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Mvskoke-Nene momis komet Yvkvpvkkeyetos/We Keep Walking the Mvskoke Path: A Reflexive and Phenomenological Ethnographic Study of the Ceremonial Beliefs and Practices of a Modern Mvskoke Community in Florida

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Mvskoke-Nene momis komet Yvkvpvkkeyetos/We Keep Walking the *Mvskoke* Path:
A Reflexive and Phenomenological Ethnographic Study of the Ceremonial Beliefs and Practices of a Modern *Mvskoke* Community in Florida

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by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is an ethnographic investigation of the intersection between cosmology, worldview, ethnoecology, and traditional religious performance, particularly in terms of the relationship between subjective experience and intersubjectivity. It is a study of how people come to understand the world – an attempt to understand understanding. I explore the acquisition of social, cultural, and ecological knowledge through participation in the traditional religious ceremonialism of a *Mvskoke* ceremonial community, called the Busk. I write about living people and living religious traditions, but I am also a member of this community and, therefore, I am also telling my own story. Reflexivity, then, serves a strong methodological role in highlighting my own positionality and experiences within the community. I use a phenomenological approach that directs the research focus to people's actual experiences of the world around them in order to investigate how individuals come to perceive and understand the world differently as a result of participation in the Busks. The Busk ceremonials are the primary means of inculcation of the traditional teachings that inform and reinforce a distinctive framework of understanding, an intersubjectively negotiated worldview called the *Mvskoke-Nene*, or Muskogee Path. Walking the *Mvskoke-Nene* is a phrase used to describe a way of seeing and understanding the world, a way of being. As people walk the *Mvskoke-Nene*, the teachings of the Busk ceremonials are internalized and implemented into their daily lives, and give rise to new ways of perceiving and interacting with the world. In this dissertation, I examine the teachings of the Busk and explore the system of knowledge and natural symbolism that gives meaning to those teachings.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I could not have completed this dissertation without the love and support of my family and community; it is with sincere gratitude that I want to acknowledge *Weso*, *Koha*, and the entire *Ekvnv Hvtke* Community, with particular thanks to our Matriarchs, Makers of Medicine, and Ceremonial Leaders. I would also like to acknowledge my former advisor, Dr. Justin M. Nolan, who passed too early and did not get to see this dissertation completed. It also would not have been possible for me to complete this without the help of Dr. Kirstin Erickson, who stepped in to advise in the writing and editing of this dissertation. To you all, I say *Mvto*!

DEDICATION

For those who came before – whom we call ancestors,

and to those who come after – by whom we will be called ancestors.

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EXPLANATORY NOTE ON MVSKOKE ORTHOGRAPHY AND PRONUNCIATION

Mvskoke was not traditionally a written language and there have been various systems of representation that have been used to transcribe the language. The *Mvskoke* language is a tonal language and makes use of phonological alterations, including the nasalization of vowels and changes in pitch or stress, to modify words and express particular grades, aspects, and moods. In this dissertation, I follow the basic orthographies used by Robert Loughridge and David Hodge (1914) and Jack Martin and Margaret Mauldin (2000). I do not provide tonal, accent, stress, or nasalization markers for each word, which are generally absent from most *Mvskoke* scripts. I indicate elided syllables, which are associated with community-specific dialects, by using an apostrophe (‘/’). For more information on the *Mvskoke* language, I strongly recommend Martin’s (2011) *A Grammar of Creek (Muskogee).*

Vowels

A – **ah** like in t**augh**t or c**o**b: *h**a**yetv* (to make)
E – regular vowel **ē** as in b**ee**t : ***e**fv* (dog); short vowel **ə** like in orb**i**t : *momis kom**e**t* (persevering)
I (æ) – **ay**, **ey** : like in g**a**te: *w**i**kvs* (stop); short vowel: **eh** like in p**e**t : *mom**i**s komet* (persevering)
O – **ō** : like in r**o**pe : *h**o**tvle* (wind)
U – **ooh** : like in b**oo**t : *c**u**ko* (house, building)
V – **uh** : like in f**u**n : ***v**cen**v*** (cedar)

Diphthongs

UE – **oy** like in t**oy** : ***ue**wa* (water)
VO – sounds between **aw**, as in p**aw**, and **ow**, as in p**ow** : *vh**vo**ke* (door)
EU – **ew** as in p**ew** or c**ue** (**eu** is a suffix that indicates “and” or “also” when added to a word)

Consonants

C - sounds between **ch**, as in **ch**eese, and **j**, as in **j**ade : ***c**ate* (red)
F – **f** like in **f**un : ***f**ekce* (heart) & *e**f**v* (dog)*;* some speakers pronounce this voiced, particularly after **o** or **u,** which sounds between **f** and **v** : *‘Po**f**vnka* (One Above)
H - **h** like in **h**ello: ***h**okte* (woman)
K - **k** as in **c**ut; when between vowels it is voiced and sounds like **g** as in **g**un : *Mvs**k**o**k**e* - first **k** is regular, second **k** is voiced, thus: Muskogee
L - **l** like in **l**ove: ***l**ane* (yellow, green, brown) *& æ**l**a* (a universal exclamatory)
M - **m** like in **m**ove : ***m**vto* (thank you) *& fv**m**pe* (smelly)
N - **n** like in **n**o: ***n**vkose* (bear) & *tvstv**n**vke* (warrior)
P - generally sounds between **b**, as in **b**ase, and **p**, as in **p**ace : ***p**vk**p**vke* (flower)
R - **thl** like in mon**thl**y : ***r**akko* (big) & *pv**r**ko* (grape)
S - **s** like in **s**un : ***s**epvcetv* (to defecate in one’s pants) & *nvko**s**e* (bear); often pronounced by speakers as **sh** like in **sh**oe : *fu**s**wa* (bird) & *hele**s**wv* (medicine)
T - sounds between **d**, as in **d**une, and **t**, as in **t**une: ***t**otkv* (fire) & *e**t**o* (tree)
W - **w** like in **w**ater : ***w**otko* (racoon) & *ue**w**a* (water)
Y - **y** like in **y**es : ***y**vhv* (wolf) & *ha**y**etv* (to make)

EXPLANATORY NOTE: MVSKOKE STORIES

Stories are a vital component of the Busk and the *Mvskoke-Nene*; they give valuable lessons and contain information both in the stories themselves and in their interpretations (reading between the lines as one community member described it). The stories that introduce each chapter in this dissertation can certainly be linked to the chapter for which they were chosen, yet they are still stories, in and of themselves, with meanings and interpretations that do not necessarily connect to any particular chapter.

These stories reflect important cultural information, values, and ideas. Each is a modern version that I have heard told throughout my research process. There are many ways to tell a story; these are abbreviated versions of stories, shorter renderings that were shared in order to express the sentiment of the fuller versions of traditional stories.

I felt it is important to have these variations of traditional stories documented and recorded for posterity; while I discuss and explain several other stories throughout the dissertation, which illustrate how stories can be dissected and their meanings applied to the practices of the Busk, the presentation of a story *as* a story is still a vital means of communicating ideas, and the telling of stories could probably be considered just as important to *Mvskoke* ways of thinking and being as the formative and acculturative experiences of the Busk explored in this dissertation.

CHAPTER 1

Hiyomat' vlicecetomes (Now we begin)

This is the story of how all things came to be and why we call this land Turtle Island. In the beginning, long, long ago, there was nothing; there was only Creator. All was dark and Creator was alone. For a very long time, Creator was completely alone, until one day he decided to make something and Turtle came into existence. Creator, very pleased with his new creation, began to create more things, and more… a plethora of plants and animals, fishes and birds and four-footed things, trees and small leafy things, mosses and insects; there were beings of all shapes and sizes and colors. Soon, though, all these new beings began to grow restless, for – having never done anything like this before – Creator had not given his creations Place; they existed but did not belong anywhere… they were simply nowhere – and nowhere is not a very pleasant place to be. The restlessness grew among the many living things and Turtle, the first of creator's creations and the oldest, pleaded to Creator for help. She explained that his creations needed a sense of belonging, a Place to be. Immediately, Creator brought about the great primordial waters and Turtle felt at home and happy. She swam in broad circles and tight spirals, enjoying the feel of the water about her, as did the fishes and all manner of swimming things; even Duck floated upon the surface of the water, contentedly, her wide feet lazily carrying her about. They had found Place and their fears were replaced by a sense of belonging and they were happy.

Yet, many others were not so happy; in fact, they were very unhappy. Many of the birds were not able to float on the water like Duck and were getting very, very tired from flapping their wings to stay in the air and many creatures found that they were simply not suited for the water and were very nearly drowning! *Æla!* [*æla*, or *ila*, is a generalized, universal exclamation] A new feeling came into existence: fear. There was much fear and again the animals pleaded to creator, but he did not know what to do… all of this was so far outside of his experience. Turtle, taking it upon herself, decided that she would help. She dived down, very deep, all the way to the bottom of the vast, dark waters and brought up mud and began to pile it upon her shell. Duck came and helped, using her large, flat feet to pack down the mud and all the other birds that flew then began flying about, beating their wings as hard as they could and blowing great gusts of air across the newly packed mud, drying it. Then, all the trees and plants, the four footed things, all of the birds and flying things, the snakes and crawling things, and insects and everything that did not find the waters very homelike, made their way on to Turtle's back and each found their Place and each was content… at first. They had found Place but they had no purpose, they had not been given First Instruction… but that is another story. That, as I heard it, is how Turtle Island came to be.

– a brief Muscogee creation story

***Este Mvskoke* (The *Mvskoke* People)**

The *Mvskoke* (also: Maskoki, Muscogee, Muskogee) people are an indigenous group who traditionally called the southeastern United States their home, particularly areas of the modern states of Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. This area is rich with rivers like the Suwanee, Aucilla, Ochlocknee, and the Apalachicola, which is part of the larger Apalachicola, Chattahoochee, and Flint Rivers, system. It was along these many waterways that the *Mvskoke* peoples built their towns, which gave rise to another name these people: the Creeks. Of course, the 500 years of colonial expansion into the southeast and the forced removal from their traditional homelands has had a dramatic effect on where communities of Creek peoples make their homes today.

The *Mvskoke* language is part of a larger language family (Muscogean or Muscoghean) that includes two distinct divisions based upon the geographic distribution of its speakers. Upper Creek (including languages such as Chickasaw and Choctaw) refers to people who lived along the Appalachian Piedmont while Lower Creek (including languages such as *Mvskoke,* Hitchiti, and Mikasuki) refers to those people living on the Gulf Coastal Plain. In the community with whom I conduct research, the *Mvskoke* language is spoken mostly in a ceremonial context, although there are continuous efforts to increase knowledge and fluency.

Mvskoke society is moiety based and the concept of duality found within that basic social bifurcation manifests in many fundamental aspects of Creek thought and life. The red and white moieties were the means of identifying towns and their relationship to other towns, yet duality is found symbolically in traditional stories, where the moieties were tied to the first medicines and were brought by a Being known as Yahola, sent by Creator to give the Creek peoples the tools for living in peace. Duality is also found in the separation of the year into male and female time, representing times of killing and growing respectively, and in the concept of a bifurcated soul. It

is central to the sexual metaphor that serves as a symbolic foundation upon which so much of Creek thought and identity is constructed. Duality is even doubly presented in the Creek concept of time, with the use of two different dual-calendar systems. There is a twelve-month solar-based calendar that pairs with a thirteen-moon lunar calendar; there is also a Sacred Fire calendar that pairs with a Ceremonial calendar. Thus, even within the construct of time itself, there are layers upon layers of symbolism presenting and reinforcing the concept of duality.

Creek society is also matrilineal, and kinship is still often discussed and understood through a lens of matrilineality. However, how Creek people understand and implement kinship patterns and, thus, how they understand themselves and their families has fundamentally changed. This change is the result of the massive devastation wrought by ethnocide, genocide, and the spread of diseases from Europe beginning with the arrival of the Spanish and French in Florida in the early 16th century – and continuing to this very day with the current Coronavirus pandemic. Over time, there has been an eroding of traditional kinship patterns and social structures, such as matriclans, which have been supplemented or replaced with elements of bilateral kinship, particularly when identifying one's connection to an indigenous ancestor.

Matrilines were traditionally necessary for establishing clan affiliation, in formulating one's identity, and could affect the roles one might have in a community and influence social position. Matrilineality was used to indicate whether someone was born Creek (and was thus considered fully Creek) or was considered an adopted Creek. It is now common practice to identify as being born Creek regardless of whether the descent is matrilineal or not. However, there still remains a recognition that without a direct matrilineal descent, a person would have always been assigned to a single, specific clan referred to as the Longhouse Clan or Long-Hair Clan. This was a kind of catch-all clan that differentiated between those born of Creek mothers and those who merely

came from Creek fathers and was thus more akin to Turtle Clan (which was reserved for adopted non-Creeks, like me) than the primary matriclans. Yet, the degradation of the clan structure has generally rendered this association more of a tool in social posturing than actually affecting social positioning within in the community and the few exceptions (such as the choosing of a Matriarch) now only apply to members of Turtle Clan, thus elevating the members of the Longhouse Clan to an equal level to the traditional Matriclans.

Mvskoke religious practices center around the Busk ceremonial (from *posketv*: to fast/to pray). If you were to go into any site of worship for a particular religion, you would be confronted with a system of belief conveyed and enacted through ceremonies and rituals embedded with deep symbolic meaning that, at once, both communicates and reinforces a particular way of seeing the world. So it is with the *Mvskoke* Busk. At a Busk, layers upon layers of symbolism present and reiterate, inform and evoke, particular ways of thinking. Ceremonial leaders have often said that there are "sixteen layers of interpretation to every symbol – and that's just getting started." One described it thusly: "understanding the teachings of the Busks and the stories, the Creek Path, is like looking through layers upon layers of translucent discs; each one you remove lets you see that the stack is even deeper than you knew… there are always more layers."

Mvskoke Posketv **(The Muscogee Busk)**

Busks are semi-annual events that are intimately connected to the natural world and take place during the growing time of year, generally from April to November. The Busks serve as a means of connecting community members to each other and to the natural world and perform the symbolic role of establishing balance in the cosmos, which has been likened to a spinning top. Just as a top wobbles when it begins to slow down, so too does the cosmos begin to wobble as

people create more and more imbalance in the world; just as the top must be stopped and spun again to once again spin smoothly, so too is the Busk described as stopping and restarting the very cosmos, a cosmic rebalancing act to counter the imbalance we are causing ourselves.

The four ceremonial Busks, each with particular symbolic meanings, are Berry, Green Corn, Little Green Corn, and Harvest. Berry (*Ke*) is generally in April and marks the transition from the winter months into the growing season, or female time of year, and is primarily indicated in the natural world by the ripening of *ke* (mulberries) – hence its name. Green Corn (*Vce Lane*) is the next Busk, which takes place in June. Green Corn is celebrated as the Creek New Year and is marked in the natural world by the ripening – but not fully ripe – first crop of corn (*vce*), while the husks are still green and the ears still have corn milk. Little Green Corn (*Vce Lanuce*) is usually in August and is also associated with the maturation of corn, with little green left on the husks of the first crop and the ripening of a second. Little Green Corn is referred to as a teaching Busk, since this is a Busk in which questions are much more likely to be answered by the ceremonial leaders than at any other. Harvest (*Hvyo*) marks the end of the ceremonial year and the transition into the winter months or male time of year. Harvest is associated with the final fall harvest of the natural world and the shift in focus from the living, Growing World during the female time of year to what is also called the killing time of year, due to an increased reliance upon hunting to provide food and the occurrence of plant-killing frosts during the winter months.

Traditional stories and beliefs are enacted and reenacted in the rituals of the Busk ceremonial, in dances, in the preparation and treatment of the ceremonial grounds, and the making and taking of ritually prepared Medicines; the making of tobacco or food offerings, the community stickball game, fasting, and feasting all reaffirm traditional ways of interacting with each other and with the world. Yet, as with any religious community, there are also inconsistencies that are found in

the subjective interpretations, beliefs, and practices of individuals within the congregation of any spiritual community. Each individual arrives at their place of worship with a unique history, a singular perspective colored by their own experiences, a lens though which they perceive and interpret symbolism and thus gather meaning from the teachings and practices and from their experiences.

In the Muscogee community with whom I conduct my research, every participant interprets the religious practices and teachings through their own subjective lens. One of the ceremonial leaders acknowledged this and said, "you only need to bring a good heart to the Busk; what you take home is a different story. What people take home with them… in here [placing his hand over his heart] and here [pointing to his head], well… there's really nothing we can do about that." The complex interweaving of many different beliefs and practices that results reflect a unique aspect of the modern, living Muscogee religious ceremonialism that certainly did not exist before the influences of the larger non-Native world. What a person takes from their participation in the Busk is unique to their own perspective and experiences; just as what they bring to the Busk is similarly unique. However, when the teachings of the Busk are better understood, then the various perspectives of Busk participants, their understandings of the world can be interpreted through a distinctly *Mvskoke* cultural lens.

The teachings of the Busk, learned through participation, observation, and much hard work, lead to similar changes occurring in those who participate in the Busk. Everyone who walks the Creek Path (*Mvskoke-Nene*, also: *Nene Mvskoke*) does so in their own way, interpreting and applying what they learn in a subjectively unique way. Yet, as I have both observed and experienced, participation in the Busk changes how people see and understand the world around

them and those changes bear the mark of a way of being in the world; though the paths may look different, when they are walking the *Mvskoke-Nene*, it is all the same path.

As an example, two of my informants (a father and daughter) identify as both Catholic and as Creek – the common demonym "Creek" referring to the *Mvskokvlke* (Muscogee people) but also used to refer to those who engage in the Busk as a religious practice. Both father and daughter blend these two belief systems in ways that reflect a Creek way of thinking, so to speak, although they do this in very different ways. The father has a more conceptually syncretized and balanced way of blending the two. In long conversations while shaping wood for bows and practicing archery, he described his thoughts on the matter; for him, the Bible and the teachings of the Catholic Church reaffirm everything he sees and does at the Busk and everything that he sees and does at Busk reaffirms what he experiences in the Church. He said that it is about balance. Balance is a central concept within the Busk symbolism and one that shapes, to a large degree, understanding of the world. Balance and purity are described as the two most fundamental ideas or concepts that are at the core of everything… the Busk, the Medicines, our entire way of life comes down to balance and purity.

The manner in which the father blends the two significantly different religious traditions and belief systems, then, purposefully and thoughtfully interpreting what he reads, learns, and experiences through the concept of balance, reflects his long participation in the Busk. His daughter, on the other hand, has a very different relationship between her Catholicism and being Creek. She often described the two as being connected but distinct; there is ideological overlap but what she takes away from her experiences – what she called "the point of them" – is entirely different. She described the basic teachings about what it means to be a good person for example, as being the same in both. She also described how, for her, each cosmology informs the other, in

particular shaping her concept of a higher power. This reflects a kind of syncretism that is conceptualized, in which an individual engages subjectively with different systems of belief and practice and arranges the seemingly discordant systems into a meaningful, syncretic blend. For her father, this is a deeply engaging process. We often spent hours in conversation where he discussed how the two systems interact and inform each other in his own mind, pulling from scripture and traditional stories, as well as historical and archaeological information. While his daughter has done some of this thoughtful reflection, her analysis also differs from her father's because she engages her religious beliefs and practices by allowing herself to follow what "feels right" in the moment. Following what she feels to be right often results in transitioning back and forth depending on the circumstances rather than consciously and purposefully blending the two belief systems. In one particularly memorable conversation, she described the two religious systems as having particular uses in different circumstances. As she described it, if she feels an issue is better served by kneeling and praying the rosary, then she does exactly that; if she feels that a tobacco offering is more important or appropriate, she makes one. She made a point to stress: "religion is practical; Creeks are practical people."

This idiom – *Creeks are practical people* – is often heard at Busks. It is applied just as readily to the symbolism and practices of the Busk as it is used as a general expression about life and living. When the daughter quoted this idiom to describe her own approach to religious practice and belief it revealed the depth of impact of a way of thinking about life and existence that is distinctly *Mvskoke*. She also discussed how she did not really think about these things, rather, she described a sense of when to use one or the other as guided by intuition, as a feeling of doing what she is supposed to be doing – another important concept associated with the Busk practice, which is discussed later in this dissertation.

The Town (*talwv*) and the Ceremonial Grounds (*paskofv*)

In this dissertation, through reflective and reflexive ethnography, I explore the teachings and practices of the Busk ceremonial at one particular *talwv* (a Creek town or community; location of a ceremonial grounds) in Florida (see Figure 1). The *talwv* is the primary means by which Creek peoples identify themselves; in the stories told by elders it has always been such. *Talwvn* (pl.) are connected through a larger, broader cultural identity, which is conveyed and reiterated by shared stories and symbolism, embedded with distinct ways of understanding and interacting with the world that are – as I have often heard those same elders say – distinctly Creek.

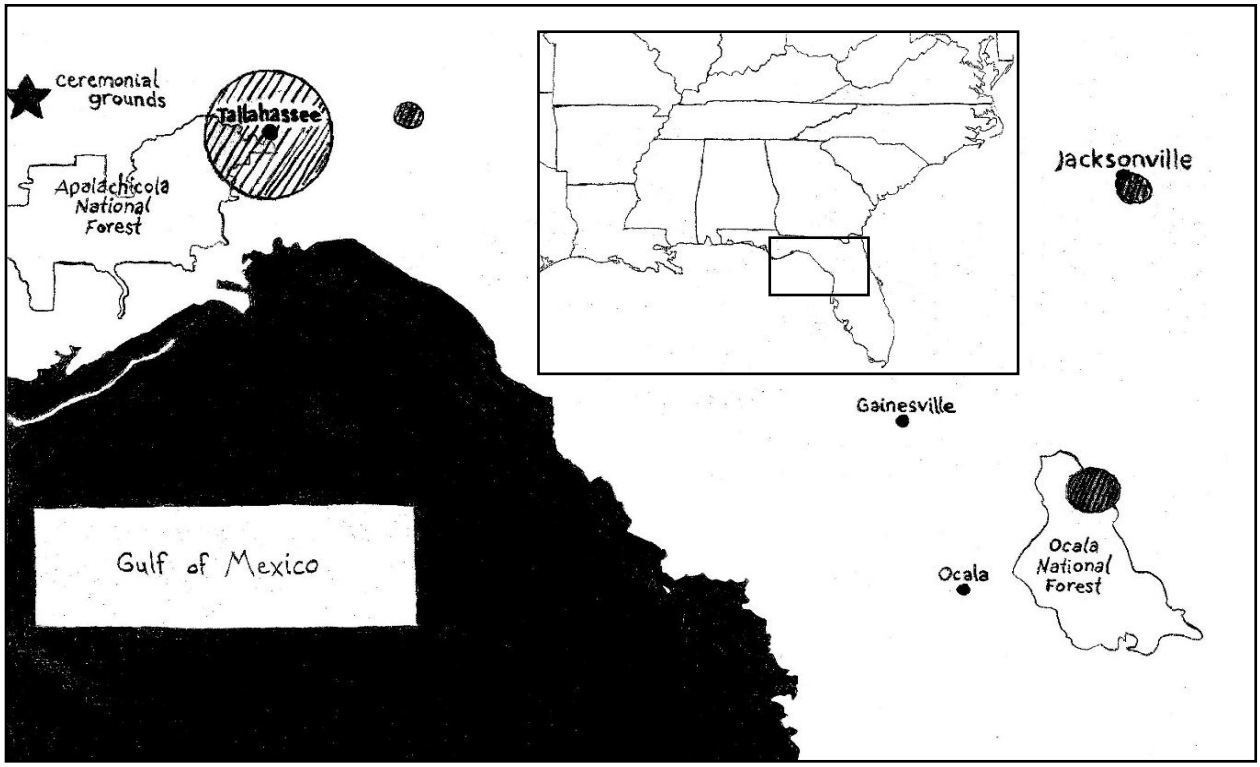

Figure 1. Map of the research area, which indicates a general location of the ceremonial grounds (star) and where research was conducted with community members (shaded areas). Rendered by author.

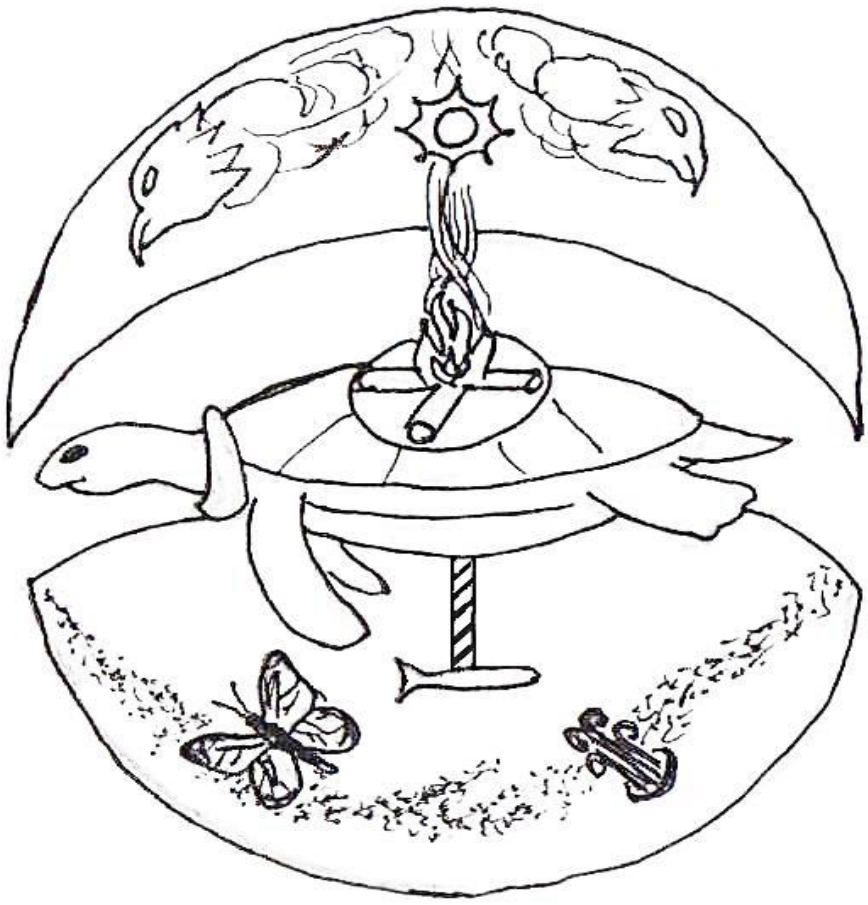

Figure 2. A Muscogee cosmogram conceptualizing the tripartite cosmos and Turtle Island. Drawn by author. (Bolfing 2010)

A *talwv* is centered around a Sacred Fire (*Totkv*), a kind of focal point and centerpiece of the ceremonials. The Sacred Fire is treated as a living being that continually grows old, dies, and is reborn each year anew at the annual Green Corn Busk. The Sacred Fire is a portal and one half of the axis mundi. It serves as a direct connection to the Above World, while the ballpost completes the axis mundi as the complementary portal to the beneath world (see Figure 2). Every Sacred Fire, and therefore each *talwv,* is unique; each with its own history and sense of identity, its own needs that shape the ceremonial practices of each community. Each *talwv* has its own, internally

decided leadership and ceremonial positions that are specific to that community, as well, which brings further autonomy and individuality to each *talwv*.

The *talwv* within which I conduct my research consists of a ceremonial grounds (*paskofv*, which translates as the place of Busk; note that the translated phrase "ceremonial grounds" is both singular and plural), where the Sacred Fire sits upon a flat-topped conical shaped mound within a circular shell ring (*taco*). Within the *taco*, four Arbors (*topvn*) are arranged at the cardinal directions leaving an open surfaced circular area around the Fire Mound that serves as the dancing ground. There is a smaller mound in the northwest area of the *paskofv* called the bird mound and behind this at the edge of the circle near the *taco* is a rack upon which ballsticks are rested. There is another rack that women will sometimes use in the southeast area of the circle that actually spans the *taco* so that one of the posts is outside of the actual grounds.

East Arbor, also called *Topv Hokte* (Women's Arbor). Photo by author.

The ballgame is played in field to the west of the *paskofv* that is centered around a single ballpost made from a slender pine tree that has been painstakingly stripped of bark. In this *talwv*, the ballpost is mounted with a carved and painted wooden representation of a buffalo carp upside down at the top of the post. The buffalo carp, upside down, is seen as symbolically representing the idea that by travelling up the ballpost, one can be brought into the Beneath World (so, the buffalo carp, although upside down in the our world – the middle world – is rightside up in the waters of the Beneath World).

A Community Ballgame. Photo by author.

There are also various buildings and structures at this particular ceremonial grounds, which provide many covered areas. There is a large pavilion called "the chickee" where the community feasts and gathers together for socializing or for particular ceremonial business (most importantly

a “court night” at the first Busk of the new year, Green Corn). A “women’s shed” has a couple of beds and a cold-blowing window ac unit where women can change into their ceremonial attire, or community members can rest or cool down as needed. A woodshed houses firewood for use on the Sacred Fire and there is a community tool shed, called the “Medicine shed,” where tools for making Medicines and for cleaning and maintaining the grounds are kept along with buckets, chairs, tables, propane burners, tarps large enough to cover the sacred bundles, and myriad miscellany that often comes in handy during the Busk.

Various buildings and structures surrounding the grounds. Photo by author.

The kitchen is the most important building at the grounds, for it is in the kitchen that the *Hompetvhaya* (makers of food) prepare food not only for the community but also as offerings to feed the Sacred Fire. The kitchen is a large single room space with tables and countertops, lots of storage, multiple stoves and ovens, and a pair of refrigerator/freezers. It also has a large covered porch with several large tables where food and beverages can be lain out buffet style. Directly to

the west of the grounds there are a few covered tables (one with a sink for washing). The largest of these covered areas is "the Medicine table" where the ceremonial leaders lay out their various ceremonial regalia and accoutrement. Behind the medicine table is a bench whose primary use is a stand for the *Heles'Hopelkv* (Grave Medicine; used to cleanse oneself before and after the ceremonial – sometimes likened to "Creek Holy Water"), which keeps it off the ground and makes it much easier to reach..

Each Creek *talwv* has defined social hierarchies, including distinct ceremonial and leadership positions. *Mvskokvlke* are Matriarchal and women are naturally positioned with more power than the men. Women not only own the grounds, they are also a source of symbolic power associated with creation through the ability to give birth. The community has a Matriarch who serves as the primary decision-maker for the community. While conducting my research, the former Matriarch was replaced. She was quite elderly and was no longer able to keep up with the responsibility of the position. She stepped down and was acknowledged by the community as a Beloved Woman until her death. My adoptive mother was selected by the community as the new Matriarch.

There are male-filled roles that serve as counterpart to the power of the Matriarch, including the ceremonial leadership and the *Mekko.* The ceremonial leadership consists of a maker of medicine (*Heles-Haya*) and his assistants (*heneha*), as well as individuals who are actively being trained on the Medicine Path. The word *mekko* somewhat problematically translates as king or emperor, which insinuates that power and authority were seen by early translators as being fully vested in the Mekko instead of recognizing the power that was held by a Matriarch. The *Mekko* and the ceremonial leadership serve at the behest of the women of the community and are, thus, answerable to the Matriarch.

As just one example of the authority vested in the women of a community, there were only two people in a community that could decide to execute someone as a punishment: the Matriarch and a Beloved Woman. The Beloved Woman in a community, in this context, has been called by one informant "the ultimate arbiter of death" for a community. According to this informant, a decision to withhold the punishment of death by a Beloved Woman could halt an execution order given by a Matriarch; she also stated that this type of situation was probably exceedingly rare, as the Beloved Woman would make clear her support for any ruling by the Matriarch beforehand or the Matriarch would simply defer any judgement in such a case directly to the Beloved Woman.

The *Mekko* despite the grand English translation, primarily serves in an advisory position and an ambassadorial role. The *Mekko* is a counterpart to the Matriarch with his power firmly in the social sphere, rather than the ceremonial arena, and often serving as a kind of public face of the community. The *Heles-Haya* is a Matriarch's counterpart whose power is in the ceremonial arena. As with the position of Matriarch, the *Mekko* and *Heles-Haya* positions also changed during my research. After several treatments, remissions, and then reoccurrences of brain cancer, the former *Mekko* had become unable to fulfill his role and responsibilities. The former *Heles-Haya* replaced him as *Mekko* after finishing out the rest of his four-year elected term as Maker of Medicine. He had served for many such terms in the position and had long before decided to "retire" after this particular four-year cycle. One of the *heneha* was elected by the community to be the new *Heles-Haya*.

Most importantly, of course, a *talwv* consists of people. Some community members are born to the Fire, meaning they descend from members of the community. Others – myself included – are described as being "called to the Fire." Individuals who are born to the Fire are described as having an inherent, inherited right to be at the grounds of the Sacred Fire to which they are born,

while those who are called to the Fire must be granted permission to come by the Matriarch. Once a guest has received permission to attend a Busk, they may continue to come to Busks unless they are prohibited from returning to the grounds or if they miss all the Busks for four consecutive years (at which point they must request permission to return).

A Brief History of the *Mvskokvlke*

The research for this dissertation was conducted with modern people and focused upon traditional religious practices and, thus, is not a history dissertation; however, a brief history is important for understanding who these people are. Immediately, the largest problem in such an endeavor is deciding how to encapsulate and synopsize a history that spans at least 14,000 years (and likely longer). I have broken this history into four, general sub-sections that correspond to transformative periods for these people: the earliest origins of the ceremonialism of the Busk, the Mississippian Period transition, European contact and colonialism, and the Creek Civil War to the present. This must be looked at as merely a contextualizing of the historical circumstances that have affected this community and not a comprehensive history.

