

**Cherokee Story-telling Traditions:
Forming Identity, Building Community**

By

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In a scene from the film Smoke Signals, two young Coeur D'Alene men, Victor and Thomas, trade a story for a ride from their friends, Velma and Lucy. Forewarned that the story "better be a good one," Thomas closes his eyes and begins a story about Victor's father.

During the sixties, Arnold Joseph was the perfect hippie, since all the hippies were trying to be Indians anyway. But because of that, he was always wondering how anybody would recognize when an Indian was trying to make a social statement. But there's proof, you know? Back during the Vietnam War, he was demonstrating against it, and there was this photographer there. He took a picture of Arnold that day and it made it onto the wire services and was reprinted in newspapers throughout the country. It even made it to the cover of Time magazine. In that photograph, Arnold is dressed in bell-bottoms and a flowered shirt, his hair in braids, with red peace symbols splashed across his face like war paint. He holds a rifle above his head, captured in that moment just before he proceeded to beat the shit out of the National Guard private lying on the ground beneath him. Another demonstrator holds a sign that is just barely visible over Arnold's left shoulder. It reads MAKE LOVE NOT WAR.

Thomas opens his eyes as Lucy asks Victor, "Jeez, did your dad really do that?" "No way, Thomas is full of shit," replies Victor. Unconcerned by issues of veracity, the young women encourage Thomas to continue. Again, he closes his eyes and speaks.

Arnold got arrested, you know? But he got lucky. At first, they charged him with attempted murder. Then they plea-bargained that down to assault with a deadly weapon. Then they plea-bargained that down to being Indian in the twentieth century. He got two years in Walla Walla.

Clearly pleased with the story, Lucy asks Velma her opinion of the story. "Well," says Velma, "I think it was a fine example of the oral tradition" (Alexie 36-40).

Although Velma's reply may be understood as ironic, oral traditions remain a central part of Native American cultures.¹ These traditions, which include stories, songs, and orations, comprise a significant part of the cultural basis from which individual, familial, and tribal senses of identity may be constructed. The formation of identity, however, is a dynamic process that must respond to the demands of time and place. Thus, while being an Indian in the twenty-first century may not require plea-bargaining *per se*, the construction of indigenous identity does

require a negotiation of the contemporary overlapping boundaries of native and non-native cultures. Oral traditions – particularly storytelling – provide native people with the means to negotiate those boundaries. In word and deed, these stories still respond meaningfully to the perennial existential questions: “Who are we?” “Why are we here?” “Where do we come from?” “What is our purpose here?” “How should we live?”

Within Cherokee culture, storytellers respond to these questions with a variety of stories that, for the sake of discussion, may be divided into two general types. The first type includes those stories told by generations of Cherokees within a single, but extended family. These stories may range from humorous tales about a relative (“I remember this one time when your uncle...”) to serious remembrances of ancestors who survived the Trail of Tears – or as many traditional Oklahoma Cherokees would say *di-ge-tsi i-lv-se-i* (the forced removal) or *ti-ge-tsi i-lv-se-i* (driven like animals) – yet these latter stories are very rare. The second type includes those tribal stories told by Cherokee people from time immemorial. These stories include origin stories, migration stories, stories of cultural “heroes” such as *Ka-na-ti* (the first man) and *Se-lu* (the first woman), and stories about a ballgame between the birds and the animals, to name only a very few.² While these types are not mutually exclusive, the first type of stories tends to be more prominent in the construction of individual and familial identities, whereas the second type of stories tends to be more prominent in the construction of a shared tribal identities. Given the focus of this project, *Lessons in Courage: From the Trail of Tears to Cherokee Recovery*, the following remarks will be confined to a discussion of this second type of stories. In particular, an argument will be made that these stories should be considered as community discourse, and, as such, may be used to facilitate – or, in some cases, initiate – *ga-du-gi*, a coming together or cooperative effort, a sense of community based upon a shared cultural experiences.²

