

Cultural Kudzu

The Creep of an Invasive Culture Upon the Cherokee

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Abstract

Kudzu, a vine originating in East Asia, is notorious in the South for its invasive nature and destruction of the environment. This article describes the impact of Western European culture on Cherokee culture brought about by sustained exposure to one another. Kudzu is employed as a metaphor to describe the destructive, invasive impact of Western European values at the expense of the Cherokee people. The creep of Western European culture upon the Cherokee culture started subtly, but over time and through stealth, Cherokee culture has not only been overtaken but torn apart in a way that was unnoticed until it was too late to fully recover.

This essay serves as a warning to not only the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (ECBI) but to Americans in general. The lessons of encroachment by cultural kudzu must be learned and understood by all. In the current state of American society, we are on fertile political ground for the expansion of cultural kudzu. Much like the planting of kudzu, it only takes one cultural seed, dropped in fertile soil, to propel the invasive creep that can infest and destroy other cultures in America.

Keywords: Cherokee, culture, Indigenous education, colonialism, kudzu

Introduction

There are many things that people born and raised in the southwestern mountains of North Carolina “just know about.” Kudzu is one of these things. Those of us who originate from this area are well aware



of the devastating effects of this invasive vine that starts innocently enough, maybe one or two here and there, but if left unchecked, can cover everything in sight. Many old homes and structures are brought down, not by fire or demolition, but by this vine that becomes all-consuming in a matter of weeks. This article is not merely about the kudzu vine, rather, it is used as an analogy for the impact of European culture and influence on the Indigenous Cherokee people who once occupied land that today includes eight southern states.

I was born and raised on the Qualla Boundary. This is what remains of the land holdings of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) in North Carolina. I, like my father, never learned the true history of our tribe and people as a young man. Simply living on “Indian” land did not afford us, like many others that were born and raised here, the knowledge of our ancestors or what happened to them. Nor did it allow us to see the reality of our people, our language, and our culture. These things were hidden... covered by a kind of cultural kudzu.

Kudzu is native to parts of Southeast Asia, particularly, China and Japan. There, kudzu is kept in check by competing flora and insects, such as the bean plataspid (Roney, 2011). However, introduced in the United States during the late 1870s, where similar natural checks were absent, kudzu has continued to grow at exponential rates. Kudzu was

originally hailed as a wonder plant. Its main use was for soil erosion, while other uses included textiles, feed for livestock, medicinal tea for various ailments, and simply as an ornamental plant (Alderman, 2015). Yet, because there were no natural checks on kudzu in the American southeast, it has been able to run rampant and become the noxious weed that now covers over eight million acres of land (Suszkiw, 2009).

There are efforts currently underway to control and even possibly eliminate kudzu, but they are limited. The most common attempts at eradication have involved long tedious processes involving defoliant sprays, grazing, mowing and burning. Yet despite such processes that require much time and continuous work, the march of kudzu continues unabated (Everest et al., 1999).

Much like kudzu, the impact upon and devastation of Cherokee culture began innocently enough. A trade agreement here and there, the union of a young Cherokee woman and a European trader; along with the eventual spread of ideas, things were about to change. When the first trade agreement between the Cherokee and a Spaniard by the name of Juan Pardo was settled, the seeds for this “cultural kudzu” were planted (Conley, 2005). These seeds would be cultivated by the continued interactions between the Cherokee and the French and British throughout the 1600s. Eventually, these seeds would grow, spreading throughout Cherokee culture. Ultimately, like the old sheds and barns littered throughout the southwestern North Carolina mountains, Cherokee culture would be torn to pieces by this invasive entity, and nothing could be done to cull it back.

The planting of cultural kudzu was methodical and executed with the care and precision of a seasoned farmer planting crops. It was not carelessly tossed about, like the Christian proverb of the sower. These seeds were purposely planted in good soil and produced (Matthew 13: 8, KJV). The initial agreement with Pardo was, in itself, the planting of a cultural seed (Kickler, 2016). It was an introduction to the way the Europeans dealt with other nations, cultures and people, exemplified by the signing of a document, a handshake and the establishment of a border, as well as the introduction of the idea that this land is now ours and you can only come when asked. The Cherokee were also introduced to how the Europeans would use the land—to build forts to defend themselves from those with whom they had just made an agreement. In many ways, this was a sign of things to come. This should have been a sign of the contempt that Europeans have for “others” whose cultures are different. The English would time and time again repeat their actions, sign agreements, then fortify and point their guns in the direction of those with whom they claimed to be friends.