On the Earliest Inhabitant of Florida and the Possible Origins of the Creek People. There has been a significant amount of archaeological and historical research regarding the history of the *Mvskoke* and other Native peoples of the region (see Braund 2008, Caughey 2007 [1938], Cotterill 1954, Debo 1989[1941], Ethridge 2003, 2009, and 2010, Foreman 1934, Foster 2007, Gatschet 1884, Green 1982, Griffith 1998, Hann 2006 and 2017, Hawkins 2003, Martin 1991, Metcalf 1976, Moore 1988, O'Brien 2003, Perdue 1993, Purdy 1996, Saunt 1999, Swanton 1998a, Todd 1977, Vickery 2009, Wickman 1999, Willey 1998 [1949], and Wright 1986). Yet, the history and background of people living in the panhandle of Florida is complicated. It is not

known exactly when *Mvskoke* speakers first began differentiating themselves from other peoples; it is also not known exactly when the earliest inhabitants arrived in the area, who those people were, nor from where they originated.

The earliest inhabitants left few remains for archaeologists to study; in part, due to being pre-ceramic and thus leaving fewer material remains to study (making lithics the primary evidence of human habitation). Difficulty in finding evidence of these Archaic peoples is also the result of changes in climate that occurred at the end of the Younger Dryas, around 10,000 years ago, when water that had been trapped in glacial and polar ice raised the ocean substantially, radically shifting the coastlines and thus consuming many sites of early human occupation. The presence of the earliest ceramics generally marks a transition away from the Archaic Period into more distinct cultures with more permanent settlements, approximately 2,000-3,000 years ago.

It is also at this transitionary time that archaeologists have identified the first rings made from shells. Before this, mounds of piled shells are generally thought to have accumulated more as a result of subsistence upon shellfish than due to purposeful and symbolic behavior, which likely indicates a shift in a social or ceremonial role of shell. This transition has been described by several community members who are educated in archaeology as the most likely time period of the origins of the ceremonialism we know of today as the Harvest and Berry Busks, marking the transitions between the male and female times of year, which is described as being tied to the story of the *Hayaholket* (a version of which precedes Chapter 3).

These beings are also identified by a name derived from *hvyayake* (bright light), which is translated as People of Light or Illumined Ones: *Hvyayvlke* (see Wickman 1999:40-41). As relayed through traditional stories and reenacted in the ceremonialism of the Busk, these four beings brought and taught the Red and White (the first Medicines and the Moieties) and provided

the *Mvskokvlke* the tools to live in peace. This aspect of the beings, as teachers, gave rise to the name by which they are known today in the community and within the context of the Busk ceremonial: *Hayaholket.* This word comes from the blending of the verbs *hayetv* (to make) and *holketv* (to crawl, as on all fours), and describes how, like an infant first learning to crawl before being able to walk, the Creek peoples had to first learn to crawl before walking the Path of Peace. Yahola, who stayed behind and became the first *Heles-Haya* (Maker of Medicine), is the only one of the four beings for which any name is known or given and is given the credit for actually teaching the *Mvskokvlke* how to crawl and thus set forth the *Mvskoke-Nene* as a way of being.

The Mississippian Transition. Another major transition for southeastern peoples occurred with the arrival of corn, likely as a symbolically important ceremonial trade item before later becoming the major food staple of southeastern peoples. The transition to corn as the primary subsistence crop brought about a massive transformation of southeastern Natives, known as the Mississippian Period, which began with the rise of Cahokia in what is now St. Louis, IL about 1,200 years ago, which was the largest mound site associated with Mississippian peoples. The Mississippian Period has received enormous scholarly attention (e.g., see Anderson 1994, Brain and Philips 1996, Brown 1996, Cobb 2003, Eastman and Rodning 2001, Emerson 1989, 1997, Emerson and Lewis 1991, Ford and Willey 1941, Galloway 1989, 1994, Hall 1991, 1997, Holmes 1883, King 2007, Knight and Steponaitis 1998, MacCurdy 1913, Moorehead 1927, Payne 1994, Philips and Brown 1975, 1979, 1980, 1982, Reilly and Garber 2007, Sawyer 2009, Scarry and Scarry 2005, Sears 1953, Steponaitis 2009, Townsend and Sharp 2004, Waselkov and Smith 2000, Welch 1991, Willey 1945, 1998 [1949], Williams and Shapiro 1990, Williams 1977, and Worth 2000).

Much of the attention paid to the Mississippian Period is due to the proliferation of art and artifacts containing shared iconographic themes and elements, which are still used in *Mvskoke* art and on ceremonial items today. The shared iconography and the highly intricate trade networks that are associated with its spread demonstrates how the expansion of a Mississippian interaction sphere was tied directly to the spread of a shared Mississippian religious ceremonialism, referred to as the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex (or SECC). Many aspects of the SECC was still extant when the first Europeans arrived, which was hundreds of years after the fall of the major Mound centers associated the Mississippian Period (e.g., Lake Jackson Mounds in FL, Etowah Mounds, Kolomoki Mounds, and Ocmulgee Mounds in GA, and Moundville in AL – the second largest mound site after Cahokia in modern-day St. Louis – just to name a few). This complex system of beliefs and practices persisted in the ceremonies of the many towns and communities of descendant southeastern peoples, evidenced by the ubiquity of the Green Corn ceremonialism amongst southeastern Native peoples. The Green Corn Ceremony is also associated with the symbolic death and rebirth of the Sacred Fire, which may also have emerged during the Mississippian transition. These are still continued today, with the birth of the new Sacred Fire at the annual Green Corn Busk celebrated as the Creek New Year.

European Contact and Colonialism. Of course, it has been the past 500 years that has been the most life altering and destructive, and which has received the most attention in history, which began with the arrival of Europeans. The introduction of new viruses and bacteria, against which Natives had no immunities, caused numerous diseases (including bubonic plague, chickenpox, cholera, common cold, diphtheria, influenza, malaria, measles, pertussis, scarlet fever, smallpox, typhoid fever, typhus, and tuberculosis). These new diseases decimated populations throughout the Americas with tens of millions of Natives perishing as a result.

It was not just diseases that Europeans brought; they brought new technologies like metal cooking pots, new types of cloth and styles of clothing, new animals and plants, and they brought war. The colonialism that brought the Europeans to these shores cannot be disentangled from the struggles between those powers elsewhere around the globe. The Protestant Reformation and Counter-Reformation by the Catholic Church were well under way as colonial powers shifted their sights onto the Americas. Wars were a constant and ongoing occurrence in Europe and bled into the colonial territories. The Spanish, French, and British had all laid claim to the areas of the southeast that were home to the *Mvskokvlke*, and each sought to establish trade and military partnerships with Native populations for their own gains in the colonial struggle of power.

The Europeans also brought slavery with them, with the first African slaves arriving in New World with the Spanish *conquistadores*, over 100 years before 1619 – which marks the arrival of the first Englishman with a shipment of slaves solely for the purpose of trade as a commodity. While slavery in Europe can be traced back much earlier, the emergence and proliferation of slave markets in western Africa facilitated an increase in slavery that caused a massive shift in thought, instituting a new paradigm: racism. Racism emerged as a direct consequence of the escalation of the slave trade; previous colonial thought generally regarded those they colonized in terms of how easy they were to colonize and their ability to be converted to Christianity.

Those peoples who resisted colonialism or refused to convert were deemed savages, less than human. However, many African slaves and Natives readily converted to Christianity and many Native communities welcomed the opportunities presented in establishing trade and diplomatic relations with Europeans; there needed to be a new justification for slavery – the profitability of slave labor was such that they refused to stop the practice but were also unwilling to accept that

they were monsters for doing it; thus, in order to justify their own barbarity, thoughts shifted to racialist and racist ideas that have dominated social relations ever since.

Europeans were now primed with a new sense of racial superiority and there was massive profitability of slave labor, especially in the farming of tobacco, corn, cotton, indigo, flax, and hemp, but also in the collection of ambergris, cochineal, oil, salt, and in making salt peter from the copious excrement from massive flocks of passenger pigeons (see Coxe 1976 [1722]). This caused escalations in slave raids, particularly by the British from the Carolana colony, which ultimately failed, and subsequently the Georgia colony – the last of the original thirteen colonies that would become the United States. Uprisings, including the Yamasee War (1715-1717), began to unify Natives from many towns and who spoke many different languages against these acts of barbarity. This coming together against the threat of European colonialism brought about a shift in the thoughts of the indigenous peoples of the Americas: the very concept of being Native.

Before the arrival of Europeans, there was no need to have a concept that unified all Native peoples; Natives were simply seen as other people. This is not to say there was no ethnocentrism but when the Europeans first arrived, they too were simply seen as other people by the Natives they encountered. The Natives had their own political and territorial concerns, their own disputes and conflicts, and their own identities and interests that did not revolve around European colonial powers. The Europeans, however, merely saw the Natives as yet another means to expand their power and colonial influence. For the first time in tens of thousands of years, there arose a need for indigenous peoples to understand themselves in contrast to foreign invaders. The concept of being Native is, therefore, a way of defining oneself or community in contrast to the Europeans; it also bears with it all of the trauma of that particular relationship.

The Red Stick Wars, the Trail of Tears, and the Aftermath. Most writings on modern Creeks, particularly research focused on traditional practices are most often conducted with Oklahoma Creeks, who have experienced a significantly different cultural development in the two centuries since the transformative era of Andrew Jackson, from the Creek Civil War (or Red Stick Wars of 1813-14) through the removal period of the 1830s (e.g., Bell 1984, Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri 2001, Howard and Lena 1984, Lewis and Jordan 2002, and Swanton 1998b [1922] and 2000 [1924/1925]). The Red Stick Wars were essentially an ideologically-based civil war between the staunchly traditionalist Red Sticks, who were violently responding to the encroachment of white settlers on their lands, and White Sticks, who sought peace between the colonists and Natives and, thus, aligned themselves against the increasingly violent tendencies of the Red Sticks. While history records this civil war as occurring between 1813-1814, the tensions that resulted in the Red Stick War had been steadily getting worse for generations before those fateful years.

In my Master's thesis, I discussed an event in the late 18th century, about thirty years before the Red Stick Wars, in which Red Stick members of the community burned a house containing several mixed-blood families, killing all inside (Bolfing 2012). This act turned the town from a White Town, or Peace Town, to a Red Town for over 200 years. It was only about twenty years ago that the town was able to reclaim a White Town status as a Peace Town. The identification of a town as White Town or Red Town, which was determined according to the moiety tradition, did not correlate to the Red Stick or White Stick identity of individuals of any particular town. The ideological civil war that culminated in the Red Stick Wars was an internal one, and it had already fractured many communities as members of the same town often felt differently about interactions with the encroaching white settlers.

As violent acts increased, White Stick groups began fighting back, aligning with various groups that could help including American forces. When Red Sticks attacked Fort Mims and killed white settlers, the attack was sensationalized as a "massacre" perpetrated by the violent Red Stick Creeks and subsequently used to justify outright war, which would then allow the seizure of their desirable lands. Andrew Jackson was eventually brought in to lead the combined force of White Sticks and American troops. In 1814, his forces crushed the Red Sticks encamped at Tohopeka, in what is known as the Battle of Horseshoe Bend. This defeat lead to the Treaty of Fort Jackson that forced to cession of millions of acres of land controlled by the Red Sticks.

The appetites of the white settlers, however, was not sated by engorging the lands of the Red Sticks and they continued to increasingly encroach on Native lands, leading to the first Seminole War (1817-1818), which further escalated tensions. Although some progress was made in the 1820s under the presidency of John Quincy Adams, who was at least somewhat sympathetic to Native peoples, the election of Andrew Jackson to the presidency in 1829 would result in a blow to Natives of the Southeast that is still felt strongly today. He instituted and implemented the Indian Removal Act of 1830, even though the Supreme Court ruled the Act expressly unconstitutional in the 1832 *Worcester v Georgia* case. With no ability to enforce their ruling and a compliant Congress unwilling to take action against Jackson, the Trail of Tears was begun. Native peoples across the Southeast began to be forcibly displaced from their homes and marched to lands west of the Mississippi River, into parts of what would later become the states of Oklahoma, Texas, Kansas, Nebraska, Arkansas and Louisiana.

Those who remained, escaping the Trail, were either forced into hiding or into conflict, yet again. After the 1836 Second Creek War, Jackson decided to forcibly remove all remaining Creeks, betraying the very White Sticks who had waged his earlier war on the Creeks in the Red

Stick War of 1813-14. The Seminole continued to resist relocation efforts but were pushed further and further south during the later Seminole Wars (1835-1842 and 1855-1858), which preceded the American Civil War (1861-1865). Many of the Natives that remained hid from relocation efforts, with some retreating into more isolated areas and others finding ways to hide any way they could. It would not be until 1879, in the Supreme Court ruling in *Standing Bear v Crook*, that Natives would even be recognized as people within the meaning of law at all and thus be judicially granted basic civil rights. Yet, this ruling did little to prevent the continued oppression of Native peoples.

The Jim Crow era was a time of racist white backlash against Reconstruction, which is best exemplified in Florida by the 1885 Constitution that enshrined segregation and racial oppression as law until the Constitution was redrafted in 1968. During Jim Crow, the rights of Natives in Florida, outside of small reservations for Seminoles in south Florida, were nebulous at best and at worst simply non-existent. The guiding legal opinion was that all Natives had been removed, therefore, to be a Native outside of the reservations risked legal ramifications, including lynching (that were either sanctioned by the legal authorities or to which they turned a blind eye). Natives who remained, then, did not openly display or discuss their identities as Native, which was made only slightly easier by the shifting of the racial gaze from Native peoples to Black peoples in the backlash against the loss of the Civil War and subsequent Reconstruction efforts.

Several community members related stories, told to them by their parents or grandparents of this time, in which communities would hide their ceremonial grounds by holding Busks in Methodist churches, rearranging the space inside to resemble a Creek Square Grounds with the pews arranged just as the Arbors would be, facing inward, with the speaker walking in circles around a fire in the very center (which might be a candle or lantern). Others described stories of

different members of the same family passing as white or colored depending upon how dark their skin was, rather than identifying as Native when the rights for Natives was questionable at best. Although this community did not really begin to openly identify itself as Native until well into the 1970s, exceptionally brave individuals – all of whom were women – began asserting their Native identity decades earlier, particularly in challenges to their racial classification on their voter registration in the late 1940s.

The 1947 announcement of a Land Claim Settlement by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which prompted the coming together of the members of various Creek towns throughout the area who had previously remained in hiding. They formed the Florida Band of Eastern Creek Indians, now known as the Muscogee Nation of Florida, which formed its first, self-elected Tribal Council in 1978 and later gained state recognition in 1986. The Muscogee Nation of Florida, for whom I serve as Cultural Anthropologist under the direction of the Tribal Anthropologist (Dr. F. Kent Reilly, III), has yet to be recognized federally, despite ongoing efforts for generations – since those first brave women challenged white superiority in the late 1940s by demanding that their voter registration be changed.

The ceremonial community has been recognized and sanctioned as the traditional square grounds for the Muscogee Tribe of Florida, but it is truly a distinct entity. This distinction is both political and structural, with the leadership of the community (the Matriarch, ceremonial leaders, and *Mekko*) completely separate from any roles held in the Tribal Council. The community is also legally and economically distinct with the community registered as 501(c)(3) tax exempt organization, the same as any other church. For those who attend the Busk, the grounds *are* their church: a place of reverence and healing that unifies a community through shared practices and beliefs – and encourages people to live in peace with other people and the world around them.

Dissertation Synopsis and Literature Review

In this dissertation, I employ a phenomenological approach to understand the acquisition of social, cultural, and ecological knowledge via intersubjective participation in traditional religious ceremonialism in a *Mvskoke* ceremonial community. Specifically, I investigate the ways that individuals come to perceive and understand the world differently by participating in a ritual community whose organization is defined by the practice of traditional ceremonialism (i.e., the Busk). The Busk serves as a primary place of inculcation of traditional beliefs and worldviews, and an understanding of peoples' relationship to the world around them. Many of the community members were not raised from childhood as participating members of the community and only came to the Busk later, as adults. Thus, when these people participate in the Busk, they are being inculcated into new ways of perceiving the world around them, which has afforded my research a unique opportunity to investigate alterations in consciousness in terms of the perception and meaningful understanding of the natural world.

The ethnoecological focus of this research, as well as of my Master's thesis (Bolfing 2012) that was conducted with the same community, is no coincidence. According to the ceremonial leaders, everything in the Busk is based on observations of the natural world. There are symbolic correlations between nature knowledge and Busk knowledge; as a person acquires either form of knowledge, they simultaneously reaffirm and potentiate knowledge of the other, and vice versa, making this topic ideal for assessing, more generally, the various cognitive and cultural impacts of participation in traditional religious communities.

I have spent more than a decade conducting research and spending time with members of this community, as well as having attended dozens of Busk ceremonials. I collaborated with various community members, including Matriarchs, Makers of Medicine, elders, and even other scholars

conducting research from time to time on how to best situate my particular research approach to provide a substantive contribution to academia as well as the community (see Evers and Toelken 2001). This collaboration required a significant amount of rapport building but more importantly, it forged strong interpersonal relationships with members of the community. Throughout my interactions with the community, I was first adopted by a family, then a clan, and then welcomed into the community as a full participating member. This has established a positionality in which reflexivity serves a strong methodological role in ongoing research (see Davies 1999 and Stoller 1987).

Looking at the intersection between cosmology, worldview, ethnoecology, and traditional religious practice/performance in terms of subjective experience and understanding requires a sufficiently dynamic theoretical framework to explain how all these elements fit together in the cultural lives and daily practices of *Mvskoke* community members. The study of how people come to understand the world – an attempt to understand understanding, so to speak – crosses many theoretical borders. Phenomenology is the dominant strand of the study of consciousness and the mind that influences and guides my research.

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that focuses analysis on the transformation of an external world into a meaningful, internal world within a particular subjective framework; it is the study of the subjective aspects of the phenomenon of consciousness that renders knowledge, experiences, and perceptions meaningful to a particular individual (see Chelstrom 2013, Heidegger 1962 and 1982, Husserl 1962, Jackson 1996, 1998, and 2013, Lyotard 1991, Merleau-Ponty 1962 and 2012, Moustakas 1994 and 2009, Nagel 1970, Vagle 2014, and Van Manen 2014). Phenomenology, then, has naturally had sympathetic relationship with the discipline of anthropology and the conducting of ethnographic research. Within my own research, intertwined

with phenomenology, are studies of worldview and identity (see Callicott 2004, Gill 2002, Gluck and Patai 1991, Kearney 1984, Kondo 1990, Skinner et al 1998, Smart 2000, Tucker and Grim 1997, Tuleja 1997, and Visweswaran 1994). Exploring the complex ways that a community of subjective individuals interact and how these interactions influence each of those individuals' own negotiations of worldview and identity brings the study of intersubjectivity into the research as well (see Crossley 1996, Jackson 1998, Mensch 1988, and Stolorow 1994).

Other theoretical fields besides those directly related to phenomenology have also been important, particularly in framing and interpreting my research. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols, especially their uses, interpretations, and meanings in social interactions (see Barthes 1967, Eco 1976, Panofsky 1955, Peirce 1955 [1940], and Saussure 1959 [1916]). This field of research has been valuable for analyzing the symbolic correlations between people's understanding of the natural world and the performative aspects of the Busk (such as the dances, songs, spatial layout, and relationships of Busks to seasonal, lunar, solar, and celestial/constellar observations). Symbolic interpretive anthropology (e.g., Geertz 1973 and 1983 and Turner 1992) has also informed my research, especially in ascertaining and assessing the intersubjective networks that facilitate the dissemination or transmission of local knowledge and the particular worldviews that I argue accompanies participation in religious ritual.

Studies of space and place (see Bachelard 1994 [1964], Casey 1996, de Certeau 1984, Lefebvre 1991, Nabokov 2006, and Tuan 1990 [1974] and 1977) are useful for the proposed research because, as Lefebvre (1974:44) argued, "what we call an ideology only achieves consistency by intervening in social space and in its production." In studying the Busk, social space obviously includes the square grounds where the community comes together for rituals but, more broadly, it also includes the plants, animals, and even some aspects of the landscape

itself (e.g., stones, shells, winds, etc.) that are perceived as living, conscious, social beings, thus increasing social space to include all of the natural world. Likewise, studies of material culture (e.g., Hallam and Hockey 2001, McDannell 1995, and Morgan 2012) are also relevant. The materiality associated with the Busk is not restricted to various fabricated objects associated with the Busk or with Creek identity (i.e., ritual objects, shell carvings, baskets, fingerweavings, etc.), although these items, and especially the crafting of them, are definitely important to community members. Rather, the natural world itself becomes laden with meaningful materiality that validates, reaffirms, and provides tangible links to cultural knowledge, learned through participation in the Busk.

As Medicine plants, sacred trees, and various animals increasingly become a part of peoples' awareness, they come to be recognized for their roles in the ecosystem, as well as for their roles in traditional stories—which often reflect one another— and consequently become internalized and embodied as they enter into peoples' daily practices and social lives. Naturally, investigating how people interact with the natural world in these ways bridges into another field of studies that informed my research: ethnoecology (see Anderson 1996, Austin 2004, Atran and Medin 2008, Berkes 2012, Cruishank 2005, Descola 2013, Fowler 2013, Kohn 2013, Latham 2013, Martin 2004, Milton 2002, Moerman 1998, Nagel 2012, Nazarea 1999, Nolan 2007, Snow and Stans 2001, Viveiros de Castro 2015, and Vogel 1996). Furthermore, because the primary avenue of inculcation of cultural knowledge is through the ceremonialism of the Busk, studies of ritual and religion were crucial to framing the performative and social aspects of religious participation (see Bell 1992, 1997 and 2007, Berger 1969, Durkheim 1965[1915], Eliade 1958, 1959[1957], 1964 [1951], 1988, 1991[1961], and 2009[1958], Evans-Pritchard 1937, Peña 2011, Turner 1992, Turner 1967 and 1995 [1969], and Weber 2010 [1930]).

This dissertation is the culmination of long years of research and analysis. I am writing of living people and about living religious traditions, yet I am also telling my own story. I am not a mere observer, documenting from the sideline; I am a member of this community and I feel as responsible to my commitments to the community as I have ever felt to the pursuit of any of my academic degrees. Therefore, this dissertation is intended to be as much a contribution to the community as to the field of anthropology in fulfillment of the requirements for a PhD.

Power, the ceremonial leaders often say, is always in motion; to stop is to die, for stillness is death and without power. It is important to point out, then, that the knowledge contained within this dissertation is not meant to serve as a manual for conducting a Busk. Every Busk is unique; the needs of the community and of the natural world are different at each and every Busk. To create a manual or cook-book for the Busk then, is to make static what must remain in motion. Ethnographies are, inevitably, only snapshots of moments in time, even if a researcher spends their entire life conducting research – that is still only one lifetime, after all. Yet, the information in this dissertation can hopefully provide a useful tool for future generations to see what we are doing now and to bring insight into why we are doing these things, particularly because no such document exists for our current generation to look back to. In this way, perhaps my research can be of some assistance to future generations of the community to better understand their own relationships to the natural world and to the Busk ceremonial.

Going Native; Coming Home…

I have researched the Busk as a living tradition, ritual ceremonialism, and religious practice through years of participant observation, while developing deep and lasting relationships with members of the community. I have been particularly attentive to the symbolic meanings of what

I see and participate in. I have also been keen on identifying the practical implications of rituals that condition participants' interactions with the natural world by investigating how community members apply knowledge gained through their participation in Busk into their daily lives.

While approaching the Busk practice as a religious community and ritual tradition with its own unique and specific doctrine and worldview, I have also learned about the community members' personal interpretations of those traditional practices and observed and discussed the subjective variation that exists within any religious community. There is no simple set of changes that occur in people's thoughts or actions by participating in the Busk; rather, there is a slow process of learning and internalization of ways of seeing and interacting with the world that is more pronounced, more embodied in community members that have been active participants in the Busks. Subjectivism creates myriad interpretations and variations, complicating any analysis of how people meaningfully understand the teachings of the Busk, yet, there are observable patterns in this learning process, such as the making of tobacco offerings or specific perceptions of and interactions with plants and animals, which have been useful in researching the Busk community and have also helped me to better understand and connect my own thoughts and experiences to those of community members.

It is important to note that I, too, am not free of the biases of subjectivism. My experiences and understanding of the world shape my interpretations of the Busk as well as my interactions with members of the community. Determining positionality, therefore, is vital for my research. As I will discuss in further detail, I was adopted by my research community. When I first began my dissertation research, I had already found at these grounds a sense spiritual home (by this I mean a place in which I felt spiritually connected to rituals, to the place and its geographic

surrounds, and the community of people participating in this ancient, living tradition). In the course of writing this dissertation, it has become my home truly.

I was not born into this community, nor was I born *Mvskoke*, but I do identify as Native. I have more than a few ancestors that walked the Trail of Tears, though very few made it all the way to Oklahoma. My blood is a mixture of southeastern Natives, intermixed through marriage to whites and other Natives. For various reasons – including the burning down of a courthouse in 1906 by the KKK that destroyed the only copies of documents needed to establish proof of my ancestry for the purposes of obtaining a CDIB card – I am not a registered member of any Tribe, although I do serve as the Cultural Anthropologist for the Muscogee Nation of Florida, with whom my wife and daughter are registered members. I have matrilineal connections to the Cherokee in Oklahoma where my great-grandmother's great-grandmother ended up with her own grandmother – the only two members of their family to survive, according to my family's oral history. I cannot even be truly sure whether they were actually Cherokee or were simply taken in by a group of Cherokee along the Trail of Tears after everyone else in their family and community died. One of the few aspects of my Native identity I am sure of is that I am adopted Creek.

My wife, on the other hand, is a member of this community who was born to the Fire. Beyond the connection of wife and husband, beyond our connection as members of the same ceremonial community, we also share identities as Natives. While there is an undeniably broad gap between the historical experiences of being forcibly relocated rather than escaping relocation efforts (as is the history of this particular community), we were both told stories of Corn Mother and creation stories of Turtle Island, a version of which began this chapter. I was told these by my mother and

her parents when I was a child; I was intimately familiar with the tripartite cosmos (see Figure 2) long before I first came to the Busk or to study the topic as a scholar.

When I relocated to Tallahassee to be with my wife and stepdaughter, we acted in a way that reflects our shared identities by continuing a tradition shared by many Natives from matriarchal societies of the southeast, from whom we both descend. It was a common marriage practice for men to relocate to women's community, just as I have done – a fact my wife enjoyed pointing out to me, since exogamous husbands were a considered a kind of status symbol amongst Creek women. When we have talked about our relationship and my role as an anthropologist, we have often bandied the phrase "going native" in jest – for when you already *are* Native, isn't "going native" simply going home?

Yet, it was though participating in the Busk that the many stories I had been told in my youth and the things we did as a family came to have a deeper, more cultural meaning, allowing me to come to deeper and more meaningful understanding of my own identity as Native. At the Busks, the ways of thinking that I had so often associated with my own identity as Native were enacted right before me, and I found that I intuitively recognized much of what I saw. Having such a shared but different experience of identifying as Native, positions me rather interestingly in the community, for I am both an outsider and an insider. I was adopted by the community and there I have remained… and so, perhaps I truly have "gone native" as the saying goes, for my story is now interwoven with the stories of other community members and the story of this community.

When my wife and I were running around the Fire, wrapped together in her heirloom blanket that had belonged to her great-grandmother, I was no longer the student I had been at my first Turtle Dance that summer evening long ago. I became my wife's husband. In the years since I was first welcomed into this community, I have developed deep and lasting relationships with

community members and have had experiences that have forever changed me and given me new perspective on life and living – and I am a better person for it.

Running Around the Fire. Photo by Cheyenne Alderson, used with permission.

CHAPTER 2

Ekvsvmkv tawvt heleswv em vnvttecetos (Ego is the first thing to get in the way of Medicine)

This is a story about the time a witch (‘*stekene*) stole beloved Teamaker’s heart, although I have also heard it was his liver, and *Cessuce* (Mouse) became a hero, as I heard it. Long ago, when animals and people still lived together and spoke to one another, there was a great meeting but the Beloved Teamaker was nowhere to be found. Everyone looked for him until he was found by Toad, as though fast asleep and unable to be woken. To his horror, Toad discovered Beloved Teamaker’s heart had been stolen; a ‘*stekene* had come and taken it to his abode. Now, ‘*stekene* are awful; they can shapeshift and sometimes fly about in the dark as owls, which is one reason people fear owls – of course, even if they aren’t a witch, owls can see directly into your soul, which can be scary enough (since they can even see what you hide from yourself). Witches cause many problems and can be very powerful and they are always dangerous. Nobody in town was strong enough to fight the ‘*stekene* and so they mourned, crying out: “What can we do?! How can we save our Beloved Teamaker?!” Mouse decided to retrieve the stolen heart himself. He was small and quick and quiet; he could sneak in where others could not. So, Mouse went to the dwelling of the witch and, using a ladder woven by Spider, climbed up the wall of the house and snuck into the rafters, where the ‘*stekene* had stored away many, many baskets containing the hearts and livers and various other parts stolen from the evil witch’s victims. Mouse was scared and gasped in shock at the sight, which almost roused the witch, who was sitting below in what appeared to be a quite restless sleep. The witch snorted and tossed, and Mouse froze; he did not move a hair – he even held his breath – until the witch seemed to fall back into a deeper sleep. When he was again snoring below, Mouse quietly began searching among the baskets until, at last, he found the basket with Beloved Teamaker’s heart! He gnawed a hole through the side of the woven reeds of the basket, retrieved the heart, and returned with it to Beloved Teamaker, reviving him. To honor mouse for his courage, a mouse’s tail was added to a ball in the stickball game so that people would continue to tell Mouse’s story and would remember that an individual can make a difference, for bravery is not measured in size but in deed. That, as I heard it, is why the stickball has a tail.

– a *Mvskoke* story on why the stickball has a tail

On Reflexive and Phenomenological Ethnography

This chapter begins with a discussion of the importance of reflexivity and understanding one's own positionality in the research process. This chapter then explores the theoretical and methodological approach used in this dissertation: phenomenological ethnography. Reflexivity and having a good understanding of my positionality is important because I have personally experienced the transformation in consciousness I am interested in studying. Through discussions with community members, I found them describing having similar experiences. Through the years of conducting research, I have seen changes take place in others. Participation in this ceremonial community, with its strong cultural and religious contexts, brings about changes in how participants perceive and make meaning of the world around them and in how they interact with that world.

As with art, where the artist becomes integral to the story conveyed through their art, so it is with ethnography; I have become a part of this community, this community is my home. While style, composition, choice of materials, and techniques are all expressive tools of an artist, they are ultimately used as a means of conveying information through symbolic presentation or representation. Ethnography, similarly, has a set of tools, including narrative analysis and storytelling, reflexivity, and theory and methodology to convey information through symbolic presentation – i.e., this dissertation (see Clifford and Marcus 1986 and Riessman 1993). The information I attempt to convey addresses how participation in the Busk ceremonial community influences peoples' perceptions of and interactions with the natural and social worlds around them. The theoretical way in which I approach and conduct reflexive and phenomenological ethnography frames and contextualizes my research and has certainly shaped the way this research is conveyed to others.

On Reflexivity and Understanding my Positionality within the Community. When conducting reflexive ethnography, it is important for researchers to recognize their own positionality to and within the community they are studying (Davies 1999:3). In my case, this also requires a brief analysis of how participating in the Busk has affected me. Before I attended my first Busk, I had spent a lot of my life researching many different religions and searching for spiritual fulfillment. I had also spent several years pow-wow dancing, competing in the fast-paced, colorful Fancy Dance style. I was well aware that fancy dance emerged on the Oklahoma reservations as a way to increase tourism, yet I could not help it… the rustling of feathers on my double-bustles, clanging and jingling of bells of all sizes, clacking of rattles, and stomping of feet all harmonized by the beat of the drum was both invigorating and calming. When I was surrounded by all the other dancers, all dancing to the same drum, pulsing with the same heartbeat, I felt the closest thing to spiritual fulfillment I ever felt growing up.

However, my Busk experiences would later frame this in a different context. As a community member later described, "the difference between going to a pow-wow and going to the Busk is like the difference between going to a bar and going to church. There is nothing wrong with going to the bar, but when you mistake it for church, you are missing something" – a point with particular salience to an alcoholic.

Entrée into the Community. Just after the sun went down on Friday night at my first Busk in the summer of 2009, the ceremonial leaders called out: "*locv opvnka*!" This was the call for community members to gather for the Turtle Dance. People began to line up in pairs consisting of one male and one female. *Emv,* the Matriarch of the community at the time, who has since passed away, asked if I would dance with her and I agreed. We began the dance that recreates the creation story, where Turtle eventually establishes herself as the first land, referred to as Turtle

Island. As our feet went into the rhythmic double-stepping of the stomp dance – instantly familiar to me from those pow-wow dancing days – I was utterly awestruck. Somehow, I had found what I had been searching for my whole life. That sense of spirituality and fulfillment I had glimpsed while dancing at pow-wows was revealed as a pale imitation, like the light of a streetlamp at night compared to the sun at high-noon. I only knew one way to describe what I felt: I had come home.

Emv. Former Matriarch and Beloved Woman - entered the "Dog's Road" in 2019. Photo by author.

I did not, at the time, have any idea that I would be conducting anthropological research with this community. Rather, when presented with the opportunity to attend a Busk, I agreed because of a personal calling. I continued attending the Busks in a desire to continue experiencing that

sense of home and spiritual wholeness that I felt during my first dance at the grounds. I wanted to take part in this ceremonialism for personal growth and I also felt it was important to get to know the people of this community, who had so graciously allowed me to come into their sacred place. I later learned that this is a common theme for people's experiences at Busk and for the motivations to return again and again. Amongst the *Mvskoke,* this is referred to as being "called to the Fire" (Bolfing 2012:16-18) – I definitely felt called to the Fire.

