systems are dependent on voluntary compliance by each of the opposing forces. Peace systems are only effective if both parties adhere to the rules within the system. If one party neglects to respect the societal norms by breaking the rules, the institutional structure of the peace system may collapse, causing the entire system to fail. This may be evidenced by a disastrous occurrence that took place roughly one generation prior to the incident at Choctaw Corner. The following is a summary of what happened as recorded by H.S. Halbert, and shared with H.B. Cushman, describing the infamous event known as "The Great Ball Play and Fight on the Noxubee" (Cushman 1962:131-135). Halbert says the story was often told by Stonie Hadjo, an aged Creek warrior that had been adopted by the Choctaw and died in the Fall of 1836, and refers to an incident that occurred around 1790 on the Noxubee River in Mississippi (Cushman 1962:131-132). According to the oral history, there was in ancient times a very large beaver pond on the Noxubee River that both the Creek Confederacy and the Choctaw claimed as their private hunting ground, thus setting the context for the violent dispute (Cushman 1962:132). Although it is thought that the Creek had been the first to discover the pond, the area was deep within traditional Choctaw territory. Since the fur trade in Mobile and Pensacola was very lucrative for both parties, neither was willing to concede their right to hunt the beavers. After much diplomacy, it was finally decided to play a stickball game to resolve the matter. It is said that by the day of the game, there was in excess of 10,000 Choctaws and Creeks camped around the ballfield (Cushman 1962:132).

Witnesses on both sides admitted that this was the most closely matched stickball competition ever played. The first game ended in a tie. Therefore, it was decided that another game would be played to settle the contest. After about four more grueling hours the Creek team won and thus began to sing and celebrate the great victory, which humiliated the Choctaw team (Cushman 1962:133). According to the oral history, one high-spirited Choctaw player was unable to constrain himself and insulted one of the Creek players. The Creek player retaliated by throwing a female's petticoat on the Choctaw player—a great insult—and the two were soon locked in mortal combat. This quickly spread to the other players, who began taking up all manner of weapons and attacking each other. The warriors from each tribe then joined the fight and the ensuing battle lasted throughout the night and into the next day (Cushman 1962:133).

Stonie Hadjo stated that by the time the great Chiefs of the Choctaws and Creeks arrived to put a stop to the fighting, in excess of 500 warriors and ballplayers lay dead on the ballfield (Cushman 1962:134). It is likely that as many more later died of the wounds received during this battle. Prior to this incident, the Choctaws and Creeks had had many battles and fought several wars, but none was as catastrophic as the fight at the Noxubee River beaver pond. H.B. Cushman states that, "for many long years the Creeks and the Choctaws looked back to this event with emotions of terror and sorrow. For here, their picked men, their ball players, who were the flower of the two Nations, almost to a man perished" (Cushman 1962:134). It is thought that nearly every family in each of the Nations lost at least one of their kinsmen in the fight on the Noxubee ballfield. So devastating was this loss, that both the Creeks and the Choctaws made yearly pilgrimages to this site to mourn over the graves the dead, the Choctaw right up until removal to

Oklahoma in 1832 (Cushman 1962:134-135). As a consequence, there was never another recorded occasion in which the results of a stickball match were not ultimately honored between the Creek and the Choctaw Nations.

# CHAPTER 3

# METHODS

## Research Design

The research design employed in this study is multi-component and includes several methods of data collection. The collective goal of this study is the creation of an accurate ethnographic representation of the prosocial complexities of Native American stickball. Research for this project was undertaken following the ethnographic research guidelines set forth in H. Russell Bernard's, *Research Methods In Anthropology*, Sixth Edition (2018). These methods include literary search, participant observation, and structured interviews. One important exception to Bernard's standard methodology was the inclusion of an experimental replication section in Appendix A. Experimental replication was undertaken to produce both stickball rackets and their antithesis, the war club.

Project methods and data collection were undertaken through a series of phases. Phase I involved an extensive literary search with two goals. The first objective was to obtain a comprehensive academic understanding of peace, peace systems, and peace processes as they are currently interpreted. Contextual supplementation was augmented with contemporary biological and anthropological perspectives of prosocial behavioral expressions exhibited by both humans and non-human primates. Findings are presented in Chapter 1 and reexamined in Chapter 5. The second literature review objective was to

assemble and analyze both historical and contemporary accounts pertaining to the prosocial function of Native American stickball. More specifically, a special focus was placed on identifying examples of stickball's role as a platform for fostering peace and diplomacy, positive socialization, and cultural stability. This includes published eyewitness accounts and Native American oral histories alluding to the game as a means of forming and maintaining peaceful relations between potentially confrontational entities. Findings are presented in Chapter 2 and reassessed in Chapter 5.

Being primarily an ethnographic study, participant observation was employed within a wide variety of contexts during Phase II. Participant observation is the foundational method of cultural anthropology in which the researcher becomes immersed within a host culture (Bernard 2018:272-293). This requires the proactive establishment of an honest working relationship before research can take place. As per Bernard, once trust has been founded, much can be learned by simply hanging out, building rapport, and asking questions (Bernard 2018:272-293). This method was essential to gain a strong personal understanding of Native American cultural practice to thereby present an accurate representation of contemporary Native American values and beliefs. This phase of research involved approximately one and a half years of fieldwork with the purpose of educating the author on the complexities and practice of traditional Native American lifeways and belief systems as interpreted by contemporary Native American groups (Bernard 2018:276-277). Phase III of research consisted of structured interviews conducted with members of several distinctive traditional Southeastern Native American Tribes, Bands, and Nations. This was undertaken to gain a broader understanding of contemporary Native American perceptions of stickball and its functionality as a medium

for promoting peace. Simulating Bernard's model, an identical set of predetermined questions were presented to each participant (Bernard 2018:165). The conclusion of each interview allowed for reflection and elaboration on the part of the participants. Interview results are presented in Chapter 4.

## A Note on Tribal Names

The term "Indians" can be found throughout the entirety of this study. However, this designation is not used or implied in a derogatory manner or context, but only to respectfully identify and differentiate those federally recognized Native American Tribes, Bands, or Nations that have included this designation within their official title. These include but may not be limited to, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, and the Poarch Band of Creek Indians.

## Cultural Group Selection

The anthropological premise of cultural relativism maintains that if any study of cultural phenomena is to be considered accurate or authentic, as a minimum requirement, the work must contain informed contributions from representatives of those cultures that practice that convention. Therefore, field research began by initiating contact with tribal members of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI). This was initially accomplished at the 30th annual Native American Festival at Moundville Archaeological Park, Moundville, Alabama, in 2018. During the festival, this writer attended a public stickball demonstration and met several MCBI members with lengthy histories and intimate knowledge of the institution of stickball. After explaining the nature and goals of

the intended research, these individuals, and many others, ultimately generously volunteered to participate in this research project.

The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians was selected for several reasons. The first being their intimate association with the Native American cultural tradition of stickball, both past and present. Within the Southeastern geographical region of the United States, the MBCI are renowned for their long history with the institution of stickball. In fact, this association is so prevalent within Choctaw culture that it has been suggested that they are the originators of the tradition, although the Iroquois and other Native American groups also make credible claims for this designation (Barry 2019: Cultural Consultant; Iroquois Nationals Lacrosse 2018).

The fully developed tradition of stickball play was first recorded among the Mississippi Choctaw by French chroniclers as early as 1729-1731 (Blanchard 1981:27; Swanton 1918:3). Today, the MBCI are host to the Stickball World Series (Ben 2019: Choctaw Indian Fair). This series takes place each July at the annual Choctaw Indian Fair in Pearl River, Mississippi. This researcher attended the series in 2019, personally observing several playoff games and the championship match at the invitation of cultural consultants from the MBCI. These sessions were supplemented by personal commentary and insight provided by MBCI cultural consultant, Jackson, in the bleachers during the games, and MBCI cultural consultant, Afo, on the field and behind the scenes between games. This included personal participation in the grand entry of the team from the MBCI community of Standing Pine (Choctaw-Tiak Hikiya). In 2020, both the Choctaw Indian Fair and The Stickball World Series were suspended for one year due to the

Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, the 71st Annual Choctaw Indian Fair and Stickball World Series were postponed until July 2021.

