

An Etymological Note on the Tribal Name of the Cherokees and Certain Place and Proper Names Derived from Cherokee

by
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It would appear that a disproportionately large number of Cherokee place and proper names have been designated in the literature as of unknown origin (usually with a strong inference of irreclaimability), or else have been inaccurately translated. There even exists an uncertainty as to the derivation of the name of the tribe itself. The present object of the author is to advance certain probable, or at least possible etymologies either suggested, or in some measure sanctioned, by individuals among the Oklahoma Cherokees who possess a command of the Cherokee language.

THE TRIBAL NAME OF THE CHEROKEES

It is the misinterpretation of a passage in MMOC that has added one more myth to the Mooney collection: i.e., that the tribal name of the Cherokees, employed in reference to themselves, is Aniyûwiyá. The passage in question (p. 15) is as follows:

"The proper name by which the Cherokees call themselves is Yûñwiya, or Anì-Yûñwiyà in the third person, signifying 'real people', or 'principal people', a word closely related to Oñwe-hoñwe, the name which the cognate Iroquois know themselves. The word properly denotes 'Indians', as distinguished from people of other races, but in usage it is restricted to mean members of the Cherokee tribe, those of other tribes being designated as Creek, Catawba, etc., as the case may be."

Upon careful perusal, one finds no substantiation for the widely disseminated error that the tribal name of the Cherokees is Aniyûwiyá; for the heart of the whole statement is: "The word properly denotes 'Indians', as distinguished from people of other races..." And that, indeed, is precisely what the word means—Indians, of any sort whatever, and not necessarily Cherokees, except insofar as Cherokees are Indians.

It is the qualification of this simple asseveration of the truth that no doubt sowed the seed for future error; for Mooney continues in a wording that is quite unfortunate: "...but in usage it is restricted to mean members of the Cherokee tribe, those of other tribes being designated as Creeks, Catawbas, etc., as the case may be." What he is saying here is something to

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the effect that Cherokees, being the only Indians ordinarily present, or under discussion, customarily refer to themselves as Indians, but that members of other tribes receive a more specific designation.

This would appear to be the proper juncture, moreover, to point out that Anìyûwiyá does not actually mean "real people", and is not within hailing distance of "principal people". A translation of "complete" or "unalloyed" would be far closer.

The tribal name of the Cherokees (in the Middle and Western dialects) is, and within the historic period appears always to have been: Anìtsàlagí pl.), Atsàlagí (sing.), Tsàlagí (adjectival). The familiar Anglicization is, of course, derived from the adjectival form of the Eastern, or r—dialect: Tsàragí.

Now there exist three principal hypotheses as to the origin of this term which we will designate as: 1. the Adair; 2. the Mooney; and 3. the Swanton. The author wishes to posit a fourth, together with evidence in its support.

In AHAI (p. 237) we read:

"Their national name is derived from *Chee-ra*, 'fire', which is their reputed lower heaven, and hence they call their magi, *Cheerà-tabge*, 'men possessed with divine fire'."

Adair, who obviously suffered from the lack of aural acuteness usual in the Europeans who made early contacts with Indian societies, probably was attempting to transliterate one of the two following forms which in the Western l—dialect would be: *atsil' agí* = "he took fire" or *atsil' agíh'* = "I possess fire." Mooney's (op. cit., p. 16) cavalier dismissal of Adair's claims with "...an error founded upon an imperfect knowledge of the language" may very well contain the whole truth of the matter; still it takes no very long stretch of the imagination to convert either of the foregoing phrases into "Atsàlagí". In fact, we might have here a well-packaged solution to our problem were it not for one stultifying fact: every Cherokee to whom the author has offered it has firmly refused to accept it.

The Mooney hypothesis is as follows (op. cit., pp. 15-16):

"Cherokee, the name by which they are commonly known, has no meaning in their own language, and seems to be of foreign origin... There is evidence that it is derived from the Choctaw word *choluk* or *chiluk*, signifying a pit or a cave, and comes to us through the so-called Mobilian trade language, a corrupted Choctaw jargon formerly used as the medium of communication among all the tribes of the Gulf states, as far north as the mouth of the Ohio."

Mooney bolsters this postulate with (op. cit., p. 183):

"The Iroquois (Mohawk) form is given by Hewitt as O-yata'-ge'ronoñ', of which the root is *yata*, cave, *o* is the assertive prefix, *ge* is the locative at, and *ronoñ'* is the tribal suffix... It is probable that the Iroquois simply translated the name (Chalauque) current in the South, as we find in the case

in the West, where the principal plains tribes are known under translations of the same names in all the different languages."

Upon reading this one immediately experiences a desire to see for oneself the "evidence" that Mooney professes to have in proof of his Mobilian-Choctaw theory of origin, but it is never brought forward. Moreover, one has but to recall the Cherokee names for other tribes in order to decide not to repose much confidence in there being any information of value in what the Iroquois choose to call the Cherokees. Furthermore, two disquieting questions are not supplied with answers: 1. Why did the Cherokees find it necessary to adopt a foreign word for their tribal name? 2. Assuming that the Cherokees were intrusive in the Southeast, what did they call themselves before removing there?

Needless to say, the author has never found the Mooney theory acceptable to a single Cherokee of his acquaintance.

The Swanton hypothesis, to the average Cherokee, is the most untenable of all (SISU, p. 217):

"Cherokee. Probably from the Muskogee word *tciloki*, 'people of a different speech'."

