

Collectanea

Choctaw Myths

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Discussion of genres in the abstract—that is, without a particular myth, corpus, or community in mind—can often stray from the material such genres are supposed to represent. And while no one myth may ever satisfy all the boundaries tentatively placed to define it, it is nonetheless useful to remember the texts themselves, to keep a concrete example within easy reach to keep us from straying too far.

The myths that follow are intended to serve as just that: simple reminders that the text remains important. This is perhaps a heavy burden, but by no means are these myths intended to be representative of anything more than what they are: stories told today by Choctaw storytellers in a multitude of variations and to a variety of people.

All five storytellers are living today in Mississippi, their native homeland. As in the past, these storytellers are both men and women, for whom the role of storyteller is only one of the many roles each fills.

Terry Ben is the superintendent for the Choctaw school system, which includes seven elementary and middle schools and one high school. He is also a history teacher, both inside and outside of the classroom, where he focuses on Choctaw oral history, material often ignored in formal education. Melford Farve is a councilman for Tucker, one of the seven established Choctaw communities in Mississippi. In addition to leading the Tucker community dance troupe, Melford has written and produced a video based on community legends of “hopaii”—doctors whose intent is to harm, rather than help. Such stories abound today, some as legends, some as memorates, and some, thanks to Melford, as good horror movies.

Rosalee Steve is known throughout the Choctaw community, and even throughout the state and across the country, as an eminent storyteller. She is as likely to tell stories at a local middle school as at a conference in Arizona. When she’s not telling stories, she is painting, beading, sewing, organizing church events, or picking healing herbs for herself and her neighbors. Harry Polk similarly wears the many hats of a consummate artist, carving rabbit sticks and blow guns with members of younger generations of Choctaw at

the tribe's Bilingual Education summer camp. During "nap time," he entertains the children with the stories he has heard and learned throughout his life. Jeffie Solomon, too, remembers the old stories from her youth, and narrates both these and more recent events with the same practiced verbal art. While she sits with other women, snapping peas or weaving baskets, they tell stories to pass the time, keeping their minds as engaged as their hands.

These summaries cannot possibly provide an adequate picture of the storytellers, nor can similarly brief notes completely contextualize the stories below. But attempts at both are necessary to facilitate an initial approach to the material, and to recognize these stories as individual creations, despite their larger communal value. As such I have added brief contextual information for each story. This information is not uniform; rather, I have chosen data that seems pertinent for each tale, and each tale's performance.

It should be noted that most Choctaw stories do not have fixed titles, and these stories are no different. Nevertheless titles are useful in a printed collection to identify particular stories of interest to the reader, as well as facilitate later reference to them. The titles here are suggested either by words from the story, or by the main persona in the story. One other note about the format of the stories should be mentioned: I have employed the double dash to mark those places where the storyteller paused and began a phrase or sentence anew.

The following five stories are, of course, only a small sampling of the myths of the Choctaw. A more complete collection of Choctaw tales from the past and present is currently under review by the tribe. Greater contextual information and a more thorough discussion of these stories is provided in that work.



MIGRATION MYTH and EMERGENCE MYTH

The Choctaw have two distinct stories of the origin of their people. One describes their migration to Mississippi from their homeland in the West; the other, how the Choctaw were created in Mississippi. Many Choctaw have noted the discrepancy between the two stories, but have not been particularly troubled by it. After all, myths interpreted symbolically, spiritually, socially, pragmatically, or affectively need not be contradictory.

Both myths place the Nanih Waiya mound at the center of their stories and in the center of their homeland. The mound remains visible today in Winston County, Mississippi. Yet like the myths, there are two distinct mounds. One, the state park mound, bears a state park sign declaring it to be the

Nanih Waiya of myth. However, most Choctaw consider the cave mound, a mile away in the swamps, to be the true Nanih Waiya.

