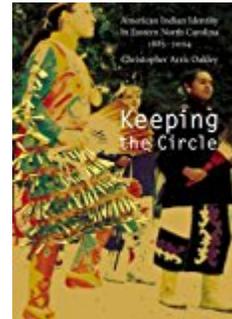




Christopher Arris Oakley. *Keeping the Circle: American Indian Identity In Eastern North Carolina, 1885-2004*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2005. ix + 191 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-3574-8.



Reviewed by Meg Devlin O'Sullivan (Department of History, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill)

Published on H-AmIndian (February, 2006)

## Retribalization and Recognition in Eastern North Carolina

Christopher Arris Oakley skillfully outlines changes that many Native Americans faced during the twentieth century while focusing on the particular experience of eastern North Carolina Indians. Oakley maintains that the “real focus of the book” is how “Native Americans in eastern North Carolina have struggled to survive as a separate people” and preserve their identity (p. 13). By examining papers of the North Carolina Commission on Indian Affairs, personal collections, federal records, newspapers, documents generated by the tribes under consideration, and oral histories, Oakley describes the twentieth-century experiences of the Coharies, Haliwa-Saponis, Lumbees, Meherrins, Occaneechi-Saponis, Tuscaroras, Waccamaw-Siouans, and Person County Indians. This is quite an undertaking, because as Oakley comments in the book’s bibliographic essay, “official documentary evidence is somewhat sparse” (p. 181). Yet, with a keen eye on culture, *Keeping the Circle* does justice to the larger series of which it is a part and narrates the ethnohistory of these “Indians of the Southeast.”

The work begins in the sixteenth century with an examination of the first contact between the indigenous

people of North Carolina and European colonists. From here, the book moves to a description of Native Americans’ experiences during Reconstruction and Jim Crow. Oakley describes white Carolinians’ attempts to label Indians as “colored” and the insistence of Native Americans that they were Indian, a third classification. In order to prove their cultural difference, these groups formed their own churches and schools. Oakley correctly asserts that, historically, being Indian did not rely on race or “blood” but rather on kin and community. By describing the experience of tribes in eastern North Carolina, *Keeping the Circle* sheds light on Native communities that used alternative markers of “Indianess” to form a clear Indian community and identity.

World War II is a watershed in Oakley’s account. Wartime employment both at home and abroad coupled with postwar economic development and industrialization resulted in a new landscape for Native North Carolinians. The “shift from agrarianism to industrialization” transformed the rural isolation that many Indian communities knew prior to the war (p. 80). As Indians of eastern North Carolina increasingly interacted with the

larger community, they needed to redefine what it meant to be Indian. This took the form of some pan-Indian activism in the 1960s and 70s but primarily resulted in the long struggle for federal recognition in the 1980s and 90s.

One of the book's most interesting aspects is its focus on the complexity of the tri-racial region and in particular the Native Americans' sense of identity in relation to the African Americans in the state. Oakley makes clear that eastern North Carolina Indians wanted to separate themselves as much as they could from blacks during Jim Crow. What Oakley does not address, however, is what drove this desire. Was it simply a political need to exist as other than "colored" or was it a reflection of the racial hierarchy of the day? What is even more striking is the po-

litical alliance that African Americans and Native Americans formed in the 1960s, particularly around the issues of voting and electing non-white officials to local offices. Oakley writes: "Because of the Indian-black coalition, being nonwhite became an important part of the Native American identity, whereas previously the primary focus had been on being nonblack" (p. 89). Some readers might wish for a deeper investigation of this reversal in perception. Nonetheless, Oakley does a fine job with this monograph. *Keeping the Circle* is a welcome addition to the growing historiography of Native Americans in the twentieth century; and no doubt, students of southeastern Indian history will welcome this engaging and informative narrative. It is a significant piece of scholarship for both its subject matter and analytical framework.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-amindian>

**Citation:** Meg Devlin O'Sullivan. Review of Oakley, Christopher Arris, *Keeping the Circle: American Indian Identity In Eastern North Carolina, 1885-2004*. H-AmIndian, H-Net Reviews. February, 2006.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11457>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).