International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies

Volume 4, Number 2, 2011

Book Review: Recognition Odysseys: Indigeneity, Race and Federal Tribal Recognition Policy in Three Louisiana Indian Communities.

Brian Klopotek. Published by Durham: Duke University Press, 2011, paperback, xii + 391 pp., 15 b/w Photographs, Maps, Appendix, Notes, Bibliography, Index, USD $24.95. ISBN 978-0-8223-4984-6

Reviewed by Circe Sturm, Associate Professor of Anthropology and co-Director of the Native American and Indigenous Studies program, University of Texas at Austin.

With the publication of Recognition Odysseys: Indigeneity, Race, and Federal Tribal Recognition Policy in Three Louisiana Indian Communities, Brian Klopotek establishes himself as an emerging new star in the field of Native American Studies. Rarely have I encountered a first book that is so meticulously researched, powerfully argued, theoretically original, while also being accessible to a general reader. His book offers a comprehensive account of U.S. federal recognition policy and its impact on three small American Indian tribes in central Louisiana: the Tunica-Biloxi Tribe (federally recognized in 1981), the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians (federally recognized in 1995), and the Clifton-Choctaws (federal recognition pending). These tribes are quite distinct from one another in terms of their histories of colonial incorporation, interactions with the state of Louisiana, and individual community characteristics. By systematically looking at how these differences are handled and interpreted during the acknowledgment process, Klopotek is able to build on earlier critiques of federal recognition policy and take them to an entirely new level. In doing so, Klopotek provides critical insights into the fundamentally political nature of Office of Federal Acknowledgement (OFA) policies and decisions, the limits of interdependent forms of sovereignty that stem from tribal acknowledgment, and the ongoing expressions of white supremacy that undergird both anti-black racism and settler colonialism.

Although federal recognition is often held up as transformational moment in the life of a tribal nation, one that promises greater political legitimacy and overall empowerment, Klopotek is careful to show the unintended consequences, both good and bad, of the process. He argues that “recognition efforts have been but one segment of tribal persistence struggles” and that they “need to be reframed in this manner so that we can better understand how OFA decisions matter and how they do not” (p. 10).

Over the course of the book, Klopotek helps the reader to understand these distinctions. For each of these three Louisiana tribes, he provides a detailed account of community life before, during, and after their involvement with the federal acknowledgment process, focusing on changes in their economy, culture, political strength and social health. He points not only to the transformations but also to the continuities in American Indian life that persist despite the outcome of a recognition decision. He repeatedly shows that Louisiana tribes, irrespective of where they find themselves in the recognition process, still make political decisions, regulate the boundaries of their community, and innovate new, distinctly Indian cultural and social forms that are unique to their people. Furthermore, regardless of their official status, American Indian tribes in Louisiana are subjected to both racism and colonialism, whether they are “federal” or “non-federal”–terms that Klopotek uses to good effect.

Recognition Odysseys begins with a thoughtful introduction that positions the book as a deeper rumination on the intersections between race and sovereignty, and thus as an effort to bridge the primary analytical concerns of Native American Studies and Ethnic Studies.

The introduction is followed by a first body chapter providing necessary historical background on the origins of the U.S. Federal Acknowledgment process, including the transformation from more informal systems of federal recognition that existed in the 1960s and early 1970s to the much stricter requirements that were put in place in the late 1970s (which have since been revised, as recently as 1997). The next seven body chapters provide the bulk of the historical and ethnographic data on the three tribes and their experiences with recognition.

The first four of these focus on the Tunica-Biloxi tribe: beginning with their initial efforts to achieve recognition in the early 20th century, their persistence during the period of termination and relocation, and their eventual success in 1981 as one of the first tribes to be achieve formal acknowledgment under the newly developed criteria. As might be expected, with formal recognition, the Tunica-Biloxi tribe attained a greater sense of legitimacy that carries weight in various social, political and legal arenas. For example, in 1985, after a protracted legal battle, the tribe finally recovered the Tunica Treasure, a set of 18th century grave goods, and sets an important legal precedent in the pre-NAGPRA era, and soon after the passage of the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, the Tunica-Biloxi develop a casino in 1991 and enter into the gaming industry with great success. Casino wealth benefits the community in a countless ways and is put to good use in the development of tribal infrastructure, as well as cultural programs. Yet, gaming has also had unexpected consequences for the tribe. Jobs from the casino allow Tunica-Biloxi citizens to interact almost exclusively with other tribal members, but they are also now subjected to prejudices and resentments concerning "Rich Indians," alongside other more familiar forms of racism (p. 123). More strikingly, the Tunica-Biloxi recognition story reveals even more subtle transformations: a tribe that once enjoyed fluid forms of membership and local sovereignty before its involvement in the federal recognition process, now has a membership that is "tightly patrolled in ways that are more closely connected to bureaucratic discourses and attendant racial projects than they were previously" (p. 113).

