Choctaw Folklore: A Complete Overview

The Choctaw people, one of the “Five Civilized Tribes”, are a Native American people of southeastern origin whose language belongs to the Muskogean family. Before they were removed from their lands, a large portion of the tribe via The Trail of Tears, they had a strong traditional order and established spirituality reflected in their mythology and folklore. This spirituality was first disrupted by intermarriage by foreign settlers and continued to become disparaged by the removal of the Choctaw from their land which disrupted their sense of order and interrelatedness between the spiritual and physical world.\(^1\) The forced migration also led to the breakdown of traditions and traditional roles such as the role of women in agriculture and as the managers of the Choctaw lands. Choctaw folklore was based heavily on spirituality and mythology and included riddles, tongue twisters, and prophecies.

The first aspect of Choctaw folklore to explore is riddles and tongue twisters. Tongue twisters were used in Choctaw culture as a form of entertainment. The audience would find entertainment in watching the performer and seeing if they would stumble or not, often being amused if they messed up.\(^2\) Riddles, in comparison, were used mostly in interpersonal situations as a means of establishing status through wit.\(^3\) An example of a Choctaw riddle is “What goes over the water, into the water, and under the water but never touches the water?” The answer to which is, “Ducks egg.” The performer of the riddle will then often follow up the

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answer by explaining why that is the answer demonstrating his wit.\(^4\) When elders tell the younger members of the tribe the riddles they are teaching them the way to perform the traditional riddles while simultaneously establishing that they are wiser and of higher status than them. Riddles played a part in social status and organization in this way.

Prophecies, which are a significant part of Choctaw folklore, would often become riddles after they were fulfilled. Many prophecies of the past are performed within the tribe today as riddles because once they are fulfilled the performer has an answer to it.\(^5\) Examples of prophecies from the past that are much like riddles are “beasts with two eyes which roar across the land” which are cars, and “spider webs that cover the land” which turned out to be electric wires. Often prophecies would play out to equal darker tidings. For example, the Choctaw people prophesized paved roads which would make travel easier but they also prophesied that foreign armies would invade the Choctaw lands using these roads.\(^6\) Some performers also tell prophecies that have been fulfilled as narratives which emphasizes and accredits the ancestor who told it first and is meant to make the audience reflect on the prophecy’s fulfillment.

Unfulfilled Choctaw prophecies tell of the desecration of nature and the end of the world within a few generations at the hands of humans. This reflects the Choctaw people’s spiritual connection to the physical world and nature because the prophesy emphasizes the importance of natural order to the existence of the world and humanity. It is a reaction to the industrialization and human habits of foreign people’s that tended to harm the environment.

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\(^4\) Tom Mould. “Prophetic Riddling”.
\(^5\) Tom Mould. “Prophetic Riddling”.
\(^6\) Mould, Tom. *Choctaw tales*. Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2004
Many prophesies were probably direct reactions to the activities that they observed of foreign entities. One Choctaw man said to his son that people would soon build many schools which would study their people and so he should keep his Choctaw possessions.\(^7\) Some prophesies also reflected a superiority, maybe morally based since they’ve been victims to foreign invaders, connected to their Choctaw identity. One such prophesy claimed that those who hung a Choctaw shirt or dress outside their home would be spared when foreign invaders attacked.

Most Choctaw folklore stories are deeply connected to spirituality and mythology. The Choctaw believed that the physical and spiritual worlds. This is visible in Choctaw folklore as many of the deities and supernatural beings that the Choctaw believed in were deeply associated with nature and the physical world. Like many other southeastern North American tribes, the Choctaw were sun worshippers, and believed fire was highly intelligent because of its connection to the sun. Scholar Greg O’Brien writes, “Anthropologist theorize that the Mississippian ancestors of the Choctaw placed the sun at the center of their cosmological system. Mid-eighteenth-century Choctaws did view the sun as a being endowed with life. Choctaw diplomats, for example, spoke only on sunny days. If the day of a conference were cloudy or rainy, Choctaws delayed the meeting, usually on the pretext that they needed more time to discuss particulars, until the sun returned. The sun made sure that all talks were honest. The sun as a symbol of great power and reverence is a major component of southeastern Indian

\(^7\) Tom Mould. *Choctaw Tales.*
cultures.”

One word for their god, the great good spirit, is hushtahli from hashi (sun) and tahli (to complete an action).