I have included Terry Ben's version of the migration myth and Melford Farve's version of the emergence myth. Both men know, and tell both myths.¹

Migration Myth — Terry Ben, 1996²

You've probably heard, or maybe read stories in the Choctaw books and all that, about—maybe a long time ago—about how Choctaw ancestors came to settle around in this area and so forth.

Supposedly a long time ago, there were two brothers. And one was Choctaw, and one was Chickasaw. Came from the far west. And they were guided by a sacred pole. And every night, you know, where they made a camp, you know, whichever direction the pole leaned, you know, the whole tribe would follow. They were going to a new land of opportunity, a better place to live, and so forth. So, that's the way they were led.

And eventually they came to the cave mound area and spent the night there, and so forth. And the next day, instead of the pole leaning in a certain direction, the pole remained standing the next day. And so that was a sign to the tribe that, you know, this was the promised land—where the Choctaws were supposed to live, whatever. And so they made provisions to stay.

And then, supposedly, at that point, there was a big old storm that separated the two big groups. Chickasaw got separated and stayed on the other side where the water was. Choctaw's group stayed on this side.

And later on, because they got separated, Chickasaw, he took his group and moved kind of further north. Hence, you know, that's where the Chickasaw Indian nation settled in, and so forth, in north Mississippi area primarily. And of course the Choctaws stayed in this area, around the cave mound area.

And supposedly around that time period, they brought the bones of their dead ancestors with them and they began a burial process, re-burying the bones or whatever. And over the years, it just grew and grew and grew and it culminated into the present mound as we know it, as far as the cave mound area. Of course, over the years, through 1986, it's not as big as it used to be because of maybe treasure hunters dig around and so forth; because erosion—time, erosion, and so forth. So, that's how the cave mound came to be.

And if you followed along in what they call a migration theory, that's how Nanih Waiya came to be; that's how the Choctaw and Chickasaw came to be as such.

Emergence Myth — Melford Farve, 1997⁹

The other one I've heard is the Creator made some people out of mud, you know, from the cave. And put them out and they were all the tribes almost. You know, each one of the mud people was to represent certain tribes. And they would walk up, after getting dried, get up and walk away. Get up and walk away and I think finally, the last one was a Choctaw and didn't want to leave. They wanted to stay close to the Creator and live there.

So that's how.

That's the one creation theory I've heard.



THE EAGLE STORY

A number of people I spoke with remembered fragments of this story, heard often as a cautionary tale to scare children from straying too far from home. Rosalee Steve's version, however, focuses attention on the parents of the missing children, rather than the children themselves. Further, it is worth noting Rosalee Steve's use of tenses, which shifts from the past to the continued action of the future, especially as it suggests negotiation between a mythic past and a contemporary reality.

The Eagle Story — Rosalee Steve 1998⁴

This is about the eagle story. This is a long, long time ago.

And it used to happen, that Indian people used to live in teepee houses; not a log house or a house like we're living in; they were teepee houses. And the big old eagle used to live in the wood. And they — watching the children, especially crawling baby.

And when the mama and papa's not watching, just a few minutes, the eagle will fly and come get the baby and take him up in the sky. And they will eat the baby while they fly into the sky. And the bones will — dropping down, back on earth.

And the grandmas and the grandpas and mamas, they will follow the bones, until the eagle fly way up, somewhere, and they can't even follow them no more.



THE SKELETON GHOST

Harry Polk told this story to a group of twenty or so six- to eight-year olds at the Choctaw Bilingual Education Summer Camp, a camp whose goal is to reinforce the use of the Choctaw language among the tribe's youth. The children had been clamoring for "ghost stories" and "something scary." Harry Polk obliged. In keeping with the goals of the camp, he told the story in Choctaw. What follows is a translation by a native speaker, Maggie Chitto.

The Skeleton Ghost — Harry Polk 1997⁵

They used to paint diamond rattlesnake designs on their face. That was a sign of war and that's how they fought. Even in ball games, that's how the Indian used to be.

They went hunting with bow and arrow.

And he went hunting. He killed a deer.