The second reason for selection of the MBCI was geographic location and accessibility during research. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians are the only federally recognized Native American tribe in the state of Mississippi, the primary focus area of this study. The MBCI occupy 35,000+ acres of reservation land comprising eight communities within their traditional homeland of central Mississippi, near the headwaters of the Pearl River. These communities are Bogue Chitto, Bogue Homa, Conehatta, Crystal Ridge, Pearl River, Red Water, Standing Pine, and Tucker. In addition to the eight homeland communities, it is understood that an unofficial MBCI colony was established during the 1950's in Henning, Tennessee. This colony is still viable and generally considered part of the MBCI community (Afo 2019: Cultural Consultant).

Last, but most importantly, the MBCI were selected for their eager willingness to participate in this study. Many of the initial MBCI contacts eventually became key cultural consultants, each providing critical framework for research, without which, this study would not have been possible. This enthusiasm regarding the research topic resulted in a strong rapport and generous invitations to, and participation in, numerous cultural events and contextual situations relating to stickball. This was important in providing a more complete understanding of Native American cultural belief and institutions as they relate to peace and peace processes. These events included both public Native American events and private family gatherings. This prosocial acceptance speaks to the positive sociopolitical elements of stickball and those that practice it.

## Institutional Review Board Compliance

Being a master's thesis, research approval was required from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB-IRB). This is a two-step process. Step one entailed the successful completion of two IRB Responsible Conduct in Research (RCR) training courses administered through the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI Program): (1) RCR Basic Course, RCR Abbreviated Course for Undergraduate Students, 1-Basic Course (also minimum requirement for graduate students), (2) Human Research, IRB Training-Social and Behavioral, 1-Basic Course. Acquired IRB Training Certificates, Record I.D. numbers 25048686, and 29112148.

Step two required selecting and applying for the correct research protocol. Prescreening indicated that this project was best defined as cultural phenomena research, therefore likely exempt from full board review and approval from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) as required for Human Subjects Research (HSR). A Not Human Subjects Research (NHSR) protocol application was generated and submitted. After a limited review, the IRB determined that this study is primarily derived from published literature, interviews, and the recording of oral histories, therefore, it is not subject to FDA regulations and is not Human Subjects Research. The project was approved NHSR as per IRB Determination Letter RE: IRB-300002451 (See Appendix B).

## Cultural Consultant Selection

This study would not have been possible without the cooperation of many Native American contributors. Native American cultural consultants were selected for this study by two different means. The first group of participants organically developed from initial contact with members of the MBCI. The second group arose during the participant observation and interview process. During participant observation, much time was spent with Afo, a primary MBCI cultural consultant. Being aware that the research agenda included both informal and structured interviews, Afo assisted this researcher at numerous Native American gatherings and facilitated contact with other cultural consultants associated with stickball. One such yearly gathering was the 2019 Oka Kapassa Return to Cold Water Native American Festival in Tuscumbia, Alabama. This festival was attended by stickball coaches, players, and craftsmen from several major Southeastern U.S. Native American Tribes, Bands, and Nations. Afo generously facilitated contact with many cultural specialists during the festival. As a result, the pool of MBCI cultural consultants was augmented to include members from three other federally recognized Southeastern Native American Tribes, Bands, or Nations. These entities include, (1) the Chickasaw Nation, (2) the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas (3) the Poarch Band of Creek Indians.

## Cultural Consultants

The following is a compilation of many of the Native American cultural consultants that contributed to this study. Pseudonyms have been issued for each participant as a necessary safety precaution designed to provide for maximizing

anonymity from personal identification. However, some information has been retained to qualify both the individual and the authenticity of the subject matter as presented. This information may include age (at time of interview), gender, tribal affiliation, community, or any other such information that is deemed appropriate for inclusion within the study but does not explicitly identify the individual. Pseudonyms were selected alphabetically and randomly assigned.

Afo - Afo is a thirty-nine-year-old male. He is a member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and resides in the MBCI community Standing Pine (Choctaw: Tiak Hikiya). Afo is a multitalented Native American craftsman that specializes in the production of hand-made stickball rackets. A highly respected veteran stickball player and coach, Afo has served in some primary capacity for over twenty years. He is also a youth mentor and performer within a Native American cultural presentation group. Afo is one of two primary MBCI contributors to this project. During research, Afo aided in every conceivable way, from explaining the fine points of stickball and introductions to other cultural consultants, to personal instruction in the craft of producing stickball rackets by traditional means. Afo's contribution was invaluable, and this report could not have been produced without the inclusion of his insight and experience.

Barry - Barry is the second primary MBCI contributor to this study. He is a fifty-one-year-old male. A veteran former stickball player, Barry is currently a youth mentor and cultural representative held in high regard as an MBCI spiritual leader and tribal elder. Although Barry lives in the community of Pearl River, he expresses strong familial ties with the MBCI communities of Standing Pine and Beaver Dam. These multiple strands of familial connection are quite common and attest to the complexity of identity

as expressed by and within Native American tribal groups. Barry was the first of the Native American cultural consultants to accept and welcome me. Being an esteemed elder of the MBCI, Barry was especially helpful in explaining the spiritual aspects of stickball as currently interpreted and practiced from a Native American perspective.

Caleb - Caleb was a twenty-two-year-old male member of the MBCI residing within the community of Bogue Chitto. Caleb was an eighteen-year veteran stickball player, social dancer and drummer performing within an MBCI Native American cultural presentation group. Tragically, Caleb succumbed to the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 which disproportionately affected Native American populations and subsequently passed before the completion of this document. Caleb was the most enthusiastic of all the MBCI cultural contributors within this study. His presence throughout the entirety of the research phase of this project was a source of constant inspiration and he was considered a close friend.

Dave - Dave is a twenty-one-year-old member of the MBCI. Dave hails from the MBCI community of Conehatta and is proud to recount that he received his first set of stickball rackets before he had yet learned to walk. He has actively supported and played stickball for seventeen years and currently plays for or otherwise represents several organized Native American stickball teams.

Edward - Edward is a fifty-five-year-old member of the Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas, and lives in Elton, Louisiana, with his wife, a member of the Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana. Edward is an official tribal cultural representative and world-famous hoop-dancer that has performed as far away as Russia. Edward is a veteran stickball player that has participated since the age of fourteen.

Frank - Frank is a sixty-four-year-old member of the Chickasaw Nation, Ada, Oklahoma. He is a tribal cultural resources and activities manager from the town of Sasakwa, Oklahoma. A life-long stickball veteran, Frank recounted traveling to his uncle's place at the Chickasaw stomping-grounds in Kullihoma, Oklahoma, from the age of five, to play stickball and participate in the social-games. There they would "dance and play stickball the next day" (Frank 2019: Cultural Consultant).

George - George is a sixty-four-year-old member of the MBCI, form the community of Standing Pine, Mississippi. Considered a highly esteemed tribal elder, he is also an unofficial tribal historian and cultural representative. George is also regarded for his skill in making stickball rackets and handcrafting balls. George received his first set of stickball rackets by the age of five or six and has played throughout the entirety of his life. Speaking of the distinctive relationship between stickball and the Mississippi Choctaw, he proudly proclaims, "we grew up with it…it's who we are" (George 2019: Cultural Consultant).

Henry - Henry was a sixty-four-year-old member of the Chickasaw Nation, Ada, Oklahoma. He was proud of the fact that he was the product of dual ancestry, being half Chickasaw and half Seminole. Recognized as an esteemed elder and official Native American cultural representative of the Chickasaw Nation, Henry was a veteran stickball player from age eight. Regrettably, Henry too fell victim to the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 and subsequently passed before this work was completed.