Although storytelling in *Tsa-la-gi ga-wo-ni-hi-s-di* (Cherokee language) survives in those traditional communities where the native language is still spoken, the needs of other diverse Cherokee communities require that stories be told in English. Accordingly, many tales from the oral tradition have been translated from Cherokee into English; moreover, many stories have been transcribed into a textual or audio format to meet the needs of contemporary diasporas. Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees, transcribed by the late nineteenth century ethnologist James Mooney, is a text by now familiar to people throughout Cherokee country and beyond. An impressive collection of stories, this report nonetheless reflects the viewpoint of an Irish-American working within the “highly print-oriented, text-determined culture” of western scholarship (Foley vii). Translations and/or transcriptions into English from a Cherokee perspective, however, are also readily available. Especially noteworthy contributions include Friends of Thunder: Folktales of the Oklahoma Cherokees, a collection compiled by Jack Kilpatrick and Anna Gritts Kilpatrick, Myths, Legends, and Old Sayings, retold by Hastings Shade, and Living Stories of the Cherokee, collected and edited by Barbara Duncan. Audio recordings by Hastings Shade (also title “Myths, Legends, and Old Sayings”), Kathi Smith Littlejohn (“Cherokee Legends I & II) and Gregg Howard (“Tales of Wonder”) are also notable. These storytellers have “listen[ed] carefully to the ancient texts and produce[d] new ones of their own,” thus enabling Cherokee people – regardless of linguistic ability – to have access to traditional sources of knowledge (Nofire 45). This access, of course, is essential to *ga-du-gi*; for community building requires openness to the materials that communicate culture. To this end, recently produced “comparative texts in Cherokee and English with commentaries play a major part in delivering the traditional works” (Nofire 47). Still, the production of alternative versions through translation, transcription, and commentary raises certain inevitable questions regarding

the fidelity of languages to thought, the status of oral and written expressions, and the distinction between primary and secondary texts. While these questions warrant consideration, however, none are an impediment to *ga-du-gi*. In fact, a sustained consideration of such questions may prove useful in the negotiation of overlapping cultural boundaries; for the practical objective of these negotiations is neither the authentication of any particular linguistic expression, the privileging of oral or written form, nor the determination of priority among texts; rather, the goal is “to reach as accurate a view [of the story] as possible using Cherokee and English.” The more important question, then, is how to obtain an “accurate view” within a tradition that accepts the synchronic and diachronic interplay of dualities as given conditions.

The question, here, is one of interpretation; consequently, some issues pertaining to Cherokee hermeneutic praxes must be addressed. The criterion for accuracy within Cherokee culture is not *go-tlv-hi-s-o-di*, or correctness, but *a-ga-se-s-do-di*, care. This sense of care is at the heart of *ga-du-gi*, for there can be no coming together without it. Accordingly, any interpretation of the complex Cherokee storytelling tradition should be “undertaken with such a sense of community that it belongs to the community itself, and at the end no one knows who first proposed a particular idea” (Gonzalez 53). Cherokee interpretive strategies should begin and end with *ga-du-gi*. “Without such a perspective, [interpreters] fall into I-hermeneutics, which fails, not merely because it misinterprets its text, but also because it misinterprets its task. The task of hermeneutics is not merely for an individual – or even for a community – to understand a text, but is even more for building the community” (Gonzalez 54). As a cooperative effort, collaborative interpretation becomes a ceremonial event. If “[t]he purpose of a ceremony is to integrate: to fuse the individual with his or her fellows, the community of people with that of other kingdoms, and this larger communal group with the worlds beyond this

one,” then the purpose of Cherokee hermeneutics is to integrate the complex sets of dualities that appear in the Cherokee storytelling tradition: the storyteller and/or the writer; the audience and/or the readers; languages; stories and/or texts (Allen 10).

The Cherokee Humanities courses, co-sponsored by the Cherokee Heritage Center and the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma and taught by a team of Cherokee instructors, including myself, are an excellent example of *ga-du-gi*. Each course seeks to provide Cherokee people – and people interested in Cherokee culture – with college level experiences that strengthen the critical thinking skills necessary to negotiate the overlapping boundaries of cultures. Central to these experiences is the Cherokee storytelling tradition. In particular, classroom experiences with one story – or one set of stories -- stand out among the many others. Those stories recount the origin of fire.

