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Can Ethnohistory Help the Ethnomusiciologist?

CHARLOTTE HETH

A problem in ethnomusicology that defies solution is that of influence—was the music we are studying influenced by outsiders? If the music changed because of replacement, acculturation, or attrition, how did it change, and how much did it change? In order to find a beginning point for the music, we sometimes have to start with historical documents written before the first recordings (but not the first songs) were made. The ethnohistorical approach can be useful in finding the starting point.

Definitions of ethnohistory vary according to the source consulted. Axtell's consensual observation in his review essay, "The Ethnohistory of Early America," is that "ethnohistory is not a separate discipline (or even subdiscipline), but rather a hybrid method, process, or approach applicable to a variety of historical problems. It can make no claims to special techniques independent of history, and it has no theory independent of other theories in cultural anthropology. It is an exacting but flexible approach to the problems of cultural process and change, problems that are shared by the complementary disciplines of history and anthropology."¹ Washburn has seen ethnohistory a "process and a method, not as a rigid discipline with fixed borders and strict entrance requirements."²

Reciprocal cultural relations are emphasized by most ethnohistorians, as opposed to the frequent treatment by historians of conquered or "primitive" peoples as merely actors on a stage constructed by the conqueror or colonist. Axtell continues arguing that "By emphasizing that each culture must be understood in its own terms . . . we must not only see the ethnocentric biases in each culture but understand the reasons for them." Another characteristic of ethnohistory, according to Axtell, is its emphasis on sociocultural change. "Its primary aim is to gauge the degree of change that occurs in cultures and to comprehend the historical factors involved in and determining change." Moving both forward and backward in time, the perspective of history "allows us both to detail specific changing variables (because of depth) and control our comparison of variables (because the same cultural tradition is under study)."³ Axtell regards change and persistence as two sides of the same process and believes that "ethnohistory offers the best opportunity for 'testing theories of pattern growth and decline, for demonstrating cultural change, and for explaining stability." "He deems such a service of "considerable value both to history and anthropology because historians tend to assume too much change and anthropologists too little, especially in the cultural study of small societies."⁴

My work on the music of the Oklahoma Cherokees, who were forcibly removed to Indian Territory on the infamous "Trail of Tears" in the 1830s from their Southeastern homeland, is necessarily fraught with problems concerning cultural change and acculturation. The ethnohistorical approach appears useful in resolving some of these problems and in illuminating the various elements of culture contact situations.

Because ethnohistory has its roots in Indian-White relations, and more specifically in the need for anthropologists and historians to provide expert testimony in Indians Claims Commission cases after 1946, many of its practitioners have successfully developed specific methods of dealing with Indian materials. One of the earliest and most successful ethnohistorical methods used by anthropologists is to "work back from cultural knowns of the present to the unknown past," a process Fenton has called "upstreaming."⁵ This technique rests on three premises, according to Fenton:

- 1. Major patterns of culture tend to be stable over long periods. We are too often taken in by the fallacy of assumed acculturation.
- We proceed from what we know, concentrating on the most recent manuscripts first because they are apt to contain things familiar to us.
- 3. We employ an ethnologist's preference for sources: those sources which ring true ethnologically merit attention. Later, sequences may be arranged in chronological order.⁶

Because music is not as easy as some other cultural phenomena for a layman such as a missionary, soldier, or traveler to describe, ethnomusicology lacks the time depth contained in the use of most historical documents. The earliest sound recordings of Cherokee music are from 1951⁷ in Oklahoma and from 1927⁸ in North Carolina. Creek music was recorded in Indian Territory by Speck in 1905, transcribed and published in 1911.⁹ These older recordings and transcriptions are useful in assessing the degree and kinds of changes that have been allowed in this century. With current practice as a base, and with older recordings as stepping stones, we can move back to eighteenth and nineteenth century accounts of music and dance with an eye to stripping away the biases and sensationalism associated with them. We can emerge with meager but truthful descriptions of ancient practices.