Ivan - Ivan is a forty-seven-year-old male member of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, Atmore, Alabama. The Poarch Band of Creek Indians are the only federally recognized Band of Native Americans in Alabama. Ivan is a Native American cultural

presenter and has played stickball since the age of twelve. One of Ivan's main responsibilities as an official tribal representative is to maintain and prepare the Poarch Creek ceremonial Stomping Grounds for use in early Spring. He considers this chore a great honor that he inherited from his uncle. Speaking with great reverence and pride, he addresses the Stomping Grounds as if it were a living entity, declaring "once the Stomping Grounds have rested for the winter season, tradition dictates that it must be awakened with a stickball game" (Ivan 2019: Cultural Consultant).

Jackson - Jackson is a fifty-two-year-old male member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. He is the first cousin of Barry, and a veteran stickball player. Although not formally interviewed within this document, Jackson's personal assistance and informal instruction were critical elements of the research process. Jackson was present during the entirety of the project and contributed at virtually every event. He was especially helpful in explaining the nuances of stickball play during the Stickball World Series at the 2019 Choctaw Indian Fair.

**Participant Observation**

Since stickball is regarded as a gift from the Great Creator in many Native American oral histories, including that of the Mississippi Choctaw, it was decided by Barry and Afo that research should begin only after obtaining personal blessings and experiencing the spiritual power of the most sacred site of the Mississippi Choctaw, Nanih Waiya. The Nanih Waiya complex is comprised of an earthen platform mound and nearby cave site located in the heart of the Choctaw homeland in Winston, and Neshoba Counties, Mississippi. The sites are separated by approximately one mile and are

connected by a walking trail. This dual complex is considered by many Choctaws to be the location of their sacred origin. One of two Choctaw creation stories declares that they emerged from the underworld and into the present world through the opening at the mouth of the cave (Barry 2019: Cultural Consultant). Thus, the cave itself is considered by many to be the Earth Navel. Although there is a competing creation story that describes an ancient migration from some undetermined location in the West, both versions either originate or terminate at Nanih Waiya and the cave mouth, hence denoting the significance of the site within Choctaw folklore.

This spiritual pilgrimage was undertaken at the invitation of MBCI tribal elders. The experience included historical observations pertaining to Choctaw oral histories, including an oratorical rendition of the Choctaw creation story as recounted by Barry, an esteemed MBCI elder and spiritual leader. Incidentally, this version of the Native American creation story also includes the Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Muscogee/Creek, which also speaks of peace and fraternity between Native American groups. Inclusive within this visit was participation by this author in a spiritual cleansing ceremony, accomplished by smudging with sage and conducted by MBCI elder and spiritual leader, Barry. This was complemented by participation in two separate tobacco offering rituals. The first offered up to the Great Creator, and the second presented at the mouth of the cave itself. This writer was deeply affected by a sense of overwhelming power during the experience. Bernard describes this level of participant observation, that is, total immersion of oneself into another culture, as being key to accurately perceive and intellectualize what one has observed (Bernard 2018:274).

Other events included either attendance, observation, or participation in every tangible aspect pertaining to stickball. This involved personally attending innumerable stickball games and practices, both from the perspective of spectator and from direct interaction behind the scenes with players, coaches, and others associated with the institution during the entirety of this project. Included were multiple interpretation and explanation sessions presented by a myriad of cultural consultants of every conceivable persuasion; young and old, women and men, children, young adults, and teen-agers alike. Each eager to communicate the complexities of traditional and contemporary Native American cultural belief and practice. Participation within these events also produced positive associations with representatives from several other federally recognized Southeastern Tribes, Bands, and Nations, thus augmenting the strength and diversity of an already impressive list of Native American contributors.

**Structured Interviews**

Each of the Native American cultural consultants listed, with the exception of Jackson, was interviewed during the September 2019 Oka Kapassa-Return to Coldwater Native American Festival in Tuscumbia, Alabama. In addition to the specified list of questions provided, each participant was encouraged to add and elaborate on any point deemed relevant to the study This was included with the goal of attaining a more complete understanding of how stickball's traditional function as a peace system corresponds to contemporary Native American cultural belief. Below is the list of interview questions presented. Each response was recorded and subsequently analyzed. The evaluation of interview responses is presented in Chapter 4.

**Interview Questions**

1. What is your age, gender, tribal affiliation, and home community?
2. When did you first encounter Native American stickball? (Where, when, and age at that time)
3. If you remember, what was your first impression of the game?
4. How long have you played, coached, or otherwise been associated with stickball, such as making rackets/balls, officiating, or supporting by other means?
5. What is it that inspires you to do so? Might it be civic or personal pride; personal, tribal, or Native identity; competition, unity, or something else that you might want to express?
6. This question is related, but how does your participation make you feel?
7. What does the game mean to you? Both in a personal and broader sense?
8. Is there a religious or spiritual aspect that is important to you? Can you explain?
9. What percentage of your friends, family, and other members of your community would you estimate that either play or otherwise support the game in some way? (25%, 50%, 75%, or some other number?)
10. How do you envision the future of stickball as a viable Native American peace system?
11. Is there anything that you would like to add?

## Data Analysis

The data utilized by study are primarily qualitative and were generated from four main categories: (1) data derived from publications, (2) conversations recorded on audio device, (3) transcriptions, including interview responses, and (4) observations and field notes. Processed raw data was coded and compared with personal observations to assess trending patterns and consistencies. The results are presented in Chapter 4.

# CHAPTER 4

# RESULTS

The purpose of study was to assess the social functionality of Native American stickball and its role as a viable indigenous peace system. Specifically: (1) the reason(s) for its development, and how the institution associated with stickball functioned in the past to facilitate or maintain peace, (2) to evaluate its contemporary function as a peace system and assess what it represents to those that practice it today, and (3) how the institution of stickball might operate as a peace system in the future.

To understand the early development and history of stickball, this study relied heavily on published literature. This included review of early colonial eye-witness accounts, Native American oral histories and folklore recorded in historical literature, and contemporary academic publications pertaining to stickball and peace systems. The results of this research phase is evidenced throughout the entirety of this study. To evaluate stickball's future and contemporary functions required no less than 1.5 years of intensive field work, which was achieved by the application of participant observation, structured interviews, and experimental replication.

Participant observation is the immersing of oneself into a foreign culture group, and entails going where they go, doing what they do, eating what they eat, and recording everything along the way (Bernard 2018:272-293). This was accomplished by initiating contact with members of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (MBCI), befriending

them, and soliciting their participation and contributions as cultural consultants within this study. This culture group was the ideal choice for this research, as the Mississippi Choctaw are synonymous with the institution of stickball and the association is both ancient and inseparable. Many of these MBCI representatives became key cultural consultants and were instrumental in educating this researcher on the various complexities inherent within both the institution of stickball and greater Southeastern Native American lifeways.

This initial unit of cultural consultants facilitated the rest of the research within this study. Members of this group aided research in every category. This began by including this researcher in a spiritual pilgrimage to the most sacred of all Mississippi Choctaw sites, the Nanih Waiya platform mound and cave complex. This visit entailed a complex spiritual cleansing with sage and two ceremonial tobacco offerings, followed by an oratorical rendition of the Choctaw Creation Story. Upon obtaining favor and blessings from the Great Creator, participant observation commenced within this group of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. This researcher was afterwards invited to participate in every possible social event. This included Native American cultural festivals and pow-wows, private family gatherings, and personal attendance in every conceivable contextual situation pertaining to Native American stickball. This researcher was introduced to elders, craftsmen, stickball players, coaches, and officials throughout the Southeast, culminating in personal attendance of the 2019 Stickball World Series at the 70$^{th}$ annual Choctaw Indian Fair, in Pearl River, Mississippi. The results of participant observation are presented and discussed at the end of this chapter.