On Phenomenology

My positionality within the community is a balance between my roles as researcher and community member. The two cannot be disentangled, since my educational background shapes how I think, what I pay attention to, and how I approach the research process. Academically, I have a dual background in philosophy and anthropology. My methods and theoretical approaches to conducting anthropological research come from blending what I have learned in my studies to become an anthropologist with my philosophical studies in phenomenology.

Phenomenology is a philosophical approach to understanding consciousness. My conversion to phenomenology was fully realized when I read Thomas Nagel's famous article "What is it Like to Be a Bat?" (Nagel 1970). I was an undergraduate in a philosophy class on existentialism and phenomenology and after reading Nagel's paper, I was indelibly hooked. Indeed, my interest in human consciousness and perception has never waned – if anything, it has only grown as I became an anthropologist.

Nagel's major argument was to explain that scientific understanding does not reveal actual experience or perception. We know how bats use echolocation to move about and "see" their environments through sound. What we do not now, however, is the way that the bat actually

experiences that "sight." The bat brain, while having some similarities to a human brain due to being a mammal, is fundamentally different than our own and, no matter how hard we try to envision what it would be like think with a bat's brain, we can never escape the fact that we are imagining that with our own human brain. Thus, we cannot *ever* know what it is truly like to be a bat. I was captivated, taken in hook, line, and sinker. My thoughts raced for days; if we cannot know what it is like to be a bat, due to differences in the brain, could we ever actually know what it is truly like to be another *person*? Every person has a distinct history and set of experiences that has shaped their neurological and cognitive development; that is, every person's brain is different. This forced me to have a reflexive turn; Nagel asked, "what is it like to be a bat?" but I came away with "what is it like to be me?" I began scouring the phenomenological writings.

Edmund Husserl presented the first succinct phenomenology with his *Ideas* (Husserl 1962), a highly influential work. In *Ideas,* Husserl explored the idea of the phenomenological epoché, which focused the analytical gaze upon experience itself. His work was succeeded by Martin Heidegger and his magnum opus *Being and Time* (1962), which made the important contribution of Dasein (or "being") and the various ways that people *are* at different points in time.

Heidegger's concept of being, making use of Husserl's phenomenological epoché to reduce his focus to experience itself, distinguished between those experiences, perceptions, or actions that were ready-at-hand versus present-at-hand. Those things that are present-at-hand are like opening a door using the doorknob: they often do not require any special thought or attention to accomplish and are often forgotten – or likely just not converted from short term memory to long term memory. These were differentiated from experiences or behaviors that were ready-at-hand, in which the skill set and knowledge is present but must be recalled: like counting out change for a parking meter. Furthermore, behaviors that are ready-at-hand, through repetition, can become

present-at-hand, which relates to the research I conduct. As participants in the Busk continually engage in symbolic, codified behaviors over time, such as only moving around the Sacred Fire in a counterclockwise direction or performing certain ritualized behaviors associated with touching the Medicines, there is a point in which the process of recall that is associated with Heidegger's category of ready-at-hand is no longer needed; they have internalized the behaviors to the point that they became present-at-hand.

Finally, I encountered Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962). In his analysis of perception, Merleau-Ponty added a way to conceptualize and discuss how the outside world interacts with the internal world investigated by previous phenomenologists. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenal field metaphor described a kind of cognitive matrix within which a person's perception and experiences take place. In this way, spatiality and materiality entered the phenomenological discussion. In my research, I have found that the participants' subjective perceptions of the world around them take on aspects of the symbolic, internalized ways of acting and thinking that are part and parcel to the Busk. Each participant has a phenomenal field that encompasses their own unique experiences and understanding, but the nature of the Busk is such that the participants' experiences and perceptions, particularly while at the ceremonial grounds during the actual Busks, are also shaped by the interaction with and shared nature of community participation (i.e., the Busk ceremonial is intersubjective).

Intersubjectivity, first explored by thinkers such as Edmund Husserl (1962), has also been a crucial component of phenomenology. In its simplest explanation, intersubjectivity is when a person experiences something differently because they are experiencing it with another person or persons than they would have if they had simply experienced it alone. I imagine going to an art gallery by myself versus going with another person who appreciates and enjoys art. When going

with another person of that sort, you are inevitably faced with alternative interpretations of the art pieces. Of course, intersubjectivity need not always be a positive thing. Imagine watching a movie alone versus watching it in a theater in which a person behind you keeps kicking your chair, the person in front of you keeps checking their cell phone, and somewhere in the theater, a child is continuously crying with no perceptible response by its guardian. The first situation (in the art gallery) can lead to a more enriching and culturally deep experience through the intersubjective participation in the art viewing experience; the second is likely to render the movie watching experience negative, with the intersubjectivity interfering with paying attention to the movie itself and rendering the entire experience a bad memory. Either way, the effects of intersubjectivity are not to be overlooked.

Collective participation in the Busk, then, creates a whole experience that is greater than the sum of its parts. Although I mean to encompass the collective Busk experience, particular events often have an even greater intersubjective aspect than others, which can serve as good examples for discussing intersubjectivity more broadly. The ballgame is one such example. The ballgame that is played in the Busk is an intra-town ballgame, which distinct from the intertown ballgame often called "the Little Brother of War," which was used to settle conflicts during the female time of year, from Berry through Harvest, when war was traditionally forbidden. That ballgame is played with two goals at opposite ends of a playing field and is between two teams of male players. The intra-town ballgame, played at the Busks, has only a single goalpost, situated in the center of the playing field, and the teams are men versus women. The men still use two sticks, just as in the Little Brother of War, but the women do not.

In a symbolic presentation of the distinction in power in a matriarchal community, the women can simply use their hands, which gives them a decided advantage; it is, in fact, quite rare for a

men's team to actually win, but winning is not the point. The point, as described to me, is that "it gives the women the opportunity to take out all their aggression and frustration that the men have been responsible for since the last ballgame." The men are to play hard but also to stoically take the rough play of the women; scratches and bruises are simply a part of this game.

While playing, there is constant laughter and the cheering spectators (which consists of those in the community that are physically unable to play the game themselves) help keep the energy levels high. The game is fun, painful, and exhausting; yet, it is not just these subjective feelings that keep us playing. The game as a whole creates an atmosphere for the community that helps alleviate pent up stress and anxiety; it is, therefore, not truly a competition between women versus men, rather, it is a community celebration, a way to increase social cohesion, which takes the guise of a game.

Perhaps an even more illustrative example of a highly intersubjective event is found in the collective grieving event, called Cry Time, held at Harvest Busk. At Cry Time, the community members who have lost someone close to them gather around the ballpost after the sun has fully set. The ballpost serves as portal to the Beneath World and the entrance to the "Dog's Road" (the Milky Way) that serves as the path to reach the Place of the Ancestors after we die. Each person can approach the ballpost and tell stories about the deceased to those who are gathered; they then strike the ballpost with a stick (often referred to as "the Medicine pounder;" used to prepare the *passv* (also called Warrior's Medicine). The knocking made from hitting the ballpost is said to be heard by the departed and to help orient them on their journey. Cry time is a way for participants to send their goodbyes and well-wishes to the departed and share stories of the person with those gathered around them. Yet, because each and every participant in Cry Time has experienced the death of someone important to them, their grief becomes shared by everyone there – it is called

Cry Time for a reason. This event is incredibly personal, as grief is a very potent and subjective emotion; yet the experiences of Cry Time can only be truly understood through the very intersubjective nature of the event – the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

On Phenomenological Ethnography

In 2003, Jack Katz and Thomas Csordas published an article entitled "Phenomenological Ethnography in Sociology and Anthropology" detailing the intersection between ethnographic anthropology and phenomenological analysis. In their findings, they describe the dearth of ethnography that expresses a distinctly phenomenological approach. The differences in focus between phenomenological approaches and ethnography are more than partly to blame.

Phenomenology, as a philosophical approach, attempts to understand and explain all the variations and complexities of how a subjective individual experience the world through a unique phenomenological perspective. In my research, the ways that people conceptualize and explain their beliefs and, thus, rationalize and understand their own participation in community religious ceremonialism is a huge aspect of their phenomenological perspectives. Ethnography, however, tends to reverse this subjective focus. I often find myself looking to identify the shared aspects of the community, to explain how events reflect and inspire a more nuanced and shared understanding of what is transpiring than a purely subjective perspective, which is utterly unique. The biggest hurdle in ethnographically applying a phenomenological approach is to link the vast complexity of the unique, subjective experience to an intersubjective, community context and, thus, reveal the shared phenomenological perspective of a particular *Mvskoke* tribal town (i.e., their worldview). This community worldview consists of profound connections between Busk ceremonialism and an understanding of the natural world – and our place within it – established

over the course of many, many generations and passed along through participation in social and religious community events, and which is made especially meaningful by engaging in personal introspection and reflection and sharing thoughts and experiences with others. These experiences impact social interactions, influence perceptions of the natural world, and are crucial in the process of forming and negotiating identity.

There certainly exists a significant overlap between the intended goals of both ethnography (esp., "emic ethnography") and of phenomenology. Both are trying to understand, and ultimately explain how people understand the world around and why they engage in the particular behaviors and ways of thinking and despite the dearth described by Katz and Csordas (2003) authors have employed phenomenological perspectives. In his *Interpretation of Culture* (1973), Clifford Geertz took a lead position in the interpretive shift of the 1970s, particularly with his concept of thick description, in which the ethnographer is looking to contextualize thoughts, behaviors, and social going-on in a deeper and more interpretive way. He used the concept of "webs of signification" to discuss what I recognize, as a phenomenologist, as people's intersubjective network of meaning-making, within which myriad interactions create complicated interconnections like the intersections of a vast spider's web.

Over the decades, other anthropologists have also employed phenomenological voices in their work. Scott Atran's *Cognitive Foundations of Natural History* (1990), for example, articulated a phenomenological perspective when explaining how various local or folk classifications actually served as the impetus for scientific taxonomies rather than ration and pure empirical observation. Steven Feld and Keith Basso's edited volume *Senses of Place* (1996) had several distinctly phenomenological articles, including Edward Casey's "How to Get from Space to Place in a Fairly Short Stretch of Time." A social philosopher and phenomenologist, Casey had previously

written several highly influential philosophical explorations on phenomenological topics. In *Imagining* (1977), Casey explored ways that people's imaginings come to effect change in how they understand reality. In *Remembering* (1988), he brought the issue of memory into the discussion of phenomenological experience and consciousness. His 1996 contribution to *Senses of Place* relied heavily on these phenomenological understandings in exploring how peoples' experiences and understanding of the world are intimately tied to place. Casey's distinction between space as an abstract concept and a concept of place as having meaning to people serves to highlight the power of place in how people understand themselves and others. Place is what has meaning; a concept the *Heles-Haya* encapsulated in the saying "the Busk, and all the knowledge in it, are geographically specific."

In a very real way, the land become a part of the people, just as the people themselves become part of the land. Generations of horticultural practices, planting and harvesting techniques, the use of fire in controlled burns, and even traditional residency patterns (such as dispersing into family-groups in winter homes and coming together into towns in summer encampments) created real and lasting effects on the environment. The knowledge that accumulated through generation after generation interacting with the same lands is found reflected in traditional stories and is presented symbolically in ceremonies that are loaded with symbolism from the natural world. Yet, each person's connection to place is also highly personal. The people of this community, who call the panhandle of Florida home – and many know that their ancestors have always called this place home – feel connected to a place that has been continuously inhabited for thousands of years.

I heard the concept of geographic specificity come up again at another Busk when a visitor asked about "Medicine Men" who would travel from village to village. "Makers of Medicine,"

our *Heles-Haya* replied, "are geographically specific…all of the knowledge contained in the Busk, everything that gives a *Heles-Haya* power is geographically specific. There were no wandering Medicine Men; there never have been. Those were just charlatans." He continued, "when you learn Medicine, you are also learning a specific place; the knowledge and the place are one-in-the-same." Being connected to the natural world means being connected to a specific environment with specific ecosystems; Medicine knowledge is not broad, general knowledge of the Growing World, it is highly specific and highly specialized.

Furthermore, the natural world is part and parcel to interactions within the social milieu of the Busk ceremonial community. "Everything in the Busk is derived from the natural world" is a commonly heard phrase at the Busk, which is used to describe how all of the complex layers of symbolism found in the Busk are derived from the natural world. Yet, the natural and social worlds are both necessary components of a concept of place. The natural world serves as the source of all the symbolism and power of the Busk, while participating in the ceremonial Busks maintains balance and keep the natural world in motion, thus ensuring it continues to provide the power for the Busk. While the *paskofv* is the direct setting for the Busk, Busk knowledge is not only situated within the sacred grounds where the ceremonies are held, but also in the natural world itself, with all the various, interconnected ecosystems as knowledge of the Growing World is learned and transmitted through the social world of the Busk community.

In *Rethinking Hopi Ethnography* (Whiteley 1998), Peter Whiteley articulated a distinctly phenomenological ethnography that I found particularly intriguing. His ethnographic approach argued against the objective collection of data and in favor of an intersubjective approach to ethnography that allowed the research to center upon and follow the informants, rather than being guided by the researcher's desire to collect broad ethnographic data. Certainly, Whiteley

was not the first to engage in such an approach (e.g., see Rabinow 1977 and Crapanzano 1980) and even in the same year, Michael Jackson's *Minima Ethnographica* (Jackson 1998) did similar. Yet, Whiteley's work with the Hopi was the most influential of these works to me, due its resonance with my own research. The Hopi are a particularly interesting Native cultural group due to years of researchers conducting misleading research, which popularized the Hopi and led to large-scale cultural appropriation (especially of Kachina ceremonialism) that led the Hopi to basically close their communities to anthropologists. Whiteley, working with the Hopi, resolved that attempted objectivity did not reveal actual Hopi experiences or culture, rather, the attempted objectivity simply objectified the Hopi, rendering them a spectacle instead of a people. As a way to remedy this, Whiteley decided to work with the Hopi themselves and thus let the Hopi directly decide how to present the story of themselves. This intersubjective approach to ethnographic data collection is highly resonant with my own thoughts and research approach. I have put effort into letting the community decide what is important, so that I (like Whiteley) am better able to apply my own skill sets as both a phenomenologist and an ethnographer through observing and participating, sharing thoughts and perspectives, and coming to a shared understanding of my role in the community. Also, while the Hopi's marginalized situation resulted from misleading ethnographies, patterns of structural racism and intolerance led to a marginalization of my own research community. The people of this community continuously watched their own histories be rewritten in ways that presented them as mere relics of a distant history and not a living people struggling to survive in a world that was quite literally constructed on top of them. For many generations, people who sought information about the community were not trusted since they were more than likely to use whatever they learned to attack the community. As a result, much of the Busk knowledge and teachings of the *Mvskoke-Nene* were secretive and highly protected – to

the point that revealing information without the express consent of the Matriarch and ceremonial leaders would often carry a death sentence until relatively recently.

As time progressed, the problematic language of the Florida constitution was eventually addressed in the drafting and ratification of the 1968 Florida Constitution in the era of Equal Rights. Community members began to have less fear of reprisal and violence for simply being Native, although generations of genocide, ethnocide, war, and racial violence left an indelible mark upon them, and it is not uncommon for Natives in many communities to retain a tendency to be rather closed about being Native – which has, unfortunately, become useful again as racial tensions have escalated, yet again. During those many years in hiding, the level of community understanding of culturally sensitive knowledge was drastically reduced. The community had to do things differently if the Busk and the *Mvskoke-Nene* were to survive at all. Working with the community, it became abundantly clear that the way the Busk is practiced and understood right now is important, and that I can provide future generations with a textual link to our generation, and to what the Busk means for us now. Many times, while mulling over what to write, my wife has chided me that I am not only doing this research and writing this ethnography for living peoples, I am writing it as much – if not more – for those members of the community who have yet to even be conceived, in order to give them what our own generation is sorely lacking.

In their 2001 edited volume, Larry Evers and Barre Toelken set forth a model of collaboration between researcher and indigenous community and following in that tradition, this research process has certainly been a collaborative project. I did not approach this research with any particular question or set of questions that I was seeking to answer; rather, I allowed questions to emerge naturally from my interactions and relationships with community members. Working together, we could better decide how my research might best serve the community. I asked

community members what they would like to have as a result of my research, thus allowing their input on research design, and there was a continuous process of going back and discussing my research with community member. Particular care and attention to the input and suggestions of the Matriarch and the ceremonial leaders.

Another more recent work has also been particularly enlightening and influential to my thinking, Harry Walker's *Under a Watchful Eye: Self, Power, and Intimacy in Amazonia* (2013), which focused on how people in an indigenous Amazonian community develop a concept of self in relation to their community. The emphasis in this approach is how intimacy is expressed and experienced and how the social hierarchy of power enculturates individuals into a distinct understanding of identity. Walker's 2013 work presents distinctly phenomenological findings: children's sense of self is a product of human interaction within a particular community of practice – practice that includes engaging in particular social or community events as well as including peoples' engagement in particular ways of thinking. By focusing particularly on the development of identity in children, Walker studied the primary acquisition of culture or enculturation. In this way, the work diverges from my own, as all my current informants came to the Busk as adults. I am particularly interested in how community participation results in changes in perception and cognition and so, rather than studying how children experience and come to understand the world, I investigated how different individuals' understanding of the world has changed over time, especially through acquiring new knowledge and experiences, (i.e., acculturation).

I would love to be able to truly understand and fully explore the subjective experience of another individual, but that information is like a windowless room that is accessible only by the person inside. We can share our experiences by recalling them and talking about how we

remember those experiences but the subjective experiences themselves are unique to each person – this is simply the nature of consciousness. Therefore, I must rely on conducting my research in a way that reflects my own positionality and subjective interpretations, while maintaining a grounding in conducting ethnography of a community. Phenomenological ethnography is an approach that seems designed for that very task; the only subjectivity I can truly and fully know and experience is my own. Any knowledge and understanding of experiences of others are negotiated through shared experiences in and out of the Busk context allowing for ideas to pass intersubjectively, which once again highlights the importance of collaboration in the research process (see Evers and Toelken 2001).

Conducting Phenomenological Ethnography

Phenomenological ethnography, then, is a particular approach to conducting ethnographic research that focuses specifically on how individuals meaningfully perceive and understand their experiences. While this type of emphasis is nothing particularly new in anthropological research, there has been more focus upon how subjectivity and intersubjectivity effect cultures or communities than upon how participation in cultural or community activities effects the subjectivity of individuals. When dealing with the intersection of the religious, traditional, and ceremonial spheres, the concept of beliefs becomes a very problematic area when attempting to describe communities, and even more thorny when applied to cultures. However, with a phenomenological approach, beliefs are tantamount to cultural models through which an individual's experiences are able to be interpreted such that those experiences have even deeper layers of meaning.

Phenomenological ethnography requires more than simply interviewing, observing, and participating in community events, although these are obviously required. Rapport must be established to simply begin research; yet, it is deeper, more emotionally connected relationships that allow for this type of research to gather the depth necessary to understand the perceptual changes in one's self and, resultingly, in research participants. This hits at the very heart of what makes this research approach so useful, rewarding, and so difficult. By developing emotional relationships with participants, a researcher is dedicating a significant amount of time and energy to being not just a participant-observer of the community, but a true member of the community. It is not an endeavor to engage in lightly, as the burdens of the community are shared by all members; the lives of participants become entangled with that of the researcher. Reflexivity and the understanding of my positionality is profoundly important, but it has always been my intent to approach my research as member of the community. When I requested permission from the former Matriarch to attend my first Busk, it was before I had decided to even pursue cultural anthropology; rather, my desire to attend a Busk was a personal one. As my academic interests shifted to cultural anthropology, I was allowed to conduct research for my Master's thesis and doctoral dissertation, for which I am grateful.

I could never have expected or foreseen that I would be adopted as a son by the future Matriarch of the community nor that I would find my wife at the grounds. However, the design of this research project has been fundamentally constructed around the central concept of studying my own community, as a member of the community. The traditions that I participate in and observe are not those of a research subject but my own cultural identity and spirituality. My role as anthropologist, then, often – and necessarily – takes second seat to me being a member of

the community. My marriage to a fellow member of the community is a particularly salient example.

I have spent many hours discussing subjects that are used in this research because they were of interest to me; it was only after these conversations that I would take notes on what was discussed and what I learned. Thus, note-taking was not a large aspect of conducting research, which coincides with a traditional way of learning medicine and ceremonial practices. Learning by doing, paying attention so as to remember what was thus learned is crucial in this traditional form of learning, and was therefore a central focus of how research was conducted. In this way, my own experiences cannot be separated or isolated from those of my research community, since the very research itself was an intersubjective process.

What I have learned through my participation in the community has helped me to understand what others learn through their own participation. Yet, the intersubjective nature of the Busk is such that my own participation in the community has also influenced the experiences of other community members, and together emerged changed from our shared experiences at Busks. The discussions I have had with community members have served as an exchange of ideas and a forum to discuss and interpret experience; the research process has been a source of learning for both myself and the research participants. My background and education as a philosopher and anthropologist did not simply help me to come to an understanding of the research material, it was also often a source of interpretation upon which community members would compare their own thoughts. My ideas were not always correct and I often asked the wrong questions, but the learning process was inherently a two-way street. Recognizing this made me more aware and more attentive to learning, so that these conversations could be as constructive and beneficial as possible, not just for my own self and research, but for the community. The obligations to the

community, to adoptive family, and to the Fire supersede those of any university or dissertation; should I choose to leave academia, I would still have the obligations and connections established by becoming a member of this community. Again, my marriage into this community is quite possibly the most salient example.

Luckily, my arrival into this community was met with a feeling I had searched for my entire life: I had come home. It was not a place, but a practice that gave me this feeling. Dancing the *locv-opvnka*, the turtle dance, re-enacting the creation story I had been told as a child, and which I had learned again from an academic perspective studying anthropology and archaeology of the southeastern United States, brought a sense of fulfillment and belonging that I can only describe as home. This community has given me a way to use my education to bring me home, to bring me closer to and provide for a deeper and more meaningful spirituality and identity as a Native and as a human being.

For many years, the isolation and feeling of disconnectedness that had led me to alcoholism – before finally sobering up in October of 2017 – dissipated like smoke in a strong wind when I came to the Busk. During that time, the only times I was able to set the drink aside was for the pre-Busk fast and the Busk itself. Many Tuesday nights before Busks where spent drinking until the sun rose, the signal of the beginning of the fast. Just as many Sundays after Busks, as I traveled the nearly thousand miles to return to Texas or Arkansas, I would lose the ability to set aside the drink and I found myself drinking in motel rooms. Thankfully, I finally quit drinking and achieved a state of sobriety and the fasts have become significantly less challenging. All of these experiences, though, are part of my own story, my own way of understanding the world that is also fundamentally part of this research process. I have had to engage in reflexivity and

understand my position within both the research and the research community, and to include my own story as part of the larger ethnography.

My Adoption. Two years later, I began the research for my MA thesis. I drove to Florida from Texas, borrowing my friend's car, an electric blue PT Cruiser that did not have a working air conditioner – making for an interesting summer considering it broke heat records with temperatures reaching 107°F during Green Corn Busk in June and continuing to get hotter throughout my stay. After the Busk was over, there was only one family (a retired couple) and me still at the grounds. They kept a couple of old RV trailers permanently at the grounds to stay in while at Busk and they were needing to put a tin roof over one of them to help with the heat. Even though they had an AC window unit in the trailer, at full blast it was never much below 90°F inside. So, after Green Corn was over, I offered to help put the tin roof up. It took a couple of hours of hard work in the scorching heat, but we managed to finally put in the last of the screws. As we were resting afterwards, the trailer just kept getting cooler and cooler; the roof was a success!

The couple offered to take me out for lunch before beginning the five-hour drive to get to their home in the middle of one of Florida's National Forests. As we were eating at a local Chinese buffet, the woman told me that I was now family. I had heard southerners say things like this before and initially did not think much about it. However, over the next few years, I realized that it had meant much more than I initially thought. I had been adopted into her family and was treated like a son. More than simple hospitality was established through this; I was expected to behave in certain ways, and my mama (which is how I refer to her), gained a growing interest in making sure I learned things, paid attention, and had my head on straight, even when I was not at Busk. This was a reciprocal relationship that has become as important to me in many ways as my

own consanguineal family. As it turned out my own birth mother began attending the Busk ceremonials and immediately developed a close friendship with my adoptive mother. The two refer to themselves as sisters and, in relationship to me, as sister-mothers. When I was given a name in the community a few years later, cementing my standing as a full member of the community, both of my mothers were there, holding each other's arms, crying and laughing together. They both came up afterwards and told me how happy they were for me and how proud they felt while seeing their son become accepted as a full member of the community. It is difficult to describe the emotions I felt while facing the community and being addressed with my community name – excitement, happiness, pride, humility, and appreciation just begin to scratch the surface.

Participation vs participant observation. Research conducted within this type of community involvement is as much an endeavor of understanding oneself and one's own positionality as it is an ethnographic endeavor to understand others (Kovach 2009:110-113). When an anthropologist has developed extremely deep relationships within the community they research, it becomes necessary to assess this positionality and to fully recognize the impact that participation in the community has had on the researcher (Davies 1999:22-24). It is also important to recognize that, when these types of relationships have developed, it is not always possible to engage in the role of anthropologist as actively as might be desired, having to do more participation than actual participant observation (Davies 1999:72-76). For example, during my visits to my adoptive family, I often engage in food procurement activities with Pops (my adoptive father). This has included hunting (unsuccessfully on my attempts), fishing, flounder gigging, frogging (catching bullfrogs), crabbing, and, one particularly hot summer, skinning and cleaning hogs.

While gigging for flounder, I was responsible for poling the boat along the shoreline, keeping Pops at the right position to spot and gig the flounder. When catching bullfrogs, I was at the front of the boat with a small hand-net and a spotlight, jumping out when we spotted a frog. After we return from these types of excursions, we had to clean our catch. This involved fileting and freezing the flounder and any other fish we might have caught, which would be used at some point to have a fish-fry to feed the whole family. To clean the frogs, we had to "remove its pajamas," which is when you slice the skin around the head of the frog and, using a pair of pliers, pull the skin off its body and back legs and removing the internal organs to prepare them to get battered and deep fried. When we were crabbing, we gathered up the blue crabs that were caught in crab traps strategically placed along the river, and cleaning them by removing the shell, essentially scooping out its gills and guts, and then boiling them.

The day we spent taking care of the hogs began with a visit a local pig farmer. There Pops chose out a couple of hogs and the owner, using a .22 LR rifle, shot the first hog and killed it easily enough, however, he failed to kill second even after a second shot. Pops pulled out his .22 Magnum derringer, which he carries concealed for self-defense, and dropped the wildly running, twice shot hog with one single shot at well over twenty paces (an amazing feat of accuracy with any handgun, much less a derringer).

We made tobacco offerings and loaded the hogs into a large ice chest and returned to the house, where we started boiling buckets of water while mama and her two young grand-daughters, my adoptive nieces, gathered around in the shade of the large oak trees to watch the show. They were eating flavored ice pops, laughing and having a blast as usual. With the temperature soaring well over a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, dipping the hogs into the boiling water to loosen the fur and prepare the hide for skinning was, to put it mildly, a process of

endurance. It took the better part of the afternoon to skin the hogs, which provided the family a substantial amount of meat for the rest of the year.

Skinning hogs in the summer heat… Photo on left by author; photo on right by Elizabeth Zeigler, image used with permission.

During times like these, getting done what needs to be done, especially while enduring the brutal Florida summer heat, takes complete concentration and attention. It is often impossible to take notes and while many conversations may occur, they are not guided or structured in a way to seek out particular ethnographic knowledge. Rather, they are a frequently a chance to "chew the fat" while actually giving more attention and effort to the task at hand, like gathering food for the family. Many of these conversations can get quite philosophical and I have been humbled and impressed by the depth of community members' thinking, which have mirrored the highest levels of discourse of my own doctoral-level seminars, regardless of the educational background of the person with who I am speaking (there are PhDs and high-school dropouts and everything in between). It was often only after returning from these tasks or research trips that I could reflect on what happened and the many conversations that took place, retrospectively drawing meaning from these experiences.

Chapter Conclusion

Laying out my theoretical and methodological approach and defining my positionality by using reflexivity establishes a framework for studying the experiences and the transformations of perception that I have observed in others and experienced personally at the Busk ceremonial. A phenomenological approach, which directly focuses on subjective and intersubjective experiences, is very useful. Reflexivity and positionality, which are vital to this dissertation, are tools that help the reader understand why I used this ethnographic approach. Yet, they also contribute to the integrity of the document I am providing to future generations as a personal and scholarly work that demonstrates deeper levels of thinking about the Busk that are happening right now, so that future generations can look back and understand more about who we are, what we are doing at Busk, and why we are doing it.

The Busks, because of their natural and social contexts, are responsive to the pressures of our times and are therefore shaped by our current needs. As I have often heard at the Busk, "Creator and the natural world provide us with what we need, not what we want." Differentiating between what is truly needed and what is merely wanted is not always easy and certainly requires that we pay close attention to the natural world, to the Busk, and to our social world. I say we because I am not only the author and therefore storyteller, I am also a community member, a husband to Creek woman, and stepfather to a Creek daughter. My heart is here; for any reader, "here" is a concept that needs definition and contextualization to give it meaning.

For generations, the only analyses of Creek ways of life were through the eyes and words of outsiders, with their own agendas and their own ways of thinking. The trauma of genocide and ethnocide was like *'stekene* stealing Beloved Teamaker's heart in the story that opened this chapter, devastating communities and entire ways of life. It is important, then, to do my research

and perform my duties as an anthropologist and community member with a good heart and to the best of my abilities, for I certainly do not want to become like a *'stekene* - a *'stekene* is not born a witch; they become a witch as they use power against others and their hearts become twisted. I want to be more like *Cessuce,* doing what he could to help the community stay alive; in this way, perhaps each participant in the Busk is like Mouse, keeping alive the traditional ceremonialism and preserving their way of life, keeping it alive generation after generation.

CHAPTER 3

Mvskoke-Nene kerretos (We Learn the Muscogee Way)

> This is the story of the *Hayaholket*, the beings from the Above World who brought the *Mvskokvlke* the tools of peace and the first Medicines. As I heard it, there was not always a Busk; before there was a Busk, people were mostly living in chaos. They were killing each other and there was much anger and violence. People just could not seem to live peacefully with one another, especially men – who, for the most part, were just unfit to live in the civilized societies among the women.
>
> '*Pofvnka*, the One Above, looked down and saw the chaos and decided to help. He would send the people tools to help them to bring about peace. He sent forth his messengers, the *Hayaholket*. who descended from the Above World on rays of light. There were four *Hayaholket* who came but we now only remember the name of one, *Yahola* – who is still invoked during the ceremonial Busks to honor him for what he and the other *Hayaholket* brought and taught, for it was the *Hayaholket* who brought *Mekko Hoyvnecv* and *Heles-Hvtke*, the first Medicines (the red and white Medicines) and thus brought also the Red and White moieties of Creek society.
>
> When the *Hayaholket* returned to the Above world, *Yahola* stayed behind and became the first *Heles-Haya.* He taught the *Mvskokvlke* all of the ceremonies and dances of the Busk and introduced Court Night so people would have a chance to speak what is on their minds and hearts and anger and animosities did not fester beneath the surface. People were allowed to talk without interruption whether it be positive or negative, and so it still is today. The Busks brought a way of living that helped to bring men into the community by feminizing them, making them fit for civilized society. The *Hayaholket* brought people the tools of peace through the teachings and practices of the Busk, which made it possible to bring about order and balance. This, as I heard it, is the origin of the Busk.
>
> – a *Mvskoke* story of the *Hayaholket* and the origin of the Busk

The *Mvskoke-Nene*

In the previous chapter, I presented a theoretical and methodological approach that centers on a reflexive and phenomenological investigation of subjective experience of participation in the Busk. Collectively, these experiences and the teachings of the Busk comprise a worldview called the *Mvskoke-Nene* (*Mvskoke* Path or *Mvskoke* Way), which this chapter sets forth to explain.

This chapter presents discussions on the concepts of worldview and intersubjectivity to contextualize the ways of thinking and being that are bound up in the concept of the *Mvskoke-Nene*.

Worldview and the Mvskoke-Nene. The *Mvskoke-Nene* provides a kind of framework for understanding the rich, complex, and layered symbolism of the Busk and can be understood as an intersubjective worldview. It establishes a system of belief and interpretation that brings nuance and context to community practices and ways of life. Therefore, it is important to explain these "beliefs" and how they manifest in intersubjective community practices. Busk rituals, the teachings of the ceremonial leaders, the many complex layers of symbolism, and the traditional stories can be understood together as a system of praxis in which community members enact, engage, and experience various aspects of the *Mvskoke* worldview and system of beliefs (e.g., the Turtle Dance enacting/reenacting the creation story).

The phrase *Mvskoke-Nene* translates as the "Muscogee Path" or "Muscogee Way." Intrinsic to the definition of *nene,* is the concept of a trail or road that is travelled: it is a process. The process of the *Mvskoke-Nene* consists of a way of being that is given symbolic and cultural meaning through a framework of beliefs and practices learned through participation in the traditional Busks and through the traditional stories. Amongst the community I researched, when a person is walking the *Mvskoke-Nene,* there is an embodiment of traditional *Mvskoke* religious practices, which structures and conditions how that individuals engages and enacts those practices. That is, the *Mvskoke-Nene* is simultaneously a framework for understanding the ceremonial, providing important lessons that often direct how individuals act during the Busks, and the extrapolation of a community of religious practice: the distillation of complex and layered symbolism, which is

both explanans and explanandum of a way of living and being, that is distinctly *Mvskoke*. It is both the summation of lessons learned and the means of inculcating those lessons.

