Myths of the Cherokee: Extract from the Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology

James Mooney

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MYTHS OF THE CHEROKEE

BY

JAMES MOONEY

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MYTHS OF THE CHEROKEE

By James Mooney

I--INTRODUCTION

The myths given in this paper are part of a large body of material collected among the Cherokee, chiefly in successive field seasons from 1887 to 1890, inclusive, and comprising more or less extensive notes, together with original Cherokee manuscripts, relating to the history, archeology, geographic nomenclature, personal names, botany, medicine, arts, home life, religion, songs, ceremonies, and language of the tribe. It is intended that this material shall appear from time to time in a series of papers which, when finally brought together, shall constitute a monograph upon the Cherokee Indians. This paper may be considered the first of the series, all that has hitherto appeared being a short paper upon the sacred formulas of the tribe, published in the Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau in 1891 and containing a synopsis of the Cherokee medico-religious theory, with twenty-eight specimens selected from a body of about six

hundred ritual formulas written down in the Cherokee language and alphabet by former doctors of the tribe and constituting altogether the largest body of aboriginal American literature in existence.

Although the Cherokee are probably the largest and most important tribe in the United States, having their own national government and numbering at any time in their history from 20,000 to 25,000 persons, almost nothing has yet been written of their history or general ethnology, as compared with the literature of such northern tribes as the Delawares, the Iroquois, or the Ojibwa. The difference is due to historical reasons which need not be discussed here.

It might seem at first thought that the Cherokee, with their civilized code of laws, their national press, their schools and seminaries, are so far advanced along the white man's road as to offer but little inducement for ethnologic study. This is largely true of those in the Indian Territory, with whom the enforced deportation, two generations ago, from accustomed scenes and surroundings did more at a single stroke to obliterate Indian ideas than could have been accomplished by fifty years of slow development. There remained behind, however, in the heart of the Carolina mountains, a considerable body, outnumbering today such well-known western tribes as the Omaha, Pawnee, Comanche, and Kiowa, and it is among these, the old conservative Kitu'hwa element, that the ancient things have been preserved. Mountaineers guard well the past, and in the secluded forests of Nantahala and Oconaluftee, far away from the main-traveled road of modern progress, the Cherokee priest still treasures the legends and repeats the mystic rituals handed down from his ancestors. There is change indeed in dress and outward seeming, but the heart of the Indian is still his own.

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