Fire, or *a-tsi-lv*, is sacred in Cherokee culture. According to the elders, fire is a gift from U-ne-la-nv-hi, the Creator: “it was God’s idea” (Kilpatrick 161). Cherokee tradition says that the Creator will always know that Cherokee people are alive and well if the ceremonial fires are burning, an acknowledgment of this gift. The stories recounting this gift, however, suggest that the Creator works in mysterious ways; for in these stories, the bearer of fire is a tiny water spider, *Ka-na-ne-s-gi A-ma-i-ye-hi*. This paradox – how small beings can perform great acts – is a common theme in Cherokee stories.³ Thus, while the details of first-fire stories may vary from telling to telling, the Promethean heroine is always *Ka-na-ne-s-gi*, and the basic narrative structure of exposition, complication and resolution remains the same. That fundamental structure may be paraphrased as follows:

- A long time ago, the world was cold and dark. The animals, however, know about a fire burning in a distant place, so they endeavor to acquire it.

- The complication inherent in their endeavor is the disposition and transportation of the fire. Not only is the fire potentially too hot to handle, it also must be carried across a sizable body of water.
- Various birds and animals attempt the feat without success. The water-spider volunteers, but the other animals are skeptical. The problem is finally resolved by the water-spider, who swims across the water, places a coal in her web-sac, and returns triumphantly.

In selected Cherokee Humanities courses, students are provided with three English language versions of the first-fire story (*see appendices*) and asked to engage in collaborative interpretation. This assignment is presented as a series of specific tasks.

- Read each version of the story.
- Compare and contrast the versions on the following points:
 - Setting
 - Characters
 - Plot
 - Themes
- Identify, if possible, a potential purpose for each version.

Having explored the texts for various moments of similarity and difference, students are more likely to discern the purposes of the storyteller. For example, the storyteller in the Mooney transcription, with its litany of failed attempts on the part of the animals, may be understood to emphasize the theme of “How the Animals Came to Be the Way They Are,” a version of what Rudyard Kipling called “Just So Stories”; the Shade version may be understood to emphasize the relationship between the animals and native people; the Littlejohn version may be understood to emphasize the connection between the events of the past and the development of a Cherokee pottery tradition. But students are also more likely to engage – or re-engage – the stories with purposes of their own. This return engagement with the stories is perhaps the most crucial moment in the process of integration; for if they fully engage these stories, the students become more than passive listeners or readers, they become an active part of the storytelling tradition. They become storytellers. They become the tradition.

To emphasize the potential power of this transformation, Cherokee Humanities instructors encourage students to become involved in other aspects of Cherokee ceremonial life. In particular, the other instructors and I have drawn student attention to stomp-dancing, the original religious tradition of the tribe. The fact that stomp-dances⁴ occur around *a-tsi-lv*, the sacred fire, only reinforces the spirit of *ga-du-gi* experienced with community encounters with the stories of the Cherokee oral tradition. As Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma Principle Chief Chad Smith has noted “[t]o build one fire is the image of *ga-du-gi*” (1).

Endnotes

¹ The phrase “oral traditions” derives from the discourses of anthropology. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, anthropologists/ethnologists such as Henry Lewis Morgan, James Mooney, and Franz Boaz hoped to document the traditional cultural life of Native Americans. The motivating hypothesis for their work was that indigenous culture would disappear in the “inevitable” process of acculturation within the American “melting pot.” When this anticipated disappearance failed to occur, “many American Indians began to redefine their relationship to anthropology and to question whether “outsiders”—non-Indian anthropologists and other researchers—should have the right to interpret native culture. The dialogue has been acrimonious at times and is still evolving” (Archambault).

