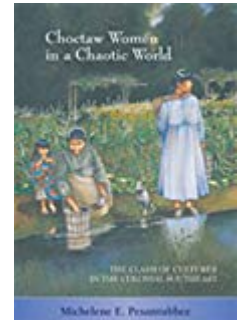


**Michelene E. Pesantubbee.** *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005. xi + 208 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8263-3334-6.



**Reviewed by** Michelle LeMaster (Department of History, Eastern Illinois University)

**Published on** H-Atlantic (December, 2005)

## Where Have All the Beloved Women Gone?

There are few tasks more difficult in the field of colonial history than reconstructing the lives of American Indian women. European men, the primary producers of written records, either did not see them or did not consider their activities important enough to record. Although a few scholars have begun to complete research on the lives of native women in the colonial Southeast (most notably Katherine Holland Braund, James Taylor Carson, Clara Sue Kidwell, and Patricia Galloway), only one book-length study, Theda Perdue's notable *Cherokee Women*, had been published by the time of this review.[1] Therefore, Michelene E. Pesantubbee's new study, *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast*, is particularly welcome. Pesantubbee, a professor of religious studies at the University of Iowa, brings substantial research in the documentary records, along with her own background and cultural knowledge as a Choctaw woman, to bear on the lives of Choctaw women during the French colonial regime.

Pesantubbee argues that when Europeans arrived in the region, Choctaw women experienced a significant and swift loss of status. "The intention of this reconstruction," she maintains, "is to explain the various ways in which Choctaw women exercised influence in their communities, and how in a relatively short period of time conditions changed so drastically in the Southeast that Choctaw women had to withdraw from many activities that at one time had given them a kind of status that among many nations in the Southeast would have been associated with beloved people" (p. 4). Karen Anderson's *Chain Her by One Foot: The Subjugation of Native Women in Seventeenth-Century New France* (1991), which makes a similar argument for the Montagnais and Huron, has greatly influenced Pesantubbee's interpretation. It is unfortunate that Pesantubbee does not engage with more recent critiques of the declension narrative as applied to Indian women's history, particularly the fine work of Nancy Shoemaker and Kathleen Brown.[2] Shoemaker and Brown raise significant questions about the assumptions that under-

lie declension narratives, demonstrating the difficulty of establishing women's position in society based on only one or two measures or categories of analysis. Declension narratives also tend to obscure the considerable ambivalence about women's roles within a single society, the surprising degree of continuity displayed by many native cultures in spite of staggering outside pressures, and the agency demonstrated by women in shaping their changing world.

Pesantubbee's methods also raise questions, although she anticipates many of the doubts scholars are likely to have. Like most historians, Pesantubbee is forced to rely on accounts produced by European male observers. She then casts her net more broadly to include archaeology, as well as linguistic and anthropological studies. Pesantubbee, as a Choctaw woman, has the added ability to bring in her own understanding of modern Choctaw culture and has been able better than most western historians to integrate oral histories shared by respected elders, one the chief strengths of her book. "[European] documents," she explains, while flawed, "can be studied in the context of Choctaw cultural narratives, archaeological evidence, and cultural patterns in the greater Southeast and from later periods in order to reimagine Choctaw women's lives"(p. 3). In order to make up for the paucity of sources for the time period in question (1699-1763), Pesantubbee adopts a regional approach, bringing in sources relating to other tribes in the area when none exist for the Choctaw themselves. In addition, Pesantubbee makes use of the technique of upstreaming, reading later cultural practices backward in time to try to reconstruct eighteenth-century culture. Pesantubbee justifies the decision by noting that "to depend solely on documentation specific to Choctaw women's lives written during the eighteenth century effectively relegates Choctaw women to the realm of the unknown" (p. 3). Certainly, the lack of primary source materials, and especially those produced by Choctaw people, leaves her with few other options. However, the reader must exercise caution, be-

cause this approach assumes continuity over time that may not have existed, as well as similarities between cultures, while ignoring the vast diversity of the region. Pesantubbee recognizes the difficulties of her approach, adding that "this is but one of many possible interpretations and permutations of Choctaw women's experience, but one that will broaden our understanding of the changes that impacted their roles in society both conceptually and physically" (p. 15). In this sense, her work does provide a valuable contribution to the understanding of Southern Indian women's lives.