Besides their spiritual connection with cosmological entities such as the sun, they also spiritualized animals within their folklore and mythology. Animals in animal stories are often full-fleshed characters such as in a Choctaw animal story where an alligator asks for help crossing a river and then gives a gift to the main character of the story in the form of an endowment that will assist him in hunting. Animals adapting humanlike characteristics such as having the ability to speak and a personality is common in Native American folklore and reflects a veneration and connection to nature and the physical world. The imagery of animals and animal-like characteristics on supernatural beings also makes the Choctaw’s spiritual beliefs more comprehensible to the people because it ties physical experiences to otherworldly experiences and ideas. This also means that spirituality in return has more of an effect on the lifestyle of the Choctaw people.

The Choctaw also believed in many unique supernatural creatures. Tales of supernatural creatures were often told as hunting stories reflecting an era where the Choctaw took up the practice of forming small hunting bands. These stories were often used to instruct young listeners about the dangers of the woods. However, it was also important in Choctaw culture for those who encountered supernatural beings to recount their experiences which were often

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10 Tom Mould. Choctaw Tales.
difficult because of the number of supernatural creatures that were believed to inhabit the woods and that some of these could mirror one another. For example, an encounter with a ball of light in the woods could be bohpoli, hashok owa hui’ga, a medicine man or woman, or just lights.\textsuperscript{11} Often these encounters would be interpreted by a medicine man or woman the first time it was recounted to distinguish what the supernatural creature was, if it was or was not a hoklonote, a creature which can mirror any other creature.\textsuperscript{12}

These supernatural creatures often themselves symbolized connectedness between spirituality and nature. There are several unique supernatural creatures that symbolize this including bohpoli, hashok owa hui’ga, okwa nahwo, and hashetapalo. Bohpoli were creatures similar to Western European versions of leprechauns. The Bohpoli are little men or people who the Choctaw believed lived within the woods and were only seen by prophets and doctors whom the creatures would assist by helping them gather ingredients for medicines.\textsuperscript{13} They were also believed to “steal” children and take them into the woods to train them in the ways of medicine and then return them to the tribe where they would become doctors or medicine men and women. The bohpoli represent spirituality in connection to the herbal and medicinal practices of the Choctaw and to a physical practice. They also add depth to the identity of medicine people or doctors and perhaps the folklore concerning the bohpoli strengthened the social status of medicine people amongst the Choctaw.

\textsuperscript{11} Tom Mould. \textit{Choctaw Tales}.
\textsuperscript{12} John Swanton. “Source Material for Social and Ceremonial”.
\textsuperscript{13} John Swanton. “Source Material for Social and Ceremonial”.

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Many supernatural beings are connected to everyday physical practices such as hashok owa hui’ga. Hashok owa hui’ga are similar to will-o’-wisps. Only its heart is visible and only at night. The creature would lead those in the woods astray. This connects deeply with Choctaw hunters and gathers who would spend long amounts of time in the woods and hashok owa hui’ga explains those who wandered astray in the woods and the telling of these stories also would serve as a lesson to young hunters and gatherers to be careful in the woods. Hashehotapalo, a being who was a combination of man and deer, served a similar function as he was also connected to the hunting practice. He delighted in frightening humans and if hunters angered him he would run ahead of the band and frighten away the animals.\(^{14}\) Another species of humanlike supernatural being are the okwa naholo, creatures reminiscent of humans with light skin, like a trout, who dwelled within deep pools of water. They were believed to capture humans and turn them into beings like themselves. This is another example of how many of the supernatural creatures Choctaws believed lurked in seemed to target hunters and gatherers and stories of such proved to serve as a means to teach hunters caution.

Besides connecting spirituality with physical practices, many deities and elements of Choctaw spiritual beliefs were connected to the physical world. For example, many spiritual beings were represented by animals and served important functions in the Choctaw people’s view of the spiritual world and explained physical occurrences. This is represented by the Choctaw story that explains thunder and lightning. The story says that two giant birds live in the sky. One, Helohah, lays eggs within the clouds which causes the sound of thunders and her mate

\(^{14}\) John Swanton. “Source Material for Social and Ceremonial”.

