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"Going to the Water": A Structural Analysis of Cherokee Purification Rituals

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Since the late nineteeth century, ethnographers have studied the Cherokee sacred writings known collectively as *i:gawé:sdi* (to say, one).[1] Our present state of knowledge is indebted to the pioneering translations of these aboriginal rituals preserved in the codified script of the Sequoyah syllabary.[2] A distinction has been made between the "rigid, doctrinaire quality" of these esoteric texts as recorded by the Eastern Band of the Cherokee and the "cabalistic abbreviations, eccentric spellings, and dialectal variants. . ." that characterize the texts of the Western Cherokee.[3] While stylistic differences abound, there are a number of structural principles that all *i:gawé:sdi* seem to share in common.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

In his classic study of the Eastern Band, William H. Gilbert, Jr. was able to identify three structuring principles that appear to underlie the recitation of the *i:gawé:sdi*: opposition, solidarity, and reciprocity. The interplay between social solidarity and opposition most often finds ritual expression in the heated rivalry between villages at stickball games. Here conjurors compete with each other to influence the outcome of the game. It is generally believed that the

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victory of one village team over another is determined solely by the skill and arcana of the village shaman or *dida:hnvwi:sg(i)* (curer of them).[4]

Gilbert found the same sort of solidarity/opposition dynamic at work in the recitation of the Cherokee love incantations, erotic magical texts that are known as *anige:hyv ugv:wahli* (women, for the purpose of). Here the intent of the formula is twofold: to attract a beautiful and desirable woman by "remaking" one's image and, at the same time, to physically exclude *di:dagale:n(v)dho?:dí:yi* (to separate them with, one), male rivals who might woo her away.[5] In the Cherokee ethos, the mechanism to achieve homeostasis is reciprocity. Reciprocity is the overarching guide to human action, and it permeates all social obligations, not only within the Cherokee kinship system but throughout the cosmos.

The close relationship between clan members is extended to the natural order of plants and animals. Moreover, the notions of kinship and mutual obligation are linked to inanimate objects and to the inorganic elements of fire, water, air, and earth, which are often personified in the language. Thus, fire often is referred to as *higayv:li tsane:gv* (you ancient one, white, you).[6] Just as frequently, a body of water is addressed by its formulistic name *yv:wi:ganv:hí:dv* (person, long, he).[7] The epiphenomenal nature of Cherokee familial relationships extends to the highest order of the supernatural world, the dwelling place of the spirits, and maintains the cosmos in a "definite order, as a system which has balance and reciprocal obligation between its parts."[8] The violation of human taboos creates a spiritual imbalance. Dysphoria occurs, and the reordering of the universe must be accomplished through the recitation of the *i:gawé:sdi* by a knowledgeable shaman or *dida hnvwi:s(g)i.*

Reciprocity manifests itself quite clearly in the traditional social organization, where marriage exchanges are regulated by preferential mating schemes employed by the various clans to maintain the strength of their membership. Historically, economic exchange was maintained through cooperative societies such as the *gadugi,* or mutual aid society, which benefitted the poor.[9] The impact of mutual obligations on the rather sensitive nature of human relationships may account for the unusual clan name *Ani:gilo:hi* (offended, they just became). The curious appellation of this clan has often been misunderstood in the literature to mean "twisters or long hair."[10]

In the realm of Cherokee *i:gawé:sdi,* we can most clearly discern the exercise of reciprocity in the compensation offered to the

conjuror by his client, known as *u:gi:sdi*.[11] In the nineteenth century, the medium of exchange was personal articles: deerskins, cloth, handkerchiefs, or moccasins. In our own time, payment usually takes the form of money, but there is no set fee for the service.[12]

Nowhere is the principle of reciprocity more acknowledged than in the Cherokee purification rituals. This type of Cherokee medicoreligious ceremony has two interconnected components: the *i:gawé:sdi,* which corresponds to the recited text itself, and *igv̋:n(e)dhi* (to do, one) which are the physical actions to be performed.[13] Reciprocity is implicit in the more specialized texts that relate to hunting magic. They frequently contain carefully phrased expiatory prayers, which offer the intended prey to the "Ancient White," the spirit of the fire, in exchange for success in the kill.[14]

Healing rituals also recognize a reciprocal relationship between the cause of the disease and its treatment. Efforts are made by the shaman, or *dida:hnvwi:sg(i),* to turn back the evil by a variety of countermeasures. In the most severe cases of witchcraft, where the life of the patient is threatened by a sorcerer, or *dida:hnese:sg(i)* (putter in and drawer out of them), the remedy may involve the actual killing of the perpetrator.