The Cherokee themselves would soon adopt this attitude towards Europeans. Turnabout was fair play. At Joara, the Cherokee and the Catawba would expel Pardo and his men from the area after only a few years (Spurr, 2013). The actions of the Spanish, though attempting to not follow the same pattern of De Soto and the other famous Conquistadors, would ultimately lead them into a conflict that, unlike in Central and South America, they could not win. The only consolation for their expulsion was that there wasn't anything they were looking for in the Southeast anyway.

The English would constantly sign agreements establishing new borders, taking away more and more each time, with the promise that this time would be the last. It never was. Eventually the American government would finish this job in 1838. The Cherokee would learn that the papers they signed meant that only they must keep their word, but not the Europeans or Americans. They could violate these agreements and it was ok. These cultural vines infiltrated and changed the Cherokee, who had always been a trusting people. Over time, they would become increasingly untrusting (Conley, 2005). This contradiction to cultural norms was developed out of continued exposure to cultural kudzu and by necessity. Learning to not trust the Europeans was a hard lesson and has remained forever ingrained in the Cherokee psyche. These cultural vines have developed deep roots in the minds of the Cherokee, which have yet to relinquish their hold, allowing them to pervade Cherokee culture today.

This mistrust is illustrated by the modern blood quantum requirement for enrollment. Federally recognized tribes have or maintain a blood quantum requirement for every enrolled member. "Each tribe establishes their own requirements for enrollment in the tribe" (U.S. Department of the Interior-Indian Affairs, n.d.). Indigenous people essentially track how much Indian blood they have. This is a literal tracking of blood quantum and made official with the distribution of, what is called an "Indian Card" or enrollment card. It is nothing more than a pedigree. Like animals, the Cherokee are further separated from other racial groups by a pedigree of blood and carry the proof in their pocket (Indian papers).

Many Native people are fully invested in the thinking that only real Natives have this much Indian blood, or that much Indian blood. It doesn't matter if you were raised in the community and everyone in your family is an enrolled member; if you don't meet the blood quantum requirement, then you aren't Indian. Consequently, you are not privy to certain teachings or even acceptance by the community. Tragically, this practice creates an alternative form of Hell for those unfortunate enough to be categorized as too White to be Indian, too Indian to be White.

Seeds were planted every time a good was traded. When the traders came, other lessons would be taught and learned. When the Europeans came looking for skins, guns would be traded; more animals would die than would normally need to be killed. A want grew into a demand. The skins would grow in number, as would the number of Cherokee hands with guns used to kill more deer and bear. The hands that made the bows, arrows, blowguns and darts would decrease more and more. Artisan skills that had been passed down from generation to generation would dissipate at a rapid rate (Conley, 2005). The loss of many of these skills would not even be noticed until sometime later. In the late 1800s, Arizona Swayney Blankenship revived the basket making and pottery crafts that were once widely practiced by the Cherokee. She was able to do this by convincing the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) that this was not cultural, but entrepreneurial in its goals. It would be a trade that would fill a demand for a good and allow the students to make money (Carney, 2005). Though it allowed a traditional practice to be resumed, it eventually became part of the skeletal structure of cultural kudzu.

Resistance to degradation of Cherokee culture has indeed occurred from time to time. During the Pre-removal era (Post-contact to 1838) many Cherokee people tried to warn against the destruction of the culture. Ironically, they would advance the degradation by creating and developing factionalism within the Cherokee. Those that wanted to continue the traditional ways became known, with some disdain, as Traditionalists (Conley, 2005). They tried valiantly to preserve the “old ways,” but were not as successful as they had hoped to be.