In order to gain an understanding of Cherokee ritual practice, of which music is a major part, we must know a little about Cherokee world view. As with many American Indian groups, numbers and colors figure prominently in religious as well as secular matters. The numbers seven and four, in that order, are the most important to the Cherokees and are invoked in all areas of life from the number of repetitions in the chanting of sacred formulas to the number of logs in the Fire. The number two applies mostly to governmental affairs with reference to the old tribal town organization of red (or war) towns and white (or peace) towns. The Oklahoma Cherokee ceremonial calendar is conceived entirely in terms of sevens and fours with only two current events fixed to the Julian calendar.

Colors are also associated with the four or seven directions and are imbued with attributes symbolizing their effect on everyday life. Fire (red) is the sun's messenger on earth symbolizing power and victory while its antithesis, water (blue), serves as a purifying and renewing agent in response to feelings of failure, weakness, and spiritual depression. Smoke (white) carries the Cherokees' message to the Creator from the sacred fire or from the tobacco, symbolizing happiness and peace. The cardinal directions and their associated colors always proceed from the east (red) counter-clockwise through the north (blue), west (black), and south (white). All dances are performed that way; all medicine is stirred the "right" way; all turns of the pipe for ritual smoking are counter-clockwise; even game playing and communal feasting have prescribed directional symbols. Animal symbolism also plays a vital part in Cherokee life, especially in the naming of most clans, the mimetic animal dances (remembered but infrequently performed nowadays), and the appeals for help through sacred formulas. Certain animals and birds are assigned roles as omens (good, bad, or ambivalent) and as agents of deities.

I will caution the reader that when reading accounts of music by missionaries, the ceremony is likely to be a "devil dance," by soldiers, a "war dance," and by travelers, a romantic or libidinous display. Some of these biases emerge in the following descriptions alongside persistent performance practices of music.

ACCOUNTS OF CHEROKEE MUSIC AND DANCE IN THE 18TH AND 19TH CENTURIES

The earliest written descriptions of Cherokee music and dance are those of travelers and missionaries. In 1725 Colonel George Chicken, traveling through the Cherokee country, describes his arrival at Ellijay,

here was mett together the head men of five Towns in the Upper Settlements who after their Ceremonial way cam and Sing'd before me and faned me with their Eagle tailes and seemed very much Joyed at my coming among them.¹⁰

Also, in the early part of the eighteenth century Alexander Longe made several allusions to Cherokee music and dance. In discussing immortality he described a place in the direction of the sun setting:

"where there is one of the finest countries that it is past the apprehension of man to imagine the felicity that is there, as music, dancing and singing, and feasting to all eternities."¹¹

That Cherokee "heaven" should include music and dance seems significant. Longe further states that the Cherokees dance many dances to divert their king and proceeds to list eleven dances by name:

necoena	first fruits	dance
yannasagh	buffalo	dance
Teccana	clamshell	dance

Eyyenora	nimble	dance
Cosaguete	the old	dance
yeheloleogh	the one foot	dance
connaughlyortila	the pole cat	dance
yeuoagh	the pigeon	dance
Yownogh	the bear	dance
yoagnnighyouh	the well done	dance
necawagh	called the Enchant	dance
	dance and the best of all ¹²	

Of these, only the old dance appears to be extant among the Oklahoma Cherokees, although others remain in the memories of the older people.

Longe states that "the Dance Leader" would be a proper name for a girl, and mentions an Indian drummer (sort of a Cherokee "Pied Piper") who led obedient people to an enchanted land by beating a drum and having them dance behind him. According to the legend, the people can still be heard "hallowing, and whooping and dancing" at the spot in the river where they entered the whirlpool and vanished.¹³ Contemporary stories told in Oklahoma describe men who vanish with enchanted female dancers they meet at a Stomp Dance.

Antione Bonnefoy, describing his captivity by the Cherokees in 1742, mentions music making at Tellico:

"Then the savages, putting in each one's hand a white stick and a rattle, told us that we must sing, which we did for the space of more than three hours, at different times, singing both French and Indian songs."¹⁴

On the next day the captives were forced to march three or four times around a great tree in the square singing and carrying a white stick and a rattle. Later they were brought into the councilhouse where each had to sing four songs.¹⁵ This is the first of several references to musical interchange among the Cherokees and outsiders, either white, black or Indian. Bonnefoy also refers to a drum, beaten by a Negro drummer, that was used during the enlistment of fightingmen.

