

• CHOCTAW • TALES



Collected and annotated by **TOM MOULD**

Foreword by **CHIEF PHILLIP MARTIN**

◦ CHOCTAW ◦
TALES

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CREATION STORIES AND MYTHS

The Choctaw have often been described as unique in that they have two distinct stories of their origin. According to the migration story, the Choctaw originally lived in the West and migrated to Mississippi by divine providence. In the emergence story, the Choctaw (and often the other native tribes of the southeast) were created and led out of a mound in Mississippi by divine providence. The first focuses on how the Choctaw came to live in Mississippi, the second how the Choctaw were created as men.¹ Despite the difference in focus, outside scholars and Choctaws alike have noted the contradiction in the two stories.²

Within the tribe today, people generally follow one version or the other, though many know both. The community of Bogue Chitto, for example—one of the communities living closest to the sacred Nanih Waiya mound—generally follows the emergence story. Other communities are more varied, versions depending more on family than community ties. But the contradiction, while recognized, is not

particularly troublesome, perhaps for the same reason that the two versions of creation described in the Book of Genesis in the Bible are not particularly troublesome for most Christians and Jews. Interpreted symbolically, spiritually, socially, pragmatically, and affectively, the stories are not contradictions at all. By focusing on different aspects of origin, both myths accomplish various goals: they explain cultural and linguistic similarities between the Choctaw and Chickasaw and other southeastern tribes; they express a vital link to the earth; they attribute creation and daily life to divine and prophetic powers; they order social relations between men and women as well as between tribes; they attempt to establish land claims in Mississippi, particularly with white settlers; they create a sense of communal identity; and they create an emotionally charged touchstone to common beliefs, customs, and practices.

This last function has perhaps been the most enduring. These stories cannot be relegated to historical accounts, just as they do not only function to validate land claims. There is a sacred tie between the community and these stories that transcends the mundane. For many, that sacred tie is symbolized by the Nanih Waiya mound, which can be visited today. While Nanih Waiya is integral to the emergence story, it is an important element of most versions of the migration story as well. In both, it is the spot the Creator chose as a home for the Choctaw. Further, in many versions of the migration myth, Nanih Waiya is described as a burial mound for the bones of the ancestors hauled the many miles from the west in respect of the dead. The mound also figures in a number of other stories, as the place where corn was given to the Choctaws and one of the homes of the *bohpoli*. The mound remains a sacred spot in both the mental and physical landscapes of the community today.³

The ability of sacred stories to operate on so many levels, in so many ways, for so many people, is one of their most alluring and

quixotic characteristics. Such stories are even more flexible when told since individual narrators can stress the points most relevant to them and their audience at any given telling. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, there are a variety of creation stories told among the community. While they can all be reduced to either migration or creation, none fares the better for such reduction. Rather, the sheer breadth of the tales, with overlapping themes and motifs, is testament to the skill of the narrator, the depth of thought involved both in the story and its narration, and the multivocality of the community itself.

Of course, the creation stories of the Choctaw do not end once the earth was created and the Choctaw in it. Balance was sought and the world changed, in part in accord with God's will, in part as a result of the actions—wise and foolish—of the first beings. Stories chart this transition.

During this time when the earth was new, the natural world's inhabitants were peers. Animals spoke and intermarried with other animals and humans, matching wits against one another. Intelligence and cunning were the most prized attributes while extravagant heroism was most often rewarded with sorrow. Social customs and moral norms were established, and vital gifts such as corn were given to the people. Eventually, the world settled into a more regular routine. The sun rose and set. Children were born. But regular did not mean safe or understood. Questions of natural occurrence and social interaction remained unresolved. Where does the sun go when it sinks at night? How are people to marry? Or hunt?

These events happened “a long time ago,” or at the moment “after God had created the men and the animals.” These stories are considered a record of the past and regarded as something like history without dates.

However, there is also the understanding that these past events continue to hold meaning for the world today. Accordingly, the

stories reflect the changing world of the Choctaws in historical time. Many of the stories, particularly those of the flood, resonate with similar stories in the Bible, evidence of the Christian missionary influence of the time. Like the stories of creation and migration, these narratives are powerful because of the fact that they are dynamic, not despite it.

• THE CHOCTAW CREATION LEGEND

Isaac Pistonatubbee 1901

A very long time ago the first creation of men was in Nanih Waiya. And there they were made. And there they came forth.

The Muscogees first came out of Nanih Waiya, and they then sunned themselves on Nanih Waiya's earthen rampart. And when they got dry, they went to the east. On this side of the Tombigbee, there they rested. And as they were smoking tobacco they dropped some fire.

The Cherokees next came out of Nanih Waiya. And they sunned themselves on the earthen rampart. And when they got dry they went and followed the trail of the elder tribe. And at the place where the Muscogees had stopped and rested, and where they had smoked tobacco, there was fire and the woods were burnt. And the Cherokees could not find the Muscogees' trail, so they got lost and turned aside and went towards the north. And there towards the north they settled and made a people.

