

Cherokee Burn Conjurations

BY JACK FREDERICK KILPATRICK
AND ANNA GRITTS KILPATRICK*

Of all the conjurations known by the laity of the Oklahoma Cherokees, those for burns are probably the most ubiquitous. Yet they are but rarely to be found in writing. Medicine men, being largely concerned with matters weightier than burns, seldom take the trouble to record them, and household remedy notebooks, in which they are frequently written down, ordinarily do not long survive their authors.

The examples presented here were garnered from notebooks and manuscripts in our possession written in the now near-defunct Sequoyah syllabary.

Four is the minor sacred numeral in Cherokee religio-medicine, seven the major one. Ostensibly, since a burn is generally a minor medical problem, conjurations applicable to it frequently fall into the pattern of a quatrain. Typically, four cooling qualities, sometimes logically arranged in an ascending scale of degrees of frigidity are invoked.

The customary adjunctive physical treatment for a burn is quite simple, and involves only the use of *i:tse ama* ("new water," *i.e.*, freshly drawn, preferably flowing, water). A small quantity of this liquid is taken into the mouth, and after each of four recitations of the conjuration some of it is blown directly upon the burn. The patient may do this for himself, or someone may do it for him.

There is no fundamental difference between the therapy for a burn that a medicine man employs and that used by a layman; however, the ministrations of the former, due to professional authority and superior spiritual power, is held to be the more efficacious.

Here is an example of a burn conjuration that was found in a small trunk of family papers in northern Adair County:

ama water	uhyv:dla cold	unesdala ice	uhyv:dla cold	v:n(v) tsi snow
uhyv:dla cold	u:hnanu:sdi to rime, it	uhyv:dla cold	utsi:hna:wagwo relief, just	

* Dr. Kilpatrick is Professor of Music and Chairman of the Department of Music, School of Humanities and Sciences, Southern Methodist University. Mrs. Kilpatrick teaches at the Maple Lawn Elementary School in Dallas. The authors gratefully acknowledge that the research necessary for this paper was made possible by a grant from the National Science Foundation.

nigvdi:sge:sdi

I will be saying to

Or, freely translated:

Water is cold.

Ice is cold.

Snow is cold.

Rime is cold.

"Relief!" I will be saying.¹

As may be seen, this specimen from the notebook of a southern Adair County medicine man is quite similar to the foregoing:

v:n(o) tsi ² snow	utsi:hnawa relief	nigvdi:sge:sdi I will be saying to	uhyadhv:hidv frost
utsi:hnawa relief	nigvdi:sge:sdi I will be saying to	du:hnanu:sdv:i rimed, they	utsi:hnawa relief
nigvdi:sge:sdi I will be saying to	une:sdala ice	utsi:hnawa relief	nigvdi:sge:sdi I will be saying to

Snow! "Relief!" I will be saying.

Frost! "Relief!" I will be saying.

Rime! "Relief!" I will be saying.

Ice! "Relief!" I will be saying.³

A burn conjuration of some unidentified medicine man (*fl.* 1912 *circa*) from Se:lami:yi in southeastern Adair County is of a slightly different pattern:

ama water	daya:i it is coming	ama water	daya:i it is coming	ama water	daya:i it is coming	ama water
daya:i it is coming	so: ² so	une:sdala ice	daya:i it is coming	une:sdala ice	daya:i it is coming	
une:sdala ice	daya:i it is coming	une:sdala ice	daya:i it is coming	so: ² so	u:hnanu:sda rime	
daya:i it is coming	u:hnanu:sda rime	daya:i it is coming	u:hnanu:sda rime	daya:i it is coming	u:hnanu:sda rime	

1. *He:nil(i) Wa:db(i) Collection.*

2. The unvoiced vowel in this word is spelled in the Sequoyah syllabary in a number of different ways, of which this is the accepted standard.

3. *Tso:wa Dboyani:si Medicine Book.*

4. This onomatopoeia for a spiritual force landing like a bird is quite common in Cherokee *idi:gaw:sdi* ("to say them, one"). Used in a series of four, it sometimes equates with the footsteps of a spirit.

daya:i it is coming	so: ² so	v:n(o) tsi snow	daya:i it is coming	v:n(o) tsi snow	daya:i it is coming
v:n(o) tsi snow	daya:i it is coming	v:n(o) tsi snow	daya:i it is coming	so: ² so	

Water is coming! Water is coming! Water is coming!
Water is coming! So!
Ice is coming! Ice is coming! Ice is coming!
Ice is coming! So!
Rime is coming! Rime is coming! Rime is coming!
Rime is coming! So!
Snow is coming! Snow is coming! Snow is coming!
*Snow is coming! So!*⁵

