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The Death System in Tsalagi Culture

Tracey Burley-Jones

INTRODUCTION

Studying the dying process and the burial practices of the Tsalagi people allows us to better understand their cultural values and their religious beliefs carried throughout their lives and into the moment of their death and beyond. The Tsalagi, better known as the Cherokee people, have an extremely rich tradition surrounding the phenomena of dying, death and the processes of grieving. The following will examine the Tsalagi death system in a historical context while supplementing with some of the practices still used today. The information will be structured as closely as possible, to the actual unfolding of death as we perceive it to be. This study will focus on the process of dying, where the circumstances are that of a lengthy illness, the actual death, burial practices, and the spiritual belief in an afterlife.

As stated before, the information that is provided is given in a historical context without specific dates or timelines associated to it. I will explain the ceremonies in general terms though they do not necessarily apply to every Tsalagi community. The Tsalagi people occupied a vast area of land, and burial practices and ceremonies varied according to particular cultural needs of the people and the natural environment they populated. The resources used vary as well according to written text, archeological accounts, and through personal contact I’ve had with Tsalagi people.

THE DEATH SYSTEM

To understanding the death system of the Tsalagi people we must first define what a death system is. According to Dr. John Morgan of the University of Western Ontario, “the [Tsalagi] death system is the sum total of the persons, places, ideas, traditions, acts, omissions, emotions, and statements that we think or make about death. In other words, it is our behavior that is directly or indirectly related to death” (Morgan 1997: 12). It is impossible to ‘recreate’ the emotions associated with death based on historical documentation therefore I consider the information that was passed down to me by my consultant, as being true. I will refer to my consultant throughout my paper as the Wisdom Keeper. He is a respected Cherokee Elder and spiritual advisor in his community. He has been an invaluable resource by assisting me with the gathering and presentation of detailed knowledge about his people.

THE DYING PROCESS

Not every member of a community would die the same way. As in contemporary society, there were many factors throughout Tsalagi history that would dictate the type of death the Tsalagi people would face. During the pre-colonization period, they died of more natural causes such as childbirth, old age and injuries sustained during
warfare with other tribes. If a member of the community knew that they were close to death, they would walk away from the village as far as they could travel, to lie down and die. If someone should find the bodies later, then rocks were piled on top of them (Wisdom Keeper 2001). Shamans would often doctor sick and ailing persons. If someone suddenly became ill, it was believed that a witch had placed a hex on the individual. The shaman was consulted because of his powerful gift of healing, to cure the person from the spell under which they had been placed. In most accounts, the medicinal concoctions the shamans provided alleviated the symptoms of the illness and health was restored in time. This, of course, was not always the case (Wisdom Keeper 2001).

Migration of the colonizers into Tsalagi territory facilitated the spread of foreign infectious diseases, which took their toll on these populations. A vivid account from a book entitled "Trail of Tears" by John Ehle describes the spread of small pox through the Cherokee nation and the shamans unsuccessful attempts to cure their people of this foreign disease.

The shamans decided that the disease had been sent to punish the adulterers, and the cure was to have them lie, bare breast, in the open, for that must have been their position when their acts were performed. The disease, spread overcoming the simple diagnosis and treatment, and the shamans turned to their water cure: they sweated a patient, then shocked the body by submersing it in the cold river. Many died. Twenty-five in one day in one river...More than ten thousand Cherokee were lost to this epidemic.” (Ehle 1988: 31)

In contemporary society, most individuals will go through the process of dying either at home or in the hospital. When the family feels the individual is very close to their death they may call upon a spiritual advisor to assist with the dying of their loved one. This spiritual advisor may bring others with him, to the hospital or home of the person. A prayer vigil is then started. The advisor will stay with the individual until they pass away. An example was given to me of a spiritual advisor and his family, having stayed with an individual for 3 days straight, until the person had passed on into the spirit world, ensuring the individual had a safe journey into the next plain of existence (Wisdom Keeper 2001).