William Richardson, a Presbyterian missionary, observed some Cherokee ceremonies in 1759:

Dances were held in the Town Houses, and the white man witnessed a dance at Chota . . . he went to their Town-house where a great many were met and were dancing around a Cane Fire going West to East, Their young peo: seemed very active and brisk, was filled with Pity for ym in their present State of Heathenism, was suprised to see ym after they were all in a Leather [lather] with sweat, having Danced an Hour together run out into e cold Air to cool ymselves and sometimes into the River, we occasions great Colds among ym'."¹⁶

This reference to the sacred practice of "going to water" for purification or solemnization of ritual was lost on the observer. On January 19, 1759, Richardson observed a dance at Chota that he considered a form of fire worship "as they frequently bowed to it."¹⁷ Questioning the "Prince of Chotte" on the matter, Richardson observed the following:

Talked about half an hour . . . concerning some dances which appeared like religious ceremonies paid to the fire by their turning towards it and singing and calling it their grandfather, as for their calling it so it was from the advantages they received from this cold weather and so ye water."¹⁸

Randolph says further that Richardson was told "that the gestures were 'only a Custom they have and they don't seem to worship anything.' ^{"19} One Indian on another occasion admitted to Richardson that some "Cherokees 'talked' to the fire and it to their Father above, others to ye Water.' ^{"20} The consensus seems to be that the Cherokees paid homage to the fire during dances, a custom that continues today. The purposes of Cherokee ceremonials today are to sing the Great Spirit songs and to call on the Creator in prayer through the fire.

Lieutenant Henry Timberlake in his *Memoirs* 1756–1765 gives an autobiographical account of his relations with the Cherokees. His descriptions of music and dance border on the sensational; nevertheless, they offer a few insights. At Citico Timberlake experienced an eagletail ceremony similar to those described by Chicken and Cuming:

About 100 yards from the town-house we were received by a body of between three and four hundred Indians, ten or twelve of which were entirely naked, except a piece of cloth about their middle, and painted all over in a hideous manner, six of them with eagles tails in their hands, which they shook and flourished as they advanced, danced in a very uncommon figure, singing in concert with some drums of their own make, and those of the late unfortunate Capt. Damere [Commander of Fort Loudon] with several other instruments, uncouth beyond description, Cheulah, the headman of the town, led the procession, painted blood-red, except his face, which was half black, holding an old rusty broad-sword in his right hand, and an eagle's tail in his left. As they approached, Cheulah, singling himself out from the rest, cut two or three capers, as a signal to the other eagle-tails, who instantly followed his example. This violent exercise, accompanied by the band of musick, and a loud yell from the mob, lasted about a minute, when the headman waving his sword over my head, struck it into the ground, about two inces from my left foot; then directing himself to me, made a short discourse (which my interpreter told me was only to bid me a hearty welcome) and presented me with a string of beads . . . He then made some professions as a token of it. He had scarce finished, when four of those who had exhibited at the procession made their second appearance, painted milk-white, their eagle-tails in one hand, and small goards with beads in them in the other, which they rattled in time to the musick.²¹

The red and black-painted dancers led by the war chief (seven in all) served to warn Timberlake of their strength and boast of past war exploits while the four (less important magic number) white-painted dancers offered the promise of peace and friendship. Since one of the worst transgressions a Cherokee can commit is lying, they showed Timberlake his options and their responses. Previous accounts of eagle and pipe ceremonies in the Southeast have failed to recognize the duality associated with the use of symbolic colors and numbers. Therefore, they have stressed peace and honoring rather than the double meaning I think was intended by the Cherokees.

After the ceremonial smoking concluded, Timberlake says, "The Indians entertained me with another dance, at which I was detained til about seven o'clock next morning . . ."²² The use of drums (including those of outsiders) and gourd rattles

70 AMERICAN INDIAN CULTURE AND RESEARCH JOURNAL

along with all-night dancing persists today. The Eagle Dance is remembered but not performed in the West.

