

# Mississippi Choctaw Names and Naming: A Diachronic View

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Choctaw Indians, a branch of the Muscogees, have resided in varying numbers in a major portion of East Central Mississippi since their migration into the area from the South or West at some undetermined point in the past.

There are primarily two Choctaw migration myths. According to one widespread tradition, the Choctaws originated in a land far to the West. An eastward trek was begun, headed by a leader named Chata who carried a sacred pole, described (depending on the source) as a leaning pole, sacred pole, red stick, staff, golden rod, or bent staff. Every evening this miraculous pole was placed in the ground at the encampment site. Each sunrise found the pole leaning toward the East as the signal for the journey to continue. After many months of wandering, Chata and his followers reached a point in Southeastern Winston County, Mississippi, where, as they placed the sacred pole in the ground and made camp for the night, a heavy rain fell.

The next morning the pole was standing in an upright position, and Chata announced that the long-sought land of Nanih Waiya (sloping hill) had been found. The people began building mounds and ramparts and made Nanih Waiya the ceremonial center of the Choctaw nation. Within this legend is also couched an explanation of the appearance of a sister tribe, the Chickasaws. The two tribes were originally one, but during the eastward migration they became separated, one group being led by Chikah-sah and the other by Chata. These two men were brothers and became the leaders of their respective tribes.<sup>1</sup>

A second migration myth was related by Peter P. Pitchlynn, a Choctaw statesman of the mid-1800's. His version includes the leaning pole and the Nanih Waiya experience, but instead of moving from the West, the

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<sup>1</sup>H. B. Cushman, *History of the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Natchez Indians* (Greenville, Texas, 1899), p. 19.

Choctaws came from across the sea (possibly the Gulf of Mexico) and moved northward to settle at Nanih Waiya.<sup>2</sup>

The origin of the Choctaws will perhaps remain speculative, but the first contact the Mississippi Choctaws had with Europeans occurred after November 18, 1540, when Hernando DeSoto, after defeating a combined Choctaw-Chickasaw force at Mobile, Alabama, directed his conquistadors to march to the northwest into the Mississippi Choctaw territory.

After DeSoto moved at a diagonal path through the entire Choctaw territory, no further contact with Europeans was made for almost a century and a half. However, toward the end of the seventeenth century, European explorers were once again making their way into the Choctaw territories. Records indicate that as early as 1670, English traders and emissaries had made contact with the Choctaws.

The French, always seeking to keep pace with other Europeans in the new world, dispatched Louis Jolliet (a trader) and Father Jacques Marquette (a missionary) from Canada by canoe down the Mississippi River as far south as the mouth of the Arkansas River, where they made contact with several Mississippi tribes. Nine years later, in 1685, Robert Chavelier Sieur de LaSalle and a party of fifty-five Frenchmen and northern Indians completed an expedition down the Mississippi River to the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>3</sup>

Next, the English, who were determined to establish a foothold in the Mississippi Valley in order to exploit the resources the region had to offer, sent two English traders into the area in 1698. These men were equipped with a supply train of goods which they traded with the local Indians in return for pelts.<sup>4</sup>

The French then became concerned over the English competition and sent two missionaries to the Indians. The following year, in 1699, Pierre Le Moyne Sieur d'Iberville landed on the Mississippi Gulf Coast to establish a French settlement at Biloxi. By the turn of the eighteenth century, European encroachment into the Choctaw territories had been firmly established and the stage set for the gradual but continuous changes which have occurred in Choctaw social and cultural history.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Angie Debo, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic* (Norman, Okla., 1961), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup>J. F. H. Claibborne, *Mississippi as a Province, Territory and State* (Jackson, Miss., 1880), p. 12.

<sup>4</sup>Arrell M. Gibson, "The Indians in Mississippi," in Richard Aubrey McLemore, ed. *A History of Mississippi* (Hattiesburg, Miss., 1973), pp. 74-75.

<sup>5</sup>Jesse O. McKee and John A. Schlenker, *The Choctaws: Cultural Evolution of a Native American Tribe* (Jackson, Miss., 1980), p. 15.