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Melatha flies at such a high speed that he causes lightning in the sky.\textsuperscript{15} Other examples of this are black squirrels causing solar eclipses and corn being a gift from birds.\textsuperscript{16} Another example of animals’ importance in spirituality is the horned serpent figure, Sinti Lapitta, who visited unusually wise men.\textsuperscript{17}

The most interesting animal deities are perhaps the death figures within Choctaw culture. One of the most prominent death spirits was nalushashito or nalusa chito who is described by some as a “black being” or shadow being but by others is described as a black panther.\textsuperscript{18} Nalushashito is believed to be a soul eater who took the souls of people who allowed evil or depression to enter their minds. The imagery of nalushashito as a shadow is interesting because the idea of shadow beings appears in Choctaw spiritual folklore often connected to the idea of the soul being a shadow itself. This is perhaps why a soul eater would be described as a shadow. Shadow beings also exist in several different identities, outside of the human soul, such as Nalusa Falaya, who approached men by sliding on his stomach like a snake (another example of nature/animal imagery) to frighten them away and do harm to or transfer the ability to do harm to hunters.\textsuperscript{19} This is perhaps an example of corruption of the soul as the shadow beings are linked to imagery of the soul. The Choctaw also believed that owls were death spirits and their appearance were omens of death. The description of nalulshkitini, the

\textsuperscript{15} Tom Mould. \textit{Choctaw Tales}.
\textsuperscript{16} "Eagle Dance, Choctaw." \textit{Luce Foundation for American Art}
\textsuperscript{17} Alchin, Linda. "Horned Serpent Symbol". \textit{Native Indian Tribes}.
\textsuperscript{19} John Swanton. “Sources for Social and Ceremonial”.
The horned owl, was believed to prowl at night killing both men and animals. The appearance of the ofunio, screech owl, symbolized the death of children and the presence of opa, the common owl, meant that there would be death among relatives. The connection of spirituality and death to the image of the owl and black panther further symbolize how the Choctaw connected the physical and spiritual world and how this deep interconnection led to many of their practices both religious and traditional.

Another interesting aspect of Choctaw folklore and spiritual belief is the duality between good and evil. Most Native American cultures did not have belief systems where there was duality between good and evil like European culture does with heaven and hell or many other religions. The Choctaw are believed to be a rare exception from this as their folklore reveals. The Choctaw believed in a good spirit and a bad spirit. This duality in their spirituality is further demonstrated in the folklore about the afterworld which had strong representations of reward and punishment. The folklore concerning the afterworld shares many commonalities. The character who enters the afterworld arrives after crossing a river and is cast out of the good hunting ground because they have committed a great crime. The crimes can be specific or vague depending on the version of the story told. In the oldest known version, the specific great crimes are tattling on your neighbors, spilling or causing the spill of innocent blood, and divorcing your wife when she is pregnant. Interestingly, lying is not a great crime to the Choctaw unless it results in the spill of innocent blood. The bad hunting ground is

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21 T.N. Campbell. “Choctaw Afterworld”.
characterized as being cold and in perpetual twilight. Meanwhile, the good hunting ground is a land of youth and eternal spring. In all versions of the story, those stuck in the bad hunting ground must endure hearing the merriment from the good hunting ground but never being able to reach it. Those stuck in the bad hunting ground are sick, sore, wounded, naked, and live in bad conditions.

Duality is also represented in a different way when Choctaw folklore addresses the idea of the human soul. The belief is that every human has two souls. The first is shilombish the outside shadow. This shadow is believed to follow the physical body of the person in life and when that person dies it remains in the physical world haunting the spot where the person died, frightening off their survivors, and can imitate animals, usually a fox or owl.22 The purpose of the haunting was to scare off friends from the spot where the person died as a warning. The Choctaw believed that they could tell between shilombish and other animals because when a shimbolish made a sound in animal form other animals would not respond.23 The second soul is the shilup, the inside shadow, which was sent to the afterworld where it would either live in the good or bad hunting grounds.

The Choctaw people have a distinct folklore that is deeply interconnected to their social and spiritual traditions as well as physical practices. Animals are given human like characteristics and supernatural beings animal-like characteristics which connects Choctaw mythology and spiritual belief to aspects of the physical world which makes the beliefs more comprehensible and relatable and has a greater effect on the Choctaw people’s daily practices

23 John Swanton. “Sources for Social and Ceremonial”.

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and life. Also folklore such as riddles and prophecy, establishes social roles and provides the Choctaw with a sense of identity. While the removal of the Choctaw people from their native lands and increasing intermarriage has interrupted some of the Choctaw people’s social structures and the beliefs concerning interrelatedness between the physical and spiritual worlds, many of the supernatural folklore are unchanging within the Choctaw culture such as Nalusa Chito and the bohpoli. Choctaw folklore and culture is also enduring and distinct because of its differences to other Native American folklore traditions such as its belief of good and bad spirits and punishment in the afterlife as well, the use of riddles in interpersonal situations to establish social status through wit, and the many prophecies made and repeated by the tribe and the use of these prophecies as riddles later on. Choctaw folklore is distinct, unique, and provides great context to the social and spiritual life of the Choctaw people.

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24 Tom Mould. *Choctaw Tales.*