The most ubiquitous of the Cherokee purification rituals is the *amó:hi atsv̋:sdi* (water place, to go and return, one) or "Going to the Water" rite.[15] It is occasioned by lunar events, ceremonial dances, stickball games, or as a remedy against an outbreak of disease or witchcraft. Sometimes it is even performed as an antidote to the malady of old age.

This cleansing rite is usually preceded by a period of fasting by the participants. The actual ceremony is performed at the edge of a creek, where the source of water is freeflowing. It is timed to coincide with the spiritually potent illumination of sunrise. *I:gawé:sdi* are recited by the conjuror, and then the patients libate themselves with water, cupping their hands and pouring it over their heads and breasts, or they may completely submerge themselves in the water, according to the prescriptive fiat of four or seven times.[16]

CHEROKEE-CHRISTIAN TEXTS

Parallels have been drawn between the purificatory nature of the *amo:hi atsv̋:sdi* and the immersion rites of evangelical baptism.[17]

While superficial similarities do exist between the Christian and the Cherokee ceremonies, we would suggest that no right thinking *dida:hnvwi:sd(i)* (curer of them) would confuse the two.

Historically, the Cherokee have enjoyed only a tempered understanding of the Christian tenets. One is often struck by the curious omission of any reference to a supreme being in their purification rituals. The reversion of the Cherokee to nativism during periods of national crisis must have been a continual source of chagrin for the missionaries who had the additional burden of coping with an indigenous language that was thought to be "deficient in abstractions suitable for theology."[18] While the Moravians were assured that the Cherokee had a term for a supreme being, they were confounded by the poverty of the Cherokee lexicon, for it contained no counterpart to the Christian concepts of sin or damnation.[19] Actually, a transitory state of imbalance underlies the Cherokee concept of sin. This made it difficult for them to grasp the Christian meaning of the word. To the Cherokee mind, "depravity" or "transgression" were evanescent states of human behavior. The concept of purgatory, the place of fallen souls, was totally alien to them.

Thus, while the symbolic act of washing away one's sin was readily acceptable, the belief that this act promulgated the soul's conversion and ultimate salvation was quite foreign. The recognition of nature's ephemeral aspects is evident in the Cherokee verb *atse:li* (to change form, to manifest). *Atse:li* is the most often transcribed designation for the Christian term *soul.* [20]

If we examine the published translation of the Lord's Prayer that appeared in the 1828 edition of the newspaper *The Cherokee Phoenix,* we can easily recognize the difficulties that the Brainerd missionaries must have endured in transliterating nativistic thought patterns.[21] This collect for purity begins with the traditional phraseology, "Our Father above who dwellest, honored be thy name." *Father,* in this case, is translated using the familial term of kinship, *ogi:do:da,* rather than the more ritualistic term for the supreme being, *une:hlaňv:hi.*[22]

The second stanza is of particular note, since it contains the same transformational concepts that are echoed in the *i:gawé:sdi* texts. The Christian readership undoubtedly would have perceived this curious syncretism, "Thou king the Being so spring to Light," as an awkward rendering of the canonical phrase, "Hallowed be thy name." Actually, behind this honorarium to divinity lies a distinctive Cherokee principle: metamorphosis.

TRANSFORMATION

Most of the Cherokee purification texts celebrate the concept of transformation in some form or another. The most common ritualistic instrument employed for this purpose is *tso:lagayv̌:li* or "remade" tobacco. This form of *Nicotina rustica* is grown in remote places and prepared in great secrecy, and is used only in conjunction with certain purification rites. To be effective, the tobacco must be imbued with the power from the *i:gawé:sdi* text or *go:dhlvhi:so?-hnv̌:hi* (remade, it). Its potency then may be increased by exposure to the sun's lustration. However, remade tobacco is vulnerable to contamination from pregnant or menstruating women or from unauthorized use by the uninitiated.[23]

In purification rituals involving dealings with a supernatural being such as a *skili* (a colloquial term for a witch), ashes often are *go:dhlvhi:so?-hnv́:hi* (remade, it) from lightning-scorched logs or bark. Similar to ritualized tobacco smoke, the ashes can then be blown in the direction of one's enemy.