Today, the EBCI continues to fight cultural kudzu by implementing language programs geared towards revitalizing the Cherokee language. There are also attempts to continue the teachings of our ancestors and the preservation of our cultural traditions. Though these programs and efforts are present, there is still much work to do. Our living resources also diminish by the day. The number of fluent Cherokee speakers is only getting smaller. The number of people that know our history and culture also dwindle. A timer has been placed on the EBCI and everything that makes us culturally Cherokee. The timer was set a long time ago and it is getting near and nearer to its end.

With every treaty, with every trade, the practices of the Cherokee would become more infested with the sprouts of Western European practices, until some were completely overtaken. Eventually, the vines of European culture would overcome Cherokee culture in a way more effective than war ever could. There are many examples, but I will focus on three: religion, language, and education.

Religion

When looking at the “Old World” religions, a commonality is that the first man and woman were expelled from Paradise. Humans had a good thing going, established by the deity or deities that they claimed to worship, and they blew it. In the big three (Christianity, Judaism and Islam), God gave Adam and Eve everything they could possibly need and charged them with looking after the animals and plants. All they had to do was not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil (no, it wasn’t an apple)! This proved to be too difficult a task and ultimately man and woman were cast out, never being allowed to reenter Paradise, resulting in the curse of original sin (Genesis 3:1-24, KJV).

In the end, this led to the vilification of Eve and by default, all women. Mankind was punished and the result was the loss of Paradise and equal status for men and women. Why does this matter? It’s simple really. This is one of the many vines that have crept into Cherokee culture. The Cherokee originally believed in the concept of Paradise and that an all-powerful Creator placed the first man and woman there (Mooney, 1992). Yet, the idea of being expelled from Paradise was not even entertained until the final theft of Cherokee land resulting from the Treaty of New Echota. That treaty is highly controversial in its own right, but that’s a story for another day.

The Cherokee, much like many of the other 567 federally recognized Indigenous nations, were always in their Paradise. For the Cherokee, Kanati and Selu were the first man and woman. And neither of them was responsible for the “fall” of man. It was actually their children, two boys, which were the cause of man’s fall from grace (Mooney, 1992). Consequently, the guilt about expulsion from Paradise did not originally exist because the Cherokee were living in their Paradise. The guilt of original sin was non-existent. That sin belonged to the two boys in the story, not Kanati and Selu (Mooney, 1992). Therefore, there was no animosity towards Selu or women because they played no role in what happened; at least, not a negative one.

Why is this important? European culture, based on Christian teachings and values, was unwilling to accept that people might disagree with its concept of Paradise and the fall of man. It was also unwilling to accept that women were considered as equals by Indigenous people. So, the Western seeds of inequality between men and women were planted and then cultivated over a long period of time.

Today, there are numerous churches on the main EBCI land holding, known as the Qualla Boundary. Why? Roughly one third of the people living on the Qualla Boundary are Christian. More than half have no

declared religion or religious affiliation (Cherokee, North Carolina (NC 28719, 28789) Profile, 2018). Few still hold on to the old religion, if that is even what you can call it? The cultural kudzu ravaged traditional religious beliefs and was able to do so because of the many similarities that it shared with Christianity, especially the concept of the trinity. These similarities allowed the infiltration to be so effective that today the idea that our old stories can be taken at the same value as those in the Bible is laughable to many Cherokee. There are not many who follow the old or ancient practices. However, there has been a small resurgence of Eastern Cherokee (a larger number of Cherokee in Oklahoma) that either continue or have begun to practice what is called “Stomp” on the Qualla Boundary. This is a gathering of Cherokee people who practice traditional dances, singing and ritual and is not accessible to outsiders. This number is still small, but is showing some promising growth (C. Tiger, personal communication, March 14, 2019).

Language

The language is also another casualty in this invasion of culture. Today in Cherokee, North Carolina and the surrounding areas, there are less than 200 fluent Cherokee language speakers left (McKie, 2019). Why is there such a shortage of speakers? The U.S. government’s assimilation program was relentless in making sure the language was beaten and scrubbed (literally and figuratively) from the mouths of the children that spoke it. These methods were quite successful under the direction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and its Boarding School policy (Reyhner, 2018). “Kill the Indian, save the man” was their mantra (Carney, 2005). And kill it they did, with an efficiency that soldiers and bullets could never do.

