

Storytelling as Revolt

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Throughout time, cultures have developed and shared stories as a way to pass down their knowledge, their religious and spiritual beliefs, and their creation within the world. Each story can offer a differing perspective and representation of culture and understanding. In these communities, storytelling is regarded as sacred, and in many cases, it is a reserved rite for the elders of a tribe. It is even said that for many cultures, “stories describing events in images and in oral and written language are at the heart of world cultures” (Warnes). These cultures root themselves in their interpretation and telling of these developmental stories, creating a foundation that the entire tribal community is founded upon. Many cultures still use storytelling as one of their primary ways, sometimes even their only way, to communicate their cultural history to the generations that follow. Through time, many of these cultural practices have been eradicated to fit the mold of mainstream America, yet “scholars have no doubt discovered the importance of oral traditions for obtaining a greater understanding of Americana Indian culture” (Cheek Jr. 343). It is undeniable that some Native American tribal communities have been forced to modify and transform their cultures and their practices to move with the times. While this is a sad reality, it also becomes evident that many of these communities are taking a stance to maintain and preserve a sense of heritage through the retelling of their cultures, beliefs, and practices. In this way, Native American tribal communities form a unit of individuals that, together, confront philosopher Albert Camus’s concept of the absurd. As tribal communities begin to combat this issue, readers can see that some fall victim to Camus’s concept of philosophical suicide, while others, such as the Chickasaw, are able to use their storytelling as a living literature that continues to revolt against the absurd which is perpetuated with the retelling of each oral tradition.

First, it is important for readers to understand that within Native American culture, “...storytelling provides ethical teachings, as storytellers are rememberers, educators, entertainers, historians and carriers of tradition” (Veeder 178). Historical tradition highlights “...the importance of oral traditions, emphasizing their role in preserving Indian culture through centuries of assimilation and genocide” (Veeder 178). Before boarding, and eventually mainstream, schools moved in, a large part of Native American education stemmed from the stories told by their elders. It is no longer a question of preference, but an issue of preservation, as numerous tribes struggle to keep their culture. To many tribes, having a strong oral history provides members the opportunity to more fully know and understand themselves and their community, both in the past and the present. It is this

daunting task of preservation, in the face of eradication, that brings many tribes to confront the absurd, leaving them to ask if the life and the continuance of their tribe is possible. It is at this point that readers can see some tribal communities struggling to recapture their language and their traditions of storytelling, while other tribal communities are finding ways to revolt against the absurdity of conforming to a culture that is not their own.

To better examine the rift between traditional tribal belief and modern society, it is important to first understand that it is a common belief among western culture that storytelling is a form of entertainment. It becomes evident that Native American culture is distinctly different from the western ideologies that are perpetuated within mainstream America. Looking more closely into one of these dividing characteristics, Joanna Bornat and Daniela Koleva say that “the oral history literature provides few examples of comparative studies. One reason for this, we would suggest, is because a defining characteristic...is challenged by the need to translate and the disabling effect of non-comprehension when listening to voices speaking in a language which is not familiar to the hearers” (Bornat 36). Bornat and Koleva present the idea that there is a disconnect between the telling of a story and the translation thereafter. This disconnect can offer further division between Native American communities and western cultures; however, it can also stand as a unifying factor for tribal communities as they continue their revolution to revitalize and maintain their language and culture. It is important for individuals to understand that oral tradition has offered a way in which Native American cultures are able to withstand years of cultural genocide and assimilation.