A variant of the above is found in the notebook (1879 circa) of an eastern Cherokee County shaman:

v:n(o) tsi ⁶ snow	daya:i it is coming	ada:wé:hi wizard, he	itsi:hnawa your (pl.) hearts
da:ǵv:hni ⁷ he massages them	une:sdala ice	daya:i it is coming	ada:wé:hi wizard, he
itsi:hnawa your (pl.) hearts	da:ǵv:hni he massages them	u:hnanu:sda rime	daya:i it is coming
ada:wé:hi wizard, he	itsi:hnawa your (pl.) hearts	da:ǵv:hni he massages them	uhyadhv:hidv frost
daya:i it is coming	ada:wé:hi wizard, he	itsi:hnawa your (pl.) hearts	da:ǵv:hni he massages them

Snow is coming! The Wizard massages your hearts!
Ice is coming! The Wizard massages your hearts!
Rime is coming! The Wizard massages your hearts!
*Frost is coming! The Wizard massages your hearts!*⁸

A collateral descendent of the man who recorded the above, a resident of western Sequoyah County and one of the most eminent of contemporary medicine men, in the summer of 1963 wrote down for the present writers this variant:

gha ⁹ now	usinu:li quickly	v:n(o) tsi ⁹ snow	a ² dhloho:si:ga it (granulated) has just come to alight upon it
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5. *Sv:gbi Medicine Book No. 5.*

6. The second syllable is omitted in the manuscript. Any *v:n* (vowel) is apt to be spelled as merely *v*., the strong nasalization of the vowel being considered sufficient to cover the situation.

7. This is a ritualistic form for *de:gv:hnia*.

8. *Wi:l(i) Ubyv:dhlo:yi Medicine Book.*

9. *Vide note 6.*

gha [?] now	usinu:li quickly	une:sdala ice	a [?] dhledi:tsi:ga it (long) has just come to fall upon it
gha [?] now	usinu:li quickly	ama water	asdudhli:tsi:ga it (liquid) has just come to pour upon it
ha [?] ha		utsi:hnawa relief	nigvdi:sge:sdi I will be saying to

Now! Snow has just quickly come to alight upon it!

Now! Ice has just quickly come to fall upon it!

Now! Water has just quickly come to pour upon it!

Ha! "Relief!" I will be saying.¹⁰

Not all burn conjurations are cast in the foregoing format. The following example from the extensive manuscript library of the eastern Cherokee County medicine man and nativistic leader who was the great-uncle of the junior author of this paper is illustrative:

unv:di milk	u:tsi his mother	unv:di milk	u:tsi his mother	unv:di milk	u:tsi his mother	unv:di milk
	u:tsi his mother					

The milk's mother!

The milk's mother!

The milk's mother!

The milk's mother!¹¹

Neither does this specimen, written down in the spring of 1962 for the senior author of this paper by a western Adair County shaman, follow the stereotype:

tsha:hyu:gv your sickness	tsha:hyu:gv your sickness	tsha:hyu:gv your sickness	tsha:hyu:gv your sickness
tsagana:da ¹² it just licked you	tsagana:da it just licked you	tsagana:da it just licked you	tsagana:da it just licked you

Your sickness! Your sickness! Your sickness! Your sickness!

It just licked you! It just licked you! It just licked you!

It just licked you!¹³

10. *Uwo:digé:i* Collection.

11. *Uwe:da:sadb(i)* Medicine Book No. 57.

12. The concept of a spirit coming to lick, and thus soothe, an injury is a common one in Cherokee medicine.

13. *Ade:lagb(a)dbi:ya* Sga:da Collection.

Another example of Uwe:da:sadh(i)'s reads:

haʔ	naʔtsi:i	həʔ	naʔtsi:i	haʔ	naʔtsi:i	haʔ
ha	pine-place	ha	pine-place	ha	pine	ha
naʔtsi	haʔ ¹⁴	usanu:liyu ¹⁵			galo:si:ga	
pine	ha	quickly, very		over here	he just came to pass by	

Ha! The Pine-place! Ha! The Pine-place!

Ha! The Pine! Ha! The Pine!

Ha! Very quickly he just came to pass by over here.¹⁶

This final illustration is from a collection that is apparently in the holograph of a contemporary shaman from southern Adair County:

ghaʔ	sge:ʔ	tsigi	ga:galó:hi
now	listen	I just took it (solid)	over here he just passed
gé:i		wi:galo:hi	hadi:na
over there		over there he just passed	not
			sagho:ni ¹⁷
			blue
gvdi:sge:sdi		utsi:hnawa	gvdi:sge:sdi
I will be saying		relief	I will be saying

Now! Listen! I just took it.

Over here he just passed by; over there he just went.

"It is not blue!" I will be saying.

"Relief!" I will be saying.¹⁸

14. Possibly the foregoing is to be sung. Both *naʔtsi:i* and *naʔtsi* appear to be derived from *no:tsi* ("pine"), but as is frequently the case when dealing with Cherokee ritualisms, one cannot be positive. Practicing medicine men themselves are not infrequently puzzled. "It came from up there" is their exegesis.

15. This is a dialectal form (sa *vice si*).

16. *Uwe:da:sadb(i) Medicine Book No. 53.*

17. The color of misfortune, of malignant agency. "It is not blue" = "all will be well."

18. *Wi:l(i) Dlu:dlu Collection.*