Even now, with desperate attempts to try to save the language from certain death, the Western kudzu has found its way into the language. The Bureau of Indian Education (BIE), part of the BIA, has spearheaded initiatives to try to help save that which it originally had tried to destroy. However, the efforts that on the surface appear to be genuine are themselves part of the creep of the vines. In an interview with an elder, Bullet Standingdeer (personal communication, April 20, 2018), I have learned that our words have meanings beyond those that are simply translations. The focus of current language preservation efforts has been on finding how to say English words, old and new, in Cherokee. According to him, this is not understanding the language and keeping it alive; it is translation. If the true meanings and values of our words are lost, then the Cherokee language simply becomes another dialect

of English. If the language no longer contains these meanings then it is effectively dead—the Cherokee language becomes English.

Education

Finally, education is yet another cultural vine. Native education, for the Cherokee people and Native Americans in general, has a dark and disturbing history. Well before the BIA boarding schools, established on EBCI landholdings known as the Qualla Boundary opened in 1890 and closed for boarding in 1953, there were the missionary schools (Finger, 1984). These schools were developed with the understanding that a school was to be built first and then a church. Trying to convert people was fine to the Cherokee, but it was not to be forced on them. In regard to the missionaries, they claimed that the Natives had the option to accept or reject Biblical teachings. Education was considered to be the primary focus not religious teachings. Unfortunately, the missionaries almost always built the church first and would eventually build a school only after being under threat of being removed from Cherokee country. This was indeed the case with the Moravian missionaries. The Cherokee sent Sour Mush, a staunch traditionalist, to the Moravian mission to declare that the missionaries had roughly one year to build the school and start teaching, or leave. The missionaries would comply and were allowed to stay (Schwarze, 1923).

These schools dealt with many of the same issues that contemporary educators face today. Truancy and little or no support at home are examples (McClinton, 2010). Yet, students were educated, and they did learn, but they were slowly stripped of what made them Cherokee—their culture. EBCI elder and educator Freeman Owl, along with many survivors of the Cherokee BIA school, confirms what is considered common knowledge to all with EBCI lineage: the one consistency between the mission schools and the BIA school in Cherokee, North Carolina was the severe punishments inflicted on Cherokee children for any conduct that even closely resembled traditional practice.

The development of the Cherokee syllabary would help to usher in a Golden Age for the Cherokee for a time. However, even with a literacy rate in the 90 percent range, it was not enough (Conley, 2005). Yes, the Cherokee had a written language. Yes, the Cherokee were literate in that language and had a thriving society. Though, in the end, it did not matter. In many ways, the success of the Cherokee mocked Western society and its attempts to “civilize” them and eliminate what made them Cherokee. The Cherokee attempted to adapt their already thriving civilization to “modern” standards without completely abandoning

their culture. Unfortunately, although they were able to successfully fight back the vines of cultural kudzu, it was only to be for a while.

History books barely mention the Cherokee and their struggle against the United States under the guise of *Manifest Destiny*. In modern textbooks, the most that is discussed about the Cherokee is a brief paragraph about the “Trail of Tears.” Some texts even go as far as to claim that the land was willingly given up. They definitely do not mention that the Cherokee fought in every way possible to keep what was rightfully theirs. They rarely mention the importance of the United States Supreme Court case of *Worcester v. Georgia* (1832) that determined that the Cherokee were a sovereign nation and were not subject to the laws of the United States. They do not tell students that the Cherokee developed their own government and established a constitution, heavily influenced by the U.S. Constitution. They certainly do not tell students that the written language, developed by Sequoyah, was so quickly adopted and learned that literacy rates far exceeded that of the United States (Conley, 2005). They definitely do not reveal that when the Cherokee were removed from their homes, at gun point, that there were white families waiting to take their land and their place. They never write of the stockades that these people were confined in, like criminals or even worse, animals. They do not tell of the families that had to watch their past (elders) and futures (children) die in their arms. They do not tell you of the conditions that allowed an eighth of the Cherokee population to die, were essentially concentration camps. They do not tell of the other 1/8 of the Cherokee nation that would die on the forced march to what is now Oklahoma (Conley, 2005).