Timberlake includes "A Translation of the WAR-SONG" describing song texts as a "sort of loose poetry." He says that the love-songs "contain no more than that the young man loves the young woman and will be uneasy according to their own expression, if he does not obtain her." The category to which war, hunting, and love songs belong is affective. Generally a magic formula is sung to insure the success of the singer or his client in a chosen activity. It is never really "loose" but has prescriptions as to the number of repetitions, directions one must face, time of day for performance, hand motions, paraphernalia, etc. Further comments on the text say that "expletive syllables" are "introduced for the music and not the sense, just like the tolderols of many old English songs." Timberlake's comment on composition states, "Both the ideas and verse are very loose in the original, and they are set to as loose a music, many composing both tunes and song off hand, according to the occasion." He continues that "some tunes, especially those taken from the northern Indians, are extremely pretty, and very like the Scotch."23 These observations appeared to be the first mention of vocables, improvisation, and borrowing of songs among the Southern Indians. All of these are ongoing processes in Cherokee music.

Timberlake describes a war-dance held to relieve the poor, "at which all the fighting men and warriors assemble" featuring one dancer at a time who

... after hopping and capering for near a minute, with a tommahawke in his hand, gives a small hoop, at which signal the music stops till he relates the manner of taking his first scalp, and concludes his narration, by throwing on a large skin spread for that purpose, a string of wampum, piece of plate, wire, paint, lead, or anything he can most conveniently spare; after which the music strikes up, and he proceeds in the same manner through all his warlike actions: then another takes his place, and the cermony lasts till all the warriors and fighting men have related their exploits. The stock thus raised, after paying the musicians, is divided among the poor. The same ceremony is made use of to recompence any extraordinary merit. This is touching vanity in a tender part, and is an admirable method of making even imperfections conduce to the good of society.

In speaking of the war chief, Timberlake explains that "he strives to inspire them with a sort of enthusiasm, by the war-song, as the ancient bards did once in Britain."²⁴ Nowadays a collection is taken for relief of the poor before an evening of stomp dancing begins. Examples of redistribution of wealth and honoring ceremonies accompanied by music are widespread among North American Indians.

Timberlake describes a scalp dance in which forty Indians marched around the town-house "three times, singing the warsong, and at intervals giving the Death Hallow."²⁵ Oral tradition in Oklahoma mentions the same kind of scalp dance occurring in the nineteenth century at Three Forks (Ft. Gibson) during the Cherokee battles with the Osage Indians in Indian territory.

William Bartram's monumental "Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida . . . affords some glimpses of Cherokee life during the period, 1773–1777. After meeting with a Cherokee hunter, Bartram says they "shook hands and parted in friendship, he descended the hills, singing as he went."²⁶ We can only speculate that the hunter may have been singing a hunting song to conjure the game or to divine the direction in which the game lay, still a well-known practice.

In Cowe Bartram describes the council or town-house rotunda as capable of accommodating several hundred people and gives us the most complete picture of Cherokee ceremonies we have from the eighteenth century:

... In the centre the fire is kindled for light, near which the musicians seat themselves, and round about this the performers exhibit their dances and other shews at public festivals which happen almost every night through-out the year ... About the close of the evening ... was a grand festival, music and dancing. This assembly was held principally to rehearse the ball-play dance, this town being challenged to play against the other the next day."²⁷

After an oratorical prologue by an aged chief,

the musicians began, both vocal and instrumental when presently a company of girls, hand in hand, dressed in clean white robes and ornamented with beads and bracelets and a profusion of gay ribbands, entering the door, immediately began to sing their responses in a gentle, low and sweet voice, and formed themselves in a semi-circular file or line, in two ranks, back to back facing the spectators and musicians, moving slowly round and round; this continued about a quarter of an hour, when we were surprised by a sudden very loud and shrill whoop, uttered at once by a company of young fellows, who came in briskly one after another, with rackets and hirls in one hand. These champions likewise were well dressed, painted and ornamented with silver bracelets, gorgets and wampum neatly ornamented with moccasins and high waving plumes in their diadems, immediately formed themselves in a semi-circular rank also in front of the girls, when these changed their order, and formed a single rank parallel to the men, raising their voices in response to the tunes of the young champions, the semicircles continally moving round. There was something singular and diverting in their step and motions, and I imagine not to be learned to exactness but with great attention and perseverance.28

Whoops, responses, formal oratory, intricate dance patterns around the fire, and drama are still found in Oklahoma Cherokee ceremonies. The ball game ceremony is still known among the North Carolina Cherokees, and was practiced by the Oklahoma Cherokees up to the twentieth century.