In order to establish the story of rapid decline she wishes to tell, Pesantubbee focuses not on politics or economics, as so many before her have done, but rather on the change in women's roles, with a heavy emphasis on religion and ceremony. She breaks the book up into six thematic (and somewhat chronological) chapters. Chapter 1 establishes the baseline from which to trace the changes in Choctaw women's lives over the course of the eighteenth century. In pre-contact Choctaw society, women could enjoy the status of "beloved," a term that originally meant "something powerful, beyond the ordinary" (pp. 14-15). The position of beloved person was not limited to men, but was available to women by virtue of their contributions as mothers, providers, and individuals with expertise in ceremonial practice. Women could inherit leadership roles if no males were in line, perform important ceremonial functions in diplomacy, provide and prepare food for diplomats, decide the fates of war captives, tend the wounded, accompany war parties to sing, and participate in birth and funeral rites, all of which provided avenues for women to attain status.

Chapter 2 asserts that the arrival of Europeans brought increasing conflict and violence, which by 1729 culminated in the "withdrawal of women from public space as a result of increasing dangers, and changes in the conventions of warfare" (p. 34). The rise in the Indian slave trade put women and children at particular risk. As a result,

women curtailed many activities that brought them into contact with the French. The retreat of women from public functions and unprotected places caused them to lose the ability to influence conditions in the community and to lose political power and responsibility for family. Women lost the power to determine the fates of war captives, who were increasingly sold by Indian men to French or English traders. They also lost the power to provide for the community, as war disrupted their traditional agricultural pursuits. This chapter is probably the most effective and convincing in supporting the declension narrative, and the logic of Pesantubbee's arguments regarding the effect of warfare and slavery on Choctaw women is difficult to discredit. However, there are times when she seems to contradict herself. For example, she argues that the decline of references to women in French records is evidence of the withdrawal of women from public functions. Yet her evidence does not seem to bear this out. She claims that there were few references to Indian women in records written between 1681 and 1701 because the French had not met many Indian women. She then goes on to argue that there were few references to women after 1701 because the French were mostly focused on military affairs and not interested in domestic matters. If there were so few records that mention Indian women at all, it is difficult to prove the "disappearance" of women who were seldom seen even in the beginning. Chapter 4 follows in the same vein. The French, Pesantubbee points out, were themselves struggling to survive and sometimes displaced Indians in order to do so. They would appropriate women's crops, put pressure on food supplies by arriving as refugees in Indian communities, enslave Indians to do agricultural work, and exploit Indian women by forcing them to serve as concubines. The widespread sexual abuse of women led native communities to adopt protective measures, which usually involved constricting women's freedom. Perhaps most damaging, Pesantubbee concludes, French behavior toward women "consciously or unconsciously be-

came a part of their [Indians'] perceptions of women" (p. 107).

Chapters 3, 5 and 6 focus on Pesantubbee's strengths in religious and cultural studies. Chapter 3, "The Novel World of the Jesuits," investigates the impact of Christianity on Choctaw society. Pesantubbee argues that, in spite of the Jesuits' relatively weak position in the region and their late arrival among the Choctaw, they were able to introduce "subtle changes in consciousness" (p. 68) as "Choctaw matrilineal conventions met French Catholic patriarchal practices that necessitated recognition and integration into their cognitive world" (p. 71). The missionaries' practice of avoiding women (whose sexual freedom they found alarming and threatening) could not go unnoticed by the Indians, she explains, who then incorporated this observation into their own world view. In addition, French ideas of marriage also complicated relationships within the Choctaw community, and intermarriage led to fears that women married to French men would have torn loyalties, leading men to exclude women from war councils. However, Pesantubbee seems to overstate the amount of influence the Jesuits had among the Choctaw, especially in light of her own admission that the Choctaw only had priests among them from 1727 to 1750. Most of the evidence for this chapter comes from the Choctaw's neighbors, many of whom had greater contact with the Jesuits than the Choctaw and therefore likely experienced greater cultural change as a result than can be demonstrated for the Choctaw.