The American history that is taught to children today is a lie. It is a lie because it only tells part of the story. We owe it to our children, our ancestors, and ourselves to know the truth. What is taught today is merely the foliage, the top leaves of the cultural kudzu that covers the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI). Sadly, as many that have to deal with kudzu know all too well, it is relentless. Many measures have been used to fight off the creep of the vine, and some appear to work, but never do. Cherokee society and its advancements have never been held in the positive light that they had hoped (Conley, 2005). Instead, they have always been seen as an immediate threat that needed to be stamped out with extreme prejudice. The Western cultural creep has repeatedly returned with a vengeance and repeatedly destroyed chances for a new more “Civilized” Cherokee Society. Today, cultural kudzu has infiltrated every crack and crevasse of the Cherokee culture.

Conclusion

There is something missing from the knowledge of the people in the mountains of southwestern North Carolina. Here, people know about kudzu. However, many are unaware of the cultural kudzu that has infested this region since the early 1500s. They are unaware of a process which allowed the cultural landscape to completely change in the area. Most are unaware of the intricate and methodical way that the Cherokee people were not only cast out, but systematically stripped of every aspect that made them a thriving culture and power in pre-contact North America.

The purpose of bringing this history to light is preventative in nature. It is to prevent those of us that still call these mountains our home from losing what does remain of our culture and ancestral teachings. It is to remind the EBCI that we have a long way to go when it comes to regaining our former glory and standing as an influence in not only North Carolina, but the United States as a whole. We have come a long way from removal and the boarding schools, but similar threats remain. In order to combat those threats, we must understand how they were developed and how they were able to be effective.

Planting mistrust amongst the Cherokee was the key to infiltrating Cherokee Culture. Once mistrust was able to blossom, further infiltration was almost inevitable. The cultural kudzu that would overtake Cherokee culture would use the apparatus of religion, language, and education in order to continue its infestation. Once the vines of cultural kudzu were able to establish their position in these structures, its creep and takeover would become almost complete.

It's hard to discern a single force that brought the Cherokee culture down, but we do know the process over time involved many things such as greed (gold, and land), jealousy (literacy rate and quality of life), and the idea of racial superiority.

This is a warning. The methods described in this article can be used with adaptations today. Our current American society is not immune to this type of attack. What made the methods of cultural kudzu so effective was its stealth, its ability to remain hidden over time. America today is subjected to so many distractions, it is quite possible that our thinking can be coopted by nefarious forces through time and subtlety. In today's political environment, saturated with sensationalized news geared towards ratings and polarization, we as a nation are fertile ground for cultural kudzu. Much like the kudzu plant, all that cultural kudzu needs to be able to grow is for one seed to take root in fertile ground. If that occurs, inevitably, it will become entangled in every aspect of culture.

Americans should not think that they are impervious to a cultural attack of their own. In a global world that is increasingly economically bound together by economic and geopolitical interests, it is inevitable that there will be many future clashes of cultures. The process of cultural consumption is cyclical and constant. The irony behind the destruction of Cherokee society by Western European “Civilization” is that, like the Cherokee nearly 200 years ago, America is now primed for a similar battle against the same entity. Cultural kudzu is always relentless, never ceasing, always creeping. George Mason famously stated at the 1787 Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, “Nations cannot be punished in the next life, so they must be punished in this one” (Johnson, 1989).

When people drive in the southwestern mountains of North Carolina today, they are unaware of all that was taken from the original inhabitants. They do notice, however, through a twist of irony, a vine that seems to grow at exponential rates. They see the old sheds and barns covered by the big, heavy vines. They see those same vines reaching into the roads on the brightest, hottest days. They watch the mowers cut through the vines on top of the grass, cleared for a day, only to see them return the next. They witness the fight to keep those vines from gardens, lawns and driveways, just to have a day or two of peace. All the while, they do not realize that just two hundred years ago, the native inhabitants of this area repeatedly fought a similar battle—one that would cease for a day or two, but ultimately be never ending. Cosmic karma has clearly decided to act; the land of the people overtaken by *cultural* kudzu is now close to becoming one massive patch of *Pueraria Lobata*.

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