The *Mvskoke-Nene* is not to be confused with the subjective beliefs of individual community members, rather the *Mvskoke-Nene* provides a way for community members to derive meaning from or apply meaning to their experiences through their own understanding of the many layers of symbolism in the Busk ceremonials, garnered through the intersubjective participation in community practices. Engaging in these community practices shape the subjective experiences of community members, which come to reflect the *Mvskoke-Nene* but in ways that are unique for each individual. In essence, the *Mvskoke-Nene* is an intersubjective worldview, a continuous flow of experiences and interpretations of the Busk ceremonial, the teachings and the Medicines, and the traditional stories. The *Mvskoke-Nene* is a path that is travelled and though the ancestors may have carved that path, it is the living who walk it.

Overview of the Mvskoke-Nene. Every member of the community that has participated in the Busk for very long has come to their own understanding of the *Mvskoke-Nene* and each finds the meaningfulness of what they see and learn from their experiences tied directly to these subjective understandings. However, all agree that it is a way of life and living that brings people into more balanced relationships with their natural and social worlds. One community member described it saying, "the *Nene Mvskoke* is a way to live life… it is doing what you are supposed to do: acting with respect, with integrity… it is what it means to be Creek."

There are several basic tenets that are fundamental to understanding the *Mvskoke-Nene*, yet, balance and purity are often referred to as the most fundamental aspects of the Busk. The Maker of Medicine said it plainly: "when you look at everything we do here, it all comes down in the end to balance and purity. Now, I don't mean purity like in a Puritanical sense… I mean purity in

a Creek sense." Purity, in a Creek sense, was described as acting with a good heart, that is with pureness of intention. Some community members described purity as doing what you're supposed to do simply because it is the right thing to do – a pureness of action. The old adage "the road to hell is paved with good intentions" was even used to describe how purity requires an overlap of intention and action, since people can act with good intentions and yet do plenty they are not supposed to do. When it comes to balance, he said, "well, everything the Busk teaches is about balance; it brings people into balance with the natural world, it brings balance to society and the community, and it also rebalances the cosmos by alleviating some of the imbalance that people create. So, balance is everywhere."

The other ceremonial leaders have added that a vital Creek concept to understand is that power is always in motion; balance itself is an ongoing process in all its iterations. This harkens to a cosmogonic belief in which "Creation itself is an ongoing event; *Hesakatv'messe*, the Master of Breath, did not breathe existence into existence like a child blowing out birthday candles… he is continuously blowing existence into existence…" as one community member described. The Busks themselves are a kind of rebalancing of the cosmos, which is often likened to a spinning top. As the top begins to slow, it starts to wobble; likewise, after a Busk, the power set in motion at that Busk begins to slow and eventually begins to wobble. The twenty days before a Busk are seen as the most unstable, when the wobble is at its worst; these are called Broken Days.

The name Broken Days comes from when bundles of sticks were delivered to members of the community to tell them how long they had before Busk; each day they would break a stick until there were no more and that was the day the Busk began. Broken Days are a time of deep unrest among community members. As described by one community member, "approaching Busk, during Broken Days, people, well, they just become more abrasive; they need to separate from

interactions with other people and start centering their minds on the approaching Busk." Another put it this way: "a lot of shit happens during Broken Days; I've had cars break down, phones short out, I can't even remember how many printers and computers have crapped out on me during Broken Days. While things like that happening may seem circumstantial at first, how many times does it have to happen before it is more than just mere circumstance? No, Broken Days just suck." The Busks, however, which serve as a means of reestablishing balance and cosmic order, is like picking up a wobbling top and respinning it.

The concept that power is always in motion and that balance is something that is ongoing is central to understanding a particular word heard often at the Busk and that is arguably among the most important words in the entire *Mvskoke* language: *mvto.* The word *mvto* has often been said to be "the only real Creek prayer" and the symbolism found therein is an important part of Creek identities. In a very basic sense, *mvto* simply an expression of gratitude commonly translated into English as "thank you" and is very common in everyday speech. However, at the Busk, where everything is layered with symbolism, *mvto* is often better translated, as my informants have explained, as meaning "things are the way they are supposed to be."

Approaching this from a "Creek sense," *mvto* is translated as "things are the way they are supposed be" not because this is the best of all possible worlds; for Creeks, this is the only world possible. Rather, things are the way they are and that they even are, at all, is because the Master of Breath, *Hesakatv'messe,* is continuously breathing existence into itself… that existence exists, then, is what is supposed to be in this worldview. Things are not the way they are supposed to be because they are the result of the intricate machinations and grand designs of Creator, for our actions have consequences and fate, as such, is not considered predetermined. Rather, our fates are malleable and able to be changed. *Hesakatv'messe* merely blows existence into existence and

lets that which may blossom and grow from that creation do as it may. Things are the way they are supposed to be because they are, even though they need not be at all; *Hesakatv'messe*, after all, does not have to keep breathing existence into being. Thus, there is much gratitude, as well as profundity, in the word *mvto.*

Already, with the concepts of balance and purity, with the complex meaning and importance of expressing gratitude, other principals of the *Mvskoke-Nene* begin to emerge, particularly the ideas of respect and humility. There is a saying at the Busk that Ego is the first thing to get in the way of Medicine and behaviors that are seen as arrogant, braggadocious, cocky are very much frowned upon within the ceremonial. Bound up within the layers of meaning of *mvto* is the fact that to grasp the purpose for saying *mvto* as a prayer requires deep respect and humility. Again, "in a Creek sense," things may not be as we want them, but when we consider that the alternative is that things do not have to be at all – that non-existence is an option on the table – we can more easily step away from thinking about how bad things might be, at that moment; we can, to some degree, remove or reduce away our own problems from the equation of existence and thereby reduce the influence of our egos. The traditional stories, too, reaffirm the importance of acting with respect. For example, in the story of the origin of Medicine – which opens Chapter 5 –all diseases are the direct result of disrespectful behaviors towards animals and all healing from Medicine hinges upon being respectful of plants.

Along with the importance of respect, humility, and the rest, it is crucial to understand the emphasis on the individual within the practice of the Busk ceremonial. In many discussions, community members have described how each individual impacts the community with their actions, thoughts, and intentions. A person who comes to Busk with a bad heart, as one might say, is not only risking harm to themselves but to the entire community. Therefore, there are

expectations on individuals who come to the Busks, responsibilities that shape the ceremonial every bit as much as the rules of decorum and etiquette (esp. following the directions of the ceremonial leaders, and once the grounds are closed, moving counterclockwise around the Sacred Fire, entering and exiting the grounds through an Arbor, moving in pairs when outside the grounds, never allowing anything with saliva to touch the Sacred Fire, and never letting your shadow come between another person and the Sacred Fire).

Everyone is expected to fully participate in the Busk ceremonial if they are able, including in the preparatory fast for the Busk. The fast begins at sunrise the Wednesday before Busk and includes fasting from salt, sex and masturbation, alcohol, and drugs (unless prescribed by a doctor). Additionally, the men and any women who choose to also participate fast from food from sunrise to sunset during the preparatory fast. Some are not expected to fully participate, either in the fast or the Busk itself, such as those who have medical conditions that could make fasting or full participation dangerous, like diabetes or cardio-pulmonary issues. Women who are pregnant or menstruating are not allowed to participate because they are seen as having so much raw, cosmic power that if they were to participate, they "fry the men of the community, short circuiting them like plugging a 110 into a 220," as one community member described.

There is also a strong personal responsibility to learn. At the Busks, information is not always freely given and the *Mvskoke* religion is non-proselytizing, so if knowledge is desired it must be sought out and asked for. A ceremonial leader, particularly the *Heles-Haya*, will generally answer questions, but they are under no obligation to the community to answer every question asked of them nor are they obliged to answer a question that is asked only once. Only upon a question being asked for the fourth time do the ceremonial leaders report being obligated to give an answer, though it may not be very satisfying to the questioner if the ceremonial leader does

not really want to give an answer. If a person is asking a particular question that the ceremonial leader does not want to speak about, does not have an answer to, or simply cannot answer for whatever reason, they are likely to respond only after the fourth asking, when they feel like an answer is required but forcing the person to re-ask the question again and again, over the course of several Busks. Also, the ceremonial leaders are quite talented at creating confounding answers and at obfuscating information in profound statements, much like Zen masters teaching through the use of unanswerable koans. Such answers, when finally given, may just raise more questions.

Learning, especially at the Busk, is hands-on; learning requires doing. Mistakes are bound to be made and are simply seen as learning experiences. If a person is performing a particular role at the Busk and makes a mistake, they may be corrected or scolded, but it is rarely with anger that such corrections and scoldings are delivered. A person who is violating proper decorum or etiquette willfully, however, might receive a fairly severe backlash. A story is often told of a visitor that came to the Busk a few years before I first came to the grounds. He was very disrespectful and was purposefully and noticeably doing what he had been told not to do. He got his comeuppance during the ballgame when he was knocked to the ground and someone came and jumped up and down on his leg until he broke it. He was then told he was not welcome back at the grounds – and yet again we see the value of respect and humility in Creek society.

Another concept that is very important to understanding the *Mvskoke-Nene* is groundedness. While nearly every person gave a different explanation of groundedness, there was significant agreement that it included an internal balance, a calmness, and a sense of balance with the natural world. When people are highly emotional, they are seen as not being grounded; those who participate in Busks while not being grounded are risking a lot, as ceremonial leaders and community members all said: "Medicine will reach up and bite you." I can certainly attest to this

within my own experiences. At one particular Busk, after a fairly ugly break-up, I was in a very foul mood and ended up cursing while sitting around the Sacred Fire. Within minutes, I began vomiting and did not stop for three whole days – which, coincidentally, is the exact amount of time ceremonial leaders say it takes to return to a more normalized state after participating in the Busk. It was not only my actions at the Fire that were not grounded, however. I arrived at the Busk overcome by emotion and therefore completely ungrounded. On the Friday I arrived, I realized that it was going to be a rough Busk when I accidentally defecated in my pants three different times. I had engaged in the full fast but had been drinking a lot of coffee, about twenty cups that day, which was apparently enough to give me uncontrollable diarrhea – I ruined several pairs of pants. The next morning, things continued in a poor direction; while kneeling down to gather a particular Medicine plant, my knee locked up. I have had problems with my knee since I fell thirty feet in Marine Corps recruit training and I have had multiple surgeries on it. A fellow community member – my adoptive brother – helped me back to the Chickee; I could not stand, much less walk or dance, and so, my trick knee prohibited me from participating in the Busk. However, I did get the opportunity to observe the Busk from the sidelines, which I had never before experienced. Later, after the fast had been broken, someone helped me hobble out onto the ceremonial grounds to sit by the Fire with the community, where things got worse.

I was feeling particularly miserable and I misbehaved; I let my anger get the best of me and said some terrible things about an ex-girlfriend. I certainly did not approach the Fire with a good heart – and I paid the price: I got violently sick. I was helped from the grounds and proceeded to projectile vomit. I did not stop retching for three days, which made the drive to the airport, the flights back to Arkansas, and the drive back to my apartment an awfully memorable experience. That entire Busk gave me a deeper understanding of what is meant when ceremonial leaders

decry the dangers of Medicine, most often comparing it to working with live power lines with a garden rake. Medicine will, indeed, reach up and bite you if you are not grounded and approaching things with a good heart.

On Subjectivity, Identity, and Worldview

The terms subjectivity and identity are important phenomenological concepts that are distinct yet also intrinsically interconnected. Subjectivity is the broadest term possible to describe the way any particular person *actually* experiences reality. Identity refers to the way a particular subject (i.e., a person with a subjectivity) articulates a concept of self at any given point in time. Subjectivity includes all the various factors that influence how a person thinks and behaves. In effect, there is an undeniable correlation between the functionality of an embodied human brain and a person's subjectivity or consciousness. This creates correlations between cognition and consciousness that merit discussion.

Cognition, to begin, is comprised of two distinct phenomena: perceptions and conceptions. Perception describes the brain's access and response to sensorial data, which, itself, can be broken down into internal sense data (like feeling hungry or thirsty) and external sense data called qualia. The processing of sense data is a complex phenomenon. For example, visual qualia enter the eye through the cornea and lens, inverting onto the retina, which relays the information via the optical nerve to the brain. Visual perceptions are more than simply seeing a light wave reflected off an object; they require the brain to process and render meaningful the sense data to a person's consciousness, that is, to their subjective experience of the world around them.

The processing of internal sense data is even more difficult to explicate because of the incredibly complex system of feedback loops that allows people to cognize their own internal

states. Gerald Edelman (2004) explored these feedback loops and the way that information travels through various layers of the brain's grey matter as a reentrant system. Sense data enters through the third layer and continues through the fourth, fifth and sixth layers before reentering the system to be processed through the first and second layers. The processing of this sense data shapes the newly incoming sense data, just as it was shaped by previous sense data, thus creating feedback loops. This continual reentrant process never stops because as long as we are receiving internal or external sense data, our brain will continue to bring about our consciousness, without which perceptions have no meaning.

Conception, on the hand, is a term used to describe what goes on in someone's mind. This is differentiated from internal sense data, which is the brain's immediate response to the world outside of the brain (even if "outside" is still inside the same body that houses that brain). Conceptions may potentially involve previous perceptions (in the form of memory), but in general, conceptions are referring to purely mental phenomena. The "concepts" that comprise a conception may have external influences or have been influenced by externalities, but a "concept" itself is not something of the outside world – what Immanuel Kant (2003 [1900]) described as the *noumenal* world (i.e., the world-as-it-really-is). The number three, for example, is a purely mental concept. There is nowhere in the real world that "three" is manifest as a physical reality. Rather, we understand the concept of three as a number because we apply the concept of numerosity to the external world. If we see several apples on a table, we can apply this concept and count them, thus seeing three apples, but without the concept of numerosity and without a meaning given to plurality in general, numbers become utterly devoid of meaning.

Conceptions and perceptions are reiterative; that is, our perceptions shape our conceptions and vice versa. Nowhere is this more readily apparent than in discussing memory. Memory is

another type of conception, albeit one that is influenced through previous perceptions. Memories are a temporary mental state that is not directly tied to the immediate processing of sense data, rather, it is the remembering of the processing of sense data. To actually determine the anatomical complexity of subjective neurofunctionality would require the invention of a vastly smaller, more portable, and more powerful fMRI machine that could be used in the field and take more than 10 images per second due to the Libbet delay of 10ms (the Libbet delay is the time between the brain receiving data and the resulting change in consciousness in the individual in which the received data is meaningfully incorporated into the person's consciousness). Instead, phenomenologists rely on alternative means to assess alterations in consciousness, such as using models of cognition that breakdown into various integrated and reiterative processes that are involved in thinking.

Cognition also involves a phenomenological transformation of perceptions into conceptions. Returning to sight as an example, visual sense data requires perception of light waves oscillating at certain frequencies that are reflected from the surface of that thing. The waves are transformed into cognitions in the neuroanatomy of the perceiving individual when they are interpreted as a particular color. Creeks, for example, construct color categories in a culturally unique way that categorizes the natural world through shared aspects (Bolfing 2010). The word *lane* is glossed as the color term indicating yellow, green, and brown, for example; colors that represent the life cycle of plants. Different wavelengths of light that are perceived as sense data are given context and meaningfulness through cultural concepts that render the perception of those light waves a particular color category.

Consciousness, however, involves more than cognition. Emotion, too, plays a huge role in how we contextualize our perceptions, they act as a lens through which perceptions are filtered,

and our conceptions are colored by our emotional states. Place too, has a role in bringing context to experiences, and the process of interacting with place is an emotional one as much as cognitive. Yifu Tuan (1977) differentiated place from space by defining place as those spaces that have been socially constructed or given social or subjective meaning. Places are meaningful to people and influence their consciousness; particular landscapes and types of weather are often experienced on multiple different cognitive levels. For instance, the Texas panhandle is a vast plain and it is easy to reach a place where no tree is visible in any direction, for as far as the eye can see. It is the only place I have been that is like this; while there are those who call that place home, for me, it is an emotionally draining landscape that hammered at my psyche in intensely negative ways. I have spent the vast majority of my life in forests or coastal swamps, where the landscapes have consisted *primarily* of trees; as a result, trees have had a massive impact on the formation and articulation of my identity and shape my emotional responses to different places.

Identity is the way that a person actually articulates a concept of self; while identity is an intrinsic feature of subjectivity, it is not necessarily a consciously negotiated articulation of that subjectivity. Rather, it is often situational and highly context dependent. We do not need to consciously shift between alternate constructions of our identity when we are in a bar versus when we are in a classroom. When we are in a classroom, the particulars of that space/place and the intersubjective expectations of the classroom create a situation in which we act in a different way than if we are tossing back a few beers with a friend in a bar. Needless to say, there are plenty of times that this articulation *is* consciously executed, which can be experienced when entering sacred spaces in which distinct and specific rituals are performed. I think at once of attending a Catholic mass and feeling woefully ignorant about the proper way to behave amongst the kneeling and gestures, the collective utterances and prayer responses. At the Busk, too, there

are specific rituals that are performed and distinct rules of behavior to be followed, which, once learned often shift from the conscious to the unconscious. Thus, through participation and through repetition, the cues we take from particular situational contexts can become normalized and internalized to the point that a person can simply shift their identity without thought, just as is done in intuitively knowing the difference between a bar and a classroom.

One key feature of identity is its effervescence; change is an essential part of identity. While there is a general tendency to assume consistency in identity (my mother still remembers me as the little boy I once was, for example) this tendency is simply not a true or accurate account of our identities over time. Just as our memories are not the same as the original experience that caused that memory, so too does our identity shift and change over time. Contexts change, new memories are added, new perceptions and conceptions are experienced, and emotional states vary. As these contexts change, so too do our identities.

The concept of worldview is also vital to understanding identity, as worldview and identity articulate, reflexively, with one another. Worldview can be defined as the total set within which a person's consciousness is encompassed and it serves as the boundaries for a person's identity. As a person's identity changes, there are correlated changes to worldview to account for those changes. Likewise, when acquisition of knowledge or new experiences lead to a broadening of worldview, identity finds new ground to articulate.

Michael Kearney (1976), an historical materialist, produced an anthropological examination of the concept of worldview. In his account, being a materialist, worldview is something that is learned, but it is learned through participation and interaction with external and material elements. I think that participation in ritual ceremonialism of the *Mvskoke* Busk certainly falls into this category.

While a person may not be cognizant of their worldview, it nonetheless shapes how a person understands the world around them. Worldview establishes cognitive limitations on how new information is processed and interpreted. For example, before a child learns object permanence, their worldview does not incorporate an understanding of the material world that a pair of keys placed under a piece of paper does not actually cease to exist when the keys leave the child's perceptual field. Once the child learns object permanence, their worldview changes and expands, incorporating their new ability to understand the world into their worldview; the keys are not actually gone, they are simply under the paper. Of course, as anyone who has been around children at that age, this new knowledge of the world leads to investigating under all kinds of things in the environment. Even as adults, changes in worldview can literally change how a person views and interacts with the world.

However, the interconnections between cognition and consciousness, between subjectivity and identity entail that worldviews are, at most, only moderated or expanded through external, material reality. A materialist reduction can easily overlook the important internal negotiation process in which a person engages in the reflexive discourse between worldview and identity – and which is connected to the material world only through the subjectivity of any particular individual. What people experience, what they remember, and what these things mean to them shapes their worldview into a unique relationship that bridges their concept of self with what they have come to understand about the world through both internal and highly subjective processes and through intersubjective participation in community, society, and culture. Accounting for this complex relationship between our subjective, internal state and the external, material world requires examination of how external factors (such as the ecological and social environments), internal factors (such as personal histories), and the interplay between these two

factor sets (i.e., the ways people understand the world around them in a meaningful way) affect the application of meaning to cognitions and experiences in general.

Understanding the three parts of the cognitive phenomenological equation (internal, external, and the interplay between the two) allows us to create a model for how both individual learning and socially situated learning are reflexive processes that happen in tandem with one another. To begin, it must be understood that the desire to place meaning application and learning in the situatedness of a subject in a particular environment is a response to efforts to reduce learning to abstract thinking, which only happens at the individual level. In essence, this is the post-modernist dilemma, that is: 'how can we ever move beyond our own perception of the world when describing others?' This dilemma can easily lead to ignoring the roles of perception and the individualistic nature of human subjectivity. However, this ignores the fact that human brains react differently to stimuli given the unique situation, personal history of experiences, and subjectivity of the individual perceiving the stimuli. Thus, it is necessary to situate experience, and the application of meaning, in the individuals themselves.

The model with which to use cognitive phenomenology as the approach to conjoining different theories of learning must account for the interplay between an individual in-situ (a person-in-situation) and the role of the social atmosphere that has conditioned and shaped that person throughout their lifetime. The term 'worldview' describes the overarching paradigm or "umbrella" that restricts one's ability to interpret a perception or conception in any meaningful way. Worldviews are the ways in which different peoples think about themselves, about their environments, about their perception of cosmology; in essence, the way in which people are able to envision and come to a meaningful understanding of the world around them (Kearney 1984). Worldviews act as 'filters' to our understanding and fundamental beliefs (Bawden 2010:95).

Because our perceptions and understanding of the world around us are filtered through our worldview, so too are our identities. Essentially, at a given moment or in a given situation, our identity is a subjective articulation of our worldview, with a specific context of internal and external factors shaping how our identities might be constructed, a negotiation of sorts, between possible articulations of our identities. For example, when a person is in class, they act in conventionalized ways that are different from how that person might act if they were at a bar or when entering sacred spaces.

The dichotomy of worldview and identity bring insight into two learning theories places situated learning and agency theories into a reflexive and interdependent relationship. Situated learning views learning as "an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991:31). Engagement in a community is necessarily active with learning as a part of the "generative social practice in the lived-in world (Lave and Wenger, 1991:35). The generative aspect of this process acknowledges the historically and culturally embedded nature of social practice of learning, such as storytelling or the traditional teacher-pupil dichotomy of academic educations (Contu and Willmott 2003). In this way, it is directly associated with a person's worldview, as it is the correlation of the external factors that affect a person's cognitive processing.

Agency theory is "a theory of social reproduction [that] provides a framework for understanding how material culture relates to everyday social action, to long-standing cultural institutions, and to wholesale cultural change" (Dobres and Robb 2005). Agency theory focuses on relationship between individual and society, framing the individual as an agent that actively interacts with, modifies and is modified by society around them (Dornan 2002). By accounting for how a person is able to interact with and constitute their own meaning of the world, agency

theory identifies internal factors of the cognitive phenomenological equation and describes how external factors affect those internal factors. In this way, agency theory is directly associated with Identity.

If we assemble worldview and identity as correlated and reflexive forces, then worldview (which is conditioned and shaped by the outside world) are constricting or limiting of a person's subjectivity, while identity (which is shaped through internal factors of experience) functions as force of expansion. In this way, what is learned, whether in traditional educator-pupil learning or in situated social learning, is always a combination of internal and external factors. This falls into the same dichotomy as that of the *self* and the *other*, which is proposed as an inseparable and constitutive aspect of a person's worldview (Kearney 1984:63). Thus, situating the application of meaning and learning processes in an individual is still able to account for the social situatedness of that individual without reducing the importance of subjectivity and neurophysiology.

It has been argued that social relationships are not only the source of meaning application for any individual but also that they can therefore be used as the unit of analysis of understanding meaning in others (Kirshner and Whitson 1997). The cognitive phenomenological perspective suggests that social relationships only exist in because of how they affirm and reaffirm the way in which any one individual within that social sphere articulates their subjective identity at any given moment; the interaction and communication of social relationships intersubjectively condition the worldviews of those individuals who are interacting.

Mvskoke-Nene in Practice

When approaching the *Mvskoke-Nene* as an intersubjectively negotiated worldview, the use of tobacco offerings is a particularly useful example. The origin story of tobacco, as it was told

to me, was that the plant emerged as a result of the love between first man and first woman. When the two had lain together, their sexual juices leaked onto the ground; from this grew the first tobacco plant. First man went back to the spot and found the plant; when he smelled it, he found it had a most pleasant aroma and he decided to take it back and dry it and smoke it. The taste and smell were delightful and has been used by all of the descendants of first woman and first man. At the Busk, tobacco is ubiquitous; the smell of tobacco permeates and saturates the grounds. Tobacco (*hece*) is given as gifts to ceremonial leaders or other community members, when harvesting Medicine plants, and as offerings to the Sacred Fire at the Busk – where the smoke is said to carry prayers into the Above World and to Creator. Thus, tobacco is a plant whose use, particularly as an offering, can provide a connection between participation in the Busk and an inculcation of the teachings that are found therein on the one hand and walking the Creek Path in one's daily life on the other.

All of the community members with who I have interacted make tobacco offerings outside of the Busks. They are made when hunting, fishing, gathering wild plants for food or Medicine, or for fiber for particular crafts. My adoptive father, for one, will not even begin hunting or fishing without making a tobacco offering. Tobacco offerings are made over the kill of a hunt or when cleaning the fish, frogs, or other animals, often with a prayer of thanks for the animal giving its life to be sustenance to humans. Similar prayers are uttered when harvesting most plants. Yet, not all harvests from the natural world are necessarily associated with the making of tobacco offerings. It was quite uncommon, in particular, to see community members make tobacco offerings when harvesting plants from their own gardens.

Gardens are an incredibly important aspect of the *Mvskoke-Nene*. All community members are encouraged to grow gardens and you find all manner of food and flowers, tree, shrub, and

Medicine plant being grown in gardens. Men are actually encouraged, more so than women, to plant and grow gardens; the former Maker of Medicine said it plainly, "every good Creek man should be growing flowers." Growing and tending gardens increases and strengthens people's connections to the Growing World and when men garden, it is seen as assisting in, symbolically, one of the primary functions of the Busk: feminizing men to make them fit to live in Matriarchal society. The growing of flower in particular is stressed for men walking the *Mvskoke-Nene* because it is distinctly outside of the typical male domains; the household and "civilized" lands are the domain of women while the male domain is the wilds. Male behavior is associated with hunting and providing food during the winter months; flowers are not food and growing them, then, a man must be motivated by other intentions than feeding his family. The growing of flowers does provide food to pollinators, which cannot be overlooked since pollination is vital to the Growing World and ceremonial leaders often teach about the role of pollinators in their talks. However, it is the growing of flowers for their own sake, because they are pretty and because they bring joy, which is seen as assisting men along the Creek Path. With the importance of gardening often discussed at Busk, it was somewhat surprising at first to learn that tobacco offerings in gardens were rare. However, it began to make more sense when I started to notice parallels in behavior between plants in people's gardens and pets in people's homes.

While it may initially appear tangential, the category of house pets actually helps establish a framework of understanding about how participants interact differently with the Growing World in distinct domains or realms and, resultingly, conceptualize, or make sense of, the world around them depending upon their relationships to and within these domains. These domains directly reflect an understanding of the world that is influenced by participation in the Busk and shows an internalizing of the *Mvskoke-Nene*. The first of the domains is a feminine or female domain that

encompasses areas of "civilization," including the ceremonial grounds, areas of habitation, and everything that has been cultivated. The masculine or male domain encompasses what is often called wilderness, which refers to the wilder areas that are uncultivated, uninhabited, and thus unowned by the women – since all property is owned by women in Creek society. There is also a third domain that serves as the merger or boundary between these two domains that is generally referred to as the "edge-of-the-woods," which is often associated with Medicine plants and animals and is guarded by beings called *Este-Lopokuce* (the Little People; beings that are like small humans and are often associated with tricksome behavior – often compared to elves, fairies, or other wee folk of various European mythologies).

These three domains are an important part of the Busk ceremonial, with different domains being associated with different Medicinal plants, ceremonies, and lore. The treatment, then, of these categories in daily life is an important indicator of an internalization process of the teachings of the Busk. It is therefore important to note that pets are personified, as are many of the plants in gardens. This personification is quite distinct from how other beings are perceived. In many of the tellings of the creation stories, it is discussed that "all beings think and understand in their own way, each to its own kind" – although some we may understand better than others. All the beings created by Creator are seen as having a small part of Creator that is manifest as a consciousness that is unique to that being.

With pets, however, there is an understanding of these beings cultivated through daily interaction and observation, a familiarization that conditions how they are approached and perceived. Pet owners, and gardeners alike, feel deep connections to individual beings and while they may have an affinity for like kind, they have attachment to individuals (i.e., just as a person may be a "dog person" but has a profound relationship with their dog). Particularly with pets,

people feel confident that they truly understand what these beings are feeling and thinking and ascribe mental states to explain behaviors. Similarly, when gardening, plants are personified in explaining their particular behaviors (such as a plant feeling sad when it is wilting or happy when it is looking healthy). When harvesting from gardens, tobacco offerings are not often made the way they would be when harvesting wilder plants; the tobacco offerings are an important symbolic behavior that reveals differences in how various living beings are perceived.

The more within the women's domain of the household and community, the more deeply they are observed, interacted with, and to whom more attention is directed, the more likely that the consciousness of these beings is personified, although not always anthropomorphized; likewise, the less personified the being the less interaction that is had with these beings. The most foreign of beings are those with who humans have little to no interactions, such as plants that have no known Medicinal use, are inedible, and are not useful as fiber. These are a much smaller part of community members' phenomenal field; less attention is directed to them and they may not even have a name for them. Those plants that have use as food or fiber, but not as Medicine, are much like animals that are hunted. Tobacco offerings are very often made to them when harvesting them, but likely not with the same attention that is given to the collection of Medicine plants. For example, in addition to being given tobacco offerings, Medicine plants are not allowed to touch the ground, while plants harvested only for food or fiber are not imbued with such reverence.

Medicine animals and animals about whom people have heard traditional stories are often ascribed consciousness that is not quite personified but is still interpretable. Bears (*nvkose*) are a useful example here. *Nvkose* is found in both traditional stories and in the symbolism of Busk ceremonial; *nvkose* was the keeper of the first fire, which went out while unattended because *nvkose* hibernated – thus, the first fire story that explains how humans came to be the caretakers

of the Sacred Fire is actually the second first-fire story). However, homage is still paid to the first first-fire story and to role that *nvkose* held in letting the Fire go out by an association of bears to the lighting of the Sacred Fire, while it is men of the South Arbor – as agents of the women – to keep the Fire burning after being lit. The men who are tasked with lighting the Sacred Fire at the Busk, traditionally, were from the Bear clan, which was seated in the North Arbor. In modern times, there is simply a tacit association between bears and the North Arbor, as the clan system has eroded and, particularly, after many men died during the Spanish Flu epidemic of 1918, which caused the traditional ceremonial roles to be reinterpreted so that the Fire and the Busk could continue. Thus, nowadays, men from North Arbor, regardless of any clan affiliation are a symbolic representation of *Nvkose.*

Bears are not uncommon in the forests of Florida; when walking my dog at night in the Ocala National Forest when visiting my adoptive family for example, I must always be vigilant for bears. While they are by no means common, there is a much larger amount of interaction than with some animals; chicken coups, fruit trees, gardens, and pets are all at risk from bears. Their role as Medicine animals, however, ensures that they not treated as mere nuisance animals. They are described as having a consciousness that is unique, but that we can understand, especially if we are paying attention to the teachings of the Busk. A mother bear protecting her cub from a coyote, for example, is a bear behavior that would be considered easily interpretable and very relatable. It may even be talked about with a personification that resembles that of pets at times, however, when people describe bear behaviors, they are much more likely to preface their descriptions with phrases like "it seems to me" than they would when describing a pet, which signals at least some acknowledgement that bears cannot be understand completely. Bears are described as having a different relationship to Creator and a different role in the cosmos; they are

described as having a "bear consciousness" that is distinct from our own and that their behaviors, motivations, and intentions are, therefore, different from our own.

Chapter Conclusion

Creeks describe the *Mvskoke-Nene* as a way of living that brings about balance with the natural world and helps establish the necessary tools to cross the *Efv-Nene*. Approaching the *Mvskoke-Nene* not as a codified set of behaviors but as an intersubjectively established and maintained worldview, a way of seeing and understanding the world that gives meaning to particular ways of thinking and behaving, which are seen as holding the cosmos together by making up for the imbalance caused by human beings. Anybody who truly walks the *Mvskoke-Nene* is trying to be a good person, for the Busk and the *Mvskoke-Nene* are tools to help people live amongst each other in peace. The story that opens this chapter describes the *Hayaholket* bringing these tools of peace to the *Mvskokvlke*, and just as their name implies, they raised us from mewling, helpless babes unable to live peacefully with each other by helping us learn to crawl and, thus, making our first steps along the path known as the *Mvskoke-Nene*.

CHAPTER 4

Vketecetaks! Nak omvlkvn empaskofv ekvn'hokte ayicetomackes

(Pay Attention! Everything in the Busk comes from the Growing World)

This is the story of the origin of corn, as I heard it. Corn Mother fed her two first sons, the twins, corn every day; they loved it, just as we do today. Every day for a long time the twins would watch their mother walk off and always she would say the same thing, "I'm going to out gather corn!" The twins would wait a little while and their mother would return with a basket of ears of corn. The twins, being naturally curious, began to wonder where she was gathering corn; they had walked around much of the land and had never seen corn growing, yet every day Corn Mother would go off, returning with a basket of corn. Eventually, the twins' curiosity got the best of them. When they heard their mother call out "going to gather corn!" they hopped up and followed her, sneaking as quietly as they knew how, for always she would scold them if she caught them trying to follow her. A little ways away, they realized their mother had stopped so they snuck as close as they could so they could see her. Now, some people say that twins saw her scraping kernels from her skin, that the corn grew upon her skin like warts, but the actual story as I heard it – and not making it more PG as is so common nowadays – is that Corn Mother defecated the corn, cob and all.

