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## Issue Brief: African Americans and Native Americans

### **Key Words (4-6)**

African Americans, Native Americans, descent, origin, Cherokee

### **Description (2 sentences)**

This issue brief examines the relationship between African Americans and Native Americans in the United States. It discusses the implementation of a blood quantification system whereby persons of African American and Native American heritage are denied not only the benefits but more importantly membership to these Native American groups.

### **Key Points (4-6)**

- Individuals of both African American and Native American background cannot claim their Native American heritage without first quantifying the percentage of Native American blood they possess
- Black Cherokee Freedmen, the former slaves of Cherokee Native Americans, are not recognized as part of the tribe and disenfranchised, yet historically and culturally they pertain to the Cherokee Tribe
- The Bureau of Indian Affairs allows for each tribe to define membership, which in some cases deliberately excludes Native Americans with any African American blood
- This emulates the exclusion of mulattos or persons of African American and White background to the White community in accordance with the one-drop rule

### **Images (2-4)**



This is Congressman John Lewis who honored Chief Chad Smith at a ceremony, who implemented the disenfranchisement of the Black Cherokee Indians. As a former Civil Rights activist in the feud between the Whites versus the African Americans, his veneration of a man who denied African Americans the right to vote in the Cherokee tribe is contradictory.



Current Day Black Cherokee demonstrating for acknowledgement by the Cherokee Tribe.

**Brief (500-700 words)**

Historically, African Americans and Native Americans were ethnoracial groups that were subjugated by white Europeans. The Native Americans were robbed of their land, grouped together as one, and forcibly relocated to significantly smaller regions. The African Americans were seized from the motherland, sold to the colonizers of the New World, and exploited for labor. Although often omitted from historical accounts of African American and Native American history, it is evident that there was a twofold relationship amongst the two groups—that of enslavement and that of intermarriage.

Fearing the possibility of a backlash against the reigns of oppression, the white colonizers pit the African Americans and the Native Americans against each other. Individually, each group comprised of far more individuals than the white populace. The Europeans did more than just divide and conquer; they divided the groups and in some instances ordered them to control one another with the use of force. Despite the fact that whites had used African Americans to

crush any potential Native American uprisings, the fact that the Cherokee tribe in particular had black slaves demonstrates which group prevailed in this battle.

African Americans who were once the slaves of the Cherokee are now referred to as Black Cherokee Freedmen. These individuals were raised and lived according to Cherokee culture long after slavery was terminated. The Trail of Tears was the forced exodus of the Cherokee people and alongside them were their slaves. This tragic journey was one they both embarked on, sharing the history of objectification in which they were removed and moved to a new land is what unites the two. In essence, the former slaves are Cherokee, despite the lack of Cherokee “blood.” Eventually many of these Black Cherokee Freedmen intermarried with the Cherokee, which explains the large amounts of African Americans with Native American ancestry in contemporary society.

While Native Americans of the Five Civilized Tribes, which include the Cherokee, the Chickasaw, the Choctaw, the Creek, and the Seminole tribes granted African Americans citizenship to their tribes upon the emancipation of slaves nationwide, this was merely by law but not in practice. Similar to the long history of discrimination and difficulty to exercise the newly granted rights nationwide, blacks were marginalized on the plantations. Cherokee leader, Chief Chad Smith submitted a proposal that was passed and managed to swiftly disenfranchise a large number of Black Cherokee Freedmen.

The marginalization of the Black Cherokee Freedmen, through the deprivation of citizenship and the benefits that come with it, along with the need to quantify the degree of Indian blood offers a striking resemblance to the relationship among whites and blacks in the United States. The intolerance of mixed African Americans and Native Americans is similar to the exclusion of mixed African Americans and whites, which was driven by the one-drop rule. In

essence, the stripping of a connection to their Native American ancestry, figuratively created a Trail of Tears for these mixed African Americans and Native Americans, making them feel as though they no longer belonged.

While the European Americans no longer arrange the state of affairs amongst these two groups, the disunity of African Americans and Native Americans persists. As minority groups, it would make sense for them to bond to achieve potential collective goals and have strength in numbers but this is not the case. The Native American preoccupation with “purity” and decision to ignore those who wish to claim partial heritage is a big impediment.

### **General References (3-5)**

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