Afo, one of these primary MBCI cultural consultants personally trained this researcher in the complex craft of producing authentic Choctaw stickball paraphernalia, including instruction in crafting both stickball rackets and their antithesis, various types of war clubs. Afo was also instrumental in introducing this researcher to an assemblage of other Southeastern Native American cultural consultants, thus producing a diverse group of Native American respondents for the structured interview process. Cultural consultants within the interview pool are comprised of nine individuals representative of four federally recognized Southeastern Tribal entities from four U. S. states: (1) The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (Mississippi), (2) The Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas (Texas), (3) The Chickasaw Nation (Oklahoma), and (4) the Poarch Creek Band of Creek Indians (Alabama). Each of these Native American Tribes, Bands, and Nations is noted for their historical association with the institution of Native American stickball. The following is a presentation of the results and analysis of the data generated during interview process.

**Interview Responses**

1. *What is your age, gender, tribal affiliation, and home community?*

100% of respondents were male Native Americans. 22% of respondents were age 20-30, 11% age 30-40, 11% age 40-50, 22% age 50-60, and 33% age 60-70. Respondents were comprised of members from four federally recognized Southeastern Native American Tribes, Bands, or sovereign Nations. Multiple tribal affiliations were expressed by 22% of respondents. These complex tribal affiliations include Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas/Coushatta Tribe of Louisiana (1), Chickasaw Nation/Seminole Nation (2).

Additionally, multiple community affiliations were recorded in 60% of intratribal responses. These multiple affiliations are (1) Standing Pine/Pearl River, (2) Conehatta/Tucker/Pearl River, (3) Standing Pine/Beaver Dam. Although these multiple community affiliations were recorded only amongst the MBCI respondents, a larger sample pool would likely expand this phenomenon to other tribal groups. These responses are indicative of the complex nature of Native American cultural and personal identity.

2. *When did you first encounter Native American stickball? (Where, when, and age at that time)*

Respondents were all exposed to stickball as children, ranging from age 2 to 14. 22% of respondents reported that their initial introduction to stickball was at school, 22% at a Native American cultural event, 44% at the home of a family member, and one respondent reported that his first encounter was in the woods. That 22% percent of respondents reported their first encounter with stickball at school is significant. This indicates that Native American stickball is being introduced alongside traditional Western sports such as football and baseball at the elementary school level in some Native American communities and tribal groups. This speaks to the contemporary trend of traditional Native American cultural revival taking place throughout North America. Also significant is that 22% of respondents reported their first encounter with stickball at a Native American cultural event. These large social gatherings, such as the annual Moundville Native American Festival (Moundville, Alabama), the Choctaw Indian Fair (Pearle River, Mississippi), The Oka-Kapassa Return to Coldwater Festival (Tuscumbia, Alabama), and various other pow-wows and events are held throughout the country and

are growing in both popularity and attendance. The prominence of stickball at these large prosocial gatherings suggest that the institution of Native American stickball still functions as a mechanism for the promotion of peace and denotes the contemporary revitalization of Native American cultural values and traditions. Perhaps the most important takeaway is that 44% of respondents recorded their first encounter with Native American stickball at the home of a family member. This suggests that Native American cultural traditions and values are principally being taught at home, and expresses the importance of familial ties within the greater Native American cultural community.

3. *If you remember, what was your first impression of the game?*

66% of respondents reported a positive emotional reaction when first encountering stickball. These impressions include wonder/fascination, excitement, reverence, passion, and amazement. 22% reported feeling bewilderment or slight intimidation. One respondent stating that he initially thought that he was too small to participate. Another reported that there was "not much to think about, as stickball was just a normal part of life." One respondent reported that his first encounter was in the woods when he stumbled upon a group of "little people" playing Stickball. To clarify; the myth of the *little people* is an ancient Native American cultural belief prevalent within both the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribal groups (Barry 2019: Cultural Consultant). Much like the Leprechaun in Western culture, these *little people* are often associated with causing mischief, however, at other times they are they are described as being helpful in some capacity. The respondent stated that one of these "little guys" befriended him, and because the respondent was a sort of an orphan, "this little guy began to teach me everything about life, he taught me how to hunt and fish, how to conduct myself, and

how to play stickball…but I couldn't play, because their rackets were too short, so this 'little guy' taught me how to make my own stickball rackets, and that is how I learned to play stickball." This assertation may represent a no more than an elaborate childhood fantasy, however, the myth of the *little people* is deeply embedded in both Chickasaw and Choctaw oral histories. Therefore, much like the ancient oral history of the mythical *Ballgame between the Birds and the Animals*, there is likely profound life-truths embedded within the symbolism.

4. *How long have you played, coached, or otherwise been associated with stickball, such as making rackets/balls, officiating, or supporting by other means?*

All respondents reported playing, coaching, crafting, or supporting stickball by other means since initial exposure. This is significant because it demonstrates the priority placed on the maintenance and perpetuation of this Native American cultural tradition within contemporary tribal groups, reaffirming the predominant role of stickball as an indigenous cultural unifier.

5. *What is it that inspires you to do so? Might it be civic or personal pride; personal, tribal, or Native identity; competition, unity, or something else that you might want to express?*

100% of respondents reported either Native American or family tradition as their primary inspiration for participation in stickball. Respondent #1 stated that "It is a family thing, family and community." Respondent #2 declared "Native tradition, it is my warrior spirit, it defines who we are, stickball has always been with us." Respondent #3 stated "Our ancestors played to settle disputes, nowadays we play for bragging rights." Respondent #4 stated "Family ties. Strong family tradition. Everybody in my family

plays, my mom, my sisters, my brothers, my dad, everyone." Respondent #5 listed "Family pride" as his inspiration. Respondent #6 stated "Family tradition, there are five generations of stickball racket makers in my family." Respondent #7 stated "Cultural tradition. It teaches you life." Respondent 8 said "Native tradition. It is what we know." Respondent #9 answered "Tradition. To keep a promise that was made between my ancestors and our Creator." These responses reflect a trend towards greater awareness of cultural tradition within contemporary Native American Tribes, Bands, and Nations, suggesting that stickball provides a platform for the development of an overarching identity, a central theme within peace systems (Douglas P. Fry 2018: Personal Correspondence; Fry 2009:7-12; Fry 2015:546-549).

6. *This question is related, but how does your participation make you feel?*

All 100% of respondents listed some form of pride as their primary emotion associated with stickball. Pride was expressed and evenly distributed on all levels: personal (bragging rights), familial, community, tribal affiliation, and Native American heritage. The following is a compilation of answers provided by respondents. #1 "True pride, Choctaw pride, bragging rights." #2 "Pride, proud to be Native American." #3 "Proud to be Choctaw." #4 "Proud, I pray before I play." #5 "It feels good to be part of a Native American tradition." #6 "Proud, stickball taught me who I was." #7 "Proud of my Native identity." #8 "It makes me feel good about myself." #9 "It is our way of life."

7. *What does the game mean to you? Both in a personal and broader sense?*

100% of respondents reported that stickball represented Native American identity and cultural tradition. The responses are as such #1 "My identity, being Native." #2 "Everything comes back to stickball. You prove yourself on the field. Physical endurance

respected. Sticks are weapons, an extension of the hand. It is an amazing thrill to be part of something bigger than myself." #3 "Everything. It is us." #4 "Everything. Strong emotion. We put everything on the field." #5 "Returning to the old ways. The better ways." #6 "Keeping the tradition alive. To settle disputes over hunting rights. Maintain peace." #7 "It is who we are. Everything. Stickball is in our blood." #8 "My culture. My belief. To keep the Medicine strong in my family." #9 "To step back in time."