James Adair's *The History of the American Indians*, 1775, tried to equate customs of the Southeastern Indians to the practices of Judaism in an attempt to establish the Indians' identities as members of the lost tribes of Israel. Adair was a trader whose name is still used as a surname by many Cherokees and has even survived to name a county in the Cherokee country of Oklahoma. In describing music, he says the following about the Cherokees:

their music consists of two clay-pot drums covered on the top with thin wet deer-skins drawn very tight, on which each of the noisy musicians beats with a stick, accompanying the noise with their voices; at the same time, the dancers prance it away, with wild and quick sliding steps, and variegated postures of body, to keep time with the drums, and the rattling calabashes shaked by some of their religious heroes, each of them singing their old religious songs and striking notes *in tympano et choro* . . . He also mentions terrapin shells containing pebbles, fastened to deer-skins, tied to the outside of their legs.²⁹ Water drums, gourd and terrapin rattles survive today in Cherokee communities.

Early in the nineteenth century, Charles R. Hicks, a Cherokee chief and friend of the Christian missionaries at Brainerd, gave some accounts of dances that do not differ greatly from those previously reported. He mentions the green corn dance, the physic dance, and the eagle tail dance.³⁰ In the same volume the Brainerd missionaries mention that the Cherokees expect after death in the other world "they shall find there the same pleasures which they enjoy on earth; that they shall attend ball-plays and all-night dances, and find various other amusements in which here they take delight."³¹ Because the missionaries did not consider these "amusements" as strictly religious or "pagan" rituals, luckily they did not try to stamp them out immediately.

Later on in the nineteenth century, John Howard Payne with the help of Daniel S. Buttrick and various Cherokee informants produced what are commonly called the Payne-Buttrick papers, a collection of descriptions of Cherokee life meticulously copied by Payne and housed now in the Newberry Library in Chicago.³² Each author went on to publish smaller accounts of this work in later years.³³ What is contained in these works can only be summarized here. Let it suffice to say that more detail in descriptions of dances, song texts, prayers, ceremonies, and customs exist in the work of these writers than in any other work until the latter part of the century. Some of the highlights follow:

The most active and efficient agent appointed by the sun and moon to take care of mankind, was supposed to be fire; when, therefore, any special favour was needed, it was made known to fire, accompanied by an offering. It was considered as the intermediate being nearest to the sun, and received the same sort of homage from the Cherokee as the same element did from the eastern magi. This was extended to smoke. Smoke was deemed Fire's messenger, always in readiness to convey the petition on high.³⁴

In Cherokee ceremonial life today, the fire is still regarded as sacred; offerings are made to it, and it is consulted at times for cures and knowledge. Smoke likewise is used in prayers and magic formulas. The papers mention war dances, women's dance, a gun dance, a "bouncing" bush dance, a common dance, a beaver dance, an eagle dance, and a great green corn dance. A comment on the religious feasts or festivals says that they are called "dances," as they are accompanied with dancing. This is always circular, i.e., the dancers always move round in a circle, having the centre of the circle at the left hand."³⁵ This counter-clockwise motion remains the prevailing direction in contemporary Cherokee dances, and non-Christian religious ceremonies are still referred to as dances.

The dance that most resembles contemporary practice is described as the "Common Dance," as it is more frequently performed than any other. It is virtually identical to modern stomp dances.

To procure a 'common dance', nothing is necessary but a proclamation by the chief of a town, stating that a dance will take place in a certain number of nights at the council house or ground.—

At dark, a keen, shrill, yelling or whooping is heard in all directions continguous to the place of dancing, which indicates that the people are collecting . . .