The twins saw this and were disgusted and horrified… they could not stop staring, watching their mother shit out several more cobs of corn. Now, the twins were often quite rash and not only did they lose their appetites, they decided to kill their mother. As she came back from, as she had called it, "gathering corn" for their meal, the twins surprised her and attacked! They beat their mother, hitting her many times. She lay on the ground, bloody and dying, but before she died she told her sons to drag her body around in circles seven times and seven times and they would be able to grow corn themselves and be fed all year round – for though she felt betrayed that her children had brought about her death, she still loved them – though I don't think she would miss shitting out corn cobs every day!). The twins felt very bad, for they had killed their mother, and so they took her last words to task… however, after they had dragged their mother's corpse around seven times, making just the first of seven circles, they were already beginning to tire; they struggled on, making a few more circles but soon they simply could not go on. It is said that if the twins had completed all seven circles, as Corn Mother had instructed, we would be able to harvest corn all year round but instead we only have a few harvests of corn a year. This is also why we must dry and store corn for the winter, when it does not grow. This, as I heard it, is how we came to have corn.

– a *Mvskoke* story on the origin of corn

The First Rule of Medicine: Pay Attention

The "first rule of Medicine" of the Busk ceremonial, as discussed by the ceremonial leaders, is *pay attention*. If I involve myself in Busk participation as a good community member, then I should be paying attention to what is going on at the Busk, the symbolism and meaning of why things are being done a certain way, and various correlations to the natural world – precisely what I do as a participant observer. Thus, being a good member of the community and a good anthropologist overlap, helping to establish a research methodology that is both academic and indigenous (see Smith 1999 and Wilson 2008). When I am researching the religious practice of Busk ceremonialism, I am observing both as an anthropologist and as a member of the community – and one who is still learning what is being done and why. Drawing upon these experiences, this chapter delves into the First Rule of Medicine and the many connections between the natural world and the ceremonialism of the Busk.

Serving as hamatlv and engaging the first rule of Medicine. Members of the Busk community are often assigned ceremonial roles by the women where attention and focus tend to be directed to specific tasks that are associated with those roles. Some of these roles do not require extended periods of active engagement nor require expending large amounts of effort, such as serving as the Log Bearers, which entails caring for, bearing, and placing four logs (called the Daughter Logs) upon the Fire Mound, which serve as the foundation for the Sacred Fire. Other roles, however, specifically the two *hamatlv* roles – a role I have served in more than a few Busks – are significantly more involved and create a situation in which paying attention is sometimes easier said than done. The *hamatlv* (also *emarv*) are often simply called "dog beater" in English, a descriptive name referring to it being their responsibility to keep dogs out of the ceremonial

arena during the Busk. Serving in one of these roles also provides the opportunity to observe and learn much that might otherwise be missed.

The Log Bearers with the Daughter Logs. Photo by author.

When it is extremely hot and there is not a cloud in the sky to provide any relief from the sun, serving as a *hamatlv* is particularly grueling, especially when performing certain required tasks, like walking on either side of the ceremonial leaders as they circle around the Fire while talking to the community. During these times, one *hamatlv* is quite close to the Fire, which often feels like being roasted alive. The other *hamatlv*, while further away from the Fire, is also on the outside edge of the circle and is practically jogging to maintain his position. Performing either of these roles requires the exertion of significant amounts of energy and can be quite trying at times.

It has been my experience, that at these times, overheating and acquiring sometimes significant sunburns are quite commonplace. For example, at one of the hotter Busks, Little Green Corn, I developed heat related edema, which caused my hands to swell to nearly twice their size, and I have witnessed other community members pass out from heat related stress. At these times, it becomes much harder to pay attention to what is going on around you and the focus becomes doing what is asked of you by the women and, thus, by the community.

Author serving as *hamatlv* at Busk. Photos by David Zeigler,
images used with permission, DZ.

In personal conversations, women have discussed with me that they often choose particular men to be the *hamatlv* that they know can "get the job done." Yet, if there are enough men at the Busk to have a substantial group to choose from, other layers of symbolism may be employed to make their choices, knowledge which is often guarded by the women. For example, the age of the *hamatlv* might come into consideration and correspond to the aging of the Sacred Fire throughout the year, with younger men being chosen at Green Corn and Little Green Corn.

However, despite the physical demands that a person may encounter, serving as a *hamatlv* also situates a person to learn deeper layers of symbolism that they might not otherwise have learned. As a *hamatlv*, a person is required to make ceremonial calls to the women that the time

for *Hvse-Opvnka* (Sun Dance), the women's Ribbon Dance, is approaching and serve as a kind of usher to the ceremonial leaders throughout different parts of the Busk. For example, after the women have gathered in the East Arbor and are getting ready for their dance, the ceremonial leaders, accompanied by the *hamatlv*, bring certain ceremonial items from the sacred bundles (e.g., a small collection of flint blades) to the East Arbor that are held by the women during their dance. The *hamatlv* are then in an interesting position to see and hear what items are lain out and what their ceremonial symbolism is.

To other male observers, seeing women carrying flint blades appears as if the women are carrying weapons. On one level, this would make sense; when entering the grounds, peoples' genders are reversed to a certain degree: women become more masculinized and men become more feminized. Thus, the carrying of weapons would emphasize the masculine aspects that such a gender reversal brings forth. However, while this may be one layer of symbolism, there are deeper meanings embedded in these objects that can be learned by paying attention – the first rule of Medicine – while serving as a *hamatlv*. The flint blades are not just any knives; they are birthing knives that are used to cut the umbilical cord of newborns. These knives symbolically emphasize mother and creator aspects of female power, which is an important theme within the *Mvskoke* worldview and in the daily practices of community members.

Hokte (women) embody power through the incredibly important symbolic role of co-creator. While *'Pofvnka* is referred to as "Creator," creation is bifurcated. '*Pofvnka* resides in the above world and is a creator through which existence comes into being in balanced, orderly fashion – more or less… the creation story tells that creator made mistakes, lacked foresight, and learned through doing, correcting or compensating for those mistakes along the way. Women, with the ability to bear children and, thus, bring life into existence are the co-creators, the counterpart to

'Pofvnka. However, unlike above-world creation, which is rather smooth and calm, childbirth is anything but… "it is bloody, messy, painful, and above all, chaotic," as a ceremonial leader once described it; the power of creation associated with women is not the above world, then, it is of the beneath world. As co-creators, women are symbolically linked to creation power, situating their symbolic role as having cosmological importance that reinforces their social roles.

Hvse Opvnka, the Women's Ribbon Dance. Photo by David Zeigler, image used with permission.

The *hamatlv* also serve a supplementary role in the women's dance, which is one of the central focal points of the Busk ceremonial when the women consecrate the grounds. The *Hvse-Opvnka* is performed as the sun is directly overhead, a time of day referred to as *facv liket* ("sits

in the middle" or, more formally, *hvse facv liket*, "sun sits in the middle") – hence its name. The common English name for the dance is the Ribbon Dance because the women wear ribbons during this dance. These ribbons are most often pinned to the shoulders and have multiple symbolic functions as described to me by various informants. On one level, they are symbolic scalps, metaphorical war trophies that emphasize the transition to the masculine within the ceremonial arena, However, the more broadly discussed function of the ribbons is serve as foci or mnemonic devices for prayers that are to be danced through the *Hvse-Opvnka*.

During the *Hvse-Opvnka*, the *hamatlv* do not participate in the actual dancing, rather they walk in front of the women as they dance. As the woman leading the dance approaches an Arbor, the *hamatlv* turn around and face the women as the lead dancer stops for a moment at the center point of the Arbor and turns to face the Fire. Essentially, the *hamatlv* are serving as attendants to the women during this dance, especially to the lead woman, the way a doorman opens the door for a person. The act of turning around is even referred to as "opening the gate" for the female power, allowing the women to concentrate on the dance alone. It is important, while serving as a *hamatlv*, to remember that the community's focus should be on the women and what they are doing, which emphasizes the importance of female power.

There are other facets of meaning woven in to the *hamatlv* roles that further emphasize the importance of the females within the Busk. The *hamatlv* are, symbolically, the first sons. Thus, the *hamatlv* are connected to creation mythology, or more succinctly, to "creation time." This concept of "creation time" connects to a symbolic understanding of the Busk as stopping time, recreating creation, and then restarting time (discussed in more detail below). The symbolism of creation, and the women's direct connection to creation power, is thus highlighted by the

hamatlv in both symbolic ways (as connections to creation mythology) and in practical ways (by serving as agents of the women).

You're asking the wrong question. Paying attention, I have often thought, does no good without knowing to what attention is being paid. As a student and scholar, I have learned to pay attention by directing my focus and attention on particular subjects. Listening to lectures, reading thousands of pages of books and journal articles, and engaging in ethnographic work, especially if conducting more formal interviews that I have employed in my dissertation process, require paying specific attention to what a person is saying or has said. However, understanding what you are hearing requires an altogether different set of skills. These skills are honed through years of being in classrooms, asking questions, and discussing those readings and formulating and debating ideas about their meanings, relevance, validity, implications, and applications. This process establishes, and reinforces through repetition, a framework of understanding and interpreting what I encounter as a scholar, an anthropologist, or merely as a human being. It cannot be denied that this framework is, itself, a cultural worldview. Often, while conducting my research, I have encountered situations in which I became aware of how my worldview as an anthropologist, inculcated through the American university system, was at odds with what I am coming to understand through a *Mvskoke* worldview. A great example is the phrase "you're asking the wrong question."

This commonly heard phrase is loaded with meaning. For example, sometimes it means that a person is focusing on one thing when they should be focusing on another, like being so focused on a symbolic interpretation of something that the practical explanation is overlooked. A great example was when some anthropologists, who had visited the community several years before I first came to the Busk, measured every aspect of the grounds and the Busk, down to the exact

number of steps the ceremonial leaders took as they walked around the circle. They interpreted the movements of the ceremonial leaders as being guided by particular symbolic numbers, when it was actually just a coincidence that all three ceremonial leaders at the time had about the same inseam and therefore often took the same number of steps to get to the same place. Had those anthropologists come around later, when a person with significantly longer legs began training as a ceremonial leader, they would have likely understood why they were told that they were asking the wrong questions.

The symbolic aspects of the Busk, of which there are many, are balanced by practicality; the practical guides lifeways while the symbolic guides thoughtways. That is, the symbolic serves as a way to convey teachings; symbolism is a visual cue or a mnemonic device for telling stories. The symbolic assists in the internalization of a way of thinking that is learned through the Busk, yet, the practical aspects establish ways of living and interacting with the world that reflect the long-learned lessons of the *Mvskokvlke*. The more that an individual understands the symbolism of the Busk, the more interconnections and symbolic meanings can be identified and interpreted but at a cost of seeing symbolic meaning everywhere, even where it does not exist.

"You're asking the wrong question" can also mean that the way a question is asked, the cognitive framework within which the question itself has any structured meaning and context is making use of a foreign framework that is inconsistent with the *Mvskoke* worldview called the *Mvskoke-Nene*. This could be interpreting gendered roles through the lens of a bilateral or patriarchal system that is decidedly different from the matriarchal society of the *Mvskokvlke*. It could be interpreting particular *Mvskoke* concepts through a Christian influenced worldview that makes use of oppositional duality and linear time in ways that do not even make sense within the complimentary duality and cyclical time of the *Mvskoke-Nene*. In these cases, a person is literally

asking the wrong question because the question is unanswerable within a *Mvskoke* way of thinking. It can be very difficult to explain *why* a person's question doesn't make sense; thus, it is often chalked up as "you're asking the wrong question."

Being an anthropologist at the Busks, and thus bringing my scholarly research that is so influenced by Western thinking, I heard this phrase often at my first few Busks. As I began to recognize how much of what I had learned had been through a western theoretical lens, and not a *Mvskoke* worldview, I began to hear the phrase less and actually found myself saying it in response to questions that I received, especially from newer participants in the Busk. What made this particularly ironic is that I had heard this phrase long before my first *Locv-Opvnka*. My grandfather had said this often. Yet, I did not remember this until I was explaining to my mother about the Busk on the way back from one (my mother was extended the invitation to come to the grounds when I was given permission, which she accepted and has been a community member for years now). She asked me a question about why something was done a certain way and I responded, "you're asking the wrong question," to which she replied "Damnit! Daddy used to say that to me all the time! You sound just like your grandfather!" As we both participated more in the Busks, we both came to understand our relationship with her father in a new light.

Although we all knew we were Native, it was rarely talked about. We had thought that being descended from Natives was as Native as we got… we didn't realize until participating in the Busk that so much of what we did growing up, so much of what were taught, had been Native. Everything finally made sense. For so many years, we had thought that our family simply had traditions that were unique – what other people often called weird. Growing up, we did things that other people didn't. We would eat certain foods, gather particular plants, and always leave food for the Little People – what we all knew to be small, often tricksome creatures, rarely seen,

like knee-high people that lived in the woods and who could generally be appeased by leaving gifts of food for them at the edge of the woods. I always held a fondness for early mornings with my grandfather, silently watch the sun come up and welcoming the sun into the world and spending time in the kitchen with my mother or grandmother as they softly sang to themselves songs learned watching their own mothers and grandmothers in the kitchen.

As we participated in Busks and learned more, we began to reinterpret our experiences with my grandfather and grandmother; our own life experiences came to have new meaning in our understandings of who we are as Natives, in turn, enriching our experiences and deepening the meaningfulness of the Busk in our lives. This dissertation is not about being Native, nor what it means to be Native. While the vast majority of Busk participants certainly identify as Native and the Busk is absolutely Native, actually *being* Native is not necessary for participating in Busks. Neither is it necessary to be Native to walk the *Mvskoke-Nene*, internalizing and applying what is learned through participation in the Busks. Paying attention, however, is required.

Natural Symbolism and the Busks: Applying the First Rule of Medicine

Paying attention: Natural Symbolism and the Busks. As the first rule of Medicine, the idea of paying attention plays a significant role in Busk participation. However, because everything in the Busk is derived from the natural world, paying attention often requires community members to expand what it is to which they are paying attention. For example, the timing of the Busks are tied to changes that occur in the natural world. The ripening of mulberries in the spring, the maturation of the corn crop in the summer, and the onset of the winter months indicated by a killing frost are just a few of these changes and are referred to as "natural indicators" of Berry, Green Corn, and Harvest, respectively. However, there are many examples of symbolism that

establish connections to the natural world, which can range from being symbolic metaphors for changes in season to helping people identify when to collect certain wild foods or times to plant or harvest specific foods from their gardens.

Additionally, there are pairings between Busks that highlight aspects of those Busks to one another. For example, Harvest and Berry Busks are symbolically paired Busks that represent the changing of the seasons and the focus of the community from a more family-oriented position in the winter months to a more community-oriented focus during the growing season. Green Corn and Little Green Corn are also symbolically paired Busks that represent different aspects of the maturation and harvesting of corn. In both paired sets, there is a High Busk (Harvest and Green Corn) and its "little brother" (Berry and Little Green Corn). Participating in the Busks inculcates and reaffirms the various symbolism as meaningful experiences, thus increasing knowledge and understanding of the Growing World and further encouraging participants to take the lessons of the Busk (such as Pay Attention) into their daily lives.

Paying Attention: Natural Symbolism at Wild Onion. Although the Wild Onion gathering is not a formal ceremonial Busk, it holds quasi-ceremonial functions that directly relate to the natural symbolism embedded in the ceremonial Busks. First, it symbolizes the "breaking of winter's back," or the time of year when there will no longer be any killing frosts. Thus, Wild Onion sets the stage for refocusing attention to the Growing World, which occurs ceremonially at the Berry Busk. The namesake for Wild Onion, *tvfvmpuce* ("little onion," *Allium canadense*, L.), is a symbol of fertility, sex, and procreation, which is deeply layered into the Busk and worldview that comprises the *Mvskoke-Nene*. Metaphors for sex, and the symbolic role that sexual reproduction holds, cannot be overemphasized. These metaphors serve as cultural root-metaphors, which underlie the entire symbolic system of belief and practice of the Busk and

Mvskoke-Nene, such as the role of women as co-creators associated with beneath-world creation, mentioned previously. Even the concept of duality in the symbolism of the Busk ceremonial, like bifurcating creation power into two complimentary parts, are derived from sexual reproduction. This is a particular type of complimentary dualism in which the two parts function together to bring about the whole.

The sexual metaphor of *tvfvmpuce* is that the stalk of the onion represents a phallus, while the onion bulb represents a womb. The flowers of the plant are *pvkpvke*, which can translate as "flower," "foam," "froth," or "semen" (Bolfing 2010:95-96). As the first plant crop of the growing season, the wild onions are indicative of the fertility and fertilization of the Growing World that will provide the food for the community for the ceremonial season.

The sexual metaphors that are loaded into the symbolism of the wild onion also extend to how it is consumed at the Wild Onion feast. There are usually several dishes that are prepared using wild onions, but there is one specific dish that resounds with symbolic meaning: wild onions with eggs. The stalks, again, represent the masculine side of procreation as a phallic symbol, while the eggs are representative of the feminine side of procreation. However, with the eggs deriving from the animal world and the wild onions deriving from the Growing World of plants, there is another symbolic layer embedded in a dish of scrambled eggs and wild onions that engages the natural world beyond the sexual metaphor.

Paying Attention: Natural Symbolism at Harvest and Berry. The Harvest and Berry Busks delineate the female time of year from the male, that is, the growing season from the killing time. These Busks are described by the elders and ceremonial leaders as being the older of the four Busks, predating the adoption of corn as the primary food staple for southeastern peoples. Harvest is referred to as a High Busk, which indicates its importance in the ceremonial cycle

where it serves to celebrate the culmination of the growing season and a transition into the winter months. Berry, celebrating the beginning of the next growing season, is the "little brother" of Harvest. The ripening of nuts and fall crops (such as gourds and squashes) are celebrated at Harvest, while the ripening of berries, particularly mulberries is celebrated at Berry. The primacy of Harvest over Berry correlates to the nutritional and subsistence value of these two different foodstuffs. The fall crops, particularly nuts, are very rich in nutritional value and can be stored for later use (such as being ground up into flour). Berries, however, are great for immediate use, being rich in sugar and certain vitamins, but are not as viable as a staple foodstuff for an entire season or even for an entire community. As one ceremonial leader described, "nuts can provide for the entire community throughout much of the fall and winter, but if the community becomes reliant upon berries as their primary food, they are experiencing *serious* hardship." While Berry is the first Busk of the growing season, it is actually the final Busk of the previous ceremonial calendar, which begins and ends at Green Corn. Harvest, then, is a celebration of a growing season that went well, while Berry is the hope for a fruitful growing season.

Berry is named for its primary natural indicator or marker plant: *ke* ("mulberries," *Morus rubra*, L.). *Ke* translates specifically to mulberries but also serves linguistically as a cognitive model for talking about berries as a general category, what Eleanor Rosch (Rosch 1978:35-41) described as a prototype for a cognitive category. For example, the word *ke* even serves as the root morpheme for other berries, like *kepalv* ("strawberries," *Fragaria* spp., L.). Cognitive categories such as this, reinforce the cultural significance of mulberries, with layers of both practical uses and symbolic meaning. It is associated with the transition into the female time of year through its affiliation with Berry Busk, reaffirming its visibility in the perceptual fields of those who pay attention to the teachings and symbolism of the Busks and the *Mvskoke-Nene*.

That is, because mulberries are emphasized ceremonially through the symbolism of Berry Busk, people pay more attention to them. Thus, it makes it more likely that they will be noticed and interacted with, which has practical effects: they help make people feel better. They taste sweet and delicious when ripe, and even when not ripe are still surprisingly flavorful – although sour. They are especially welcome after the winter months when such tasty treats from the Growing World are few and far between; thus, mulberries indicate that winter is over and the good stuff is coming! This ties people more closely to the natural world around them, who then begin noticing more and more nuance of their immediate surrounds because of their participation in the Busk. This, effectively, is how people develop what they often described as groundedness. When a person is grounded, there is a feeling of balance and connectedness to the Growing World, which brings into focus the teachings of the Busk. They are learning from Medicine ("Medicine is its own Teacher"), they are being required to pay attention to the natural world, and to recognize the connections between Busk symbolism and the natural world, therefore reaffirming and validating the idiom: everything in the Busk is derived from the natural world.

Mulberries are, of course, consumed because they are delicious; I readily admit that I find mulberries to be the most delicious and desirable berry and relish any opportunity to consume ripe mulberries – I am always keeping any eye out for that sure sign of a mulberry tree as I drive around: the tell-tale purplish stain. However, mulberries are consumed for a variety of reasons and the plants itself has numerous uses. One community member reported that, as a child, she was encouraged to eat as many mulberries as she was physically able to consume when they were just beginning to ripen. She described this behavior as preparing the body for the oncoming year, jumpstarting the immune system. Scientific analysis of the mulberry indicates that mulberries are not only high in vitamin C, but also that the vitamin C levels are highest before

the fruits begin to darken in color (Gundogdu et al. 2011), which leads credence and validity to this traditional folk behavior. Many of the community members also discussed that mulberries were also traditionally used to make a dye; however, this traditional practice is beginning to die out because of the availability of colored yarns and printed fabrics that are being used to construct Busk attire and accoutrement (such as patchwork dresses, men's ribbon shirts, and fingerwoven sashes). There is also a cosmological association of mulberry. The ceremonial leaders discussed how young mulberry shoots are used to appease or calm the horned serpent, so that scratchings or shavings can be collected from its horns, which are described as having immense power.

Berry Busk and Harvest Busk, as already mentioned, are often discussed as being much older than Green Corn and Little Green Corn, predating the introduction of corn as a primary food staple to which a significant amount of symbolism in the Green Corn and Little Green Corn Busks is associated. The Berry and Harvest Busks, then, naturally correlate to a broader array of symbolic meanings that derive from a lifestyle that was dependent upon many different foods gathered from the natural world. Many of these meanings correlate to how these Busks function as the transition between the male and female times of year, which marks the beginning and end of the growing season. As such, these two Busks are deeply connected and even include Busk-specific dances (Berry dance and Harvest dance) that are often described as actually being one dance, beginning in the spring and completed in the fall, which celebrates the beginning and end of the growing season.

The steps and dance patterns of the Berry and Harvest dances are identical, with only one real difference between the two dances. In the Berry dance, the women dance with empty baskets, while at Harvest, the women dance with baskets that are full of foods (especially fruits, nuts, and

squashes). These are markers of the subsistence value of the available crops and relate to the connection between the community and the growing season. The baskets are displayed in front of the Arbors during Harvest and Berry, giving a visual element indicating the symbolic role that these Busks hold and further illustrating a deep interconnectedness between the Busk ceremonials and the natural world.

Harvest Busk includes other natural symbolism that highlights its connectedness to the transition between the female growing year and the male time of year or Killing Time. Certain plants, such as *wvlane* ("yellow water" – *Dysphania anthelmintica*, also known as wormseed or Mexican Tea; Mosyakin and Clemants 2002, Clemants and Mosyakin 2003:267-299), poke sallet (*Phytolacca Americana*, L.), and winged sumac (*Rhus copallinum*, L.), undergo visual changes that are associated with this transition. Around the time of Harvest, the stems of *wvlane* begin to turn red, or *cate*, in color.

Cate is associated with blood, to the shedding of blood in particular, and is thus seen as a visual correlation to the transition into the killing time, which is a highly important symbolic meaning of the Harvest Busk. Poke sallet, also known as pokeweed, is a poisonous plant whose berries turn a deep reddish purple and whose stems turn a brilliant red. The leaves of winged sumac also turn red, as do its fruits; however, unlike pokeweed, it is not poisonous. Rather, the ripe berries of winged sumac are particularly important as a "fall tonic" in which the berries are crushed into water to create a tart lemonade-like beverage that is highly regarded amongst community members. Interestingly, phytochemical analysis has found the fruits of *Rhus copallinum* to be rich in various antioxidants that prevent cell damage (Ma 2011:32-46), which lends pharmacological validation to such practices.

The timing of the Harvest Busk further highlights the transitional symbolism between the growing season and the killing time. Harvest usually correlates to the arrival of the first killing frost of the year, which traditionally signals the end of the growing season and thus a shift in subsistence strategies. This natural, seasonal change in the symbolism of the ceremonial year serves to encourage a deeper understanding of the natural world in participants.

Performative aspects of the Busk at Berry and Harvest also reinforce the seasonal transitions that connect the Busk symbolism to changes in the natural world. For example, the men's dance, called the feather dance, involve the men singing and dancing at the Arbors; at Green Corn and Little Green Corn, this involves the men dancing at all four Arbors, however, at Berry and Harvest, certain Arbors are skipped (the North Arbor at Berry and the South Arbor at Harvest). This signifies the migratory patterns of birds moving north in the spring and south in the fall, thus tying the practice of that dance with seasonal migrations occurring in the natural world.

There is also a visual decorative adornment of the Women's Arbor in the east that has similar connections to the natural world. Large, wooden, painted Monarch Butterflies are always placed upon the East Arbor at Harvest and Berry, and sometimes placed on the Arbor at Green Corn as well. A surface layer of symbolic meaning of these decorations is that butterflies are pollinators, which fertilize the Growing World. However, at Berry and Harvest, there is a specific symbolic reference to the migration patterns of the monarchs around these times: the northeastern migration in March-April and the southwestern migration in October-November (Urquhart and Urquhart 1978). Community members describe the southern migration of the Monarchs as a particularly spectacular event with thousands of the butterflies gathering in the north Florida area (especially the St. Marks Wildlife Refuge) before continuing to their destination in Mexico. However, community members also discuss that the massive numbers they remember from their

youth has dropped significantly, likely due to the overuse of herbicides to which milkweeds (*Asclepias* spp., L.), the food source for Monarch Butterfly larva, are particularly susceptible. Yet, in the past few years, there have been increasing numbers of Monarchs as awareness of the interdependence these butterflies and milkweeds increases.

The adornment of the East Arbor with *tvffolupv* (butterfly) presents even more layers of symbolism because *tvffolupv* is part a group of animals classified as Soul Carriers, which also includes *tvpvsnv* (dragonflies), *tvpvsvnv* (craneflies), and *hvrvnrvcukwv* (hummingbirds), among others. Soul Carriers bring souls back to this world from the Place of the Ancestors to be born into a new body. The Place of the Ancestors is the afterlife that can be reached after death by successfully traversing the Milky Way, or *Efv-Nene* ("Dog's Road," so named because the dogs that a person befriends in life will help the person travel from this world to the next). This is not a reincarnation, however, because the *Mvskoke* belief system stresses a multiplicity of souls with only one of these souls making the journey to the Place of the Ancestors and back. Rather, it is better considered a "recycling of souls" (Bolfing 2010:21-24). Berry and Harvest are often discussed as being the times of year that the "veil" between these two worlds is the thinnest, which makes the visual display of butterfly decorations particularly salient at these Busks.

Furthermore, the East Arbor is the logical place for such symbolic adornment; the east and west are symbolically representative of creation/procreation and the transition into/through death, respectively, which is illustrated by the color associations of these directions. The west is associated *lvste* ("black"), which is symbolic of death and transition, while the east is associated with *lane* ("yellow, green, and/or brown"). *Lane*, as a color, seems quite complicated, since it can represent what is identified as three distinctly different colors. However, it becomes more clear when it is understood that *lane* does not actually refer to a color, but, rather, to an

association to the Growing World, specifically the life cycle of deciduous plants, which are green in the spring and summer, yellow in the fall, and brown in the winter (Bolfing 2010:92-95). Thus, *lane* conceptually reaffirms the procreative metaphors associated with female power and the transition of souls back into this world from the Place of the Ancestors.

Paying Attention: Natural Symbolism at Green Corn and Little Green Corn. The Green Corn and Little Green Corn Busks are associated with the maturation of the Growing World. Held in the summer, community members' gardens should be getting full of ripening tomatoes, beans, eggplant, greens, peppers, and more. Tobacco (*Nicotiana rustica*, L., is preferred but *Nicotiana tabacum*, L., is more common) should also be coming into bloom for these Busks. Usually, at least one of the community members saves one of the tobacco blossoms from their own garden to make as an offering to the Sacred Fire.

Hece (tobacco) holds deep symbolic importance and has an important role in the Busk and in everyday life., particularly in the giving of tobacco as an offering. When given to the ceremonial leaders, *hece* is likened to the sealing of a compact; while *hece* is gifted to the ceremonial leaders at every Busk, it is not seen as payment. Payment, as such there is, comes in the form of three types of traditional gifts: beads (or buttons), hides (or cloth), and meat (although, depending on which ceremonial leader is receiving the gift, chocolate or fresh baked scones are an acceptable substitute for meat). *Hece* is also offered to plants that are harvested for use in Medicine, where a small prayer and an offering of tobacco is giving thanks for the life of the plant that is being taken. Likewise, tobacco offerings are made when hunting and fishing in similar thanksgiving. When smoked on the grounds, it is seen as helping to ground the individual and also to carry prayers into the above world in its blueish silver smoke. When, offered to the Sacred Fire, the smoke is described as being able to carry one's prayers directly to '*Pofvnka*, the One Above or

Creator. The rich, sweet smell of cured tobacco, along with the sharper, more pungent aroma of burning tobacco, saturates the grounds and often feels like a harmonic accompaniment to the rhythms and chorus of the Busk.

Corn; (*Zea mays*, L.), which is first coming into maturation around the time of Green Corn, however, holds some of the deepest symbolic meanings for these two Busks and intimately ties many traditional practices to the natural world. As mentioned, Green Corn and Little Green Corn are symbolically paired Busks with connections to the maturation of corn and to Busks practices associated with the life cycle of the Sacred Fire. Green Corn is associated with the first maturation and harvest of the corn crop, while the ears still have what is referred to as corn milk, a milky white juice that is produced while the corn kernels are maturing, which holds a deep meaning associated with creation and origin mythology. Corn Mother, in the stories told within the community, gave her life to provide corn to the world. Thus, the corn milk is symbolically the breast milk of Corn Mother. Since the ceremonial Busks follow along the life cycle of the Sacred Fire, Green Corn represents the death of the old fire and its subsequent rebirth as the New Fire (*Totkv Mocvse*). A newborn fire must be fed with this milk, which provides an impetus for a corn fast that begins at Berry, when the corn is just beginning to grow. The community fasts from corn to preserve the crop until it can be made as an offering to the New Fire, giving a ritual priority to feeding the Sacred Fire, with the feast that breaks the Green Corn fast also allowing the people to eat corn again – to the absolute delight of all community members, who usually stack their plates with a variety of corn dishes from corn-on-the-cob and corn casseroles to grits and cornbread.

There are also layers of practicality built into this practice of fasting from new corn, the most important of which is "do not eat your seed." Until you have a mature crop, you do not know

how much corn you will produce throughout the growing season. Blights, droughts, infestations, and storms can adversely affect the development of corn. People always save at least a few kernels of the previous year's corn crop as a safeguard against these possibilities. While they may not be able to grow as much corn by planting after such an event, if they can get even a single ear, they can replenish the seed stores, ensuring a healthy crop for the community the next year. As the ceremonial leaders reaffirm each year, "a single ear of corn would hardly feed a single person, however, if you distribute the kernels of one ear throughout the community and each person puts in the effort to care for and grow those kernels, they can produce enough to feed the entire community and provide the seed for the next year."

Additionally, at the Harvest Busk, dried corn kernels from the year's last corn harvest are distributed to the community. As it is distributed, the ceremonial leaders discuss that "each kernel contains the entire history of the corn plant from the time it was a simple grass to the time that became the primary food staple of Native peoples across the Southeast." Corn thus provides a kind of social and visual metaphor for the transmission of tradition and history from one generation to the next and highlights the role of personal responsibility in connection to the social importance of carrying on the traditions of the community and maintaining the practice of the Busk. Only by working together and everyone doing their part will the community succeed and flourish.

Little Green Corn, which is held about two months after Green Corn, is associated with the second harvest of the corn crop. The ceremonial leaders often describe Little Green Corn as a continuation of Green Corn, which associates it with the continuing maturation of the corn crop. Little Green Corn is also called a teaching Busk and is a time when people who are interested in gaining deeper knowledge of the Busk are encouraged to ask questions that might otherwise go

unanswered. Young men who have shown interest in the Medicine Path (the training that a person goes through to become a ceremonial leader) might be called upon to perform tasks that are usually reserved for the Medicine leadership, such as the bubbling of Medicines, recitations of Medicine formulas, or giving community talks. These behaviors also connect to symbolism related to the life cycle of the Sacred Fire; at Little Green Corn, the Sacred Fire is discussed as being just old enough to start learning. Thus, the teaching that goes on at the community during this Busk is not only for the members of the community, but also for the Sacred Fire.

Little Green Corn is also associated with the arrival of the Dog Star (Sirius) in the evening sky in late July to early August, which signals the "dog days" of summer, which is often the hottest time of the year. Although the days get shorter after the summer solstice in June, the heat does not usually begin to break until October. The hot temperatures, then, are indicative that the oppressive heat will soon begin to break, and the onset of fall will begin, which is emphasized and highlighted through the natural symbolism of the Busk. For example, besides the symbolic associations to corn, Little Green Corn is also associated with late bloomers in the garden, like wild grapes (*Vitis* spp., Michx.), the planting of fall gardens, including various greens, squashes, and gourds, and the first, early flowering of autumn-fruiting trees, like white oak (*Quercus alba*, L.) and persimmons (*Diospyros virginiana*, L.), which become the focus crops of the Harvest Busk.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter presented a fundamental starting point in exploring the *Mvskoke-Nene*: the first rule of Medicine is to pay attention. However, we must direct our attention towards something and the phrase "everything in the Busk comes from the Growing World" is heard at the Busk as

often as “pay attention.” When we direct our attention to the natural symbolism presented at and given meaning through the Busk, we can easily see why this phrase is so common. As we walk the *Mvskoke-Nene*, we accumulate knowledge and deeper understanding of our experiences, we learn about deeper connections and more layers of meanings associated with different plants or certain times of year, and we become more attenuated to natural world. Each Busk connects the people of this community to each other, to the natural world, and to the cosmos, with symbolism that informs participants about their present place in the world.