THE DEATH

The concept of “death” is very complicated for the Tsalagi and must be examined in order to better understand the ceremonies performed around the burial. John Witthoft wrote an article for the “Journal of Cherokee Studies” which relates directly to the Cherokee belief system concerning death. Witthoft wrote his article based on information he had obtained during various meetings with a Cherokee elder named Will West Long.

The Cherokee believe that there are four souls in the body, and as such there are four stages of death. The first is the soul of conscious life, which leaves the body immediately after death has occurred. This soul can sometimes be seen as a ghost but is considered
harmless and powerless. This soul may remain close to the body for a short period of time immediately after the death but will eventually follow the “trail of Kanati” to the resting place of spirits in the Western lands. This soul is said to be located in the head, immediately under the front fontanelle (Witcroft 1983: 68). This is a very important notion in Cherokee culture as the ritual treatment of scalping your enemy is a direct attack against the soul. “This soul is conscious, self conscious, has personality, memory, continuity after death, and is unitary, not quantitative in its essence” (Witthoft 1983: 69).

The second soul is that of physiological life, which is located in the liver. This soul is understood to exist in material form as the yellow bile, black bile, and gastric juices. Exhaustion of the liver substances produces physiological death. When a person dies of causes that are unrelated to the liver, the soul of the liver is believed to be still alive. It may take time for this soul to die with the rest of the body. It is imperative that measures be taken to prevent witches from attacking the souls immediately after death has occurred. Witches have been known by some people, to actually consume the secretions of the liver to extend their own lives, and to inflict disease upon other souls still living on the earth (Witthoft 1983: 69).

The third soul, located in the heart, exists in the blood in the circulation system. This soul takes a month to die and eventually returns to the earth as a life force. Witches generally have no interest in this soul, except when attacking the living with various blood-sucking anemic diseases (Witthoft 1983: 70).

The fourth soul is in the bones. The secretions produced by this soul were not clearly understood by Witthoft or myself. This soul takes up to a year to die, and its essence gradually returns to nature as well. The materials left from the bones are believed to be in the form of crystals in the ground. Because this soul is still living for one year after the body has been buried, it is important that the grave be tended to and weeded during this time period. After one year is over, there is nothing left in the grave and it no longer needs to be cared for. Will West Long stated that he did not know of any conjuring against the soul of the bones (Witthoft 1983: 70).

The influence of conjurors and witches on the death of an individual is extremely important in Tsalagi culture. They conceive a distinct difference in people who are considered to be “White Witches” and those who practice bad medicine, or “Black Witchcraft”. White witches are those people who practice witchcraft in order to help others and heal them from the products of bad medicine. Black witchcraft is intended to inflict pain, discomfort and even death upon individuals. The art of witchcraft may affect the individual while he/she is alive, or after they have died, as a result of directly attacking one of the body’s souls. The terms conjuror and witch can be used intermittently. The main distinction between the two terms seems to be that a conjuror has vast knowledge and magical power, and does not partake in stealing the liver-souls (Witthoft 1983: 70). It is believed that a figure known as the Raven Walker stands over the body of the dying person, moments before their death. When the dead gasp their last breath, the Raven Walker is said to steal it, and so begins the magical feud between the conjuror and the assaulting raven symbol (Mooney 2001).
THE WAKE

The preparation of the body for the wake was done immediately after the death of an individual. The body would be washed, and “dead clothes” would be placed upon the individual. “Dead clothes” were costumes prepared in early adulthood, which were stored away until the body was prepared for the burial. A vigil was organized just prior to the death, which continued throughout the wake until after the body was buried. It was expected that this is the most vulnerable time for witch attacks on the soul of the deceased. The defenses used to combat witch attacks, are the magical power of the fire in the household hearth, the knowledge of the conjuror that stays by the body, and the power of vigilance (Witthoft 1983: 72). The Fire was said to have an intensely spiritual nature, have human thoughts, conscious, intent, and emotion. The spirit of the fire was likened to that of an old woman, and was regarded to be a grandmother in kin terms. It was necessary to treat the fire with great respect and make sure she had enough strength and energy to ward off the witches who would attack in the night (Witthoft 1983: 72).