This is apt to be received with open hostility; for the theory that the Cherokees would adopt for the name of their own people a term bestowed upon them by their historic principal enemies is to a Cherokee the epitome of absurdity. He will point out that Swanton possibly put the cart before the horse, that the Creeks must have borrowed the word "Cherokee" as a designation for those who speak a language foreign to the Creeks.

If the Cherokees refuse to accept any of these hypotheses and stubbornly insist that the tribal appellation is derived from some word in the tribal language, the question is: Does the word still exist, and if so, what is it?

The author is indebted to Mrs. Anna Gritts Kilpatrick for calling his attention to a word that, when advanced to those Cherokees who speak the language fluently as a possibility of being the source of the tribal name, invariably receives thoughtful consideration and eventual indorsement as being the most likely genesis that has ever been suggested to them.

This word is *tsà^dlagí* "'=" he [or she] turned aside". It is employed in reference to someone who unexpectedly took a fork in a path, or who turned out of a trail and pursued a way independent from those with whom he was in company. It is a word that any Cherokee might know but would not have occasion to use with any great frequency; for the expression *aedìl' tsin'galô* covers a much greater number of physical circumstances involved in the act of "turning aside" and is therefore more often utilized.

The difference in pronunciation between *tsà^dlagí* and *Tsàlagí* is far slighter than would appear from typographical representation. The ^d in the one word, an ever so soft, slightly voiced dental, is barely perceptible. The

adjectival form of the tribal name gives the impression of being nothing more nor less than an over-hasty enunciation of "he (or she) turned aside". Anitsadlagí would be, of course, "the people who turned aside".

In short, the author maintains that the name for the Cherokee tribe signifies "Seceders", with the implication that the act of secession took place while in the act of traveling. The possible connection with Iroquoian prehistory is obvious.

PLACE NAMES

The author has yet to see in print anything approaching a satisfactory etymology of Echota, the tribal capital on the Little Tennessee River. Most authorities assume that the meaning is lost and irrecoverable. One might suspect a historical continuity between the old capital, through New Echota, Georgia, to Echota, Oklahoma, a settlement of conservatives in Western Adair County, but apparently no one has yet made a study in an effort to prove such continuity.

It would be logical to assume that someone in the Echota community of Oklahoma might be in a position to cast some light upon the derivation of this place name, and such was the case. The author is indebted to his father-in-law, Mr. Jack Nofire, a fullblood, non-English speaking, lifelong resident of this community, with ancestral ties to it going back before the Removal, for the information that the word Echota, pronounced Itsôdi in Cherokee, is a contraction of itsôidítl' = "across the stream", and not related to the numeral three (tsôî), as the author had previously suspected.

The place name Tellico, attached to towns formerly in Monroe County, Tennessee, in both Macon and Cherokee Counties, North Carolina, and perpetuated in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the former capital of the Western Cherokees, is obscure chiefly because of the variety of etymological possibilities that it presents. However, most Cherokees with whom the problem has been discussed agree that the first part of his word, usually written in Sequoyah as Talíqua, is simply what it appears to be: Tá.hli = "two". A majority opinion would seem to hold that the syllable qua is a corruption of quu = "only", and that the original significance of "only two" had to do with springs or watercourses.

Toxaway, the Eastern (Lower) Cherokee settlement in South Carolina, upon which Mooney comments, "The meaning of the name is lost, although it has been wrongly interpreted to mean 'Place of shedding tears,'" is rendered both Dùksáí and Dùkw'sá-i in Mooney's orthography. The meaning, "terrapin-place", is perfectly discernable, although Dak'síyi might be some slight improvement in the spelling of it.

The author has never had occasion to visit the site of Seneca on Keowee River, and is therefore not in a position to state what geographical phenom-

enon gave this Cherokee town its name. Although authorities are unwilling to venture a guess as to what the name implies, they are all certain that it bears no relation to the Seneca tribes, and they are correct: Seneca is undoubtedly derived from *asinigá* = "it comes in [flows?] backward".

Although authorities ascribe a Cherokee origin to the word Tennessee, the meaning is certainly not "big bend" nor "great horn spoon", both of which frequently appear in print. The source may likely be *dūnasí* = "they touch [lean against] it"—in reference to the mountains to the east. Other, and more remote possibilities are: *tianūsí* = "you will send him [or her]" and *tinūsí* = "you will send it".

PROPER NAMES

In the literature the clan name *Anìgilôh'*, if any attempt at all is made to translate it, is usually rendered "Twisters" or "Long Hairs". It is indeed strange that no one has taken literary note of the fact that in Western Cherokee *anìgilôh'* means "they have become offended", and that members of the clan possess a folk-reputation for temper and irritability, much as the people of the Wolf Clan are reputed to have special insight into the occult.

The most obscure name that we consider here is that of Sequoyah, the inventor of the celebrated syllabary. Although in that syllabary the name is usually spelled as if it were pronounced *Siquôya*, and Sequoyah himself so spelled it, in actual practice it is almost invariably transmuted into *Siquôyi*. Its meaning is assuredly not "he guessed it", an often seen attempt to bring the Cherokee into agreement with Guess, the patronymic by which he was known to the white men, and "pig in a pen", sometimes seen, is equally erroneous. The name, a loan word from some other Indian language (*Taskigi?*), appears to be utterly meaningless to all Cherokees.

It is the contention of the author that almost all of the Cherokee names that have been given up as irreclaimable can be recovered if diligently sought for in the moribund, but still living language itself.

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