CHAPTER 5

Heleswv emahayetos; em heleswv mahakv kerrcicetomackes

(Medicine is its own teacher; from Medicine, lessons are learned)

> First Man, husband of First Woman, used to always go out hunting and would bring home meat and skins to his family. He loved hunting so much in fact, that he hunted more than he actually needed. He would take anything he saw as game and he even began to get fat from eating more than he needed. The animals were watching this and felt afraid of being killed themselves; they got very angry at First Man and with humans in general for killing and eating too many of them. The animals came together in a great council to discuss the problem and decide what to do. After much discussion, they decided to create and inflict diseases and illnesses on humans, as retribution for their overhunting and lack of respect. Each animal began concocting their own disease or illness to inflict upon the humans. Wasting diseases, sickening illnesses, every imaginable possibility was being formed. The plants overheard this entire council. They too had seen the humans take more than needed and cause much harm around them, yet as they watched the animals devise nastier and nastier devices of vengeance, the plants realized the animals were going too far; the plants took pity on humans and decided to counteract the effects of the diseases created by animals, with each disease or illness having a different plant remedy. However, because they had seen the harm done by humans, they did not give the humans their remedies freely; rather, they would give them only when asked and the humans would have to pay attention and learn, and thus respect the natural world. This, as I heard it, is the origin of Medicine.
>
> – a *Mvskoke* story on the origin of Disease and Medicine

Understanding Medicine: More Teachings of the Busk and Lessons of the *Mvskoke-Nene*

The previous chapter explored the natural symbolism that underpins everything in the Busk, contextualizing the *Mvskoke-Nene* and the Busk within an ethnoecological relationship between the *Mvskokvlke* and the natural world. This chapter continues this exploration by revealing more teachings of the Busk and lessons learned by walking the *Mvskoke-Nene* through a discussion of the *heleswv* (Medicines) of the Busk ceremonial. As the ceremonial leadership continually stresses: "Medicine is its own teacher" – but only if you are willing to learn.

Medicine is its own teacher. The saying "Medicine is its own teacher" is commonly expressed as a primary lesson of the Busk, often regarded as supplementary to "pay attention." In their descriptions of Medicine being its own teacher, several community members emphasized how things change from Busk to Busk and having to learn how to interpret things that happen at the Busks, such as the strength of certain Medicines, for example, or the availability and health of particular Medicine plants. These interpretations are accompanied by, and informed by, paying attention to observable changes in the natural world, such as noticeable changes in the direction or forcefulness of the wind or the presence of different types of birds and insects, help guide the interpretation of the Busk, in understanding the impact of the Busk on the community and on the world, as well as assisting in people's understanding of the needs of the natural world and the community in what needs to be done at particular Busks. Since the Busks are perceived as being directly tied to the natural world and serving as a kind of balancing mechanism for the world, the needs of each Busk are unique. The same Medicines might be prepared, and the same dances performed, thus following a similar overall plan, however, the focus of participants and the directedness of particular aspects of the Busk ceremonial performance respond to particular needs that are contextualized and given meaning through people's experiences.

When preparing Medicines, it is not uncommon for some to be more potent than at other times. When the *Passv*, the warrior's Medicine, is particularly strong, it could be interpreted as the strength of the warriors of the community but might also be a sign that the community needs the extra power of the *Passv* to deal with problems that could be arising in the world. When the *Vsse-Hvtke* is particularly strong, it can be interpreted as a sign of the strength of the community itself. Thus, particular aspects of the Medicines are indicating symbolic information that can be

interpreted, if community members are paying attention and letting themselves learn from the Medicines.

Natural phenomena are also interpretable in similar ways. The forcefulness of wind, for example, is generally associated with power. When correlated to particular directions, can relay signs of the power of or the need for increased power in particular parts of the community. The symbolic meanings associated with directionality on the square grounds overlap those meanings of the Arbors; south is for the young men who serve as agents of the women, the north is for warriors, the east is for the women, and the west is for the ceremonial leadership. A strong wind coming from the east, then, is associated with female power in various ways, while a strong southern wind is indicative of community. Paying attention to how the wind is blowing and how it changes directions during different parts of the Busk, then, allows Busk participants to interpret and contextualize where the community is and where it is heading.

Another important aspect of the concept "Medicine is its own teacher" is that people are not in control of the world around them; rather, they are merely participants in that world (Bolfing 2012:19-20). When making Medicines, the community is exposing themselves to power, which, early in my interactions with the community, was described by a community member as being like "working on live power-lines without gloves" (Bolfing 2010:19). It is important, here, to differentiate the idea of working with or being exposed to power from the idea of manipulating that power. A ceremonial leader is fond of describing the difference by referencing Slim Pickens performance as Major "King" Kong in Dr. Strangelove (1964), when the character hops on a nuclear bomb and rides it to its detonation. The ceremonial leader often says this is the best metaphor for manipulating power. It is an inherently dangerous prospect, rendering the concept of working with and even discussing Medicine taboo (e.g., see Kilpatrick 1998). Rather than

manipulating power, then, the community is described as working in tandem with the power of the Medicines and the practices of the Busk ceremonial; they are exposing themselves to power without trying to control it in a collective hope that doing so can help bring balance to the world.

Community members and ceremonial leaders often discuss that things go the way they are meant to; that is, it is for the community to interpret why things happen the way they do and not to force things into the way they want them to be. Thus, community members are quick to point out that the attitudes and feelings that people bring to the Busk have a noticeable effect on the community and are interpreted as altering the way the Busk plays out. By engaging Medicine in such a way that it is treated as the teacher and not the means to an end, the community is steered away from the temptation of manipulating power, which can have destructive and dangerous consequences for the entire community.

The knowledge of how to make sense of what goes on at Busks is the result of participating and paying attention. This includes paying attention to various observable phenomena at the Busks, but also in paying attention to what the ceremonial leaders are teaching, the links between the Busk symbolism and the natural world, and even to the feelings and attitudes of other community members throughout each Busk. When allowing the Medicines to serve as a guide (i.e., Medicine being its own teacher) and taking the time and effort to pay attention to different signs that surround them, people more readily interpret their experiences within a framework of understanding that is cultivated and shaped by the Busk, called the *Mvskoke-Nene*. These interpretations give meaning to experiences that further shape the understanding of both the Busk ceremonial and the *Mvskoke-Nene*.

Slow down. Another important lesson of the Busk is to slow down. As with "Medicine is its own teacher," this lesson also supplements the "first rule of Medicine," *Pay Attention*. It is

difficult to truly pay attention to the many important things that shape people's understanding of and participation in the Busk ceremonials if they are too big of a rush. The old saying, "stop and smell the roses" seems quite apropos to this lesson. There are times that if you are trying too hard or rushing certain things, you may miss a valuable learning opportunity. To better pay attention, then, also requires slowing down to allow yourself the ability to have something to which to pay attention. The meaningfulness of many aspects of the Busk are there, right in front of the participants, but if they are not open to seeing it, for example, they are trying to rush through the particular dances or are constantly vigilant about other things, like how much water is available or the amount of firewood that has been stacked to keep the Fire going, they could easily miss very important and meaningful things. Having water to bring to the women after their dance and keeping sufficient firewood for the Sacred Fire are important, but these things should not be the focus of a person's attention. Rather, just being consistent in checking them from time to time is enough. When people just calm down, slow down, and pay attention, the Busks often become much smoother.

"Slowing down" has often been interpreted in other ways as well. One community member said that a lot of the deeper aspects of what is done in the Busk is done from a place of "feeling it" and not so much "thinking it." Overthinking the Busk, he said, places a participant in a precarious situation in which they have the tendency to overanalyze what he called the mechanics of the Busk, while overlooking many of the connections to the natural world or the relationship between the Busk and the community. The mechanics of the Busk are the things like what Medicines are made and when, the timing of particular dances, the types of dance steps that are used, and, when getting more extreme, the number of steps that a person might take when approaching the Fire or the distances between Arbor posts. While many of these things have

symbolic value, such as the timing of certain dances and the various steps that might be used during a dance, others can often be coincidental, such as the number of steps that a person takes to approach the Fire. Not everything in the Busk has deep levels of symbolic meaning; it is important to just slow down and not overthink everything.

As an anthropologist, with a history in philosophy and training in archaeology, I have had to work hard to move beyond this temptation of overthinking the Busk. One particular instance helped to foment this lesson in a new way. During the yearly work weekend that happens at the Soup ceremony, the community comes together to do various different tasks around the grounds, which includes projects like landscaping, plumbing, roofing, cleaning and restacking of firewood, construction projects, and many other things that make the Busks run smoother. During one weekend, when I was unable to make it down to Florida from Arkansas, they reroofed one of the buildings. Previously, the entire roof and been a dark grayish black roofing material.

When I arrived for my next Busk, I noticed that there was a white section that encircled the peak of the building. Additionally, when I entered the building, I noticed a white rectangular patch of paint that was now on the floor of the doorway. Later in the Busk, during what is referred to as the "Men's Talk," during which the ceremonial leaders sit down with the men of the community and discuss various aspects of the Busk, the ceremonial leaders posed a question to me: "what is the symbolism of having a white square at the top of the building and another white square just as you enter the building?"

My first inclination was to look at the answer in terms of the color symbolism and the possible connections between the three realms. However, as I pondered the question more and more, the realization hit me. They had simply spilled white paint on the floor while working and,

while trying to clean up as much as possible, ended up with a white square on the floor. There was no deep symbolic meaning, it was what it was. Figuring that out, I deduced the symbolic meaning, or lack thereof, of the roof situation, too. They had simply run out of the grayish black material and substituted white instead to make sure the job got done. By slowing down and not focusing on everything that occurs as being deeply symbolic, I finally recognized that practicality may account for much more than I had previously thought. While there are many levels of interpretation to what happens at the Busk – the ceremonial leaders often discuss that everything in the Busk has sixteen layers of interpretation – sometimes, the meaning is just doing what needs to be done because it worked at the moment.

Do what you are supposed to… Another important lesson of the Busk revolves around the concept of "doing what you are supposed to be doing." This lesson encompasses learning and engaging in proper behavior, especially by understanding one's role within the community. To properly engage in Busk participation, people must not be focused upon themselves; rather, they need to be focused upon their roles within the community. The ceremonial leaders reaffirm at nearly every Busk that the biggest thing that gets in the way with doing what one is supposed to is ego. As mentioned above, the attitudes that people bring to the Busk are perceived as affecting the way different things might happen at a Busk. In this regard, many community members have discussed that people should "do everything with a good heart" (Bolfing 2012:110-113). This includes paying attention to what they are doing, while maintaining their awareness on the natural world and natural symbolism. It also has been described as giving assistance and kindness wherever needed, dedicating a share of efforts to the common good, rather than acting for the self only. Honesty and integrity are highly valued, which help establish a strong sense of identity that can guide a person to do what they feel is right, and steer them away from doing

what they know to be wrong, which also draws intentionality into the concept of acting with a good heart. Therefore, to do what a person is supposed to often requires an understanding of why they are doing it, which involves learning as much as possible about the various symbolism that infuses the Busk ceremonial.

Observation is the primary tool by which people learn their roles within the community, especially since each Arbor has different roles at the Busk ceremonial. The South Arbor, for example, is where I and the other younger men of the community are situated. Responsibilities of the South Arbor include serving water to the women and the rest of the community at various times of the Busk, cleaning the kitchen after the feast, and performing other tasks that might be requested by the women or the ceremonial leaders. However, some tasks are split or shared by multiple Arbors. For example, the Medicines, which are discussed further in the next section, are made by members of different Arbors. The North Arbor is for the warriors and older men of the community, and they lead in the making of the community medicines (*Mekko Hoyvnecv* and *Vsse Hvtke*) but usually bring a representative from South Arbor to assist. The warrior medicine (*Passv*) is generally made by the South Arbor but is overseen by a representative from the North Arbor.

Another task that is shared between different Arbors involves tending the Sacred Fire. The North Arbor is responsible for lighting the Fire, while the South Arbor keeps the Fire burning by adding more firewood as needed. In the case of the Sacred Fire, there is directional symbolism at work. The north is associated with *Nvkose* (bear), which were the first caretakers of the Sacred Fire. However, according to the community stories, *Nvkose*, allowed the first fire to go out while they hibernated. A second first-fire story records the retrieval of fire by the water spider from a lightning struck sycamore tree on an island just off Turtle Island. This fire is the origin of the

Sacred Fire that is still maintained today. By having the North Arbor, with an association to *Nvkose*, responsible for lighting the Fire and having the South Arbor, as agents of the women and therefore associated with community, responsible for keeping the Fire burning, both first fire stories are enacted.

Other tasks or roles within the community have directional associations that encode various information. The ceremonial "log bearers," mentioned above, provide a great example. The log bearers, whose duties entail cleaning, caring for, and placing the four base logs that form the Sacred Fire, are chosen for specific reasons that correspond to directional cues. When the log bearers approach the Fire Mound to set their logs, they arrange themselves at the ordinal or intercardinal directions (i.e., northeast, northwest, southwest, and southeast). Each of these directions blend the meanings of the two cardinal directions they are between and the associated Arbors. The southeast log bearer is a person that is still learning or being mothered in their participation within the community, which reaffirms the South and East Arbor meanings. The northeast is for an attentive and community-focused man that is empathetic and caring, emphasizing East Arbor meanings overlapping with a North Arbor warrior. The northwest is associated with a man who has chosen to remain a warrior, even though he might have chosen to go into Medicine, thus associating the West and North Arbors. Lastly, the southwest represents a dependable member of the community who is situated to possibly enter onto the "Medicine Path," the sixteen-year apprenticeship for becoming a ceremonial leader.

The lesson of "doing what you are supposed to" also includes an aspect of personal responsibility. A person cannot expect to be given all the information pertaining to what is being done and why. Rather, it requires making a concerted effort to seek that knowledge out. However, the Maker of Medicine has relayed to the community on several occasions that people

only understand about 10% of what is done at the Busk. From his discussions with elders and ceremonial leaders from other communities and tribes, he thinks this may have been true all the way back into the Mississippian period, over a thousand years ago. This asserts that members of the Busk community are not able to fully understand what is being done or why. However, by engaging the various lessons of the Busk by "paying attention," "letting the Medicine be its own teacher," "slowing down," and making a concerted effort to understand what is expected and why that is being expected, it becomes easier to "do what you are supposed to." According to a ceremonial leader, "things are the way they are… you can't have a specific plan, things are going to be the way they are supposed to be as long as everyone is doing what they are supposed to."

***Heleswv*: The Medicines of the Busk**

Heleswv ("Medicine"), is an important focus in the practice of the Busk. There are several Medicines that are made at the ceremonial Busks. Four of the Medicines are prepared inside the shell ring, on the grounds themselves: *Heles-Hvtke* (white medicine), *Mekko Hoyvnecv* (king passes by), *Passv* (the *Mvskoke* name for Button Snakeroot, *Eryngium yuccifolium,* Michx.), and *Vsse-Hvtke* (white tea). The ceremonial leaders discuss these four Medicines as actually being one, a single Medicine that is comprised of four parts and form the foundation of the community.

Another Medicine, *Heles'Hopelkv* (grave medicine), made from grapevines (*Vitis* spp., Michx.) and mint leaves (including varieties from *Mentha*, L., and *Monarda*, L.), is used as a form of purification and protection from spirits. The grapevine is a plant that connects to life, represented visually by the tendrils of the vine that attach to living branches. Grapes, according to the ceremonial leaders, can make the Medicine more potent and direct the focus of the Medicine towards newer or older spirits; green grapes are associated with newer spirits, while

darkened red grapes empower the Medicine for older spirits. The mint leaves, which have a strong aromatic quality, are believed to chase away spirits. The *Heles'Hopelkv* is prepared the day before the other Medicines are made, outside the shell ring to the west of the grounds themselves, between the grounds and the ballfield. Before and after the Busk, participants wash their hands, arms, head, legs, and the bottom of their feet with the Medicine to cleanse away any spirits that may be attached to the individual.

The plants used to make these Medicines are gathered from specific locations corresponding to identifiable domains that connect to various religious perceptions and understandings learned through participation in the Busk ceremonials. These domains have specific symbolic meaning and are often gendered. For example, areas of habitation and human interaction, such as the Busk grounds or people's homes, are gendered female. Areas of wilderness, however, are generally the domain of males. This distinction correlates to the matrilineal and matriarchal nature of *Mvskoke* society. Males, as discussed by community members, are naturally chaotic, which contrasts the more civilized nature of women. A primary talking point at the Busks is that the Busks themselves are a way to feminize the males, bringing them more in line with the women and helping to teach them how to live a civilized, peaceful community. As *Emv*, the former Matriarch once said, "ultimately, the women can carry on the Fire, alone if necessary, although it has never come to that… but the grounds are the women's, the Busk is the women's, and while men may do stuff, sometimes a lot of stuff, it is only because the women are allowing them to do it, to form the bonds of community."

Passv, Vsse Hvtke, Heles-Hvtke, and Mekko-Hoyvnecv. The warrior's medicine, called *Passv*, is prepared from Button Snakeroot, a plant that has been documented by several researchers in association with *Mvskoke* ceremonial practices (Swanton 1928, Howard 1984, Grantham 2002,

Lewis, Jr and Jordan 2002, Jackson 2003). This Medicine is symbolically associated with males; thus, the plant is typically collected from the male domain, making it important to fully enter the woods when collecting the plant. Button Snakeroot grows throughout the southeastern United States and can look somewhat different depending upon where it is growing. On both practical and ecological levels, there are ways to identify where to find *Passv* in Florida. The plant usually grows in stands of pines and at places in the landscape that are generally lower than the surrounding areas, allowing water to move across the grow site. For many years, there was such a location about a half of a mile from the square grounds. To reach the site, the men gathering the Medicine plants for the Busk had to cross a stream and enter a dense stretch of pine woods with, at times, quite thick underbrush. When the site was reached, the men fanned out and began looking for specimens. The best plants have a large root with a definite phallic appearance that symbolically presents a visual correlation to its role as a warrior's Medicine.

In contrast to *Passv*, which is a warrior's Medicine with masculine associations, *Vsse-Hvtke* is a community medicine with feminine associations. *Vsse-Hvtke* is made from yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*, W.T. Aiton), which has also received significant research (see Swanton 1928, Hudson 1979, Wright, Jr. 1986, Grantham 2002, Lewis, Jr. and Jordan 2002 Bolfing 2010). In much of this literature, however, *Vsse-Hvtke* is commonly referred to as the Black Drink, which derives from the way the Medicine is prepared. The yaupon leaves are parched until they are blackened. When water is added to the cooking vessel, usually a large cast iron skillet, the water immediately boils, seeping the leaves and beginning the tea, which is a deep brownish black. This initial tea is moved to a crock, which usually has a bit of water in it to prevent thermal shock or cracking to the pottery vessel. At this point, the *Vsse-Hvtke* is more of a copper color than black. However, the literal translation of *Vsse-Hvtke* is "white tea," and it receives this name

because of the white foam that forms as it is prepared by the Makers of Medicine and because of the symbolic meaning associated with the color white (*hvtke*). White symbolizes peace and community; because of these community associations, yaupon leaves are typically brought to the Busk grounds after being gathered from around community members' homes, which is identified as a female domain.

Mekko Hoyvnecv (king passes by), also called Willow Medicine or the Red Medicine, is also a community Medicine that is primarily made from the leaves of the willow tree (*Salix* spp., L.). Dried willow leaves, when boiled produce a reddish-brown concoction, which associates willow with *cate* (red). This association ties it to the basic concept of duality within the *Mvskoke* symbol system and represents the balance of red and white correlating to the moieties of *Mvskoke* society. It is also discussed, particularly by the ceremonial leadership, that *Mekko Hoyvnecv* is one of the first two Medicines (along with *Heles-Hvtke*), which were brought by the *Hayaholket* – beings who descended from the above world bringing the tools of the Busk to the *Mvskokvlke* (i.e., the "*Mvskoke* people" – the suffix *-vlke* meaning "people").

Heles-Hvtke (white medicine) is made from ginseng and is reserved solely for use by the ceremonial leaders and is not often mentioned in much more detail than it being the complimentary Medicine to *Mekko-Hoyvnecv*, which is more openly discussed because of its centrality as a community medicine. Willow, used for the *Mekko-Hoyvnecv*, is collected from along rivers or places that are near water. On a mere practical level, this is because willow grows particularly well when it has access to large amounts of water. Symbolically, however, water is a female domain. Thus, by gathering willow near water, it associates the plant and the resulting community Medicine with feminine power. The willow is placed upon the *topvn* on the morning of the Busk, in a process called "greening" that connects the Arbors to the Growing World. At

the end of the Busk, small bundles of the willow are collected from each Arbor, which are dried and stored for use in the *Mekko-Hoyvnecv* at the next Busk.

Medicine Covers. Covers for the Medicines are made from woven reeds. The woven mat covers have a practical function in keeping rain and debris out of the Medicines; yet, they also reinforce the symbolic role of the Medicines in the Busk and the community. The *Mekko*, the male power counterpart to the Matriarch, sits upon an identical woven mat; symbolically, then, he is seated upon the Medicines themselves, which signals that the true foundation of power is in the Medicines. Since these mats are constructed from the Growing World – a feminine domain – the gender reversal associated with entering the ceremonial arena is a visible display of the role the *Mekko* holds in the community. However, reeds and rivercane also have masculine, phallic associations. They are used for the feather wands in the men's feather dance, in which they are not-so-subtle metaphorical penises (Bolfing 2012:73). Additionally, the blowing tubes used by Makers of Medicine to bubble life and power into the Medicines are a layered metaphor that connects to both the traditional stories of *Hesakatv'messe* blowing existence into being as well as the root sexual metaphor of the *Mvskoke-Nene*. As previously mentioned, the bubbles created by bubbling Medicines is *pvkpvke*, the same word is used to describe semen. The long cane reed, then, is a metaphorical penis and the Medicine in its pot is a metaphorical uterus. In this way, the power of the *Mekko*, when seated on the woven reed mat, is situated upon an article from the feminine domain but one that has a masculine association that can be interpreted as signifying that power indeed lies in the Medicines and the Women, not the *Mekko*.

In the East Arbor, the Matriarch sits upon an equally layered symbol in the form of a rabbit skin. On one level, it has an association to the masculine domain since it was taken through hunting (a symbolically masculine role). Yet, it also has lunar association. In the traditional

stories, rabbit lives on the moon (people even see his visage on the moon itself). The moon has direct connections to the role of women as beneath world co-creators because it has a symbolic connection to the menstruation cycle, which is even called "moon time" (*hvresse oketv*). In this way, even though there is a gender reversal within the ceremonial ring, there is still a visible symbol of the inherent power of the Matriarch in the community.

Menstruation is also symbolically reenacted by the men at each and every Busk: before the ceremonial grounds are closed and the Busk officially begins, the grounds are cleaned using hoes, rakes, and manual labor to clear the ground of weeds and undesired plant growth. The cleaning of the grounds symbolically prepares the grounds for the dances, for laying out the sacred bundles, and for the Sacred Fire itself, but also to assist in a primary function of the Busk: feminizing males. Women who have gone through menopause may assist in some things around the grounds, particularly the cleaning and straightening of the shell ring because they no longer menstruate, but it is purely by their own choice to do so. Women who can still menstruate are not tasked with cleaning the grounds because they already do it once a month, and that is much more strenuous than the few hours us men spend toiling away under the sun in symbolic emulation of the shedding of the lining of the uterus.

The Medicine Run. There are several other plants that carry rich symbolic meaning and are gathered at each Busk on what is called the Medicine run. This is when men go and gather the plants necessary for making the Medicines and ceremonial objects used in the Busk, particularly the ceremonial broom that is used to sweep and symbolically cleanse the grounds. The Medicine run involves traversing the gendered domains and spaces discussed above. There are various reasons that these plants are gathered; the symbolism connected to these plants can be tied to

where it is found and a wide array of characteristics about the plants that are gathered through observation (that is, paying attention).

Some of these plants are gathered along the edge of the woods at the meeting place of masculine and feminine domains, such as rabbit tobacco (*Pseudognaphalium obtusifolium*, Hilliard & B.L. Burtt), gallberry (*Ilex glabra* (L.) A.Gray), wax myrtle (*Morella cerifera*, L., small var. *pumila*, Michx., Clewell 1985), cedar (*Juniperus virginiana* (L.) var. *silicicola* (Small), A.E. Murray), and cypress (*Taxodium* spp., L.). The bridging of masculine and feminine domains reflects the similar bridging and reversing of gender roles in the ceremonial arena. Liminal spaces, like the edge of the woods, also hold other symbolic meanings. Community members describe, for example, the edge of the woods as a special place guarded by the Little People, or *Este-Lobockuce.* Leftover food scraps are left at the edge of the woods, often given with a small utterance calling the Little People to come eat – *Hayomati*! *Este-lopockuce mapohicak*s! *Hompaksce*! (Literally meaning "Hey! Little People, hear me! Come eat!").

Wax myrtle has a specific meaning and reason for inclusion in the ceremonial broom. The leaves of the wax myrtle, when crushed emit a distinct odor that is familiar to anyone who lives with mosquitoes, camphor; wax myrtle naturally deters pesky insects. In the ceremonial broom, wax myrtle is described as doing exactly this: cleaning the grounds of external parasites. *Wvlane* is a kind of counterpart to wax myrtle in the ceremonial broom, but with a similar observable practicality behind its role. *Wvlane* rids the grounds of internal parasites just as it rids the body of intestinal parasites, hence its common name of wormseed. Its Creek name reflects this use of the plant; *wvlane* translates to "yellow water" referring to how it makes urine distinctly bright yellow when used as an antihelminthic.

Some of these plants have symbolic meanings that might connect them with particular animals or to the *Mvskoke* deity referred to either as '*Pofvnka* (One Above) or *Hesakatv'messe* (Master of Breath), commonly called "Creator." Gallberry, for example has associations to the Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake, *cetto-mekko* (king rattlesnake). This association is due to hunting patterns that have been observed in which rattlesnakes will wait beneath the branches of the Gallberry to hunt birds that feed on its ripening berries (see Bolfing 2012: 10-11). When this plant is used in the Busk, particularly in the ceremonial broom, it is symbolically infusing the power of *cetto-mekko*, who often discussed as the most potent Medicine animal. Cedar (*vcenv*), on the other hand, has associations with Creator, and is said to have gained its perfumed smell by the breath of Creator. As the story is told, '*Pofvnka* became tired while walking through the woods one day. He sat down and rested his back against the trunk of a cedar tree and quickly fell asleep. While he was sleeping, his breath became infused into the wood of the tree, forever infusing it with its recognizable smell. The inclusion of cedar into the ceremonial broom symbolically infuses the power of Creator's breath into the broom that then passes into the grounds as it sweeps the sand.

Other symbolic meanings of various Medicine plants are associated with observable natural characteristics. For example, cypress, *akcenv* (water cedar) holds importance for its associations with the three realms: the beneath world, middle world, and the above world. The roots of the cypress tree are in the water, which is associated with the beneath world. Its trunk emerges into the middle world and its height places the canopy of the tree in the above world, thus serving as a connection between the three realms. Its use in the ceremonial broom brings the power of all the worlds of the cosmos together. The ability of an organism to go between the three realms is also seen amongst important animals, such as the wood stork, who hunts in the water and yet flies

extremely high, riding the thermals, allowing them access to the above world. Sweetgum, *helukvpe*, also holds importance observable characteristics, particularly the gnarled grain of the wood. The sweetgum tree is described as a burden bearing plant that helps the community by sharing the burdens that the community, especially women, must endure. The result is the gnarling of the wood grain. As a burden bearer, it is placed atop the Women's Arbor in the east, to help support the women, who take handfuls of the sweetgum and willow to dance with and offer to the Fire, along with tobacco, after the *Hvse-Opvnka*. The role of burden bearer also presents the reason for its inclusion in the ceremonial broom: the broom absorbs impurities from the sacred grounds and the sweetgum can bear them for that Busk, after which the broom is ritually burned.

While various layers of symbolism are associated with Medicines and their respective plants, it is important to note that, especially during times of hardship, there are practical ways of collecting these plants outside of their associated symbolic domains. For example, several important plants have either been allowed to grow on or, in some cases, have been transplanted to the ceremonial grounds, notably *Passv*. When no *Passv* can be found in the normal places that correspond to the layers of symbolism discussed above, the community can use one of the plants growing on the ceremonial grounds themselves, within the *taco* (the shell ring that delineates the sacred space of the square grounds). Even though the space within the *taco* is identified as a feminine domain, the masculine *Passv* is still able to be made and the Busks can continue.

Encouraging the growth of Medicine plants on the grounds is thus seen as a way of safeguarding the Medicine plants against the possibility of trying times, such as extended droughts or floods. During my fieldwork, example, there was one winter during which there was no killing frost at all. A heavy frost usually kills back much of the undergrowth in the pine

woods where Medicine plants are collected. However, with no killing frost, the undergrowth flourished, creating new shaded areas and placing a new pressure on plants like *Passv*, which needs copious amounts of sunlight to grow. During the spring after the frostless winter, some of the undergrowth was trimmed back to expose the *Passv* to more sunlight and extra care was made to protect several patches of young *Passv* plants growing on the actual sacred grounds, safeguarding them in case wild specimens are unable to be found at future Busks. Layers of complex symbolism, then, balance with practicality and ecological availability in the interaction with and understanding of the ceremonial uses and implications of Medicine plants.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter has continued the exploration of the *Mvskoke-Nene* and the Busk ceremonial. One of the key concepts of the *Mvskoke-Nene* is a willingness to learn, as is taught in the story that opened this chapter, which presents the origins of disease and Medicines. If we approach Medicine with a good heart, an open mind, and a willingness to learn, then can progress far in our pursuits, for, as the ceremonial leaders say, "Medicine is its own teacher." Yet, more than paying attention and being willing to learn are required but not sufficient. Quite often, we must slow down and accept things as they are, rather than trying to make them what we want them to be. This is how we figure out how to do what we are supposed to as participants in the Busk and, more broadly, figuring out what it means to what you are supposed to as people – as Creeks. The chapter also provides an examination of the Medicines of the Busk that serve as the foundation for the community. The Medicines are central to the Busk ceremonial and, therefore, exploring the Medicines is integral to discussing the Busk ceremonials and the *Mvskoke-Nene*.

CHAPTER 6

Mvskoke Oketv (Muscogee Time)

After Turtle Island came to be and all the things *'Pofvnka* created found their Places - in the water, on land, or in the air - everything was content for a while. It was not long, however, before a restless began to grow. They had no Purpose, they had been given no instruction; each was trying to be where others were and do what others were doing… *Æla!* There was much confusion; things were bad and getting worse. *Eto* (tree) sought only to stand in one place and enjoy herself, to reflect on all that had happened since existence came into being. She had learned that happiness comes from within and was truly happy. Standing there, tall and proud, *Eto* appeared calm and happy and the other creatures, amidst all of the confusion and chaos, saw how happy she looked and wanted to share in her happiness. Poor *Eto!* With everyone crowding her, she got trampled, beaten down, and broken apart in every way. She felt great pain and helplessness and a new feeling was discovered: sadness. '*Pofvnka* felt this new feeling and looked down in dismay - had he not created everything and given each reason? Why were they acting this way?

Locv (turtle), the first of his creations, cried out that they could not hope to know as Creator knew, for he was all and everywhere, they were but one small part. Turtle had spoken wisely and Creator infused some of his wisdom into her saying, "in you there shall be thoughtful wisdom, slow and full of sureness, that others may always look to in their need. *Locv*, first among my things, call all the beings together and I will give them instruction in how to live." So, a great council was held and Creator came, speaking with the voices of the winds, lights shining from his eyes. Happiness and joy sprang from his heart and he relayed the First Instructions, the Original Teachings. *Hvse* (the Sun), which had simply stopped in all the confusion, scorching those who stood beneath, was set into motion across the day skyvault. Living things were given languages to speak with others of their kind. The star nations, which later became the campfires of the ancestors, were sent into the night sky, to keep the moon company on its journey through the dark, and the *Efv-Nene* (Dog's Road), was placed across the night skyvault, to serve as a path for the dead to the Place of the Ancestors.

In each being, instructions were imparted, meaning was given, and Purpose was explained. Each had their relationship to other things explained; though many of these lessons were forgotten – and some were ignored altogether! *Eto*, who had been completely broken apart, was restored and made so she would forever remain green. At the same time, Creator created seasons so that in the winter, everyone would see her greenness and remember the time of chaos and confusion. Creator then told the gathered council that a new nation would come to Turtle Island that all the living things were to watch for and teach them when they arrived, foretelling the arrival of First Woman and her children… but that is another story. That, as I heard it, is the story of how living things were given Purpose.

– a *Mvskoke* creation story of First Instruction

Time is an Unbroken Circle

Many aspects of the *Mvskoke* ceremonials are derived from specific phenomena in the natural world, as previously discussed regarding the various natural symbolism of the Busk. The Busks incorporate myriad observations of the natural world and a plethora of natural knowledge into the symbolism and practice of the ceremonials. The lessons and teachings of the Busk serve to shape and guide the behaviors and experiences of community members at the Busk, framing and contextualizing the symbolism that is loaded with cultural and natural knowledge. *Heleswv* (Medicine) is one example of the interplay between the teachings and the knowledge of nature that is infused into the practices of the Busk. Another example is "Time." In the context of the Busk ceremonial, the concept of time is manifest through various calendars and cycles, the concept of "ceremonial time," and even the importance of specific times of day.