An hour, or sometimes two hours, after nightfall, the people have mostly located themselves in the house, and await in silence the signal for dancing. Presently a man steps forward voluntarily, or by solicitation as a leader. He walks around the fire in the center of the house, a time or two, and invites the others to join him. Sometimes a keg with a skin stretched over it is struck a few times, as a signal. The leader now commences singing and stamping in quick time, and in this manner prances around the fire, followed by some others, who imitate his movements, and answer in short chorus, which causes the vocal performance to resemble a boat-song; this is the mode pursued in all songs where dancing is performed. In a short time these are joined by one or two women, who have the shells of terrapins, (land turtles) with small pebbles in them, fastened to their legs: the clatter made by these in stamping, completes the concert.

Stamping with one or both feet at a time, in quick succession, constitutes the Cherokee mode of dancing. Any person wishing to dance, may now fall in ranks. Generally, an equal number of males and females are engaged at the same time; but strict regularity is not considered necessary.

The men and women do not dance alongside, or fronting each other; but invariably preserve 'Indian file'. The rear is commonly filled up with boys and girls, who are thus initiated into the art at an early age. The leader generally sings extempore: the air is a combination of high and low sounds, used in quick succession, with but few variations, which renders it disagreeable and monotonous. He relates his love adventures,-misfortunes or triumphs;-boasts of his manhood, influence with the fair sex, and dexterity in various performances. If he be an old man, he relates with enthusiasm, the adventures of his youth,-the exploits which characterized his movements in the field of battle, and the hair-breadth escapes through which he passed; he also boasts of stealing. He makes a great many grotesque motions, and contortions;-slaps his hands together, and raises them alternately,-one above the other,—all the while turning and twisting, and bowing ludicrously.-The motions and gestures of the leader are his,-for by much practice they are enabled to anticipate him. Any person can commence or leave off, dancing, at pleasure. Frequently, a large concourse of people are engaged at the same time. Towards the close of the dance they interlock hands, and represent the figure of a sergent in its coil; and often, the whim of the leader causes him to make almost as many turnings and windings, and excentric evolutions as are laid down in a figure of the walls of Troy. As the line of dancers is considerable in length, his (the leader's) sudden retrograde movements never fail in producing confusion, and the dance ends precipately, with bursts of laughter, hallowing and yelling. Repetitions of this dance, conducted by different leaders consume the night.38

Payne gives a list of musical instruments as well as mentioning many in the descriptions of ceremonies. They include terrapin shell leg rattles worn by women, a rattling gourd played by a ceremonial priest, a drum of Indian earthenware to accompany the voice to which was fastened the skin which formed the drumhead, a trumpet made of the thigh bone of a large kind of crane used for summoning warriors, a pipe or flute to signal soldiers to halt (in the discussion of Creek warfare), a "Buffalo Horn," and a "Trumpet."³⁷ Only the drum, the gourd, and the terrapin shell leg rattles survive. Buttrick, in describing an ancient feast remembered by a one hundred year old man, speaks of the dance as follows:

The leader of the dances was then called forward. He arranged the company in single file; the leader followed by his wife, the next principal man and his wife, and so on, a man and his wife;—or, if a man had no wife, he was followed by a single female who was a near relative, or of the same clan. This arrangement might form a number of circles in the house (town house). Being thus arranged, while standing, the congregation was addressed by four priests successively. They occupied the white middle seat . . . The dance then commenced . . . and the night wholly spent dancing. None must sleep but small children.³⁸

That the missionaries tried to replace native religion, language, and music with Christianity, English and hymn-singing, and that they largely succeeded in doing so, is now a matter of history. In retaining any semblance of their ancient practices the Cherokees in Oklahoma have shown remarkable cultural tenacity.

Because the Oklahoma Cherokees today interact with other Indians, especially Creeks, attending dances and singing together, one might conclude that all current music is homogenized or borrowed. That is not the case. All of the sources I have cited are pre-removal when the Cherokees were still united as a nation, and were at various stages of war with the Creeks. Detailed musical analysis of today's ceremonies reflect validity of descriptions on both ends of the historical scale. A few of the dances and ceremonies have been lost but the important symbols and processes still obtain. Cherokee music remains Cherokee in process and product.

NOTES

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22. Ibid., pp. 65.

23. Ibid., pp. 81-83.

24. Ibid., pp. 92-93.

25. Ibid., p. 113.

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