In love incantations, the reciter often attempts to *ado:dhlvh:so? dí:y* (to remake oneself) or to *ado:dv:hiso?dí:yi* (to rebeautify oneself) to be more desirable to the opposite sex. In these cases, the *i:gawé:sdi* alone is inviolate, and remade substances such as tobacco are not employed.[24]

Finally, in divination rituals, the same transformational process is alluded to in the published *i:gawé:sdi*, where the client seeks to remake his/her soul through dreams.[25] It should be noted that, in this case, as in other *i:gawé:sdi* formulae, the desired change is transitory rather than permanent and is manifest only to accomplish some specific purpose.

While nativistic transformational concepts inform the Cherokee understanding of Christian theology, the most resilient and all-embracing principle remains the notion of reciprocity. Returning to the nineteenth-century version of the Lord's Prayer, we recognize the doctrine of mutualism in the Cherokee variant of the often-quoted phrase *winiga:hl(i)sda/ hada:n(v)dhesgv̌:i/ e:lohi/ galv̌:la?dí/tsiniga:hl(i)sdí:ha* (Let happen/what Thou wilt/on earth/above/as does happen).

An implicit homage to the principle of mutuality can also be observed in the phrase *itsv: sganv̌: tshelv̌:i/ sgi:yago:li:gi/ tsidéo:tsido:lí:go/dogi:sganv:tshé:he* (in that we have transgressed against Thee/pity us/as we pity/those who transgress against us). This heartfelt acknowledgment of human culpability and of a

mutual need for forgiveness must have made a profound impression on the Cherokee mind, since it is intimated so often by their own epistemology.

FOUNDATION OF LIFE

The Going to the Water, or purification, rite reaches its zenith in the *E:lohi Ga:ghusdv:d(i)* or Foundation of Life ceremony. From the published interlinear translation of the rite, we can observe the employment of a number of familiar structural devices.[26] In the interest of our analysis, we venture a free translation of the text, being mindful, of course, that we are slighting some important linguistic nuances and complexities, particularly in the treatment of morphemes and polysynthetic elements.

The term *e:lohi* has been translated variously as *earth* or *world,* but here the contextual meaning refers to sentient beings and thus human existence or life. The usage of the term *ga:ghusdv:d(i)* has a more specific denotation; it refers to a type of support or form of underpinning.[27]

This predawn ritual, which is occasioned only by the most severe national crisis, is performed the requisite seven times by seven participants representing each clan. A delegate from the *Ani:wahhya* (Wolf) clan faces toward the sacred direction of the east and recites the *E:lohi Ga:ghusdv:d(i)* text four times. Members of the other six clans do likewise. Then *tso:laga´yv:li,* or remade tobacco (*Nicotina rustica L.*), is smoked through a ritual calumet while each clan representative walks in a slow counterclockwise circle seven times, expelling the smoke toward each cardinal direction.[28]

While the Foundation of Life ritual enjoys a revered place in Cherokee religious doctrine, it may be important to note that, in most respects, the structural elements of the *E:lohi Ga:ghusdv:d(i)* text derive from the published examples of *amó:hi atsv́:sdi* or Going to the Water medicomagical formulae. Since the object of this specialized incantation is to gain protection from the supernatural order, it follows many of the same principles as the more mundane *owá:sv ahl(i)sde: hl(v)do?di* (oneself, to help with) texts that are associated with Going to the Water rituals.

The text begins with the customary invocation of deities. The highest order in the celestial hierarchy is summoned forth: *gahl(i)gwo:gi* (seven) and *iyagalv:ló:hi* (each of the heavens). We

might translate this as an appeal to the seventh heaven, the most sanctified level in the Cherokee cosmology.