Another tradition during the time of a wake included the ceremonial feast. The body would be laid out at the home of the deceased, while relatives and friends in the community gathered around to share food and discuss the accomplishments of deceased’s life. This was seen as an opportunity to openly grieve for the loss the community had suffered (Wisdom Keeper 2001). If the deceased was a husband/family man, it was expected that the wife would mourn for one year before taking on another partner. Food from the feast, and a bowl of water were placed with the body during the burial. This was to ensure the spirit would have strength and energy to make the journey to the “happy hunting grounds” or the “place of no wants” (Wisdom Keeper 2001).

A wake in present-day society continues to hold some of the values of the past. A large number of people will still hold feasts in the communities they live in, to celebrate the life of the person who has passed on. Spiritual advisors today, will remain with the body from the time of death until the body is buried. White laws do not always allow this custom to proceed, but where there is no interference, this practice is still used. They continue to carry out vigil prayers so that the spirit will find its way to the next destination in its life (Wisdom Keeper 2001). Important items are collected and placed in the casket to be buried with the individual.

THE BURIAL

There has been extensive excavation done on Tsalagi burial mounds throughout the areas of South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and Georgia (see Appendix 1). A large portion of the Cherokee nation occupied these lands before they were forcibly removed in the early to mid 1800’s. I will focus less on the archeological finds in this area, and more on the detailed information passed down to me by Tsalagi people who know accurate accounts of their own history.

Burial practices amongst Cherokee people took many forms. As suggested previously, history was constantly changing and so did the beliefs and ideas around certain burial customs in Tsalagi society. The

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ceremonial burial of the corpse was dependent on the status of the person who died. At one time, it was accepted that if a Chief in a community died, seven of his servants would be slain and buried with him. The idea was that the life of this important figure had ended, and everything that was immediately associated with his life on earth should come to an end, so that he may enter the spirit world free of ties to his physical past. This was also true of families in a patriarchal society. If the man died, the rest of his immediate family would be buried with him as they had direct association with his bloodline on earth. These customs were changed, and the need for human sacrifice amongst families was no longer necessary when the social order shifted to a matriarchal system (Wisdom Keeper 2001). A priest or spiritual advisor was given an honorary burial when he died. His slaves were sacrificed and impaled on posts in a circular pattern around his grave. This would ensure that they could continue to watch over and take care of the priest, even in his death.

The Tsalagi people throughout many different villages commonly used shallow graves. An example of this type of grave can be found in the archeological excavation performed at Peachtree Mound and Village site in Cherokee County, North Carolina. My consultant explained to me in our interview that mounds were formed as a result of an area becoming filled with bodies already buried. Dirt and rocks would be placed down, and more people would be buried on top of this spot. As a result, large mounds began to form. When a priest died, a new burial plot would be started. The results of the excavation of Peachtree Mound found 68 bodies buried in a very similar style. Approximately seventy five per cent of the bodies were found buried in a flexed, birth like position. “Bodies were uniformly buried in the flesh, usually in pits barely large enough to contain the body readily” (Setzler and Jennings 1941: 33). Although an explanation has not been clearly given as to why the bodies are buried in this flexed position, it may be suggested that it is associated with the belief of resting the dead body in mother earth as one rested in their own mothers womb, that being in a fetal position.