Velma’s comment, then, is an instance of verbal irony. By saying “I think it was a fine example of the oral tradition,” she acknowledges the value of Thomas’ story and its relation to tribal storytelling traditions, but she also self-reflexively acknowledges an aesthetic of resistance in which contemporary native people continue to engage in a traditional practice that has been considered a relic of the past by academic study. Her self-reflexive irony thus may be understood as a means of resisting the objectifying effects of academic discourse. Indeed, if the academic discourses of anthropology have tended to collect “oral traditions” as exotic artifacts from the past, Thomas’ story – or at least Velma’s evaluation of it -- defies that ossification by insisting that the story-telling tradition is dynamic, not static.

² Traditional Cherokee Keetoowah Societies, renewed in the aftermath of the Civil war, emphasized the practice of ga-du-gi. “If any Keetoowah [Cherokee] should get sick, or unable to take care of himself, all members of the Keetoowah society who live nearby, shall look after him and visit him” (Young 148).

³ Consider, for example, the origin story transcribed by Mooney, “How the World Was Made” (239).

⁴ For more information on stomp-dancing, see Young’s [Quest for Harmony](#), Speck’s and Broom’s [Cherokee Dance and Drama](#), and the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma website: <http://www.cherokee.org/home.aspx?section=culture&culture=culinfo&cat=/182L8mTkbo=&ID=VVZXCYO3g84=>

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Appendices

THE FIRST FIRE

Recorded in Myths of the Cherokee & Sacred Formulas of the Cherokee by James Mooney

In the beginning there was no fire, and the world was cold, until the Thunders (Ani'-Hyun'tikwalas'ski), who lived up in Galunlati, sent their lightning and put fire into the bottom of a hollow sycamore tree which grew on an island. The animals knew it was there, because they could see the smoke coming out at the top, but they could not get to it on account of the water, so they held a council to decide what to do. This was a long time ago.

Every animal that could fly or swim was anxious to go after the fire. The Raven offered, and because he was so large and strong they thought he could surely do the work, so he was sent first. He flew high and far across the water and alighted on the sycamore tree, but while he was wondering what to do next, the heat had scorched all his feathers black, and he was frightened and came back without the fire. The little Screech-owl (Wa'huhu') volunteered to go, and reached the place safely, but while he was looking down into the hollow tree a blast of hot air came up and nearly burned out his eyes. He managed to fly home as best he could, but it was a long time before he could see well, and his eyes are red to this day. Then the Hooting-Owl (U'guku) and the Horned Owl (Tskili) went, but by the time they got to the hollow tree the fire was burning so fiercely that the smoke nearly blinded them, and the ashes carried up by the wind made white rings about their eyes. They had to come borne again without the fire, but with all their rubbing they were never able to get rid of the white rings.

Now no more of the birds would venture, and so the little Uksu'hi snake, the black racer, said he would go through the water and bring back some fire. He swam across to the island and crawled through the grass to the tree, and went in by a small hole at the bottom. The heat and smoke were too much for him, too, and after dodging about blindly over the hot ashes until he was almost on fire himself he managed by good luck to get out again at the same hole, but his body had been scorched black, and he has ever since had the habit of darting and doubling on his track as if trying to escape from close quarters. He came back, and the great blacksnake Gule'gi, "The Climber," offered to go for fire. He swam over to the island and climbed up the tree on the outside, as the blacksnake always does, but when he put his head down into the hole the smoke choked him so that he fell into the burning stump, and before he could climb out again he was as black as the Uksu'hi.

Now they held another council, for still there was no fire, and the world was cold, but birds, snakes, and four-footed animals, all had some excuse for not going, because they were all afraid to venture near the burning sycamore, until at last Kanane'ski Amaiyehi (the Water Spider) said she would go. This is not the water spider that looks like a mosquito, but the other one, with black downy hair and red stripes on her body. She can run on top of the water or dive to the bottom, so there would be no trouble to get over to the island, but the question was, "How could she bring back the fire?" "I'll manage that," said the Water Spider; so she spun a thread from her body and wove it into a tusti bowl, which she fastened on her back. Then she crossed over to the island and through the grass to where the fire was still burning. She put one little coal of fire into her bowl, and came back with it, and ever since we have had fire, and the Water Spider still keeps her tusti bowl.