8. *Is there a religious or spiritual aspect that is important to you? Can you explain?*

A religious component was reported by 88% of respondents. Participation was expressed as a form of worshiping the creator in 66% of responses, respect of ancestors was expressed in 33% of responses, and one respondent reported that he considered stickball as a religion in itself. Only one respondent failed to equate stickball with some form of religious element. Responses are as such. #1 "Stickball is more of a sport now, but it still teaches self-conduct." #2 "Stickball is the Creators game, our form of worship. Making one's own rackets is a rite of passage. Stickball is a *Medicine* game. We play a game instead of killing each other." #3 "Yes, we play for our ancestors." #4 "Yes, my ancestors are watching me." #5 "We play to honor the Creator and our ancestors." #6 "Honor. It is the way we speak to the Creator. Rackets are *Doctor Sticks,* they have power." #7 "Yes, in real form. It was for *Healing the Land*. It teaches you to respect others in your personal conduct, and to respect the natural environment." #8 "Stickball is my religion. When I played, I did it for my people…ancestors, family, and community." #9 "Yes, it is the Creators game."

9. *What percentage of your friends, family, and other members of your community would you estimate that either play or otherwise support the game in some way? (25%, 50%, 75%, or some other number?)*

Seven of nine respondents (77%) estimated overall community support in excess of 65%. Two respondents (22%) reported 30% to 40% community support. Active participation (playing, coaching, officiating) was estimated to be between 15% and 40% by all respondents. These numbers equate to an extraordinarily high rate of direct community support, certainly higher than that of any modern sport. This high-level of community support was verified during participant observation at the 2019 Stickball World Series, held at the 70th annual Choctaw Indian Fair, and is further discussed in the participant observation correlate section below.

10. *How do you envision the future of stickball as a viable Native American peace system?*

77% of respondents predict that stickballs future as a peace system will grow as popularity and participation are growing at an ever-increasing rate. One respondent (11%) reported uncertainty, citing that the future of stickball was dependent upon teaching the younger generations the value of the tradition. Another respondent (11%) reported that he was not optimistic about the future of stickball as a peace system, citing that the true meaning has been watered down and forgotten. Responses were recorded as such. #1 “I think it will grow because of the positiveness of it.” #2 “In the spotlight. It has a spirit and is never going away. A spirit of inclusion. The spirit knows no race or gender.” #3 “It will grow. I’m looking forward to all Tribes bringing teams.” #4 “Growing.” #5 “Growing in popularity.” #6 “Peace is the main focus.” #7 “I am not

optimistic. We don't teach the traditions anymore, just the watered down version. Now it is more like football." #8 "Unless we teach the new generation, it will be gone." #9 "Bright. I see it uniting all Tribes and races."

*11. Is there anything that you would like to add?*

Although this question was not answered by all respondents, here are the responses that were recorded. #1 "Stickball is growing in popularity. This was the first year for the Chickasaw women. Before that, many of them played on the Tuskahoma team, and a lot of them were included in Mississippi teams. The MBCI have an open door policy. Anybody is welcome. Just ask a coach. We give everyone a chance. Every team has at least one non-native playing on it." #2 "Stickball is something that cannot be destroyed. It is a catalyst for bringing people together. I would like to see more people included. I believe stickball will awaken our spirit, our identity." #3 "There is an old tradition of having towns designated by color, red and blue. One town could take the color of another by winning a stickball game. This was taken very seriously. Conehatta used to be a red town, but Beaver Dam took it, now they are a blue town." #4 "Everybody is welcome to play. Just come down to Philadelphia, Mississippi." #7 "The meaning is gone now. Stickball is not special anymore." #8 "When it comes time, it will be no more." #9 "We should use stickball to fix politics. Let me take a ball-game to Washington!"

**Participant Observation Correlate**

Though the interviewee sample was biased in favor of an all-male gender grouping, the overall age ranges was deemed to be appropriate in that it indicates the full

spectrum of adult understanding of the institution of stickball as traditionally practiced in Native American culture. Although participation in stickball is trending towards initial exposure at an ever earlier age, participant observation confirmed that children fully conceptualize the significance of stickball's traditional role as a peace system only after being taught by an adult. This should be no revelation, as all traditions are handed down from generation to generation. The important issue is that stickball's traditional purpose is being taught at an unprecedented rate to an ever-increasing number of children, suggesting that personal understanding of stickball's role as a peace system will increase in conjunction with its popularity as a sport. This is evidenced by increased team enrollment and participation in the 10-13 and 14-17 year age groups within official MBCI stickball league play. As each youth team observed was coached by a tribal youth mentor, it was noted that stickball's traditional values were being taught in conjunction with the physical aspects of the sport. All youth participants were observed as conducting themselves in an honorable and respectful manner during the entirety of the study.

Likewise, the all-male sample group did not necessarily distort the data, as personal observation revealed very similar action and responses by female participants. There were several all-female stickball teams present at the 2019 Stickball World Series, representing each MBCI community, and both the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations from Oklahoma. This is another indicator of the growing popularity of stickball, as the inclusion of the female team of the Chickasaw Nation is a recent occurrence (Afo 2019: Cultural Consultant). Personal observation attests to the validity of the data as well. Female teams were observed playing with the same passion and vigor as their male counterparts. In fact, many females were observed playing with the men's teams, often

being witnessed as the most active and aggressive of players. Female gender participation in either stickball or lacrosse, although not always recorded in historical literature, is very strong contemporarily, especially among the Southeastern tribal groups. One 14-year old female MBCI member indicated that she was the star player on the High School lacrosse team, stating that if one "can play Choctaw stickball, they will be really good at lacrosse."

All interview respondents indicated their initial contact with stickball at an early age. This trend was evidenced by personal observation with the MBCI, as there were multiple stickball teams in the Pushmataha division (age 10-13) competing in the stickball World Series. The same was observed in the Tulli Okchi Ishko youth division (age 14-17). Note that these are co-ed teams, attesting to the egalitarian nature of Native American stickball. Interview respondents recorded that 66% were initially introduced to stickball at either the home of a family member or at a Native American cultural event. Youth stickball play was observed at every Native American cultural event attended by this researcher. Although the number of Native American households that this researcher was invited into is minimal, stickball paraphernalia and evidence of participation was prominent within each. This closely aligns with the interview responses of family or Native American tradition as being the primary inspiration for stickball participation.

Respondents overwhelmingly described their first experience with stickball as being positive. This too was evidenced through personal observation, as stickball was described by cultural consultants with positive emotion at each encounter throughout the entirety of the research stage of this project. 100% of interview respondents listed some sort of pride as their primary emotion associated with stickball, either personal

glorification (bragging rights), civic/community, tribal, or Native American in general. This attitude was quite evident throughout the participant observation phase of this project. Each cultural consultant at every encounter described their participation in stickball with an overwhelming sense of pride that it is an indigenous institution that they are perpetuating, many intermingling their personal and Native American identities with that of the institution. Thus, stickball provides a medium for the creation of a corporate identity, a primary tenant of peace systems (Fry 2015:548).

The religious component of stickball is very much alive, as indicated within the interview responses. This too was validated by personal observation. Stickball was almost universally described as being a gift to Native Americans form the Creator for the purpose of healing the land. To summarize a declaration from Barry, an MBCI cultural consultant: stickball was a gift from the great Creator. He looked down and was saddened that his children were constantly fighting amongst themselves. There was no peace throughout the land, only war and destruction. Therefore, he gave us stickball so that we could settle our disputes and prosper. We believe that we glorify the Creator and our ancestors when we play, as it is understood that both are present to witness the games (Barry 2019: Cultural Consultant). This assertion was echoed several times during participant observation, revealing the spiritual veneration associated with the institution of stickball.