And a deer hit him and killed him with his horn.

And he laid there.

He had put his gun by a tree. And his gun was still there rotten. The man's bones were laying there.

Another man saw him. He stood looking at the bones, and the gun.

He went a little ways and set up camp. It was getting dark so he started a fire.

The skeleton came over. [Small laugh from Harry]

The man got frightened when he saw the skeleton. He was sitting on the edge of a log when he was touched.

The skeleton sat on the other side.

The man was sitting this way [indicates straight up] when he [the skeleton] sat at the edge. He was sitting like this [indicates very stiff posture]. He slowly turned his eyes this way, and the skeleton was getting closer. So he would avoid looking. Later, he slowly moved his eyes again and the skeleton moved closer again.

Before he got closer to him — then the skeleton came.

He looked and saw the bones, and he ran into the woods. He entered the forest; and then the man sat and wondered, "What am I to do?"

The dog was lying down sleeping. The dog never spoke before. The dog said, "Get up and get your stuff and leave."

So he got up, gathered his belongings, and went back, it was told.

He turned around and looked at the dog. "The dog is talking to me," he thought. "He says to leave." So he got his stuff and left.

He made it to a tree. "It will not be good if he comes here"; so he continued.

"I will lay here in the woods. If he comes over, I'll be in front saying, 'Woof, woof, woof.'"

The man continued for about a mile and listened. He continued and reached the top of a hill. He stood on top of the hill and continued to listen. He thought he had gone very far so he stood, deep into the woods, and heard a faint sound that went, "Woof, woof."

He thought, "He is coming." He got up and went again. [Small laugh from Harry]

He finally reached his house and sat down.

The dog ran so fast he was panting.

"He was following me," he thought as he was sitting there.

His neighbor saw him sitting there and knew he went hunting, so he wondered what happened and went over to see him.

The dog that lived there did not speak; the man did speak.

"If a dog speaks to you, or if you see a ghost, you can die."

The man was lying on the bed; the dog was on this side. "If you see a ghost you can die, or if a dog speaks to you, you can die."



KASHIKANCHAK

While many supernatural beings continue to be encountered by the Choctaw today, Kashikanchak seems to reside more in the mythic past, no longer part of the contemporary landscape. In Jeffie Solomon's version, there seem to be a number of Kashikanchaks, as if they are a race of people. A male Kashikanchak does the original kidnapping, but the human children are led back to the lair of what appears to be the female matriarch. It is this female being that appears in other recorded versions.

Jeffie Solomon speaks Choctaw almost exclusively, and she told this story in Choctaw to an audience of her friends: Odie Anderson, Meriva Williamson, and Glenda Williamson (I was the only non Choctaw-speaker present). Maggie Chitto did the original transcription and translation. Pam Smith, another native speaker, double-checked and edited the story.

Kashikanchak — Jeffie Solomon, 1997⁶

They used to say the Kashikanchak used to exist here. I don't really know, but—

Two children wanted to go fishing. The two usually enjoyed fishing, so they went to a small pond. While they were walking around, the

Kashikanchak found them. And then, because he was telling them at his water hole, there's so many fish, that if they stand in the water, they would nip their feet, these two children went with him.

So when they did not return—their mother and father were waiting for them—but because the two had not returned, they were thinking they are lost forever.

Since the Kashikanchak had led them away, he took them to his place and were there. But apparently, the old woman kanchak was there, it is said.

So then she said, "Let me check your head for lice."

And then one of the boys said, "Let me check yours first."

When the boy realized the old Kashikanchak, sitting, had placed a big knife beside her, he said, "Let me check yours first."

And the boy was busy with the old Kashikanchak's head, when he quietly took the knife and cut her neck off, it is said.

Then, because the one that stole them wasn't there, they stayed for a little while. And when he did that to the old Kashikanchak, they put the head in a mortar that was there.