THE FIRE AND THE SPIDER

as told by Hastings Shade

Many, many years ago when the earth was still cold and dark, animals, birds and insects could all communicate, and there was no fire. The animals saw the Indians needed fire to cook and warm with.

At this time, there was a race of giant people - they had the fire and were called the Fire People. They lived in the western part of the world. They guarded their fire jealously and knew instantly when a small part of it was missing.

So as the animals, birds and insects began to talk and saw the needs of the Indians, they held a council. At this time, it was decided they were the ones to get the Fire.

So the bear, being the largest, said, "Since I'm the strongest, I'll go get the fire." So he tried and he failed. As he came back and told what had happened to him, they heard a little voice saying, "Let me try." They all looked down and saw a little spider. And they began to laugh and said, "You're too small, you can't do it."

But as each one tried and failed, they kept hearing this little voice saying, "Let me try." Finally, there was no one left but the spider and they told her, "Okay, you're the only one left; so it's your turn."

So she fashioned a small clay pot with a lid and put it on her back and started after the fire. She would run a little ways and stop, run a little ways and stop, just as you see spiders do nowadays. As she began to approach where the fire was, it began to grow light. She'd run a little ways and stop.

When she finally reached the fire, she ran to the fire and put a small amber into the clay pot.

Immediately the fire was missed by the Fire People. They began to search for the fire. The spider would run a little ways and hide, run a little ways and hide, like you see spiders do nowadays. And the Fire People began to gain on her; by this time she came to some water and as she reached the water's edge, the Fire People were right over her and she went in and under the water.

Now the Fire People were afraid of the water because they knew the water would put them out. But as they saw her go underwater, they knew the water had put the fire out that she had. So they said, "Let's return home, because our fire is safe." What they didn't know was the little amber had baked the clay pot and made it waterproof. And, when the Fire People had gone away, the spider came out and brought the fire to the Indians. This is the Sacred Fire of the Cherokees.

The spider is greatly revered by the Indians and her web design can be seen on many items and pottery pieces.

Also, the Great Spirit saw what she did, and gave her the ability to live underwater. You know the spider today as the Water Spider. She still carries a little pot on her back but now it is called an egg sac.

GETTING FIRE

As told by Kathi Smith Littlejohn

A long time ago,
they didn't have fire
on our side of the world,
and everything was real dark and cold.
They knew
that there was fire on the other side of the world,
and all the animals wanted some fire.
So one by one
they said that they were gonna go get the fire.
First,
the buzzard went.
And he flew way around
on the other side of the world,
and he saw some of the fire,
and he tried to get some.
And he got a real coal,
a real hot coal,
and he thought,
"Great, I got some.
And I'm gonna fly back
and take it back on the other side of the world."
And he put it right on top of his head
and flew off.
And what happened?
It burned off all the feathers on the top of his head.
Oh, it was so hot
he went and stuck his head in the lake.
And no fire.
Everybody tried.
Finally,
the little black snake went all the way around on the other side of
the world,
(but the snake wasn't even black then).
He stole from the fire.
He didn't have a good place to carry it,
so he put on the back of his neck,
and it burnt him black all the way down.
And he's still black.
So he got into the lake to put the fire out.
So he didn't get the fire either.
Now they didn't know what to do.
Finally,
Grandmother Spider said,
"I may be small,

but I'm gonna go get the fire."
"You!"
 all the other animals laughed.
"You can't even make it,
 you're so small
 you can't carry that fire."
She said,
 "I might be small, but I'll go get the fire.
 You watch me."
She went all the way on the other side of the world,
 but this time she was thinking,
 "Now, those other animals tried to steal it,
 and it was too hot,
 so I need to put it in something.
 Hmmm. What can I put it in?"
She went down to the river,
 she made a little pot of clay,
 and she put it on her back
When she went and got some of the coals,
 hot coals,
 she put it right in the pot.
She made it all the way back
 and gave everybody some fire.
But then she also gave the Cherokee people
 the idea of making pottery.