A very high degree of community support and involvement with stickball was also observed during research, closely correlating to the responses of the interviewees. During the 2018 stickball World Series, this researcher estimates that 65% of the MBCI Standing Pine community were physically present on the field or in the bleachers when

their teams were playing. It is further estimated that another 25% of the community were watching the broadcast from their homes, suggesting the totality of community support to be in the 90% range. This is an extraordinary amount of community support for any institution and likely much higher than verifiable public support for any other organized game. Stickball was observed as being the primary prosocial driving force within each of the MBCI communities during research, and was observed to be an inextricable component of Native American cultural identity. All of these factors suggest that stickball's place as a viable Native American peace system is on the rise.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study was designed to interpret and illustrate Native North American cultural achievement and development within the context of pre-colonial sociopolitical cultural institutions. Specifically, those institutions as developed by indigenous peoples living north of Mexico, and their correlation to modern academic definitions of peace and peace systems (Fry 2015:548, Sponsel 2016:6, Verbeek 2018:297-300; Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). More explicitly, this study focused on the institution of Native American stickball's viability as a multifunctional peace system, and how stickball's direct peace, structural peace, and sociative peace functions have evolved to address contemporary social issues. Peace systems are comprised of neighboring societies or cultures that seldom make war upon each other and have created mechanisms and institutions for the establishment and maintenance of peace (Fry 2012:880-881). Within this context, peace is understood to be more than simply the absence of war and is defined as a series of behavioral systems and processes by which entities check aggressiveness, negate structural violence, and create and maintain the conditions necessary for mutually beneficial social interaction (Verbeek 2018:293, Verbeek and Peters 2018:23; Sponsel 2016:6). Stickball is one such Native North American pre-colonial behavioral system that is still in use today (Culin 1975:563; Cushman 1962:123; Galloway and Kidwell 2004:508-509; Swanton 2001:140-141).

In the above pages, it is argued that Native American stickball successfully integrates the three components of peace, direct peace, structural peace, and sociative peace, within a single dynamically adaptive system. Direct peace involves actions designed to overcome or negate physical violence (Verbeek 2018:297). Direct peace is associated with negative peace processes and refers to various forms of proactive *peacemaking* (Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). Negative peace is understood within this context as describing an environment of imminent or ongoing conflict where no positive solution or outcome has yet been achieved (Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). Therefore, direct peace processes may include direct intervention in conflict, conflict/crisis management, policing and various other *peacemaking* processes (Verbeek 2018:297, Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). Positive peace is interpreted as a state of existence within a *post-conflict* environment, therefore positive peace processes denote various forms of *peacebuilding* and *peacekeeping* (Verbeek 2018:297, Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). Structure refers to social norms and institutions present within a sociopolitical cultural landscape. These structures can be designed to accommodate either peace or violence (Verbeek 2018:297, Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). Two examples of structurally violent sociopolitical environments are the former apartheid government system of South Africa and the Jim Crow system previously practiced in the Southern Unites States. Structural peace, conversely, is associated with positive *peacebuilding* processes in a post-conflict sociopolitical atmosphere (Verbeek and Peters 2018:2). These institutional structures are designed and organized to facilitate and promote peaceful interaction in a *post-conflict* environment (Verbeek 2018:297). Sociative peace, also associated with post-conflict positive peace processes, refers to various forms of *peacekeeping*. Sociative peace

involves mutually beneficial social interactions among diverse groups that are distinguished by a high degree of interpersonal harmony (Sponsel 216:6, Verbeek 2018:297-300; Verbeek and Peters 2018:2-5). What is important to understand is that peace is composed of complimentary sets of processes operating independently or in conjunction to achieve a specific goal. Therefore, conflict need not be present for positive structural or positive sociative peace mechanisms to functionally operate. This lack of conflict is the ideal state of a viable peace system.

Within the above framework of peace and peace systems, this study was envisioned to investigate the relationship between Native American stickball and peace processes broadly over time. Research was comprised of three phases. Phase I involved a literary search of historic and modern accounts and documents relating to Native American stickball, its development over time, and how it is utilized today. This was followed by researching contemporary academic perceptions of peace, peace processes, and peace systems. The literary review provided important background knowledge of stickball that was necessary for the evaluation of responses within the second and third phases of research. Phase II entailed 1.5+ years of active participant observation at the invitation of Native American cultural consultants belonging to the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. This provided a comprehensive education of both contemporary Native American cultural practices and their perceptions and beliefs about stickball from an insider's perspective. Phase III consisted of structured interviews with several members of four federally recognized Native American Tribes, Bands, and Nations. This was undertaken to expand the diversity of the cultural consultant pool, as well as to assess a

wider range of Native American perceptions of stickball and its possible functions as a peace system.

**Return to Research Questions**

As discussed in the proceeding section, three questions guided research for this project. The findings as they relate to each research question are summarized below.

*Research Question 1:*

1. *How was the institution of Native American stickball used in the past to facilitate or maintain peace?*

The literary search for this project confirmed that the origins of stickball development are anchored deeply in the past and certainly predate sustained European contact. Stickball also was determined to be an indigenous North American cultural development independent and unrelated to the historically documented ball-court game of Mexico and Mesoamerica. It is believed that stickball originally functioned as a direct peace system designed for the purpose of intervention and intratribal conflict management. Though historical accounts typically do not include detailed information on the indigenous, or emic, functions of stickball, a *direct peace* function is indicated in the historical account of Choctaw Corner as recorded in 1810. There, stickball was documented to be the primary instrument used to settle a long-standing land dispute between the Choctaw Nation and the Creek Confederacy, thereby averting imminent war. This account demonstrates stickball's historical *direct peace* function as a means of intervention and conflict management in potentially dangerous situational contexts.

Stickball's *structural peace* and *sociative peace* functions as a mechanism for providing cultural stability within a post-conflict environment is well documented in Oklahoma after the Indian Removal Act of 1830. In his *Letters and Notes on the North American Indians*, George Catlin (2018) described the institution of stickball as the *Grand Ballgame* wherein Native American Tribes maintained peaceful social relations within the network of the Indian Reservation system via games of stickball. This use of stickball further demonstrates the positive peace system functions of both *structural peace* and *sociative peace*. In his account, Catlin described thousands of Native Americans from multiple tribal groups traveling several days, and hundreds of miles, to attend or participate in stickball competition (Catlin 2018:438-443). Social ceremonies such as feasting, singing, and dancing were described as lasting several days and nights before and after stickball games. Thus, stickball's original *direct peace* function evolved to provide a venue for *structural peace* and *sociative peace* functions by fostering prosocial interaction during the catastrophic aftermath of the Indian Removal Act of 1830, when the Trail of Tears was still very much a part of Native American collective memory (Catlin 2018:438-443, Sponsel 216:6, Verbeek 2018:297-300; Verbeek and Peters 2018:2-5).

*Research Question 2:*

2. *What is the role of peace processes within the institution as practiced today?*

Although stickball no longer primarily functions as a *direct peace* system of conflict management, its *structural peace* and *sociative peace* functions have evolved and adapted to modern social pressures. Contemporary institutional structure is provided through the establishment of the Stickball World Series competition system developed by

the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians. This institutional structure is very similar to the familiar bracket system used in other competitive sports. Essentially, each of the MBCI communities and other participating Native American Tribes, Bands, or Nations field several teams divided by age grade or gender. Sets of complimentary teams in each division compete against each other in the first bracket, then the winner advances to the next bracket. This process of elimination is repeated until there are only two teams left in each division to play for the Championship. There are several divisions currently in use. The youth divisions are organized in an egalitarian manner, with no distinction noted between genders. The adult divisions are organized by both age and gender. There are no exceptions in MBCI World Series tournament play. It is only the youth divisions that are organized as co-ed (Personal Observation 2019). The *sociative peace* function of contemporary stickball play can be identified in the ways in which participating Native American groups are using stickball as an identity-based form of cultural revitalization and community building for peaceful coexistence with other like-minded contemporary Native American groups (Sponsel 216:6, Verbeek 2018:297-300; Verbeek and Peters 2018:2-5). This function is further explored in the following assessment of research question 3.