Throughout history, when two cultures make contact, either deliberately or by accident, changes in language and naming occur, particularly if the contact is sustained. Such has been the case with the Mississippi Choctaws and their contact with other cultures from 1540 to the present.

The Choctaw system of naming apparently remained relatively constant, despite contact with Europeans, until the beginning of the removal to Oklahoma which had its genesis with the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830. The names of ancient Choctaws, as far as can be determined, were nearly always connotative, referring generally to some animal, and often proclaiming some attribute or characteristic of that animal. Choctaws were usually named or rather acquired a name (and sometimes several in succession) from some worthy deed or hazardous task which has been successfully completed.

It was not uncommon for one name to be superseded by another if a Choctaw participated in an event which was considered more extraordinary than the event for which he was originally named. Name changes among young men were far more frequent than among young women because the men participated in wars which occurred with regularity.<sup>6</sup>

At one time, a Muscogee party invaded the Choctaw Territory and made a sudden and unexpected attack upon a band of Choctaw warriors. The Choctaws, though surprised, made a brave resistance, and, after a short but furious fight, defeated and put to flight their assailants. Pursuit at once took place, and a fleet young Choctaw warrior named Ahaikahno (The Careless) went far ahead of his comrades, killed a Muscogee, and was in the act of scalping him when two Muscogee warriors turned and rushed at him. The Choctaws in the rear, seeing the danger of Ahaikahno, who was unaware of the rapidly-approaching foes, shouted to him, "Chikkee-bulilih chia! Chikke-bulilith chia!" (Chikke-quickly; bulilih-run; chia-you). Ahaikahno, hearing the shout and realizing his danger, was not slow in heeding the advice. Ever afterwards, Ahaikahno bore the additional name of "Chikke Bulilih Chia."<sup>7</sup>

If a Choctaw child was not named after some animal, he might be named for some incident connected with his birth. The name might refer to a full moon (Alota-Hushi-Ninak-Aya), a thunderstorm (hilih-ah-tasah-umba-okpulo), or a successful hunt (achukma-hoyoh).

Upon maturity, and if a second name was earned, speeches and ceremonies usually accompanied the addition of the second name. The word

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<sup>6</sup>Cushman, p. 46.

<sup>7</sup>Cushman, p. 181.

Humma or Homma (red) was often added to a man's name as a mark of distinction, and a great proportion of those who had earned second names as a result of participation in a war were given names carrying the termination "abi" signifying "killer."<sup>8</sup>

A Choctaw was very reluctant to pronounce his own name. The wife was also forbidden to speak her husband's name. When it became necessary for the wife to acknowledge her husband, she referred to him by the name of her child: for example, "Oklewona's father."<sup>9</sup> An even stricter taboo forbade the Choctaw to name their dead. During the time when the Choctaws were allotted land in Oklahoma after the removal from Mississippi, it was found that the only way parents could be persuaded to acknowledge deceased children was to have them arrange their families in a line according to ages. If this was done, the Choctaw family would always leave a vacancy where the deceased child would have stood.

There were no degrees of society among the ancient Choctaws, and all felt themselves equal in standing and on the same terms of social equality without regard to parentages. The ancient Choctaws had created a classless society which found surnames unnecessary.<sup>10</sup>

Because of their closeness to and dependence on the animals of East Central Mississippi, nearly every river, creek, lake, hill, and village was named for an animal. Current place names in the area abound in borrowings from the Choctaw, such as Neshoba (howling wolf), Conehatta (white skunk), and Chula (fox).

The Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek was ratified on February 24, 1831. Article III of the treaty stipulated that "as many as possible of their people, not to exceed one-half the whole number shall depart during the falls of 1831 and 1832, the residue to follow during the fall of 1833."

Twelve thousand five hundred Choctaws migrated to the Oklahoma Territory as a result of the provisions of the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, with an undetermined number surreptitiously remaining in Mississippi.<sup>11</sup>

The Choctaws had begun to adopt European names before the majority of them left Mississippi, and the custom rapidly expanded among the Mississippi Choctaws after education became available to greater numbers of them. White teachers found it more convenient to rename their

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<sup>8</sup>Debo, p. 17.

<sup>9</sup>Debo, p. 17.

