



# Living in the Land of Death: The Choctaw Nation, 1830-1860 (American Indian Studies)

*Donna L. Akers*

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With the Indian Removal Act of 1830, the Choctaw people began their journey over the Trail of Tears from their homelands in Mississippi to the new lands of the Choctaw Nation. Suffering a death rate of nearly 20 percent due to exposure, disease, mismanagement, and fraud, they limped into Indian Territory, or, as they knew it, the Land of the Dead (the route taken by the souls of Choctaw people after death on their way to the Choctaw afterlife). Their first few years in the new nation affirmed their name for the land, as hundreds more died from whooping cough, floods, starvation, cholera, and smallpox.

*Living in the Land of the Dead* depicts the story of Choctaw survival, and the evolution of the Choctaw people in their new environment. Culturally, over time, their adaptation was one of homesteads and agriculture, eventually making them self-sufficient in the rich new lands of Indian Territory. Along the Red River and other major waterways several Choctaw families of mixed heritage built plantations, and imported large crews of slave labor to work cotton fields. They developed a sub-economy based on interaction with the world market. However, the vast majority of Choctaws continued with their traditional subsistence economy that was easily adapted to their new environment.

The immigrant Choctaws did not, however, move into land that was vacant. The U.S. government, through many questionable and some outright corrupt extralegal maneuvers, chose to believe it had gained title through negotiations with some of the peoples whose homelands and hunting grounds formed Indian Territory. Many of these indigenous peoples reacted furiously to the incursion of the Choctaws onto their rightful lands. They threatened and attacked the Choctaws and other immigrant Indian Nations for years. Intruding on others' rightful homelands, the farming-based Choctaws, through occupation and economics, disrupted the traditional hunting economy practiced by the Southern Plains Indians, and contributed to the demise of the Plains ways of life.

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