Chapter 5, "When the Dancing Stopped," traces the decline of the green corn ceremony, which had celebrated the product of women's agricultural work. Pesantubbee suggests that women increasingly contributed less to the green corn ceremony because of wartime disruptions in agriculture and that this deprived women of formerly important ceremonial functions. In addition, when women were forced by the threat of slavery to withdraw from traditional roles in war, they were thereafter

excluded from the black drink ceremonies, another avenue for gaining status. The loss of women's agricultural roles due to endemic warfare had additional repercussions. While men gained status through the redistribution of trade goods, women became dependent upon male relatives or husbands for status. The conclusions are provocative, but the chapter is almost entirely speculation and there is little or no documentary evidence to support its conclusions.

Chapter 6 relies most extensively of any of the chapters on upstreaming and the nineteenth- and twentieth-century record. Entitled "Restoring the Balance to the World," this chapter concludes the book on a less pessimistic note. While many other ceremonial traditions were lost, mortuary practices survived, and some women continued to gain status through involvement in mourning and burial rituals. In Choctaw society, those responsible for burial also were responsible for bringing comfort and restoration of balance to the community. Therefore, while funeral practices themselves changed substantially, women could continue to perform important functions in their society through participation in mourning rituals. More broadly considered, women in Choctaw society continued to gain respect based on traditional values, simply "expressed under new conditions" (p. 149). Basic values informing structures dealing with "childcare, domestic concerns and death" survived the catastrophic events of the eighteenth century (p. 150).

As a whole, the book is engaging and provides a great deal of food for thought. Pesantubbee's familiarity with modern Choctaw culture allows her to raise questions and arrive at conclusions that would elude a non-Choctaw scholar. She has made thorough use of the primary source materials, as well as oral histories and other less traditional sources. The point is always clear and easy to follow, if somewhat repetitive at times. While the methodology and the reliance on the declension narrative raise serious questions about Pesan-

tubbee's conclusions, this book contributes greatly to the scholarship on Southeastern Indian women and should be required reading for any scholar interested in the region.

#### Notes

[1]. Kathryn E. Holland Braund, "Guardians of Tradition and Handmaidens to Change: Women's Roles in Creek Economic and Social Life during the Eighteenth Century," *American Indian Quarterly*, 14, no. 3 (1990): pp. 239-253; James Taylor Carson, "From Corn Mothers to Cotton Spinners: Continuity in Choctaw Women's Economic Life, A.D. 950-1830," in *Women of the American South: A Multicultural Reader*, ed. Christie Anne Farnham (New York: New York University Press, 1997): pp. 8-25; Clara Sue Kidwell, "Choctaw Women and Cultural Persistence in Mississippi," in *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native America Women*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker (New York: Routledge, 1995): pp.115-134; Patricia Galloway, "Where Have All the Menstrual Huts Gone? The Invisibility of Menstrual Seclusion in the Late Prehistoric Southeast," in *Women in Prehistory: North America and Mesoamerica*, ed. Cheryl Claassen and Rosemary Joyce (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997): pp. 47-62; and Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998). Also see, Theda Perdue, "Cherokee Women and the Trail of Tears," *Journal of Women's History*, 1, no. 1 (Spring 1989): pp. 15-30; "Clan and Court: Another Look at the Early Cherokee Republic," *American Indian Quarterly*, 24, no. 4 (Fall 2000): pp. 562-569; "Southern Indians and the Cult of True Womanhood," in *The Web of Southern Social Relations: Women, Family, and Education*, ed. Walter Jr. Fraser, et al. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980): pp. 35-51; and, "The Traditional Status of Cherokee Women," *Furman Studies* (1980): pp. 19-25;

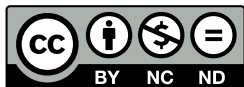
[2]. Nancy Shoemaker, "Introduction," in *Negotiators of Change: Historical Perspectives on Native America Women*, ed. Nancy Shoemaker

(New York: Routledge, 1995): pp. 1-25; and Kathleen M. Brown, "Brave New Worlds: Women's and Gender History," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 50, no. 2 (1993): pp. 311-328.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-atlantic>

**Citation:** Michelle LeMaster. Review of Pesantubbee, Michelene E. *Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11034>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.