Despite this division, oral tradition has continued to live throughout Native American communities. In their article, “Reconstructing the World: Albert Camus and the Symbolization of Experience,” authors Cecil Eubanks and Peter Petrakis, propose the idea that literature and narrative are symbols that are highly influenced by philosophy, perhaps allowing for a commonality between the two camps. Eubanks and Petrakis propose that literature becomes a vehicle for philosophy, as it acts as a representative symbol. To help readers understand the connections between a Western philosophy and oral tradition, Jennifer McMahan explains, in her article “Desperate Times Call for Existential Heroes,” that “absurdity emerges from the encounter or ‘confrontation’ between reason and the world” (McMahan 231). It is at this point in time that an individual can respond one of three ways. In his essay “An Absurd Reasoning,” Camus clarifies that these three responses are “plain suicide,” “philosophical suicide,” and “revolt” (Camus 6). While there are three options, Camus only endorses one as a correct response, which is revolt. In their article, Eubanks and Petrakis say that “rebellion against suffering may serve to dignify and enhance human existence and even to evoke a community of shared pathos” (Eubanks and Petrakis 293). It becomes easy to see that storytelling is the way that Native American communities chose to enhance their people. By doing so, the community is able to come together as one larger, joined force rather than individuals. Thus, by allowing for the continuance and preservation of storytelling, Native American tribes are able to document and remember their history. In this way, Native American tribes are able to revolt.

To more fully understand this idea, it is important to examine Camus’s personal philosophy in more detail. The first choice is to commit suicide and put an end to the absurd, as once there is no life, there is no absurdity. To further develop this concept,

McMahon explains that "...suicide represents not victory over absurdity, but the victory of absurdity over the individual" (McMahon 231). By choosing suicide, an individual, or in this case a tribe, forfeits any future to create meaning in relation to storytelling. Camus's second option is to commit philosophical suicide, which occurs when one has been confronted with the absurd yet denies its characteristics and existence. The third option, which is endorsed by Camus, is revolt against the absurd. In his essay, Camus emphasizes that in the end, "the point is to live" (Camus 22). When a tribe is threatened at the loss of their entire history, this becomes a time in which they may question if their tribal history has meaning in a modern world. It is at this point that they come face to face with the absurd. However, if a tribe has come face to face with the absurd, why is there not a large resurgence of oral histories? Camus offers an insight into this issue when he discusses philosophical suicide.

As many Native American tribes come to confront the absurd, it becomes more evident that many tribes are falling victim to philosophic suicide. In his article, "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus explains this concept by saying, "...the feeling of absurdity does not spring from the mere scrutiny of a fact or an impression, but that it bursts from the comparison between a bare fact and a certain reality, between an action and the world that transcends it" (Camus 11). It is in this absence that tribal communities commit philosophical suicide as they deny the ever-encroaching modern society, which forces these communities to assimilate into a written Western ideology. While this lack of recognition works for some time, it becomes a more dominant issue as tribal language and traditions are lost due to the death of tribal elders, creating the inability for younger generations to learn these important cultural concepts. Camus perpetuates this idea as he says, "a man devoid of hope and conscious of being so has ceased to belong to the future" (Camus 11). As it evident that many tribes are struggling with this concept, it becomes imperative that tribal communities find a way to revolt in order to solidify a place for themselves and their people.

While many tribal communities are falling victim to philosophical suicide, this is not the only answer as they confront the absurd. Camus explains this further as he says, "that the absurd is his extreme tension, which he maintains constantly by solitary effort, for he knows that in that consciousness and in that day-to-day revolt he gives proof of his only truth, which is defiance" (Camus 19). It is this defiance that is a call to action for all tribal communities. It is modern society, along with the importance of a written language and the persistence of assimilation, that continues to strip traditions from these communities. This defiance builds, and revolt becomes evident as one examines the meaning of storytelling and its entirety. Camus states clearly, "revolt gives life value" (Camus 22). In her article, McMahon helps readers to understand this concept as she says, "revolt is simultaneously born and seeks to establish a 'sense of solidarity' between individuals" (McMahon 237). This new understanding perpetuates the idea that revolt is a unifying way to make meaning in life. This is the goal of each tribe as they fight to keep their traditions and maintain a sense of 'self' as they combat assimilation. McMahon further energizes this argument as she states, "...a true rebel is not under the naïve impression that the success she achieves are permanent. Rather, the rebel acknowledges that the struggle is unceasing and 'victories will never be lasting'" (McMahon 237). It is important for these communities to understand that this battle will continue throughout life.