The next three chapters focus on the Jena Band of Choctaw Indians, who also experienced profound transformations as a result of their involvement with federal recognition. The Jena Band is a small group of related families that moved to Louisiana from Mississippi sometime after the Civil War. Consisting of only five households in 1910 (p. 130), they remain a close-knit tribal community with less than 300 members today (p. 127). They began their bid for recognition in 1979, but they did not achieve formal acknowledgment until 2005. That 26-year delay is unusual only in that no one ever questioned the indigenous identity of the community. Many members had high degrees of Choctaw ancestry, appeared phenotypically Indian, and continued to be fluent Choctaw language speakers. In fact, both the Choctaw Nation in Oklahoma and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians fully supported the Jena Band's petition for recognition, and the Mississippi Band went so far as to offer to include the Jena Band with their own citizenship if the tribe's petition were denied. Herein lies part of the reason for the delay in the Jena Band's case for recognition: the OFA struggled with determining whether the Jean Band of Choctaws was sufficiently distinct from the Mississippi Band of Choctaws.

As Klopotek later reveals, the Jena Band was eventually recognized as a distinct political community. In going through the petitioning process, the Jena Band began to think of itself less as a group of related families with leadership invested in the eldest male, to more specifically imagine itself as a tribal nation, with rights of self-governance. The tribe also had to develop models of leadership that fit this new imaginary of what it should and could be. Though most members of the community felt elation on hearing that they had finally been formally recognized as a tribe, the last several years have brought numerous disappointments. Federal recognition has not lived up to community expectations, in part because the tribe has not been able to negotiate a compact for gaming with the state of Louisiana. And as Klopotek makes clear, the energy spent on what has thus far proved to be a fruitless effort has diverted attention away for other possible forms of economic development.

The final body chapter deals with the case of the Clifton-Choctaws. Even though only one chapter is dedicated to their story, versus the three or more chapters covering the other two tribes, the Clifton-Choctaw chapter offers some of the book's greatest insights and most persuasive arguments. For example, one of the book's primary goals, stated in the introduction, is to bring the debates about sovereignty into productive dialogue with those on race and racism. Klopotek suggests that scholars working within the field of Ethnic Studies have rarely understood the full implications of tribal sovereignty, but at the same time the focus on sovereignty within American Indian Studies—as a fundamentally political rather than racial right—has deflected attention away from racial theory and critique (p. 7).

Yet, obviously race is a fundamental factor in American Indian lives that can condition and limit expressions of sovereignty. Klopotek, in this chapter and the conclusion that follows, carefully explores the racial dimensions of the federal recognition process. He examines how African ancestry in the case of the Clifton-Choctaw becomes a potential obstacle on their road to recognition. The Clifton-Choctaw are not unlike the Houma or the Lumbee in that they have indigenous, black and white ancestry but have always identified themselves as indigenous people. Yet, Klopotek chronicles the repeated failures of local communities, the state, and federal authorities—even of other Louisiana tribes—to see the Clifton Choctaw as indigenous people and to accept their self-identification as such. He links this lack of everyday recognition to larger social and political processes and argues persuasively that, "this collective erasure of indigeneity in people with African ancestry should take its place among the massive acts of genocide in United States history" (p. 213-4).

In keeping with his attention to the analytics of race, Klopotek takes the additional step of considering anti-black racism among Southern Indians, including, for example, the refusal of the Jena Choctaw to attend black schools, even when they were prohibited from attending white schools and had no schools of their own—an example that is not exceptional among Southern Indians (including those who were forcibly removed from their traditional homelands in Southern states). Instead, anti-Black racism among Southern Indians is part of a larger problem, one that rests, as Klopotek states, "in American racism and colonialism, two phenomenon that are so closely related that they may be better accounted for if they are understood as behaviors resulting from an ideology of white supremacy" (p. 218-20). In this section, he characterizes federal recognition as yet another racial project that can limit the possibilities of sovereignty and perpetuate forms of colonialism that are supported by racism.

In many ways this book is very brave. In the last several decades, there has been a growing trend in American Indian Studies to view the legitimacy of American Indian tribes and individuals as being attached to federal recognition. For instance, there is a tendency among American Indian scholars to now specify that they are "enrolled citizens" of such and such tribe. These trends grow out of an insistence on sovereignty as a fundamental analytic in our field, one that cannot be ignored, and whose most basic premise assumes the rights of tribes to define their own citizenry. Yet, Klopotek, in critiquing the federal recognition process and in championing those non-federal peoples who persist despite all odds, succeeds is disentangling sovereignty from the federal relationship, showcasing other expressions of sovereignty that are not dependent on external recognition, and sounding a warning bell about the potential pitfalls of assuming that sovereignty will always increase as a result of federal acknowledgment. Yes, recognition has a powerful effect on tribes, but the specific outcomes in each individual case often defy expectations.

The power of Klopotek's account lies in the details about how each tribal community is transformed through its involvement with the federal recognition process. *Recognition Odysseys* provides these in a gracefully written and sophisticated piece of scholarship. With rich archival depth, poignant and carefully chosen interviews, as well as theoretical sophistication, the book is essential reading for scholars of Native North America and U.S. race relations, and anyone concerned with understanding the intersections of colonialism, racism, white supremacy, indigeneity and sovereignty.