<sup>10</sup>Cushman, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup>Arthur H. DeRosier, Jr., *The Removal of the Choctaw Indians* (Knoxville, Tenn., 1970), p. 175.

students for some national hero or some friend than to stumble through the complicated syllables that made up the average Choctaw name.

In the late 1800's, missionaries from several denominations came among the Mississippi Choctaws and established churches and missions. In 1884, the Catholic Diocese of Mississippi sent Father Bekker to the Tucker Community of Neshoba County to establish a church and school. In 1889, the Methodists founded churches in The Talla Chula and Conehatta communities in Newton County.<sup>12</sup>

The missionary, as did the teacher, often found it easier to rechristen their converts than to attempt the intonation necessary for proper Choctaw pronunciation. (Mispronunciation of a Choctaw name, even today, is considered taboo and will either bring about a silence and blockage of communication or peals of laughter which also hinder continued communication.) As a result of the influence of the Catholic Church, the names of saints and Biblical characters and pious friends of the mission began to appear. Such given names as Benedict, Agrippa, Stanaslaus, and John Mark are often used.<sup>13</sup>

Before 1830, few Mississippi Choctaw surnames are recorded; but after the beginning of the removal, surnames were rapidly adopted, and today all Choctaws use a surname. When the tribe began the use of surnames, many members chose the given name of some admired white-man as a surname. This accounts for the numerous names among the tribe today which would appear to be the repetition of given names. It is not uncommon for a Mississippi Choctaw today to be christened Sam Billy, Billy John, or John Billy. Girls are named such names as Lillie Billy, Linda John, and Anita Jim.<sup>14</sup>

In Mississippi in 1830, the Choctaw territories were divided into three districts, each under the supervision of a district chief. The chief of the western district was Greenwood LeFlore. (The name certainly would indicate the influence of French missionaries and traders in the area.) Nikakechi was the chief of the southeastern district, and Moshulatubbee was the chief of the eastern district. The correct spelling for Moshulatubbee would be Moshulaabi. The name is a war name and carries the termination of *abi* 'killer,' which has been corrupted by non-Indians into "tubbee."<sup>15</sup> The name is frequently found among Choctaws today who

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<sup>12</sup>McKee and Schlenker, p. 132.

<sup>13</sup>*Choctaw Community News*, 13, No. 3, (March, 1982), p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>*Choctaw*, 13, No. 5, (June, July, 1982), p. 12.

<sup>15</sup>*Choctaw*, 13, No. 3, (March, 1982), p. 15.

do not use it as a suffix but, with altered spelling, as a complete name. Valerie Tubby, Gregory Tubby, and Finis Tubby are all members of the tribe today.

For a period during the 1950's, the Bureau of Indian Affairs encouraged decentralization among the Mississippi Choctaws. The Bureau felt that self-reliance and independence would be learned by encouraging members of the tribe to leave the reservation and seek employment in cities. Many Choctaws migrated into northern industrial cities, found employment, married, and established homes and families. Within recent years, this trend has been reversed, and those who left the reservation are returning. While off the reservation, young Choctaws married outside the tribe. This accounts for the appearance today of such names as Garcia, La Pease, La Blanc, Lopez, LeFarve, Mouton, Rios, and Romero. One might assume that these names were the result of early Spanish and French contact with the tribe during the exploration period, but this is not always the case.

Of Mississippi's original Indian tribes, only the Choctaws hold tribal lands in the state today. In 1982, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians is concentrated in seven communities, and the reservation lands total some 18,000 acres. Although a strenuous effort was made in 1833 by the federal government to remove the Choctaws completely from the state, approximately 1,000 refused to leave their Pearl River homeland and remained deep in the swamps of East Central Mississippi until the time of the removal had passed.

From this remnant of a nation that in 1831 numbered nearly 20,000, the present Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians (4,113) has emerged. The Mississippi Choctaw is today a proud member of his band and a primary source of historical information and lore. It should be remembered, however, that the scholar when attempting to collect information of any kind should always be aware of the Choctaw's ability to fabricate a good story for the gullible "na-holo-a-tak" (white man) and thereby have the last laugh.

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