"So now let's go;" because they knew when the Kashikanchak saw them, he would follow them. They took off running. They were singing as they were running, thinking, "Don't let him follow us," or "He might follow us," it is said.

And they were singing:

"Sleep,

Sleep,

Give an acorn

To the skinny pig."

He was continually singing, saying, "Roll up land," it used to be said.

Since they took off running, because they were singing as they ran, it's the children saying that, they said.

And as they looked out and saw it was really them running, coming this way.

As the two reached the open shed that was there, as they entered, they slammed the door really hard and so they did not go in with them.

That is what I used to hear.

That's all.

Notes

I have collected these stories over the past three years, funded in part by generous grants from the Phillips Native American Fund of the American Philosophical Society and the Jacobs Research Fund, both of which I sincerely thank. Without the interest and generosity of the storytellers presented here, or the avid support of then-tribal archivist Rae Nell Vaughn, none of this research could have been conducted. Special thanks also go to Meriva Williamson and Glenda Williamson who introduced me around the community and helped record texts in the Choctaw language. To a large extent, it is their interest that makes this material so meaningful. Thanks also go to Henry Glassie, for whose help on every level of my research I am deeply indebted.

The diamond design used to separate the texts is the most prevalent design among the Choctaw today, appearing on shirts, dresses, baskets, quilts, pamphlets, and posters. The design represents the diamond-back rattlesnake, an animal highly revered in the community.

¹ For further discussion about the two origin myths, see particularly Swanton 1931, who summarizes the literature to date. See also Carleton 1996.

Especially compelling is the argument made by Patricia Galloway in her book *Choctaw Genesis* that the two stories originated with two different groups that eventually banded together as the Choctaw tribe known today. For previously published versions of these two myths, see: Bacon 1973: 2-3; Bushnell 1909: 30 and 1910: 526-28; Claiborne 1880: 483-84; Cushman 1899: 298-300; Gregory and Strickland 1972; Halbert 1901: 269-70; Lincecum 1861: 13; Swanton 1928: 1; Thompson 1979-80: 26-27; Wright 1828: 214.

² Tape-recorded from Terry Ben on June 3, 1996.

³ Tape-recorded from Melford Farve on July 10, 1997. The first line of this story refers to his version of the Migration Myth that he has just told.

⁴ Tape-recorded from Rosalee Steve on February 21, 1998.

⁵ Tape-recorded from Harry Polk on July 1, 1997. Charles Lanman published a version of this story in two of his books: 1850: 264-66 and 1856: 478-80. Ada Stewart reprints Lanman's version in her master's thesis.

⁶ Tape-recorded from Jeffie Solomon on August 12, 1997 with Meriva Williamson and Glenda Williamson. To understand Kashikanchak it is useful to try to understand the name. When Henry Halbert recorded a story about this being sometime around 1900, he spelled the name Kashikanchak. The Choctaw dictionary Halbert helped edit (and which is still used today) indicates that one term for witch is *chuka ishi kanchak* (*chuka*=dwelling, *ishi*=someone who seizes, *kanchak*=corncrib). *Kashiho* means woman. In Halbert's version, and another version told by Rosalee Steve and her daughter Norma Hickman, *Kashikanchak* is female. In all the stories she eats humans.

The chant in the story posed problems for translation. The words, together, seem nonsensical. In talking to Jeffie Solomon about some of the songs she sang as a child, she says she didn't remember what they meant, but only remembered the words and tune that went together. Odie Anderson, her friend, concurred. An exact interlinear translation of the original performance would be: "Sleep, / Sleep, / Pig / Skinny / Give to him." I have rearranged the chant into a structure more similar to English. Further, Meriva Williamson returned recently to ask Jeffie Solomon about the chant. Mrs. Solomon noted that the word "acorn" was missing, and suggested the present translation.

For another version of the tale of Kashikanchak, see Henry Halbert's unpublished manuscript "History of the Choctaw Indians, East of the Mississippi River," housed in the Choctaw Cultural Center and at the Alabama Department of Archives and History.

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