It will be a constant battle that their communities will face daily, as they make the conscious choice to maintain important elements of their culture such as their language and their traditions of storytelling.

As a way to illustrate these actions of revolt, it is important for readers to delve deeply into what it means for oral stories to live, change, and adapt, according to the speaker, the situation, and the time. For a meaningful sample set, readers can turn to John R. Swanton's book *Chickasaw Society and Religion*. His book is arranged in sections; each one relaying a different part of Chickasaw society and religion. Within each of these sections, a story has been written based on an oral account of a time or aspect of Chickasaw culture. As Swanton provides examples of what oral tradition looks like, it is important for western readers to keep in mind the ability for these stories to change. This being said, a story may be told three times, each time discussing the same content matter, but allowing for growth through detail and expression. It is the purpose of this book to help provide an understanding of the Chickasaw, and their oral traditions for those who are unfamiliar with these cultural practices. Swanton's book goes into detail about every facet of Chickasaw life, from their legends to their government, marriage customs, and even games and dances. At times, the book switches into Chickasaw, and offers translations for the words given. It is imperative that in this tribal revolt, Nations are maintaining their languages. This aspect of oral tradition will allow community members to more readily align and revolt as an assembly rather than as individuals. Language is an important aspect of storytelling, as it is the root of each story. By providing these words and phrases in Chickasaw, Swanton is helping to break down each story using his traditional language in conjunction with mainstream American language. Swanton is closing the division between these ideologies by allowing readers the ability to understand some of the most important aspects of storytelling within the Chickasaw society by noting the importance of language.

Swanton presents readers with four differing stories that pertain to the migration and division of the Chickasaw and Choctaw Nations. To understand the importance of storytelling, readers examine four short excerpts from this collection of oral literature. The origin of each story is explained, followed by a brief relaying of the particular account. These stories will help to show differing views, while also allowing certain liberties to be taken by the storyteller, thus allowing for the continuation of the story, and the persistence of a living history. Although there are similarities in each account, the details separate them from each other. All four stories explain an aspect of Chickasaw migration and allow for a different viewpoint that is very important in the interpretation of each story. In his review of *Chinnubbie and the Owl: Muscogee (Creek) Stories, Orations, and Oral Traditions* by Alexander Posey, Gary Cheek Jr. says, "anthropologist Richard Mason once noted that oral tradition cannot serve as invariable fact. Rather, oral stories change over time. They compensate for changes in the world around a people and explain how and why that people thought a particular way at a particular time" (Cheek Jr. 343). Therefore, one cannot take any one of these stories as a truth, but rather, that they are ever-changing and each story told is one person's adaptation of the story.

The first version of this story was retrieved from a United States Indian emissary who lived amongst the tribes after their removal west of the Mississippi. This telling of the story states that the tribe was accompanied by a large dog who, "would give them notice

whenever an enemy was near at hand, and thus enable them to make their arrangements to receive them” (Swanton 3). While this dog makes a cameo appearance in other versions, it dominates this one. As the story continues, it is said that the great dog fell into a sinkhole as the tribe crossed the Mississippi. Upon his death, this dog became a legend of the tribe. The legend of the dog is still relevant within some tribal families today.

The next version of the story was given in the form of a speech by the Kasihta chief Tussekiah Mico in 1797. As he begins his speech, he explains that this story is from Molly Gunn, a Chickasaw woman who gave a translated version of this story to her grandson who in turn passed it on Chief Tussekiah Mico. This version focuses heavily on the division of the Chickasaw and Choctaw tribes. “Tradition says that the Chickasaws and the Choctaws were once one tribe and lived in the West, where they had powerful enemies who kept them in alarm” (Swanton 5). Due to this continued unsettling, the tribe decided to move, dividing into two parties under the charge of two brothers. After crossing the Mississippi River they stayed separated but settled in the same areas and in time even became hostile toward each other. This story also allows for two alternate endings, “...one, that they took a northwesterly course until they reached the Tennessee River and that there the pole pointed in an opposite direction and [upon which] they retreated their steps...” (Swanton 5). “The other tradition is that they followed a more southern direction after crossing the Mississippi, and reached the Alabama River” (Swanton 5).