During the Busk, there are specific times that hold particularly symbolic importance, which correspond to performing certain dances or engaging in certain behaviors. *Facv-liket*, as previously discussed, is when the sun is in the center of its journey across the day sky (generally occurring around noon, although the precise time will change throughout the year due to time changes and due to the natural shift in sunrise and sunset). This time of day is when the women perform their dance (*Hvse-Opvnka*), honoring the sun and serving to infuse the sacred grounds with feminine power and connect the grounds to the Above world and Creator. The counterpart to *facv-liket* is called the "witching-hour" and occurs during the middle of the night (around 12:00 am to 3:00 am, though, again, this changes throughout the year). While *facv-liket* is connected to the Above World, the witching hour is correlated to the chaotic Beneath World. Several community members discussed that witches are particularly strong during this time, which is why particular attention is directed at these hours during the Green Corn vigil, when

community members stay awake on Saturday night to keep the Sacred Fire burning until the completion of the Busk the following morning.

The twilight hours of dawn and dusk are also symbolically important times during the Busk. Dawn is particularly important at Green Corn. The Sacred Fire, which has been tended to by community members throughout the Saturday night vigil, is "born" when the first rays of sunlight touch the Fire Mound. Before the sun rises enough for the first rays of sunlight to reach the Fire Mound, during the morning twilight hours, a very important dance is performed, which is only performed on the Sunday morning of Green Corn: the Silent Stomp. The Silent Stomp, which is so named because it is performed silently (no rattles, drums, or singing), is one of the most complex dances because it includes many different dance steps – all of them, in fact. This dance is, essentially, the symbolic birthing process of the Sacred Fire; as the new Sacred Fire is being prepared to be brought into the world, the community performs the Silent Stomp, which changes through all of the various dance steps that are used in the ceremonial and social dances that are performed at various Busks throughout the year. By going through all the dance steps, community members discussed, the community is introducing the new Sacred Fire to all the variation it will experience in its one-year life. The Silent Stomp concludes with a complicated spiral patterned dance in the ordinal directions. The community members, arranged in a single file line, dance into the corner of the square grounds dancing into a tighter and tighter spiral until the leader of the dance turns around and reverses direction, "unwinding" the spiral. These spiral maneuvers are a symbolic "cutting of the umbilicus." After the Silent Stomp is concluded, the community lines up shoulder to shoulder on the west side of the Fire Mound and face east towards the rising sun. A hauntingly beautiful song that praises the sun is sung as the sun starts to rise above the horizon, and when its rays first touch the Sacred Fire, completing the birthing

process, the *Mvskoke* New Year is celebrated with community members hugging and wishes of a happy new year to one another. The behavior is outwardly a ritualized showing of affection, as the personal feelings of community members are cast aside to embrace one another. However, since the birth of the New Sacred Fire is seen as a time of renewal and any past animosities should have been dealt with at Court Night and the dying of the Old Fire, the embraces are not mere pretense and the affection felt amongst the community as a whole is powerfully strong. Many times, community members circle around multiple times, continuing to prolong the group hugging long after the ceremonial element has been completed. Many community members have described this embracing at sunrise on the Sunday of Green Corn as their favorite moment of the entire year.

The counterpoint to the importance of dawn is, naturally, dusk. At the Busks, dusk is when the *Yvnvs'Opvnka* (buffalo dance) is performed. Dancers are arranged in pairs (two men, followed by two women, etc.) and imitate the behaviors of Buffalo, with men using ballsticks as "front legs" to imitate the four-legged Buffalo. At specific times during the dance, the dancers imitate the rutting behavior of Buffalo, turning in circles and bumping or nudging other dancers in imitation of Buffalo laying down for the night. The *Yvnvs'Opvnka* is a fun dance; participants are usually laughing aloud, especially during the "rutting" part of the dance. However, despite the seeming light-heartedness and playfulness of the *Yvnvs'Opvnka,* the dance holds a significant amount of symbolic importance as a way to honor the animals. Honoring the animals may seem a bit counterintuitive, since the Busk is derived from and centered upon the natural Growing World, specifically plants. However, twilight holds a specific importance as transition between day and night; it is neither truly day nor night during this time, while being a bit of both. Transitional times allow for an inversion of symbolism, just as the Above World skyvault

switches places with the Beneath World skyvault during these times, so too can the symbolic meanings associated with particular dances. By performing the *Yvnvs'Opvnka* during this time, the typical focus upon the Growing World can be inverted to honor the animals. While named for and imitating Buffalo, the *Yvnvs'Opvnka* honors all animals. Dusk is a perfect time to celebrate all animals because it is a time of day during which all animals could be active; diurnal species have not all retired, nocturnal species are beginning to emerge for the night, and crepuscular are at their busiest. Dusk also serves as an important time when engaging in sweats, which very occasionally are held at Busk but are most often performed at the house of one of the ceremonial leaders during the full moon. Those who have gathered to take part in the sweat ceremony enter the sweat lodge just as the sun is setting, entering the lodge at the beginning of the time of transition, engaging in the sweat ceremony during twilight, and emerging from the sweat lodge after the sun has fully set.

The Seasonal Calendar and the Sacred Fire Calendar. At the *Mvskoke* Busk, several calendars are used that situate the ceremonials within a framework of seasonal, cyclical time. One of these calendars differentiates between the male and female times of year (the killing time and the growing time) and provides the first layer of correlation between concepts of time, the Busk ceremonials, and the natural world. Since the ceremonial Busks are only held during the female time year, the correlation to the Growing World is obvious: the Growing World is the source of the power that perfuses the ceremonial. During the male time of year, when winter causes the Growing World to die back, power is garnished from the sacred bundles, which are sometimes described as batteries for emergencies that might occur during the killing time. The sacred bundles are not an unlimited fount of power, they only have as much power as they have been charged with during the last growing season. Thus, care must be taken when analyzing

exactly when the power of the Bundles is necessary during the male time of year. In this way, various correlations between natural seasonality and the perceived understanding of the Busk ceremonial cycle are established by dividing the year into two halves.

However, besides being situated within one half of a dichotomous calendar, Busks also follow along the life cycle of the Sacred Fire. The Sacred Fire is born at Green Corn (the *Mvskoke* New Year), grows older throughout the year, and dies and gets reborn at the following Green Corn. At Green Corn, as mentioned above, the newborn fire or *Totkv Mocvse* (new fire) is symbolically "fed" the breast milk of the First Mother when it is offered the first green corn of the growing season. The ceremonial leaders, when setting the Sacred Fire at Green Corn, place an ear of corn that they have "doctored" with feather fluffs and prayers on each of the four daughter logs, which are consumed by the Fire. This offering is not only symbolic of origin myths and the importance of corn in the diet of *Mvskoke* people, it is also indicative of the Sacred Fire being a newborn that needs to suckle upon the breast for nourishment. The corn fast is broken upon the Sacred Fire being offered the first corn. Plates of food are presented to the Sacred Fire so that it may be the first in the community to feed upon the food of the *Hompetvhaya* ("makers of food"). The women feeding the Fire and the community with food that they have prepared has been described by other researchers as a counterpart to the men "feeding" the Fire by attending to the adding of firewood, with the women being described as nourishing the living aspects of the community and fire, while the adding of firewood is described as the "feeding" of the ancestors (Swanton 1928:484, 516-517 and Bell 1984:88, 96-97). Women hold this important role of *Hompetvhaya* at the Busks, providing nourishment to the community just as a mother provides an infant with its food. Contrary to what Bell described, the role of *Hompetvhaya* in this community is a ceremonial role; at home, men often assist their wives or partake directly in

cooking responsibilities themselves (see Bell 1984:88-89). When women serve the role of *Hompetvhaya*, then, rather than being perceived as fulfilling a domestic role, are contributing to the community in way that characterizes the mothering and caretaking responsibilities that women hold in *Mvskoke* society.

There are other aspects of the ceremonial that also correlate to the age of the Sacred Fire at a Busk. The size of the firewood that is used in the Sacred Fire, for example, reflects the age of the Fire; at Green Corn, the firewood is chopped into small pieces that are easily consumed by the flames. At each subsequent Busk, the firewood changes to reflect the age of the Fire, slightly larger at Little Green Corn when it is pushing into adolescence, largest at Harvest when it is perceived as a fully mature adult, and finally getting small again at Berry indicating the Fire being old and having teeth that have become worn throughout the year. Certain ceremonial positions also reflect this age progression, when enough people are in attendance to be selective about the choices. For example, younger members of the community are often chosen to be *hamatlv* or log bearers at Green Corn and Little Green Corn, reflecting the young age of the Fire. At Harvest, experienced community members who have attended for several years or more are often chosen for these positions, while at Berry, the oldest men of the community are often chosen. Thus, performative aspects of the Busk are often a reflection of deeper levels of symbolism.

The ceremonial leaders have often discussed time as "an unbroken circle." This unbroken circle is presented visually in the shell ring or *taco*, that surrounds the grounds. When ceremonial leaders have explained this concept of time, however, they often use a rubberband as visual metaphor. They will stretch the rubberband and twist it into a figure-eight shape, with the two edges almost but not quite touching. The rubberband is a representation of the calendar, with

Berry and Harvest situated at the two points closest together. This also symbolically visualizes the idea that the "veil is thin," as it is commonly said, at these two Busks. That is, the space between the non-physical, ceremonial world and what we would probably think of as the "real world" waxes and wanes throughout the year, with the narrowest gaps at Berry and Harvest (the beginning and ending of the growing year).

As with Western science, the *Mvskoke* intertwine time and space, although their perceptions of these concepts differ from the western traditions. In the *Mvskoke* way of perceiving space, as described at the Busks and by various community members, is a two-part space consisting of the world around us and the spirit or ceremonial world. The two parts are functionally taking up the same space but are separated by a veil, which is thinner at two points of the year than at other times. Specifically, at Berry and Harvest Busks, ceremonial leaders describe the veil as being thin enough that spirits are often perceivable in our own world. The simple use of a twisted rubberband has thus become an important and useful visual representation of both the calendrics of the Busk cycle and of the perceptions of space that give further nuance to concepts of time.

The Sacred Fire calendar and the seasonal calendar synchronize with one another in a stutter-step pattern. Berry is the first Busk of the growing season but the final Busk of the Sacred Fire's life cycle, which allows the two calendars, working in unison, to create a kind of motion. Each Busk has its own significance, but always takes place as a part of a larger whole that is constantly moving from season to season, Sacred Fire to Sacred Fire. This concept of being in motion is an important lesson of the Busk practice, perhaps best highlighted by the fact that the ceremonial leaders repeatedly stress that all power is power in motion, usually when the young men are not moving as fast as they need to be. This idea of motion is exhibited in several ways in the practice of the Busk; ceremonial leaders talk to the community while walking around the Fire

and dances and other ritual behaviors circle around the Fire rather than being performed stationary. Within the calendrical system of the Busk, the idea of power in motion is, essentially, the seasonal and Sacred Fire calendars situating the Busks within two circles that overlap; only by continuing forward in time, cycle upon cycle, is either of the circles completed. The *Mvskoke* language also seems to contain association between time, power, and motion. The *Mvskoke* words for time, *oketv*, and power, *yekcetv*, are both verbs. With these concepts presented linguistically as verbs, *Mvskoke* reaffirms and reinforces the concept of time and power being in motion: they are not things, they are actions.

However, particular aspects of the Busk ceremonials, particularly regarding the concept of time, add nuance and complexity to the idea of "time as an unbroken circle." Specifically, time is described as being "stopped and restarted" during the ceremonial aspects of a Busk. During these time "stoppages" ceremonial aspects of the Busk take place, beginning with the Turtle Dance on the first evening of the Busk ceremonial.

Ceremonial Time. The Turtle Dance, held on Friday night after the sun has completely set, is a kind of primer for the Busk ceremonial. The dance is a reenactment of the creation story, in which people and animals are all existing the primordial waters. In the story, Turtle seeks out and eventually establishes herself as the first land, providing firmament for the land-dwellers. The song that follows the dance includes two relevant verses that illustrate this creation story connection: *Locv, ekvnv hopoykvn* ("Turtle, seek out/search for the land") and *Locv, ekvnv hayates* ("Turtle, make the land"). By reenacting the creation story, time is talked about by community members and ceremonial leaders as, at least functionally, stopping. During the Turtle Dance, then, the unbroken circle of normal time is sidestepped, allowing participants to enter into a ceremonial time, which often is described as feeling substantially different from normal

time that is experienced outside of the Busk. I for one, have had repeated experiences in which the ceremonial time has left me completely unable to perceive the passage of time in a manner that correlates to a watch.

During the ceremonial aspects of the Busk, hours often go by in what seem like minutes. The only relevant indicator for the objective passage of time is the movement of the sun, which helps determine the appropriate time for performing the Women's Ribbon Dance, *Hvse-Opvnka.* This has sometimes caused issues to arise, such as when I have my dog, Rango, with me. Dogs are not allowed on the grounds during the ceremonial, so my dog is often kept in a trailer, where he can relax in the A/C and not become overheated. However, every few hours I need to check on him to refill his water and take him to do his business. Since my subjective experience of time is so skewed during the ceremonial, I have had to get used to bringing and wearing an actual watch – cell phones are strongly discouraged from being on the grounds – so that I can have some idea of how long has passed since the last time I checked on him. When I discussed this with various community members, they often simply laughed and said "yup, that's how it is…"

Rango, my companion throughout this research process. Photo by author.

Another aspect of the perceived stoppage of time, which effects various participants differently, is the effects of fasting during the performance of the Busk. During the days leading up to the Busk, participants will fast from sex, alcohol and other intoxicants, salt, and food during daylight hours. On these days, the fast can seem to last for a very long time and people can become quite hungry. However, for nearly all participants who have been attending Busks for several years or more, the fast at the Busk itself does not seem to cause hunger to be as noticeable as the preparatory fast for Busk. While everyone is quite excited when the fast is broken on Saturday evening, it is common for community members to lack the hunger pangs throughout the day, even though the ceremonial fast actually begins the night before. Thus, even though the Busk fast is actually longer than each day of the preparatory fast, the perceived stoppage of time often effects the experience of that fast. It is usually only when all the food is prepared and arrayed on a community table, and participants are waiting for the offering of food to the Fire by the *Hompetvhaya*, that the lack of food for nearly twenty-four hours begins to become noticeable.

Solar and Lunar Calendars. In addition to the seasonal ceremonial calendar and the Sacred Fire calendar, there are several other calendars and cycles that layer into the *Mvskoke* concept of time that relates to the Busks. The Busks are scheduled by the ceremonial leaders using two distinct calendars, a twelve-month solar calendar and a thirteen-month lunar calendar. The twelve-month solar calendar is the standard Gregorian 365-day year with leap years every four years that tracks the relationship between the sun and the earth. The lunar calendar tracks the number of new moons per year; because the lunar cycle is 29.5 days from new moon to new moon, using twelve moons to coincide with a twelve-month solar calendar would cause problems in months that have two new moons. Thus, thirteen new moons fully accounts for all the new

moons of any solar year, although it is longer by over two and half weeks than a solar year. Thus, the two are used in tandem, correlated to natural occurrences, such as those described above (e.g., the first killing frost as an indicator of Harvest Busk). Observations of the natural world over long periods of time, then, are vital in being able to determine when particular events in the natural world will likely occur and when the ceremonial Busks should, accordingly, be held.

Traditionally, Busks were held during new moons. This practice has somewhat changed over time, although the new moons are a primary indicator of when to hold particular Busks. In our modern world, the Busks are moved to weekends to accommodate community members ability to attend and participate in the ceremonials, which can often move the Busk a few days before or after a new moon. Additionally, there are times when the Busk schedule has been arranged to not overlap with particular holidays, especially Thanksgiving, also called the fall feast by many *Mvskoke*. The ceremonial leaders often jokingly say that they are not mean enough to make the community fast on Thanksgiving, however, a deeper cultural understanding of Thanksgiving gives meaningfulness to this particular holiday. Amongst community members and Natives, more generally, the genocide and cultural devastation wracked upon Native peoples by the encroachment of white settlers is not a fond memory to be cherished and celebrated. In some families, the true stories of what happened between the pilgrims and Native peoples is relayed, which emphasize the death and disease that is almost always omitted in the larger American cultural narrative of the holiday. Reciting these histories adds a somber mood to the occasion but also quite often inspires thankfulness that the devastation and cultural erosion was not complete, lest they not be able to engage in those very traditional practices through their fall feast and through their engagement in the Busk ceremonials. The fact that these practices are continued, in

the face of over 500 years of cultural oppression also serves as a source of hope for the future of Native peoples around the world.

Many modern *Mvskoke* Thanksgiving/fall feast practices overlap with the American cultural narrative of the national holiday, even though it is often discussed that the fall feast predates the feeding of the pilgrims that is commonly called "the First Thanksgiving." The fall feast is a time in which families have, and still do, come together to enjoy the last foods of the year's growing season, such as pumpkins, squashes, nuts, and fall fruits. Hunting is also celebrated at the fall feast, which indicates the transition from a focus upon the Growing World to the killing time. Turkey and deer are particularly highlighted during the fall feast as traditional foods indicative of this transition into the male time of year and the first full moon of November is often talked about as the best deer hunting time of the entire year. As a result of the social importance of Thanksgiving, Busks that would otherwise take place on the weekend of this holiday are resituated to occur a week before or a week after.

Busk Cycles

The timing for the Busks, then, are determined through a process of overlaying a lunar calendar atop a solar calendar, situated within second set of staggered calendars that place the ceremonials in the female time of a seasonal calendar and following along a yearly life-cycle of the Sacred Fire. Within any given year, then, at least four distinct calendric indicators are used to determine when the Busks should be held, all of which also are given a more substantive context through observations of the natural world and within aspects of the social world of community members. There are also longer cycles that exist within the calendrics of the Busk ceremonial, which function much like the interlocking gears of a clock. Particularly, each of these "gears"

has a similar numerical relationship to the previous "gear" by a relationship of four. The number four, for *Mvskoke*, holds a symbolic meaning of completeness or wholeness with associations to the four directions, to the number of Arbors at the Square Grounds, the number of daughter logs used to set the Sacred Fire, et cetera. Four turns of the first gear move of the next gear one turn. With three interlocking gears, the full turn of the first gear is four years, a full turn of the second is sixteen years, and a full turn of the final gear is 256 years, with each having different meaning for the Busk ceremonial, the community, and the Square Grounds.

The first of these "gears" in the Busk clock is a participatory cycle consisting of four full yearly cycles determined by the Sacred Fire calendar. For example, if a person attends Green Corn as their first Busk, a full yearly cycle is concluded after participating in beginning of the following year's Green Corn with the "death" of that year's Sacred Fire. Once a person has participated in four full life-cycles of the Sacred Fire, they have completed a full participatory cycle, often called a "complete cycle." At this time, a man who has shown a commitment to the community and to the Sacred Fire are eligible to be given a community name, although being given a name is an honor and not simply a recognition of participation and attendance in the ceremonials. Names are given only at the Green Corn Busk after what is called "the Long Talk."

On Saturday afternoons after the women's dance but before community members are scratched or touch Medicine, the ceremonial leaders address the community while walking around the Sacred Fire. They discuss different aspects of the Busk and give their own insights into what has occurred and how they interpret the meaningfulness of why and how things happened the way they did. After they have each had their opportunity to address the community, and only at Green Corn, there is the presentation of community "business." This business includes things such as the giving of names to men within the community, the moving

of individuals from one Arbor to another, and the selection of the *Heles-Haya* (the Maker of Medicine), who serves as the leader of the ceremonial leaders. The moving of individuals from one Arbor to another is not necessarily related to any particular calendrical association; rather, it is an intersection of a person's commitment to the community and the needs of the community, and is decided by the women of the community, especially the Matriarch. The selection of the *Heles-Haya*, however, does have a calendrical association that correlates to the full participatory cycle described above. When a *Heles-Haya* is selected by the community, they serve in that role for four yearly cycles (i.e., one full participatory cycle). After their term elapses, a determining vote is held at the Green Corn Busk to reconfirm the existing *Heles-Haya* for another term or to select a new *Heles-Haya*. Thus, participatory cycles are a functional tool to determine not only a single person's relationship to the community, but also as a way to keep track of and decide upon positions of authority within the community.

The next cycle, which corresponds to a second "gear" in the ceremonial clock, consists of four participatory "complete cycles" (i.e., from Green Corn to Green Corn 16 times). This cycle relates specifically to the training pattern of ceremonial leaders. Traditionally, to be a *heneha* (assistants to the *Heles-Haya*), a trainee must complete what is often called the "Medicine Path" by training for four years with four different ceremonial leaders, one complete cycle each. In modern times, much of this training is shared and a person may receive training from different sources and through participating in the responsibilities of the ceremonial leadership at the Busks. After completing four complete cycles, that trainee is eligible to be considered a full ceremonial leader, rather than a ceremonial leader in-training.

The final "gear" consists of four cycles of sixteen years, or 256 years in total. This cycle correlates to the lifetime of a particular Square Grounds. After a grounds has been in continuous

use for the entire 256 years, the *paskofv* is moved to a different location, which involves a lot of work. The entire Fire Mound is relocated, including everything that is located beneath the Fire Mound. There are as many as sixteen layers to the Fire Mound, which begins with three stones that represent turtle eggs, harkening back to the creation story.

All these layers are dug up and moved to a new location and a "cap" is placed where the Fire once was. This "cap" is considered a way to safeguard an open portal, which, according to ceremonial leaders and to elders with whom I have spoken, cannot be truly closed. An open portal is a source of great power, and, as mentioned above, is seen as dangerous. Therefore, "caps" are put in place that attempt to prevent people from accidentally being harmed by the portal's power and to prevent miscreants from misusing that power, which has the potential to cause great harm to themselves, to others, and to the world.

Other parts of the grounds are also relocated when a grounds is moved. The earth behind the East Arbor, in particular, is highly important to the community, for several reasons. The most easily observable reason for this importance is that the Medicines are placed here during the ceremonial. Therefore, the soil behind the East Arbor has been saturated by the Medicines of every Busk at the *paskofv.*

However, much less observable is that women bury the umbilicus of their children in the ground behind their Arbor, thus creating a tie between the birth of a child into the community and the physical grounds themselves. The earth that contains trace remnants of children's umbilical cords are excavated and transported to the location of the next grounds, thus bringing the entire history of all people born into the community from grounds to grounds.

Chapter Conclusion

Time, within the conceptual sphere of the *Mvskoke* ceremonial, is a complex phenomenon that consists of its own distinct cyclicality but is also directly tied to natural symbolism that is inherent in each of the Busks themselves. The complex layering of cultural and natural meaning into how the Busk is performed over and throughout time guides how participants relate to the ceremonial; the Busks contain, within themselves, the information for decoding metaphors and symbolism that hold deep meaningfulness with the *Mvskoke-Nene*. By continually participating over time, paying attention (the first rule of Medicine), and making sure to fully engage the ceremonial (especially by slowing down and doing what you are supposed to), it is easier to learn how Medicine can be "its own teacher." The meaning of the ceremonial is layered into the very practices that comprise the Busk and how the Busk is understood is a direct result of how it is performed. Concepts of time, the gathering, making, and touching of Medicines, and the many layers of natural symbolism provide a substantive footing by which to engage the practice of the Busk ceremonial, while the lessons of the Busk guide participants on how behave and how to make sense of what is being done when participating in the ceremonial. Together, these set a person on the *Mvskoke-Nene* ("the *Mvskoke* Path") and help to inculcate participants into a worldview that is distinctly *Mvskoke.*

CHAPTER 7

Mvskoke-Nene momis komet Yvkvpvkkeyetos (We Keep Walking the Muscogee Path)

This is the story of how Turtle's shell was broken. *Locv* (turtle) did not always have a shell like the one we all know; once, long, long ago, she actually had a beautiful, perfectly smooth shell – the *Mvskokvlke* even sometimes use the phrase "smooth shell days" in reference to the time of Creation and First Instruction. Now, in the times after Creation and First Instruction and after the arrival of First Woman and her family – the first *Mvskokvlke* – everyone on Turtle Island was very grateful to *Locv* for her part in bringing about things as they are now. All of Creator's creations treated her very nice and, over time, it really began to grow on her. She liked the attention and respect; she liked to hear people tell stories about her and thank her. Rather than being thankful for having a part in things, and rather than having humility, *Locv* began to grow conceited. She began to feel that people owed her all that respect. She would walk along just so she could have people show her respect. She was always telling the stories of her exploits during Creation time. She demanded that people compliment her beautiful shell; she even bragged about being first among Creator's creations. Needless to say, this was not going over well with others, especially the *Mvskokvlke*, who do not like such boastful behavior

One day, as *Locv* was walking along, a woman was out pounding corn and didn't see her; she didn't say *Mvto* or even wave; she just kept pounding her corn. Having come to expect deference and respect everywhere she went, *Locv* felt insulted and called out to the woman, demanding she show some respect. "I am first among creator's creations, after all" *Locv* thought to herself. Now, *Mvskoke* women are not to be trifled with; she'd had enough and decided it was time someone put *Locv* in her place. She took up her corn pounder and proceeded to beat *Locv*, smashing her shell into many pieces.

Locv was in terrible pain. Her prized, beautiful, smooth shell was broken into many pieces. Yet, even with a broken shell and bruised all over, what hurt the worst was her pride. She felt wretched. She looked around her and asked for help, but none would help her. At first she wondered why nobody would help her; but she remembered how she had been behaving. "Why have I been so conceited and rude?" she cried to herself. "I have been treating everyone with less and less respect. I have let my pride grow and grow." She realized she would have to change.

All the while, *tokocvlke* (ants) were crawling around, watching and listening as *Locv* cried to herself. The *tokocvlke* saw that she understood she was responsible for her own situation and decided to help, and even convinced inchworms to come help too. Now, they may be small and often overlooked, but the little ants and inchworms are actually capable of doing a lot. The *tokocvlke* began gathering all the pieces of broken shell and the inchworms helped by pulling all the pieces back together. Eventually, they were able to get Turtle's shell reassembled. She was so thankful and she had learned a very important lesson about being humble.

– a *Mvskoke* story of how Turtle's shell was broken

Conclusions

Conclusions are an interesting part of a document. A conclusion is an end; it is supposed to wrap everything up, tie it all together. This dissertation is an ethnography of the ceremonial practices of the *Mvskoke* Busk in a distinct community and the unique worldview called the *Mvskoke-Nene* that are embodied by the community members at this particular moment in time. It is difficult to summarize such an intricate system of symbols, observations of the natural world, concepts of cosmology, as well as social systems and power structures. The complicated nature of our times is even more difficult to summarize and, as we continue into the future, new challenges will arise constantly. The conclusion, however, also provides me the opportunity to say what I have not been able to work into the previous chapters yet feel it necessary to include in this document.

One of these stories is related to how ceremony is generally thought of and quite often regarded, even in research, as solemn, dignified, and serious; humor and laughter are more often associated with the social sphere than the ceremonial arena where the Sacred is separated from the profane or non-sacred. While there are certainly times at every Busk that a quiet solemnity and reverence is expected, there is often a liberating, lighthearted joy that seems to pervade the Square Grounds. Laughter is as ubiquitous to the Busk as the smell of burning tobacco.

Having a sense of humor is vital – as I learned from the former Maker of Medicine: "always be able to laugh, even if it is at yourself." After he stepped down from his position as the *Heles-Haya*, he accepted the role of *Mekko.* During his installation as *Mekko*, he donned a paper crown from Burger King, proudly walking like royalty around the Sacred Fire. He explained that he loved his crown because, as he put it, "a King deserves a crown befitting his station." Now, this was partly poking fun at the odd translation of the word *mekko* as king or emperor of course, but

it was also just to make people laugh and make the whole experience lighter, more joyous because, as he explained it, "we have to make sure to remember to laugh, especially at ourselves – because if we can't laugh at ourselves then we are doing something *wrong!*"

Keith Basso (1979) pointed out that Native humor contains and conveys particular messages, and that joking performances are therefore instructive, which is certainly true in this case. There are layers of meaning embedded in this joke. On the surface, as I just described, it connects to the relationships between Natives and Europeans. The *Mekko*, satirically imitating a pompous and arrogant king, was playing on historical, linguistic misinterpretations that arose from a lack of understanding of the basic structure of power and authority in a matriarchal community. Yet, the crown was not made of gold or jewels, it was paper from a fast-food burger restaurant. Thus, his performance was that of a fool's king, which conveys information about how the concept of power among Creeks is different from that of the Europeans who had actual kings. For Creeks, power is derived from nature, it is embodied in the feminine, and it is always in motion; power is certainly not derived from a person's station nor from their ancestry.

The performance of the *Mekko* also conveyed that a sense of humor and light-heartedness is better for the community than an excessively serious and somber attitude. We are not required to go to Busk or walk the *Mvskoke-Nene* by a god or king; we do so because we choose to. Nor is participation in the Busk required to get to the Place of the Ancestors (though most would agree that the more you participate in the Busks and walk the *Mvskoke-Nene*, the better equipped you will be to successfully make that journey). Rather, participating in the Busk brings balance, both internally and to the world, and brings our community and ourselves to a place of peace. If we are unable to laugh at ourselves, then we are much more likely to cry, and more likely to collapse under the weight of trying to counter the imbalance wrought by the entire *Homo sapiens* species.

It also cannot be overlooked that when a group of people are happy, they can accomplish much more, and endure much more, than when they are not. When the entire group is happy, laughing, and joking, all of the fasting, the heat, and the amount of effort that is required in participating in the Busk are hardly noticeable – and the Busks are fun. However, when too many people feel overly solemn and stoic, it often wears upon the entire group because it calls attention to how hungry, hot, and tired we all are – and definitely makes the experience less fun.

There is also philosophical concept layered into the *Mekko*'s humorous performance. As one community member once described it, "when we go to Busk, we are like a little kid trying on his daddy's boots, saying: 'daddy, daddy, look at me!' The Busk is the same thing, we are hoping that Creator will look down and see us imitating him; we are really just trying to get Creator's attention, and saying: 'Look at us! We're like you!'" Essentially, when we are at the Busk, we are pretending to be like *'Pofvnka* and trying to bring the order and balance of the Above World into our own. Yet, it is easy to become too serious about this imitation, and to forget that it is merely imitation. If we lose our sense of humor and forget to laugh at ourselves, then we also risk forgetting that we are definitely not the One Above. Thus, being able to laugh at ourselves helps keep us grounded, and reminds us of our place in the cosmos.

The story of the transition of the Matriarchy is another such story that I have not yet told and perhaps also serves to illustrate how conclusions need not necessarily be ends; they are merely transitions. The story of the transition of the Matriarchy bridges who we are and who we were, reminding us that the past is still with us. The teachings of the Busk are meaningful because a community of people keep coming together to participate in ceremonies around a Sacred Fire in a shell ring, acting in the best interests of the community because it is the best way to be and the

right thing to do. It is because of these teachings, this way of being, that things turned out the way they did the day the new Matriarch was installed.

The installation of a Matriarch of a community involves its own ceremonialism and is an important affair in its own right, but the story of that day also involves the community coming together, intersubjectively negotiating a very tense situation and dealing with a perceived threat to community. How this situation was dealt with as a modern White Town shows a solidifying of the community under a new Matriarch and it also shows that we are, as a community, capable of learning from past mistakes. We are always going to make mistakes, as the ceremonial leaders often say, but if we pay attention and are willing to learn from our mistakes, then we are less likely to repeat those same mistakes in the future… unless, of course, we allow our egos to get in the way, like Turtle did in the story that opened this chapter.

A New Matriarch

The transition in the Matriarch occurred on a very eventful day. The transition in power itself was not a surprise. *Emv*'s health had been declining for several years and she had become less and less able to perform the duties of her role after she had an intensive hip replacement surgery. The community obviously took notice as the Matriarch began attending the Busks haphazardly, occasionally being late or absent entirely. Unfortunately, at the time, the community did not really have the traditional lines of succession established. A transition in Matriarch was typically a planned affair, with the future Matriarch essentially going through a training of sorts to learn what was involved in serving as Matriarch.

The community came together on several occasions to discuss the situation and decide what to do. The Matriarch was not fulfilling her obligations and responsibilities to the community and

with nobody trained to step in during such a situation the community decided that, as difficult as it might be, she would have to be replaced. At Court Night on the Friday of Green Corn in 2016, the community agreed that the new Matriarch would be installed the following day. Much to our surprise, *Emv* showed up on Saturday morning just after the ceremonial grounds had been closed and the ritual separation between men and women began – so we men did not even notice she was there until she was taking part in the *Hvse-Opvnka* (the women's Ribbon Dance). I think there was a collective sense of relief when we saw her: with her in attendance, the transition of power could be done properly.

The *Heles-Haya* approached *Emv* and told her that the community had come together on who they felt would be best for the community to take over as the new Matriarch. When they then asked if she would consent to this transition, she stood and said that she could think of nobody better to lead the community and expressed her full support for the new Matriarch. With that, she had formally relinquished her role as Matriarch and the new Matriarch – and my adoptive mother – was installed. As part of her taking the mantle of power, the new Matriarch distributed gifts to everyone in the community, including baskets she had woven specifically for the ceremonial leaders, a number of turtle shells and various turtle shaped objects she had collected throughout her life, and shell carvings, amongst many other items. After the giving of gifts and with the full support of the entire community, she declared that *Emv* would be a Beloved Woman of the community until she died, a position of great respect.