And the Chickasaws third came out of Nanih Waiya. And then they sunned themselves on the earthen rampart. And when they got dry they went and followed the Cherokees' trail. And when they got to where the Cherokees had got lost, they turned aside and went on and followed the Cherokees' trail. And when they got to

where the Cherokees had settled and made a people, they settled and made a people close to the Cherokees.

And the Choctaws fourth and last came out of Nanih Waiya. And they then sunned themselves on the earthen rampart and when they got dry, they did not go anywhere but settled down in this very land and it is the Choctaws' home.

• **NANÉ CHAHA**

Pisatuntema (Emma) 1910

In very ancient times, before man lived on the earth, the hill was formed, and from the topmost point, a passage led down deep into the bosom of the earth.

Later, when the birds and animals lived, and the surface of the earth was covered with trees and plants of many sorts, and lakes and rivers had been formed, the Choctaw came forth through the passageway in Nané Chaha. And from that point, they scattered in all directions, but ever afterwards, remembered the hill from the summit of which they first beheld the light of the sun.

• **MEN AND GRASSHOPPERS**

Pisatuntema (Emma) 1910

Soon after the earth was made, men and grasshoppers came to the surface through a long passageway that led from a large cavern in the interior of the earth to the summit of a high hill, Nané Chaha. There, deep down in the earth, in the great cavern, man and the grasshoppers had been created by Aba, the Great Spirit, having been formed of the yellow clay.

For a time, the men and the grasshoppers continued to reach the surface together, and as they emerged from the long passageway they would scatter in all directions, some going north, others south, east, or west.

But at last the mother of the grasshoppers who had remained in the cavern was killed by the men, and as a consequence there were no more grasshoppers to reach the surface. And ever after, those that lived on the earth were known to the Choctaw as *eske ilay*, or “mother dead.”

However, men continued to reach the surface of the earth through the long passageway that led to the summit of Nané Chaha, and, as they moved about from place to place, they trampled upon many grasshoppers in the high grass, killing many and hurting others.

The grasshoppers became alarmed as they feared that all would be killed if men became more numerous and continued to come from the cavern in the earth. They spoke to Aba, who heard them and soon after caused the passageway to be closed, and no more men were allowed to reach the surface. But as there were many men remaining in the cavern he changed them to ants; and ever since that time the small ants have come forth from holes in the ground.

• CREATION OF THE TRIBES

Pisatuntema (Emma) 1909

Many generations ago, Aba, the good spirit above, created many men, all Choctaw, who spoke the language of the Choctaw and understood one another. These came from the bosom of the earth, being formed of yellow clay, and no men had ever lived before them.

One day all came together and, looking upward, wondered what the clouds and the blue expanse above might be. They continued to wonder and talk among themselves and at last determined to

endeavor to reach the sky. So they brought many rocks and began building a mound that was to have touched the heavens.

That night, however, the wind blew strong from above and the rocks fell from the mound. The second morning they again began work on the mound, but as the men slept that night the rocks were again scattered by the winds. Once more, on the third morning, the builders set to their task. But once more, as the men lay near the mound that night, wrapped in slumber, the winds came with so great force that the rocks were hurled down on them.

The men were not killed, but when daylight came and they made their way from beneath the rocks and began to speak to one another, all were astounded as well as alarmed—they spoke various languages and could not understand one another.

Some continued thenceforward to speak the original tongue, the language of the Choctaw, and from these sprung the Choctaw tribe. The others, who could not understand this language, began to fight among themselves.

Finally they separated. The Choctaw remained the original people; the others scattered, some going north, some east, and others west, and formed various tribes.

This explains why there are so many tribes throughout the country at the present time.

• **ORIGIN OF THE CRAWFISH BAND**

Peter Pitchlynn 1841

Our people have amongst them a band, which is called the Crawfish band. They formerly, but at a very remote period, lived under ground and used to come up out of the mud. They were a species of crawfish, and they went on their hands and feet and lived in a large cave deep underground where there was no light

for several miles. They spoke no language at all, nor could they understand any. The entrance to their cave was through the mud, and they used to run down through that and into their cave. And thus, the Choctaws were for a long time unable to molest them. The Choctaws used to lay and wait for them to come out into the sun where they would try to talk to them and cultivate an acquaintance.

One day, a parcel of them were run upon so suddenly by the Choctaws that they had no time to go through the mud into their cave but were driven into it by another entrance, which they had through the rocks. The Choctaws then tried a long time to smoke them out and at last succeeded. They treated them kindly—taught them the Choctaw language, taught them to walk on two legs, made them cut off their toe nails, and pluck the hair from their bodies—after which they adopted them into their nation. And the remainder of them are living underground to this day.

• THE CREATION OF THE CHOCTAW

Wagonner Amos 1975

As in the past and still yet today, people talk of Nanih Waiya. So as not to confuse people, I will translate what I have heard from the old people.

They stated that the events that are occurring now would happen. The creator of man, God, was the one who told them of future happenings. The incidents that have occurred are a prediction of the older generation. It is even talked about in preachings at churches today. The origin of the incidents are all related to the Choctaws.

The Creator, leaving out the woman, created three men—the Choctaw, the white, and the black. He said that he would return in seventy years. He did return with another God and they talk.