*Research Question 3:*

*3. How might stickball be employed in the future to create and maintain peace?*

Although it is difficult to predict how stickball will be utilized in the future, the results of this study suggest several likely future outcomes. Perhaps the most significant outcome for Research Question 3 is how the peace related functions of stickball have changed over time. The results of this study demonstrate that the *structural peace* and

*sociative peace* functions of stickball have evolved into an important means of expressing Native American cultural identity and a platform for community building among the tribal groups that are currently participating in the institution. These manifestations were evidenced during both the participant observation and interviewing phases of this project. Statements such as "We are stickball, it's in our blood," "Stickball is my culture, my belief, my religion," and "I think stickball will bring all nations and races together," suggest that this trend will expand in the future to include members from all interested contemporary Native American groups, and possibly non-Native American groups as well.

The above referenced comingling of identity is an important and unanticipated result for this study. Seemingly much more than a sense of overarching identity, it is as if the institution of Native American stickball has transcended from its position as a cultural phenomenon to fuse with the personal identities of people themselves, thus creating a hybrid persona.

**Potential Limitations of Study**

All ethnographic research projects are constrained by limitations and this study was no exception. Noted possible limitations of this study include: (1) time and resource challenges, (2) modest sample size, and (3) gender bias. Field research was limited to 1.5 years due to program restraints and the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. To compound this situation, this project was not funded by any outside source. All travel expenses were incurred by the researcher. This includes transportation, food, and lodging accommodation on multiple interstate field excursions. Additional funding and another

year of fieldwork would allow for a more detailed study. Further, structured interviews were limited to nine respondents. A sample size of 100 or more would strengthen the validity of this study. Also, the present sample pool is comprised exclusively of male participants. A larger, gender inclusive sample pool might yield unexpected or undetected results.

**Possibilities for Future Research**

The findings of this study suggest several promising areas for future research concerning Native American cultural institutions and their potential as mechanisms for the establishment and maintenance of peace. First, I believe it would be productive to expand the scope this study. A longer period of participant observation could provide a more comprehensive understanding of Southeastern Native American cultural perceptions as they relate to war and peace. Expanding the sample pool of interviewees to include a greater cross-section of society, both in terms of gender and age range, might yield different results from those of this study. If so, such results may have important implications for the future of Native American stickball's functionality as a peace system. Expanding this study to include participant observation within other contributing tribal entities, such as the Chickasaw Nation and the Choctaw Nation, the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, or the Alabama-Coushatta of Texas might also yield important information unobserved within this study.

The second area of future research concerns expansion of the institution of Native American stickball as it currently exists. For example, will additional Native American Tribes, Bands, or Nations participate in the MBCI Stickball World Series competition in

the future? This has important implications as it could lead to a National Native American stickball league much like the common sports of baseball and football enjoy today, thereby exemplifying Native American cultural achievement on the National level. The third area of research is closely related and dependent on the previous question. Will inclusion in MBCI stickball league play be extended to cultural groups not representative of Native American Tribes, Bands, or Nations, thus, further demonstrating stickball's viability as a contemporary peace system? This question has implications concerning stickball's future. For instance, might such an inclusion negate stickball's significance as an exclusively Native American cultural tradition? If so, how might this affect the important commingled roles of stickball and cultural identity revealed in this study?

Additionally, one final area of future research could focus on Native American cultural achievement in a broader sense. For instance, how might the prominent reemergence of stickball today illuminate other significant Native American cultural achievements that have been marginalized or overlooked due to colonial interests and preoccupations? This study focused on the various social functions of Native American stickball, and to a lesser degree the purposes of the calumet and subsequent Calumet Ceremony, within the context of peace and peace systems. Future research could reveal other such related Native American prosocial mechanisms or traditions that have not been studied within the framework of peace and peace systems. It is anticipated that research in these areas will yield valuable data about the scope and complexities of Native American cultural achievements that have been lost or overlooked within the historical record.

## Conclusions

This study contributes to a growing body of research dedicated to the understanding of peace and peace systems, both past and present (Brown 2006; Dennis 1993; de Waal 1989; Dunfield and Kuhlmeier 2013; Fry 2009, 2012, 2015, 2018; Fry et al. 2016; Sponsel 2016; Verbeek 2018; Verbeek and Peters 2018). More importantly, this study showcases Native American contributions to the study of peace and peace systems, thereby illuminating past and present Native American perceptions of war and peace. This is especially true amongst the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, as they are solely responsible for keeping the tradition of Native American stickball alive and well into the 21st century. Charles Hudson once made the declaration that war was the "beloved occupation" of Southeastern Native American men and that they "could not imagine" themselves as separated from that (Hudson 1976:240-241). Hudson's assumption may or may not have been the case in the past. However based on the results of the above study, this author argues that the "beloved occupation" of contemporary Southeastern Native Americans is Native American stickball—especially amongst the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians—and that the results of this research have positively demonstrated that "they" cannot imagine themselves as being separated from "it." They *are* stickball, and stickball *is* them.

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# APPENDIX A

# EXPERIMENTAL REPLICATION

Experimental replication of stickball related paraphernalia was conducted by this researcher following the instruction of Afo, an MBCI craftsman and expert racket maker. The principal purpose of these experiments was to assess the intricacies associated with the production of both stickball rackets and their antithesis, the war club. These items were selected because crafting one's own stickball rackets was once considered a rite of passage among the MCBI (Fisher 2002:15). Therefore, understanding the processes of production for these items was important to this study. The secondary purpose for experimental replication was to produce accurate representations of each instrument for comparison within this study. To ensure authenticity in replication, traditional MBCI methods were employed in the creation of each item under the training and direction of Afo. Experimental replication was focused on the production of each of the following, one Choctaw rabbitstick, one Eastern Woodlands war club, and one Choctaw stickball racket. Training to produce these items entailed proper tree selection and procurement, processing of the raw material into a useable form, and production of each item.

Adhering to a 300-year MBCI tradition, replication was attempted using only those tools and procedures that were made available to traditional Southeastern Native Americans as first described historically by André Pénicaut in *Fleur De Lys and Calumet: Being the Pénicaut Narrative of French Adventure in Louisiana* (1988). This narrative is a 23-year annal produced between 1698 and 1721 by André Pénicaut and subsequently translated and edited by Richebourg Gaillard McWilliams. In this narrative, Pénicaut described Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, founder of French Louisiana, as gifting Native Americans iron tools and implements as early as 1699-1700. These gifts included various knives, awls, picks, axes, and an assortment of other items including firearms

(Pénicaut and McWilliams 1988:4,7). Pénicaut stated that Sieur d'Iberville ordered the tools to be hafted and that the recipients be taught to effectively use those instruments thereafter (Penicaut and McWilliams 1988:5-8). However, Pénicaut also indicated that Native Americans in the region were already highly skilled in woodworking before receiving these iron tools. In the narrative, he described in detail how local Native Americans previously created exquisitely crafted dugout canoes using only fire, mud, and large shells for scraping (Pénicaut and McWilliams 1988:8,9). Despite these descriptions, this pre-colonial woodworking tradition without iron tools appears to have been lost to time or intentionally discontinued among contemporary Native American craftsmen, as no evidence was discovered to support its current use in this study (Nelson 2019:7-24). Therefore, the woodworking tools selected for use during the experimental processes within this study were limited to those supplied by the French at initial contact. These tools consist of a hatchet, axe, drawknife, and awl.