The third version of the migration and separation of the tribe was obtained from a long version of the migration legend of Hon. Charles D. Carter; however, only the closing section is provided. This retelling focuses heavily on the crossing of the river and the split thereafter. To cross the giant river, camp leaders decided to build rafts. Once they reached the other side, many believed that they had reached their destination and scouts were sent out to acquire a sense of the land and find food. During this time, it was brought to the council that some – the taller and fairer of the tribe – did not believe that the Promise Land had been reached. For this reason, they wanted to keep moving; however, a large majority of the tribe was opposed. Undeterred they gathered their people and left, being marked as rebels by their former brothers, thus dividing the rebels, the Chickasaws, from the Choctaws.

The fourth and final version of this story encompassed many of the ideas that are laid out within the other three. However, unlike the other three, this retelling starts at the very beginning, from when the people came from Asia, moving East in search for a place they could live in comfort, have their own country, and be independent (Swanson 6). In this story, the tribe is led by a dog who walked in the night to advance and direct them. This dog was given the name of Panti, and he kept the tribe safe from predators and illness. The tribe continued to move east until they came to the big ocean and camped where they could see land on the other side. In order to get across, a raft was built. Once safely across, the tribe did not know how to survive in the frigid cold and began to venture south as far down as modern-day Montana, where they remained for a long time. After a long while, some wanted to continue to move, while others wanted to stay; thus, the division happened. As the Chickasaw continued to move, they came to the Mississippi River. In the crossing of the great river, their beloved friend Panti was lost. When they reached the other side,

they decided to use a wooden pole as their guide, resulting in their split into two distinct tribes.

It is important to recognize that each story represents a different belief in the migration and separation of two Native American tribes, the Chickasaw and the Choctaw. The telling of all four, not only one, story allows readers to see the beauty and life in each story, while also allowing for a revolt against mainstream America. This revolt allows each tribe to tell their history how they see fit. All four of these stories are living and changing according to the teller, perception, emotion, and the choices of each teller thereafter. Each of the four stories focused on preserving and passing down insight gained by past ancestors, allowing modern day Chickasaw and Choctaw people a view of where they came from. In Rex Veeder's review of Lois J. Einhor's book *The Native American Oral Tradition: Voices of the Spirit and Soul*, he explains that "for Indian people language is connected to the spirit, and discourse is an exchange of that spirit. Words make our world. A summary of difference is that whereas Western rhetoric is specialized, rhetoric is embedded in Indigenous culture" (Veeder 178). He shows how oral tradition is the foundation for Native American culture, allowing readers to see the need for tribal communities to maintain their oral tradition throughout their communities. When tribes give way, by suicide or philosophical suicide, to a strictly written history, they are surrendering their ability to change and adapt their stories to meet the needs of their people. As Native American communities gain consciousness, and are confronted with the absurd, it becomes a need, not a desire, for them to revolt. Allowing for the continuance of their traditions and culture.

It becomes evident that books such as Swanton's help act as symbols of Chickasaw history and culture, which help to propel tribal communities such as the Chickasaw nation to revitalize the importance of storytelling and revolt against the absurd. Camus says that "...it is good for man to judge himself occasionally, He is alone in being able to do so" (Camus 22). Tribal communities must step back and assess their future, to look at their place in society, and determine their collective response to the absurd. No other tribe, or group, can make this decision for them, and it is imperative that every member of the community comes together to act as a unified whole to face this absurdity. McMahon makes this point clear as she says "Revolt is simultaneously born of and seeks to establish a 'sense of solidarity' between individuals. It strives 'to preserve common existence' and establish 'a common good'" (McMahon 237). Nations can use this need to revolt to help mend bonds and unify themselves under their own traditions. By revolting, these communities have the opportunity to thrive in a modern society while still holding onto their traditional beliefs. It is only through understanding and acceptance of differences within Western and non-Western cultures that oral tradition can continue to thrive.

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