It is here that this story takes a bit of a detour. Apparently, unbeknownst to most of us busy at work during the Busk ceremonial, a man had come with *Emv* and had been drinking beer out in her car all day. Alcohol is not allowed on the grounds, so this was already a violation of community taboos. Little did we know that the excitement of the day, which so far included the

transition of the Matriarch – which by all accounts should be enough excitement in and of itself – was only just beginning.

Explaining who this man is and why he had come with *Emv* requires its own story. After one of the Busks rather early in my research, I gave *Emv* a ride back to her house. On the drive she told me a story about how she met a homeless man one day and had been taking care of him for a while. She met him when she came home after being out and about one afternoon and found him sitting on her back porch petting her wolf-German Shepard mix dog, Street. The dog had belonged to her last living son, who had also recently passed away. When he entered the "Dog's Road," joining his two older brothers on the path to the Place of the Ancestors, *Emv* took in his large, somewhat scary, dog.

Street became extremely protective of her and generally did not allow people to approach the house. So, even though seeing him being petted by this stranger was definitely odd, the fact that Street had allowed it made her feel as though he must be a good guy – if Street approved, she might as well give him a chance, as she said. Although he was more than thirty years her junior, a relationship of sorts began with her offering him food and clothes. After a few years, the dog joined her son on the Path and she brought the guy into her home, letting him move in. That is when, I was told, the relationship developed into something else. Although I had no direct knowledge of any of this, I was told that she was perhaps overly forgiving of his drinking and far too accepting of his faults. For many in the community, this did not seem too unusual – "that was just who she was," many said.

She had always been loving and welcoming, treating everyone in the community as though they were her own children – because as Matriarch, we *had* been her children. She had certainly never been unforgiving when talking with me about my own alcoholism, always encouraging me

to be a better person; I'll never forget her telling me to imagine her face, looking at me from the bottom of each drink I finished, so that I would think about her knowing that I could be doing better. The time between Busks is long, though, and for better or worse, we live in and between two worlds. The *Mvskoke-Nene* is never truly easy to walk. The "downtime" between Busks can often make it difficult to always engage and apply what was learned from those lessons.

So it was, then, that this questionable fellow had become a part of *Emv*'s life and then had managed to end up drinking in her car during this particular Busk. The situation was discussed with *Emv*, now a Beloved Woman, who was upset and disappointed in the man. She decided that she would leave that evening after visiting a while longer and that he would not be allowed to return

When the fast was broken, we all sat down to feast together as we always do. We all noticed as *Emv* began nodding off, to the point she fell forward into her food. She said she was just tired and wanted some coffee, which someone gladly fetched for her. As she drank her coffee, she seemed to perk up a bit and we all returned to our meals. After eating, she walked out to her car where the drunk had been hiding out during the Busk, trying his best to finish his case of beer. I already happened to be out by the vehicles and coincidentally saw and overheard their interactions.

When he saw *Emv* drinking a cup of coffee, he immediately got upset and told her she should only drink the coffee *he* had made for her and had in *his* thermos; "they don't know what is good for you," he said, "they can't make it the way you like it, like *I* make it!" *Emv* became noticeably upset and told him that he was not going to be coming back to the grounds. She then went back – with her cup of coffee – to the rest of the community, who were still eating and socializing. As I watched, the drunk began talking to himself, nearly incoherently through his inebriated slur, and

repeatedly mentioning ‘ludes (meaning Quaaludes) and other drugs. When I heard him reference *Emv* in his drug-related ramblings, I felt that I had heard enough that it was necessary to inform the new Matriarch of the situation.

The consensus was that the entire situation seemed off – *Emv* nodding off at dinner, his angry reaction to seeing her drink coffee, his insistence she drink from *his* thermos – and that it seemed very likely that there were drugs in the thermos, which is a severe violation of grounds rules. The plan, then, was simple enough: get the thermos. At that time, one of the ceremonial leaders was a law enforcement officer and everyone figured he would know best what to do with it and who to make the proper reports to. If *Emv* was being drugged, it would seemingly constitute elder abuse and we all felt a responsibility to our former Matriarch and now Beloved Woman.

The newly installed Matriarch gave her approval for the men of the community to get the thermos. As Matriarch of a Peace Town, it is her responsibility to maintain the rules of a White Town, but she also recognized that things can sometimes escalate beyond the original intentions. She made it absolutely clear that if the men were unable to resolve the situation peacefully, if worse came to worse and they ended up having to kill him, then they had better not do it on the grounds. She refused to allow the community to violate the rules of a White Town her very first day as Matriarch. As she put it, “If you guys have to kill him, y’all better be damn sure you get him completely off the town grounds before you do. We *just* got our status back as a White Town, damn it; we AIN’T going back my first day on the job!”

The community had become a White Town again about twenty years ago, which is quite recent considering it had been a Red Town for over 200 years stemming from the incident when community members violated the very same rules for White Towns and the community, thus, lost its status as a Peace Town. Our reclaimed Peace Town status is now a core aspect of our

identity as a community and a position of pride that no one in the community wishes to disrupt nor upset. The memory of the hotheadedness and rashness that was responsible for turning the town Red a few hundred years ago is kept alive in the community; so, when tensions rise and that same hotheadedness seems eager to manifest itself once more, everyone has a deep understanding of the possible implications of their actions, not just for themselves but for the future of the community.

So, off we all went, the men of the community, intent on retrieving the thermos and taking it to the ceremonial leader who works as a Sheriff's Deputy the following day, who could then take it to the police crime lab as potential evidence in an elder abuse case. As the men approached the car, we saw that the drunk had seemingly passed out while the community was discussing his possible fate. Unfortunately, he regained consciousness right as one of the men got a hold of the thermos by reaching through the window and the drunk grabbed his arm. A struggle ensued and the man got out of the car and started threatening everyone, which resulted in him being immediately surrounded by the men of the community, myself included.

As an important piece of context here, the carrying of a firearm is not uncommon in this community – actually, I may have been the only person in the entire situation who was not carrying a handgun – and as the struggle ensued, I noticed several men repositioning themselves in order to draw, if it became necessary. Now, while I was not carrying a firearm, it is difficult to claim that I was unarmed; I have extensive training in multiple martial arts and I am more than capable of holding my own – even without a firearm – so, really, nobody was unarmed in this altercation. Furthermore, nobody knew whether the drunk was carrying a weapon or not. The situation was tense, to say the least, and getting worse. As we saw it, this fellow had likely been

giving drugs to our former Matriarch and had drunk himself into severe intoxication in direct violation of the rules for our Sacred Grounds.

Like a pack of wolves maneuvering a prey animal into a better position for the actual attack, the men began to shift around the drunk, keeping him circling around and not sure who to focus on. Quite quickly, he had been cleared away from the vehicles and into a more open field. The thermos was collected from where it had fallen to the ground when he had exited the vehicle – apparently, he had liked his own concoction a so much that he had drained it completely. All of the remaining beers were collected and brought into the midst of the gathered circle of men and thrown at the drunk's feet. He was told to pour out all the beer, and several started him along by opening and pouring cans out onto the ground at his feet. While he was visibly getting angrier and angrier, he was also clearly afraid; he could not help but realize that he was outnumbered, outgunned, and had no chance of fighting back or even of running away. A cornered dog is dangerous, and we all knew it. Tensions were nearly at a breaking point, with the man refusing to pour out the beer, when a single man from the North Arbor stepped up and guided us all back to the Path of Peace.

This particular man is known for being rather soft spoken, very nice, kind, and having a great sense of humor. He told the man in no uncertain terms that he better shape up, do what he was told by the men, shut up, and wait for *Emv* to take him from the grounds. Nobody had ever seen him as angry as he was that moment. This usually kind and cheerful man was deadly serious that evening, and he laid a scenario out to the drunk. He told him directly what he had done wrong by bringing and consuming alcohol on the grounds, and desecrating the grounds with his behavior. He then told him that he was giving him a chance that nobody else around was going to give

him. In no uncertain terms, he told the drunk, "these men who you see gathered around you, they are about to take you into the woods beyond the edge of the town, and there your life will end."

The man, as drunk as he was, listened. He poured out the remaining beers and agreed to sit in the car. At that moment, there was a collective sense of relief that the situation had been resolved peacefully. While the story that was laid out swayed the drunk, nobody had been planning to take him into the woods and murder him; yet, when he laid out that scenario we became truly aware of how closely we had allowed ourselves to come to violence. When we saw one of the men of North Arbor place himself in danger in an effort to remain non-violent, the men realized what it meant to truly walk the Path of Peace. We had been ready to raise our Red sticks – even though we all knew the consequences of such actions – but he stepped in and, remembering what he had learned from all his years of coming to the grounds, he stood in front of us and demonstrated what it means to carry a White stick, to be a warrior who walks the Peace Path.

A little over an hour later, *Emv* said her goodbyes and left with the man. Sadly, that was the last time I would see or interact with her. A young woman from the community followed them out, just to make sure they actually left, and that the drunk was not driving. She later told us, rather dismayed, that they had immediately stopped at a nearby convenience store so the man could buy another case of beer and then departed with him in the passenger seat. The man never returned to the grounds and *Emv* became harder and harder to get a hold of; an investigation into potential elder abuse found no evidence to support any charges. Unfortunately, people sometimes simply make poor decisions, even people who important to us. *Emv* was certainly a woman who was capable of making her own decisions, even poor ones. We may be able to make some sense of the course of events in hindsight, looking back and understand how things played out the way they did, but it does not make it any easier to see a Beloved Woman making poor decisions. In

2018, Hurricane Michael caused a lot of damage to her home and she became ill as a result; she died without anyone in the community having much idea what had happened.

Our new Matriarch has brought our community together and the community is holding strong, even in the midst of a raging, worldwide pandemic, escalating racial tensions, and an increasing threat of political and ideological violence, which are wreaking havoc on American society. The transition in the Matriarchy, which was followed by the naming of a new Maker of Medicine, has been a lot of change for the community in a short amount of time, and has certainly caused some discombobulation. Not everything has gone entirely smoothly.

Hurricane Michael damaged several buildings of the *talwv* and destroyed the South Arbor – it even demolished the trailer I had helped put a metal roof on all those years before. A *talwv* is not the buildings, it is the community. The rubble was cleared away, the South Arbor rebuilt, and the buildings repaired. The community weathered another storm, and gained new insights. For years, there had been an increasing fear of what would happen to the community when the elders, who had led for so long, were no longer able to do so. We had worried whether there would be others to step up and be able to fill those roles. Well, there were, and they did; our worries were alleviated, for now. Now we must prepare for the next time, taking what we have learned to heart, so that the Busk may continue.

Mvskoke-Nene momis komet yvkvpvkkeyetos **(We keep walking the *Mvskoke* Path)**

The title of this dissertation was carefully chosen and, just as the *Mvskoke-Nene* itself consists of layers upon layers, although I have translated *Mvskoke-Nene momis komet yvkvpvkkeyetos* as "we keep walking the *Mvskoke* Path," the agglutinative nature of the *Mvskoke* language allows for many layers of meaning to be expressed. It is important, then, to explain some of these layers.

First, the *Mvskoke-Nene* describes a way of life and living, a way of being; it is more than simply a path that takes a person from one destination to another, which should be clear by this point in the dissertation.

Momis komet is a periphrastic gerund phrase that translates as persevering or sticking to it to the end. It is derived from the two verbs: *mometv* (to happen; to be so; to do or to engage in an abstract activity) and *kometv* (to think, believe, assume; to think about; to want something or to do something, to hope for, to want (of someone); to try to do something). Thus, the concepts of believing, thinking, hoping, wanting, and doing are all similarly bound up in this phrase, which gives the phrase *momis kometv* a deeper nuance than is expressed by the word "persevering."

Then, of course, there is the verb of the sentence, *yvkvpvkkeyetos*, which is conjugated from *yvkvpvketv* – the triplural (three or more) form of *yvkvpetv* (to walk). Using the triplural form also infers a subject within the verb itself (i.e., the subject is the group that is walking). The verb is in the first person singular (*-ey-*), further indicating that the speaker is part of the subject group of three or more. It is in the transitive case, which essentially bestows agency on the verb subject (indicated by the addition of a *-k-* to the verb stem: *yvkvpvk**k**eyetos*). It is also in the durative case (*-e-* following the verb stem: *yvkvpvkk**e**yetos*); however, the durative case is actually assumed by the pronunciation. The ongoing, regularity of the verb action, then, is emphasized by lengthening and nasalizing that particular vowel. Finally, the auxiliary verb, *-os* (from *ometv*, to be), is used as a way of reinforcing the agency of the subject, which is similar to the transitive case (i.e., we are walking rather than we walk). However, the use of *-os* also signals a directedness of that agency towards the object of the verb (i.e., the *Mvskoke-Nene*).

When all the pieces of the phrase are assembled, then, we can see that there is more being said than "we keep walking the *Mvskoke-Nene*." There is an inference that we are persistent in

our walking of the *Mvskoke-Nene*; we are sticking to it till the end. As we keep walking it, it becomes more familiar to us and it becomes a thing that we do regularly – and we might further nasalize that durative vowel to indicate that it has become a substantial part of our identities. The reinforcement of agency in the verb also infers that walking the *Mvskoke-Nene* is something that is always conscious and purposeful, even if we do it regularly; it always requires effort. Each participant in the Busk who puts in that effort, coming back again and again, shows how much it has helped them in each of their own lives. There is a collective sense of confidence and hope that if we keep at it, the *Mvskoke-Nene* will help us make it through whatever challenges we face. We certainly know it has helped in the past because this community has made it through thousands of years changes; wars, diseases, racism, religious zealotry, poverty, starvation, and so many other hostilities and hardships have been survived – after all, we are still here.

We can also see another inference made in the statement, *Mvskoke-Nene momis komet yvkvpvkkeyetos,* which is the *Mvskoke-Nene* itself continues to persevere and to persist *because* we continue to keep walking it. A worldview has meaning because it is held and negotiated by someone; teachings transmit no knowledge if nobody is around to learn them. One of the largest threats to the community is a lack of participation of younger generations. There is deep concern that there will simply not be enough people learning from the elders and the ceremonial leaders about the community; there is so much to know about Medicine, history, language, ceremony, and even having a sense of humor that is required to keep the community going and keep the Busk alive… it is to this end that I offer my work as an anthropologist, of course, but also as a member of the community, husband to Creek wife, step-father to a Creek daughter. I have tied myself to this community and certainly share the fear of this particular threat and strive to be of some use to the community in confronting them. Yet, I am strengthened and comforted by the

community and by my family; for it is through those very relationships that we are encouraged not to give up, to keep going and learn as much as we can; to keep doing what we are supposed to be doing.

Another threat, and quite possibly the largest, is climate change. The calendars are no longer working with the natural world as they have for thousands of years. Harvest Busks are happening before a killing frost – if there even *is* a killing frost. Entire ecosystems are changing as keystone species (like the apple snail, for example) are dying, which causes a total collapse of food chains. We hear much less about the unbelievably important apple snail than we do about oysters; yet, the reasons for many of the recent problems with oysters stem from the same contributing factor of ongoing global climate change… our own actions. Additionally, there have been rising sea levels, increased frequencies and intensities of wildfires and hurricanes, and new diseases that are decimating entire species. Blights affecting dogwoods, one of the seven Sacred Trees of the *Mvskoke*, have been a profoundly felt example, yet it is simply one of many, including those viruses and diseases that have affected humans in particular, like West Nile, various skin eating bacteria, brain eating amoebas and other parasites, and of course the novel coronavirus causing Covid-19.

Whether the threats posed by climate change and the actions of humans recklessly wreaking havoc upon the natural world can be negotiated and the community will continue to survive still remains to be seen. There are those of us who will continue, persistently, and attempt to pass on what we know to others in the hope that it may persevere. It is hope firmly rooted in a history of people facing devasting loss and unbelievable hardships and managing to adapt to the situations, to keep going. The ceremonial beliefs and practices that bind this community together have

weathered many storms and there is a choice that must be made by each and every generation: will we allow this way of life to die or will we figure out a way to make it work?

Creeks are practical people. As the Spanish *entrada* brought disease and death, it also brought iron cooking pots, new cloths, livestock, and firearms… all of which were just as readily adopted and in a very short amount of time became just as ubiquitous as beads and buttons – which were and still are a traditional form of payment for a Maker of Medicine. Yet, we live in and between two societies. We must all negotiate a modern society that hyperfocuses on the individual, on the self, and on the ego; a society that, all too often, truly seems to embody what Christopher Lasch (1979) called a Culture of Narcissism. In such times, it is easy for traditional group identities to become somewhat muddled and confusing. There are, simultaneously, elements of feeling a deep connectedness to the group and feelings of disconnectedness, isolation. Many in the community members express feelings that what we do is somehow less impactful than it was in the past. The expansiveness of transformation that has occurred in the past five hundred years seems far too vast to fully understand and the imbalances caused by humans simply seem too much to mitigate by our actions.

We know things are very different than they were in the past and in some cases, such as the Spanish Flu, we know how and why the changes happened. We know that North Arbor took over the responsibilities of the Bear Clan because all the members of Bear Clan had died because those stories are still told. Telling those stories bridges a necessary gap between the practices of the Busk and the traditional stories. In the traditional stories, the First Fire was tended by *Nvkose*, Bear, who hibernated and allowed the Fire to go out; this was why Bear Clan traditionally lit the Fire but were not responsible for keeping it going during a Busk. North Arbor now holds this role in the Busk due to the Spanish Flu. In other cases, we do not know the cultural and social

ramifications of events like the fall of the Mississippian centers nearly a millennium ago, yet we can be sure they were incredibly transformative. We also know that people adapted and kept going; they persisted.

There are many threads connecting the present to the past. It is as though we are participating in the weaving of a vast, cosmic tapestry. Each person takes the many complex threads and bits of material that represent their own experiences, their own actions and interactions, spinning it into a strand of yarn that is their own subjectivity, their own consciousness, and which is always being woven directly into that tapestry. As anthropologists, we are tasked with investigating that complex tapestry, to try to make sense of the complexity. Yet, we often find that no matter how close we look, the complexity does not get less. Actually, it is quite the opposite. The more we learn, the more we understand, the more we realize how much there is left to be understood… "there are always more layers" – as the ceremonial leaders are so fond of saying. However, there are patterns or designs in the unbelievable complexity of this tapestry that are, as elders have often quipped: "distinctly Creek."

As we look back, viewing older and older parts of the tapestry, there is less and less left – sometimes only tatters, sometimes even less. Of course, time itself wears down much on its own; yet, particular events have had devastating effects. The effects of disease, genocide, forced assimilation, certainly destroyed entire sections of the great tapestry. What survives are the patterns, reflected in complex design of the tapestry through descendant generations maintaining a way of being, thinking and living. The origins of the design, the source of that which is Creek, may have long since faded into such obscurity but each generation that keeps walking the *Mvskoke-Nene*, each individual person that participates in the Busk and takes to heart the lessons

they learn there, keeps the community ceremonies of the Busk alive and continues that pattern that is distinctly Creek.

The creative process of weaving this great cosmic tapestry connects us to the past. As we can continue traditional practices and keep telling traditional stories, we also continue those beautiful designs that encompass the lives, memories, and experiences of our ancestors. Those who walk the *Mvskoke-Nene* are gathering the raw ingredients and bringing them together, spinning them into a yarn that is woven into the tapestry through participation in Busk. Yet, it is never simply replication; any exact duplication of a past design would be stale, dead, bereft of true meaning in the present and without value. There is always an aspect of the present that shapes the weaving of any culture's designs.

There are also myriad personal, unique designs that each individual weaves into the tapestry. For example, while it was a particular and distinct weaving that brought meaning to the images carved on shell hundreds and hundreds of years ago, it is in the present, through the work of modern artists that brings those images into modern shell carving and presents it to modern audiences. Even when the same images are engraved or etched into the same shell medium using the same techniques, the meanings are still shaped by the present, for the shell carvings bear layers of meaning that have accumulated over a thousand years and visibly reflect that past.

We are told that the shell carvings of old were mnemonic devices, used for relaying all of the accumulated knowledge of the ancestors through storytelling, and they are certainly still used as such today. However, the incorporation of new techniques of engraving and etching shell and the use of new tools has also expanded the art form into a means of self-expression for shell carvers. While artists often still replicate ancient designs or use ancient styles, especially in the making of ceremonial items like shell cups, there is also a flowering of creativity that goes far beyond mere

replication. From the styles or images that are used to the shell chosen for use as the medium of their art, shell carvers are telling modern stories in this ancient art form.

There are unique creations, which are absolutely of the present, and yet we find the carvings nonetheless connect us to that past, reflecting that past, and our connection with it – even while presenting the present. The past informs our understanding and gives depth of meaning but we come to our understanding of ourselves in the present. The reasons for adorning oneself with a shell carving are extremely complex. They represent a connectedness to a particular history, a particular community, and a particular way of thinking, but they are also unique and highly personal connections between the shell carvings and the people wearing them. Wearing a shell carving is often reflective of a particular individual's complex, myriad feelings and relationships, a way of expressing and reinforcing one's identity.

For example, my wife and I were gifted a matching set of shell gorgets on our wedding day by the artist, Christopher Thompson, who had designed and carved them specifically for us. The gorgets incorporate various traditional designs, as well as stylized depictions of our community names. Male and female sassafras trees rise from a Muscogee Cross (see Bolfing 2012: 66-67), where they intertwine in a helix, like the smoke rising from the Sacred Fire. A strong wind is blowing and the entire diamond-shaped piece is bordered with a petaloid motif. Altogether, these designs tell the story of our relationship to each other and to the community, thus continuing the traditional function of these art pieces as mnemonic devices. Yet, these shell carvings are also personally meaningful – and very thoughtful – gifts from a friend, which are also magnificent works of art.

Our Wedding Gorgets. Photo by author. Shell carvings by Christopher Thompson (Muscogee Nation of Florida).

Of course, shell carving is simply one example of many. Modern artists are using a variety of traditional media to create art that tells distinctly modern stories, including fingerweaving, basket making, the making of items like ballsticks and rattles, and in the crafting of clothing, such as the men's ribbon shirts and the women's patchwork skirts. Patchwork is a well-known example of a culturally distinctive clothing style that is also artistically expressive, and though it is most often associated with the Seminole and Miccosukee peoples, patchwork is actually quite ubiquitous in the sartorial attire of southeastern Natives. Choices of colors and patterns used in the patchwork designs allow makers of patchwork to incorporate – both figuratively and literally – many layers of meaning into their works of art, using styles and designs that both connect them and the art they create to the past while also serving as a vessel to explore their own identities. Art, in its

many forms, is – and likely always has been – a way to help us understand ourselves, to explore and express our feelings about who we are.

Understanding who we are is by no means a simple process. While we may often feel like we know who we are or who we are not, it is also an ongoing investigation, a process of discovering who we are by learning more about and connecting to our pasts, by connecting and interacting with others in the community, by participating in social and ceremonial practices, and through the relationships we form with others, especially in the time between the Busks. There is also a creative aspect to this process: we can make and remake ourselves.

We keep the memories, experiences, and knowledge of our ancestors alive by continuing what they did, what they helped to continue: the traditional stories, the ceremonial Busks, and the *Mvskoke-Nene*. Yet, when we do, we must reconstitute, reconstruct, and reconfigure the designs and patterns left behind by our ancestors in order to mold them to fit the needs of the community at this time, to fit who we are now – just as future generations will have do with what we leave behind ourselves. Community members have often said that "we are doing things the way we've always done them, because that is just how it is done" – like the old mantra says: if it works, don't fix it. There is obvious and observable efficacy in these practices, otherwise there would be little reason for generation after generation to persist in maintaining and passing on this way of living and thinking – this *way of being* – that is distinctly Creek.

This way of being helps community members understand what it means to be a good person and to do the right thing. There is a very real, emotional connection between the participants of the Busk and the actual practice of the Busk ceremonial. Participants return because it feels right; this is the way we have always done it. The efficacy of the practices of the Busk are readily self-

apparent: we are still here. Despite genocide, forced relocation, civil war, Jim Crow, termination policy, and constant racial strife, we are still here.

There is confidence, or at the very least, there is hope that this tenacity, cultivated by walking the *Mvskoke-Nene,* will help us pull through the raging coronavirus pandemic killing millions, through the current racial strife and the political tensions, and the effects of climate change that we are, even now, having to wrestle with. We can look back and see that we have weathered pandemics before, as well as racial strife even worse than today, and although a sitting president inciting insurrection may be unprecedented, we know that previous generations have made it through times that were even more unprecedented and certainly far more violent.

So, while those generations to come will certainly have to contend with their own unique challenges, it is also likely they will have to negotiate many of the same problems and threats to our existence that have plagued many, many before us. The community has persisted in walking the *Mvskoke-Nene* and it stands to reason that the Busk and the traditions passed down by the ancestors helped; each individual of the community has expressed their own, personal way of manifesting the teachings of the Busk in their life, which has helped them through trying times in their own lives. It seems that if we keep doing what we are supposed to be doing, then we have a good chance at making it through our times. Much of the hope I have, then, is for those who come next – "those who are going to take the reins" as one of the ceremonial leaders said; it is a hope that they too will learn and keep alive what we have learned and continue to keep alive.

There are seven chapters in this dissertation, which holds important symbolic meaning; seven is a number of wholeness and community within the symbolism of the *Mvskoke-Nene.* It seems right, then, to have seven chapters. The most challenging part of writing this has been turning a circle into a straight line, taking what is essentially circular and cyclical and somehow making it

linear, crafting a narrative as a vehicle for transmitting as much information as I can about what I have researched. I have taken more than the number seven into this structural process.

Just as we continually circle around the Sacred Fire as we dance on the square grounds of a *paskofv*, the chapters circle around the broader themes of this dissertation. With each chapter, I presented different aspects of the teachings of the Busk and *Mvskoke-Nene*. The teachings of the Busk and the worldview of the *Mvskoke-Nene* are reflexive; they are informed and reinforced by one another. When community members apply the teachings of the Busk in their daily lives, it influences and changes their worldview, changing how they see and interact with the social and natural worlds around. As they continue walking the *Mvskoke-Nene*, they continually reinterpret and come to deeper understandings of the teachings of the Busk – as a ceremonial leader once said, "there are always more layers."

As community members continue to internalize and further apply what they have learned, the path begins to become more discernible, more recognizable – familiar even – but it is never easy and never travelled without effort. The *Mvskoke-Nene* requires a willingness to learn and to pay attention; it requires persistence and being practical – after all, "Creeks are practical people…" Perhaps above all, though, it requires approaching life with a good heart and finding happiness in the fact that things are the way they are supposed to be: *Mvto*!

'Pofvnka Mvto! Hesakatv'messe Mvto! Yahola Mvto! Hokte Mvto!

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APPENDIX

IRB Protocol Approval (2015-16)

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

July 20, 2015

MEMORANDUM

TO:	Christopher Bolfing Justin Nolan
FROM:	Ro Windwalker IRB Coordinator
RE:	New Protocol Approval
IRB Protocol #:	15-07-007
Protocol Title:	*Mvskoke-Nene momet Ekvnv Hvtke en Talwv: Ritual, Practice, and Belief amongst a Creek Ceremonial Community*
Review Type:	☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB
Approved Project Period:	Start Date: 07/20/2015 Expiration Date: 07/19/2016

Your protocol has been approved by the IRB. Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. If you wish to continue the project past the approved project period (see above), you must submit a request, using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. This form is available from the IRB Coordinator or on the Research Compliance website (https://vpred.uark.edu/units/rscp/index.php). As a courtesy, you will be sent a reminder two months in advance of that date. However, failure to receive a reminder does not negate your obligation to make the request in sufficient time for review and approval. Federal regulations prohibit retroactive approval of continuation. Failure to receive approval to continue the project prior to the expiration date will result in Termination of the protocol approval. The IRB Coordinator can give you guidance on submission times.

This protocol has been approved for 25 participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

109 MLKG • 1 University of Arkansas • Fayetteville, AR 72701-1201 • (479) 575-2208 • Fax (479) 575-6527 • Email irb@uark.edu

APPENDIX

IRB Protocol Approval (2016-17)

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

August 4, 2016

MEMORANDUM

TO:	Christopher Boffing Justin Nolan
FROM:	Ro Windwalker IRB Coordinator
RE:	PROJECT CONTINUATION
IRB Protocol #:	15-07-007
Protocol Title:	*Mvskoke-Nene momet Ekvnv Hvtke en Talwv: Ritual, Practice, and Belief amongst a Creek Ceremonial Community*
Review Type:	☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB
Previous Approval Period:	Start Date: 07/20/2015 Expiration Date: 07/19/2016
New Expiration Date:	07/19/2017

Your request to extend the referenced protocol has been approved by the IRB. If at the end of this period you wish to continue the project, you must submit a request using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. Failure to obtain approval for a continuation on or prior to this new expiration date will result in termination of the protocol and you will be required to submit a new protocol to the IRB before continuing the project. Data collected past the protocol expiration date may need to be eliminated from the dataset should you wish to publish. Only data collected under a currently approved protocol can be certified by the IRB for any purpose.

This protocol has been approved for 25 total participants. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more than this number, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

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APPENDIX

IRB Protocol Approval (2017-18)

UNIVERSITY OF ARKANSAS

Office of Research Compliance
Institutional Review Board

July 7, 2017

MEMORANDUM

TO:	Christopher Boffing Justin Nolan
FROM:	Ro Windwalker IRB Coordinator
RE:	PROJECT CONTINUATION
IRB Protocol #:	15-07-007
Protocol Title:	*Mvskoke-Nene momet Ekvnv Hvtke en Talwv: Ritual, Practice, and Belief amongst a Creek Ceremonial Community*
Review Type:	☒ EXEMPT ☐ EXPEDITED ☐ FULL IRB
Previous Approval Period:	Start Date: 07/20/2015 Expiration Date: 07/19/2017
New Expiration Date:	07/19/2018

Your request to extend the referenced protocol has been approved by the IRB. If at the end of this period you wish to continue the project, you must submit a request using the form *Continuing Review for IRB Approved Projects*, prior to the expiration date. Failure to obtain approval for a continuation on or prior to this new expiration date will result in termination of the protocol and you will be required to submit a new protocol to the IRB before continuing the project. Data collected past the protocol expiration date may need to be eliminated from the dataset should you wish to publish. Only data collected under a currently approved protocol can be certified by the IRB for any purpose.

This protocol is closed to enrollment. If you wish to make *any* modifications in the approved protocol, including enrolling more participants, you must seek approval *prior to* implementing those changes. All modifications should be requested in writing (email is acceptable) and must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact me at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

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APPENDIX

IRB Approved Consent Form (2015-16)

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Mvskoke-nene momet Ekvnv Hvtke enTalwv:
Ritual, Practice, and Belief amongst a Creek Ceremonial Community

Principal Researcher: Christopher B. Bolfing
Faculty Advisor: Justin M. Nolan

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of participating in the Busk ceremonial on participants' perceptions of and interactions with the natural and social world(s). You are being asked to participate in this research because of your involvement in the Ekvnv Hvtke community; all participation in this research project is voluntary and your identity will remain anonymous. Your participation will consist of having conversations with the principal researcher and allowing him to participate in your daily activities if possible, and only when doing so will not place any burden upon you, your family, or your job. Activities related to foodways or traditional practices are of particular interest.

The research will be conducted during a year of fieldwork from August 2015 to August 2016, after which time the collected research will be filed in a secure area by the Principal Researcher for future reference in ongoing research amongst the community. If you give permission, some conversations may be recording using a digital audio recording device and transcribed later; all recordings and transcriptions will remain in a secure area by the principal researcher. All information will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by applicable State and Federal law. If you do not want to be in this study, you may refuse to participate; also, you may refuse to participate at any time during the study.

There are no anticipated risks involved in participating in this research process. At the conclusion of the study, you will have the right to request feedback about the results. For information, or to address any concerns that you may have, you may contact the Principal Researcher or his Faculty Advisor, as listed below. You may also contact the University of Arkansas Research Compliance office, listed below, if you have questions about your rights as a participant, or to discuss any concerns about, or problems with the research.

Principal Researcher:
Christopher B. Bolfing
PhD Candidate
Department of Anthropology
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701

Faculty Advisor:
Justin M. Nolan, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Anthropology
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701

Research Compliance:
Ro Windwalker, CIP
IRB Coordinator
University of Arkansas
109 MLKG
Fayetteville, AR 72701
Email: irb@uark.edu
Phone: (479) 575-2208

I have read the above statement and have been able to ask questions and express concerns, which have been satisfactorily responded to by the investigator. I understand the purpose of the study as well as the potential benefits and risks that are involved. I understand that participation is voluntary. I understand that significant new findings developed during this research will be shared with the participant. I understand that no rights have been waived by signing this consent form and have been given a copy of the consent form.

_____
Signature of research participant

IRB #15-07-007
Approved: 07/20/2015
Expires: 07/19/2016

APPENDIX

IRB Approved Consent Form (2016-17)

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Mvskoke-nene momet Ekvnv Hvtke enTalwv:
Ritual, Practice, and Belief amongst a Creek Ceremonial Community

Principal Researcher: Christopher B. Bolfing
Faculty Advisor: Justin M. Nolan

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of participating in the Busk ceremonial on participants' perceptions of and interactions with the natural and social world(s). You are being asked to participate in this research because of your involvement in the Ekvnv Hvtke community; all participation in this research project is voluntary and your identity will remain anonymous. Your participation will consist of having conversations with the principal researcher and allowing him to participate in your daily activities if possible, and only when doing so will not place any burden upon you, your family, or your job. Activities related to foodways or traditional practices are of particular interest.

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Principal Researcher:
Christopher B. Bolfing
PhD Candidate
Department of Anthropology
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701

Faculty Advisor:
Justin M. Nolan, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Anthropology
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, AR 72701

Research Compliance:
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_____
Signature of research participant

IRB #15-07-007
Approved: 06/03/2016
Expires: 07/19/2017