Cherokee Burn Conjurations

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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:tie 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 ministration 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:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ama</th>
<th>uhyv:dla</th>
<th>une:sdala</th>
<th>uhyv:dla</th>
<th>v:n(v)tsi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>water</td>
<td>cold</td>
<td>ice</td>
<td>cold</td>
<td>snow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>uhyv:dla</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>uhyv:dla</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cold</td>
<td>u:hnunu:sdí</td>
<td></td>
<td>uhyv:dla</td>
<td>utsí:hna:wağwo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>to rime, it</td>
<td></td>
<td>cold</td>
<td>relief, just</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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nigvdi:sge:sg
dI will be saying to

Or, freely translated:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Water is cold.} \\
\text{Ice is cold.} \\
\text{Snow is cold.} \\
\text{Rime is cold.}
\end{align*}
\]

"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:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{I will be saying to} & \quad \text{relief} \\
\text{I will be saying to} & \quad \text{I will be saying to}
\end{align*}
\]

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 \textit{circa}) from Se:lami:yi in southeastern Adair County is of a slightly different pattern:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{daya:i} & \quad \text{so:}^{4} \quad \text{daya:i} \\
\text{daya:i} & \quad \text{ice} \\
\text{daya:i} & \quad \text{so:}^{5} \quad \text{u:hnahu}:\text{nda}
\end{align*}
\]

1. \textit{He:nil} (i) \textit{Wad:b} (i) \textit{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.
4. This onomatopoeia for a spiritual force landing like a bird is quite common in Cherokee \textit{idil:gabe:sg} ("to say them, one"). Used in a series of four, it sometimes equates with the footsteps of a spirit.
CHEROKEE BURN CONJURATIONS

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

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

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

v:n(o)tsi8
snow

daya:i it is coming ada:wê:hi wizard, he
itsi:hnawa your (pl.) hearts

da:gv:hni7 he massages them une:sdala daya:i ada:wê:hi
ice it is coming wizard, he

itsi:hnawa da:gv:hni u:hnau:sdal daya:i
your (pl.) hearts he massages them rime it is coming

wizard, he your (pl.) hearts he massages them

daya:i ada:wê:hi itsi:hnawa da:gv:hni
it is coming wizard, he your (pl.) hearts 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!

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:

gha3 usinu:li v:n(o)tsi8 a'dhlho:si:ga
now quickly snow it (granulated) has just come to alight upon it

5. Su:gh1i 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:bnia.
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.

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:

The milk's mother!
The milk's mother!
The milk's mother!
The milk's mother!

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:

Your sickness! Your sickness! Your sickness! Your sickness!
It just licked you! It just licked you! It just licked you!

12. The concept of a spirit coming to lick, and thus soothe, an injury is a common one in Cherokee medicine.
Another example of Uwe:da:sadh(i)’s reads:

Ha² na²tsi:i ha² na²tsi:i ha² na²tsi:i ha²
ha pine-place ha pine-place ha pine ha

na²tsi ha¹⁴ usanu:liyu¹⁵ 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:

g ha² sge:³ tsigi ga:galó:hi
now listen I just took it (solid) over here he just passed

gé:i wi:galó:hi hadi:na sagho:ni¹⁷
over there over there he just passed not blue

I will be saying utsi:hnawa I will be saying
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

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14. Possibly the foregoing is to be sung. Both na²tsi:i and na²tsi 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:sadh(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._