Then, personified natural forces such as thunder, *higayv:li gigage:i* (you ancient one, red), and lightning, *higayv:li tsane:gv* (you ancient one, white you), are addressed and invoked for protection. These primordial entities are affined with the Cherokee through mythology. Thunder is especially enjoined to the Cherokee by social obligation, since folklore holds that its life was saved by a Cherokee hunter.[29]

Returning to the text, we recognize the standard phrase: *uyo: sdv́:ha* (evil) *a:gwadan(v)dhé:sgi* (thinker of me, he) as a referent to the cause of the crisis. In most Cherokee epistemology, the outbreak of disease or personal misfortune can be traced to the emanation of evil thoughts from some human agency.

The solution, offered by the text, is for summoned natural forces to intervene in human affairs and to blunt the attack from the enemy, who in this particular case appears to be a *ada:wé:hi* or supernatural being akin to a wizard. At the same time, the victim (in this case the whole Cherokee Nation) is shielded, attired in a shining *i:gá:hi* (flash of lightning?), and released into the safety of the *nv:do:gv:yi* (sun place or sunland). It should be noted that the sunland is not a reference to any point on the compass but to a state of being. Sunland is a metaphor for a metaphysical dwelling place of the spirits. The color associated with the sunland or sun place is red, which, in the symbolic system of the Cherokee, connotes human victory or triumph.[30]

DIVINATION

The "divining" rituals of the Cherokee appear to belong to a special realm of the *i:gawé:sdi*. Although practioners of this esoteric art might have a difficult time comprehending the Calvinistic view of predestination, they acknowledge that the adumbration of future events can be accessed through divination. To accomplish this feat, they employ a variety of inanimate objects: smooth stones, coins, seed beads, wooden needles, and the like. These objects are either suspended in the air by means of a plummet or floated on the still surface of water. Sometimes, they are held in the palm of the hand.

The power of these objects comes from placated and cooperative animal spirits, occasionally from Red Man (thunder), Ancient

White (fire), or Long Person (river). After invoking these spirits and paying homage to their place in the universe, the conjuror uses his practiced eye (among the Cherokees, the profession seems to be largely a male preoccupation) to interpret the movement of the objects and to prognosticate for the client.[31]

Because of the sheer numbers of divining texts, it is difficult to provide more than a cursory analysis, but it appears that they share common metaphysical assumptions with the purification rituals. A clear sense of reciprocity is expressed in the published invocation of a dream divining formula: "Now! Listen! I am the doer of your will: You love me, you Ancient Red One![32]

CONCLUSION

Portions of the *i:gawé:sdi* texts have been translated, most notably by Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, and the methodology employed in these rituals has been documented by ethnographers as skilled as Mooney and Olbrechts; nevertheless, little research has been done on the epistemological principles that underlie these texts. Although Mooney was careful to record and interpret the *i:gawé:sdi*, he was also driven to dismiss them as "endemic fetishism."[33] Thus, even in his classic work, the deeper philosophical underpinnings of the Cherokee psyche were not fully understood. I have demonstrated here that an abiding sense of reciprocity underscores all human thought and action in the Cherokee ontology. The same principle is no less celebrated in their magicomedical formulae.

NOTES

1. I prefer to use the singular form *i:gawé:sdi* here to denote the collective body of Cherokee medicomagical formulae. In terms of syntax, it may be more correct to use the plural form *idi:gawé:sdi*.

2. The most comprehensive collection of Eastern Cherokee *i:gawé:sdi* can be found in James Mooney, "Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees," seventh *Annual Report*, U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1891): 301-397; James Mooney and Frans M. Olbrechts, "The Swimmer Manuscript," U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 99 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1932); William H. Gilbert, Jr. "The Eastern Cherokees," U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 133 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1943): 177-413.

For the *i:gawé:sdi* of the Western Cherokee, see the series of books and monographs by Jack F. and Anna G. Kilpatrick: *Friends of Thunder* (Dallas:

Southern Methodist University Press, 1964); "The Foundation of Life: The Cherokee National Ritual," *American Anthropologist* 66 (1964):1386-91; *The Shadow of Sequoyah* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965); *Walk In Your Soul* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1965); *Run Toward Nightland* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1967); *New Echota Letters* (editors) (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1968); and "Notebook of a Cherokee Shaman," *Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology* 2:6 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1970).