Most Cherokee people were buried with items that had special meaning to them. The excavation site at Peachtree Mound found very few ornaments and grave goods in the burial areas, but the items that were uncovered tended to be located around the throat and head area. The contents mostly consisted of hairpins, beads, ear ornaments and pendants (Setzler and Jennings 1941: 33). The Garden Creek Mound, which is also located in North Carolina, had many burial sites with extensive grave goods. These goods ranged from pottery, metal and bone ornaments, to shells and ceramics (Keel 1976: 89). This large variety of grave goods gives us a clear indication of the extensive trading network the Cherokee people established early in their history.

The Tsalagi people also laid their dead in caves and cliffs (Wisdom Keeper 2001). The Doublehead Cave, better known as the Hines Cave is located about six miles from Monticello, Kentucky. Indigenous populations used this cavern as a burial ground for more than 20,000 years. The skeletal remains of many are buried here, and artifacts associated with their lives are scattered throughout the cave. Unfortunately, despite attempts by the government to
enforce strict laws against disturbing this site, desecration and looting remains a constant problem in this location (Sims 2000).

The Tsalagi believed that if an individual died before sunrise, he/she would be buried before sundown, and if this person died before sundown, the individual would be buried before sunrise (Wisdom Keeper 2001). “When a person was considered to be dead, the spiritual advisor would come and burn incense around the body; he would circle the body using his drum or rattle and sing prayers for the individual. Sometimes before the body was buried, or shortly after, a crossing over ceremony was done (Wisdom Keeper 2001).”

Witthoft draws attention to the strength of witch medicine in his article, and highlights a particular incident relating this to the burial of a body.

Once, Will said a man who had taken the witch medicine sat and watched a grave the night after a burial. First he heard the ravens. The two great raven figures that were half human, flew down to the grave. They were semi-transparent but luminous, the pale blue of skili-fire. One said “Is anyone here?” The other said “No. We have some meat.” They dove into the ground as though it was water, and came up carrying the coffin. They opened it, and then closed it and carried it back into the ground, and flew away (Witthoft 1983).”

This is a further indication that the Cherokee believed their spirit world often intermeshed with the world of the living.

Burials today are quite different than they had been historically. A large portion of Cherokee people in modern day, are living as Christians. The old ways of their ancestors have been abandoned, and the sacred ceremonies have been replaced with those of new religions. Tom Mooney is an archivist from the Cherokee Heritage Center in Tahlequah, Oklahoma whom I spoke with regarding contemporary Cherokee funerals. He concluded that most Cherokee were now of Christian faith, therefore funerals are very similar to that of the white society. The conducted funeral may be in both, English and Cherokee languages. He indicated that it was very common to have the actual burial of the body on the homestead of the deceased, rather than in a cemetery (Mooney 2001). This may be a product of the environment in which this population lives, rather than a Tsalagi cultural trait.

**THE AFTERLIFE**

The Cherokee people strongly believed in an afterlife. I have given examples throughout my paper of prayers being said for the dying, so that they may have a safe journey on their way to the spiritual plain. Items of importance, including special moccasins, with food and water were buried with the body so that the spirit would have plenty of nourishment and strength to reach the final destination (Wisdom Keeper 2001).

The place the spirit journeys to after it has left the body has many different names. I have referred to it as the “place of no wants”, “the western lands”, the “happy hunting grounds” and
that make the Tsalagi people unique are being cast aside. I have been extremely fortunate to have contact with informants who were able to offer me an exciting cultural glimpse into the traditional death system of their ancestors. Yet, the Cherokee culture is still alive in some communities. We can only hope that the surviving Tsalagi people will share the stories their grandfathers told them with future generations of people. We need to move from a society that tolerates one another to a civilization who respects the differences that we have between us, and learn what we can about life and death. Otherwise, the Cherokee ceremonies, ideas about life and death, customs and rituals will only ever be seen in a historical context.

When your time comes to die, be not like those whose hearts are filled with the fear of death, so when their time comes they weep and pray for a little more time to live their lives over again in a different way. Sing your death song and die like a hero going home.

- Chief Aupanmut 1725
(cited in Craig 1995)

REFERENCES CITED