**Training**

Training was a two-stage process. The first stage involved tree identification, selection, harvesting, and transportation of material to a designated work area. The next stage entailed processing the tree trunk section, followed by a racket making demonstration. Afo prefers harvesting in early spring, immediately following a heavy rain, when the wood is most supple. The goal was to harvest a cosmetically unblemished American Hickory (*Carya*). Being an exceedingly straight and tightly grained hardwood, hickory is renowned for its unmatched strength and utility as the preferred wood for all types of tool handles (Hodges et al. 2012: 61). According to MBCI tradition, hickory is

the only wood appropriate for the manufacture of authentic Native American stickball rackets (Afo and George 2019: Cultural Consultants). Afo explained that positive identification of hickory trees can be especially difficult during the dormant season, as many tree species exhibit remarkably similar leaf and bark patterns. The best indicator is the presence of hickory nuts on the ground surrounding the tree. However, this may be confounded in the early spring when the nuts have all been gathered or eaten by forest dwelling animals. Afo related that under such circumstances, some Mississippi Choctaw employ an ancient Native American method of identification. To demonstrate the technique, he reached out and picked some of the few leaves that were present and began rubbing them together in his hands. As he did so he explained that if the tree were a hickory, the leaves would begin to smell like mint and, if not, it was not a hickory (Afo 2019: Cultural Consultant). When he offered his hands up for inspection, one could immediately perceive a distinctly minty odor. Afo prefers trees between 8 - 12” in diameter and notes that many Native American racket makers favor trees naturally grown on a hillside, as it is thought that the wood grain tends to be straighter, tighter, and stronger than those grown on level ground. He stated that much can be learned by examining the bark pattern, as the physical properties are mirrored in the grain beneath. The pattern should be vertically straight and tightly interwoven, with few if any knots or blemishes. If the pattern is visibly twisted or otherwise damaged, it should be avoided (Afo 2019: Cultural Consultant).

**Spiritual Balance**

Afo placed a small pouch of tobacco at the base of the tree as a figurative remittance for its removal. This concept of symbolic reciprocity is deeply rooted and reinforced within many Native American cultural traditions. The value of the item offered or remitted is not at issue here, it is the attitude of the individual and action itself that is important. The action demonstrates both respect and conciliation, key elements within a viable peace system (Fry 2009: 5-12; Fry 2019:261). Once the ceremony concluded, the tree was felled, and a five-foot trunk section removed to a work area.

**Processing and Production**

The second stage involved processing the trunk section and a demonstration on the key elements of stickball racket manufacture. Using axe and hatchet, the trunk is split lengthwise, creating five staves. Each stave is then paired and shaped with a drawknife, generating two to three full length racket blanks. Each blank may produce one racket. Thus, each five-foot tree trunk section can potentially generate four to seven sets of stickball rackets. Made of iron with handles on both ends, the drawknife is a flat-bottomed knife with the single edge ground from the top and facing the user. It is used by pressing down and pulling the knife towards oneself, thereby slicing off a measured strip of the blank with each stroke. The next step is to evaluate the strength and pliability of the blank. Afo demonstrated this by drawing the blank into an arching bow, first in one direction and then the opposite. Satisfied that it passed the test, the drawknife was used to carve the final racket template.

The blank is then visually examined and the end exhibiting the tightest and straightest grain alignment is chosen for the cup. This end is cut off square. For the remainder of the process, all measurements originate from this point. The handle end is purposefully left uncut until the last step, which dictates the overall length of the racket. The next consideration is whether the set is to be right or left-handed, as this defines where and how to measure the blank for further processing. The blanks are marked on two adjoining sides that correspond to that determination. The excess is then carved away with the drawknife. Next is the two-step process of shaping the cup. First the end is wrapped around a tree limb or some other object, then drawn back on itself and secured with leather binding. Then the bottom portion of the cup is forced over a wedged shaped object that causes it to spread open and jut slightly forward. An awl is then used to burn holes for lacing in the side of the cup. The last step is to string the cup and cut and wrap the handle. Overall length is approximately 31” for an adult set. Note that in each set, the bottom racket is an inch shorter and the cup slightly smaller than the top racket. This allows for the rackets to be clasped shut in a scissor motion while holding the ball. The final component of manufacture is the application of laces. Lace patterns vary according to tradition or personal preference. Afo employs a simple cross pattern of finely tanned elk hide. Some craftsmen intentionally leave a short length of lacing dangling loose at the end. This creates a whizzing sound when the racket moves through the air that is thought to intimidate opposing players (Afo 2019: Cultural Consultant). Once the lace is applied, the rackets are ready for use.

**Experimentation and Results**

Experimental replication involved the production of three objects: one Choctaw rabbitstick, one Eastern Woodlands war club, and one Choctaw stickball racket. The Choctaw rabbitstick is a non-returning boomerang and bludgeon type of war club that is used in pairs, much like the Choctaw stickball rackets that they closely resemble. The Eastern Woodlands type of war club is meant to be wielded with both hands like the lacrosse racket that it is patterned after (See Chapter 2 for descriptive comparisons of each item).

*Experiment 1: Procurement of raw material and production of one Choctaw rabbitstick.*

Using Afo's method of hickory tree identification, a suitable hickory sapling approximately two inches in diameter was quickly located. This item was fairly easy to reproduce and required little skill.

*Experiment 2: Procurement of raw material and production of one Eastern Woodlands type of war club.*

This took a little longer than expected, as the proffered material, a root ball, could not be located. A small hickory tree approximately four inches in diameter was acquired as a substitute. This item also required a higher skill level to produce as the Eastern Woodlands war club is more complex and decorative than the Choctaw rabbitstick.

*Experiment 3: Procurement of raw material and production of one Choctaw stickball racket.*

Locating a cosmetically unblemished hickory of the proper size within walking distance of the transport vehicle proved to be quite difficult. Felling and sectioning the approximately eight-inch diameter tree was also quite laborious and time consuming,

requiring a rest period between each task. Removal of the trunk section to the transport vehicle was also tremendously challenging. The trunk section was situated on a downhill slope approximately 300 meters from the vehicle and too heavy to be carried by one person. This required some ingenuity. A rope was tied around one end of the tree section, then shouldered and dragged to the vehicle. This task required a rest interval at approximately every 100 feet. Safely loading the section onto the vehicle without the threat of personal injury also required meticulous planning and was accomplished with much difficulty. Initial processing of the trunk section required splitting into staves and then forming them into racket blanks, two steps unnecessary for rabbitstick or war club production. Processing the blanks into useable racket templates was not overtly difficult, however, bending and forming the cup proved to be much more complicated. The initial attempt failed as the blank snapped when the loop was drawn back. Another stave was processed, and a second attempt was made. This effort also failed at the same juncture. Four more racket production attempts were made, each resulting in failure during the bending process. This component of the experiment was then terminated, as skill level requirements were discovered to be above those attained by this researcher.

Though preliminary, the above training and experimentation are instructive to the present study because they provide important information on the complexities of stickball racket manufacture and the deeper cultural meanings associated with their use. This greatly expanded my perception of how material culture items both reflect and shape the values and beliefs of a culture in ways that I otherwise could never have imagined. It also added much more depth to my understanding and admiration of Southeastern Native American cultural beliefs and practices.

# APPENDIX B

# IRB DETERMINATION LETTER

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA AT BIRMINGHAM
Office of the Institutional Review Board for Human Use

470 Administration Building
701 20th Street South
Birmingham, AL 35294-0104
205.934.3789 | Fax 205.934.1301 | irb@uab.edu

**NHSR DETERMINATION**

**TO:** Pearce, Edison D

**FROM:** University of Alabama at Birmingham Institutional Review Board
Federalwide Assurance Number FWA00005960
IORG Registration # IRB00000196 (IRB 01)
IORG Registration # IRB00000726 (IRB 02)

**DATE:** 20-Nov-2018

**RE:** IRB-300002451
Interview Mississippi Band of Choctaw Representatives on the Oral History and Social Functionality of Native American Stick-Ball.

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The Office of the IRB has reviewed your Application for Not Human Subjects Research Designation for the above referenced project.

The reviewer has determined this project is not subject to FDA regulations and is not Human Subjects Research. Note that any changes to the project should be resubmitted to the Office of the IRB for determination.

If you have questions or concerns, please contact the Office of the IRB at 205-934-3789.

**Additional Comments:**

Thesis project - interviews and oral histories