3. Comments on the character of the eastern texts: Raymond D. Fogelson, "Change, Persistence and Accommodation in Cherokee Medico-Magical Beliefs," in *Symposium on Cherokees and Iroquois Culture*, ed. William N. Fenton and John Gulick, U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 180 (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1961), 217.

Observations of the western texts: Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, "Notebook of a Cherokee Shaman," 85.

4. Gilbert, "The Eastern Cherokees," 268-69.

5. Ibid., 289-92.

6. See Mooney, "The Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees," 359.

7. Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick,"Notebook of a Cherokee Shaman," 105. See also Mooney, "Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees," 341.

8. Robert K. Thomas, "The Redbird Smith Movement," in *Symposium on Cherokee and Iroquois Culture*, 163.

9. Gilbert, "The Eastern Cherokees," 306-307, 311.

10. Ibid., 204. For a more correct interpretation of *Aní:gilo:hi*, see Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Friends of Thunder*, 149. For a fanciful bit of speculation on the meaning of *ani:gilo:hi* and its relevance to a hereditary class of Cherokee priesthood, see Raymond D. Fogelson, "Who Were the *Aní:Kutánî*? An Excursion into Cherokee Historical Thought," *Ethnohistory* 31:4 (1984):255-63.

11. See Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Run Toward the Nightland*, 114. See also Mooney, "Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees," 337.

12. Fogelson,"Change, Persistence, and Accommodation," 219.

13. Of the two, the *i:gawé:sdi* is, by far, the most important, since it "focuses and directs" the generative power of thought. The integrity of its phraseology is inviolate. In contrast, the *igʊ́:n(e)dhi* merely "augments the authority of thought, or serves more effectively to apply or disseminate it." See Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Walk In Your Soul*, 5. The utilitarian character of the *igʊ́:n(e)dhi* can be appreciated by the frequency with which it is altered in shamanistic performance. Often it is left out entirely.

14. See Mooney, "Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees," 371.

15. Ibid., 379.

16. Ibid., 335. The sacred numbers of four and seven can be expressed as *nʊ̄hki* and *gahlkwo:ki* or *kahlkwo:ki*, respectively. *Nʊ̄hki* may have a proto-Iroquoian etymology, while the sacrosanct *kahlkwo:ki* appears to be a loan word or a borrowing from the Muskogean language. See Floyd Lounsbury, "Iroquois-Cherokee Linguistic Relations," *Symposium on Cherokee and Iroquois Culture*, 14-15.

For a cursory survey of Iroquoian parallels to Cherokee belief systems and ceremonies, see William N. Fenton, "Iroquois Culture History: A General Evaluation, *Symposium on Cherokee and Iroquois Culture*, 265.

17. William McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries* (New Haven: Yale Uni-

versity Press, 1984), 163.

18. Robert Berkhofer, Jr., *Salvation and the Savage* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), 48.

19. McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 64.

20. Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *New Echota Letters*, 32.

21. Ibid., 27.

22. The Cherokee term for a supreme being has been mistranslated historically either as *Utajah* (see McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries*, 37) or as *Une:hlanv́:hi*. See Mooney and Olbrechts, "The Swimmer Manuscript," 20. In the latter work, the term has been understood to mean "apportioner or he has allotted, divided into equal parts." Actually, the term comes from the verb *to provide*. For the correct interpretation of *Une:hlanv́:hi* as provider, see Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Walk In Your Soul*, 72-73, or Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, "Notebook of a Cherokee Shaman," 87n13.

23. Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Run Toward the Nightland*, 812.

24. Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Walk In Your Soul*, 11.

25. Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Run Toward the Nightland*, 119.

26. Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, "The Foundation of Life," 1386-91.

27. Ibid., 1386.

28. Ibid., 1386-87.

29. Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Friends of Thunder*, 50-56.

30. Mooney, "Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees," 349.

31. Some of the methodology utilized in the Cherokee divining rituals borders on psychometry and clairvoyance. For a lengthy description of these practices, see Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Run Toward the Nightland*.

32. Ibid., 119.

33. Mooney, "Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees," 329.