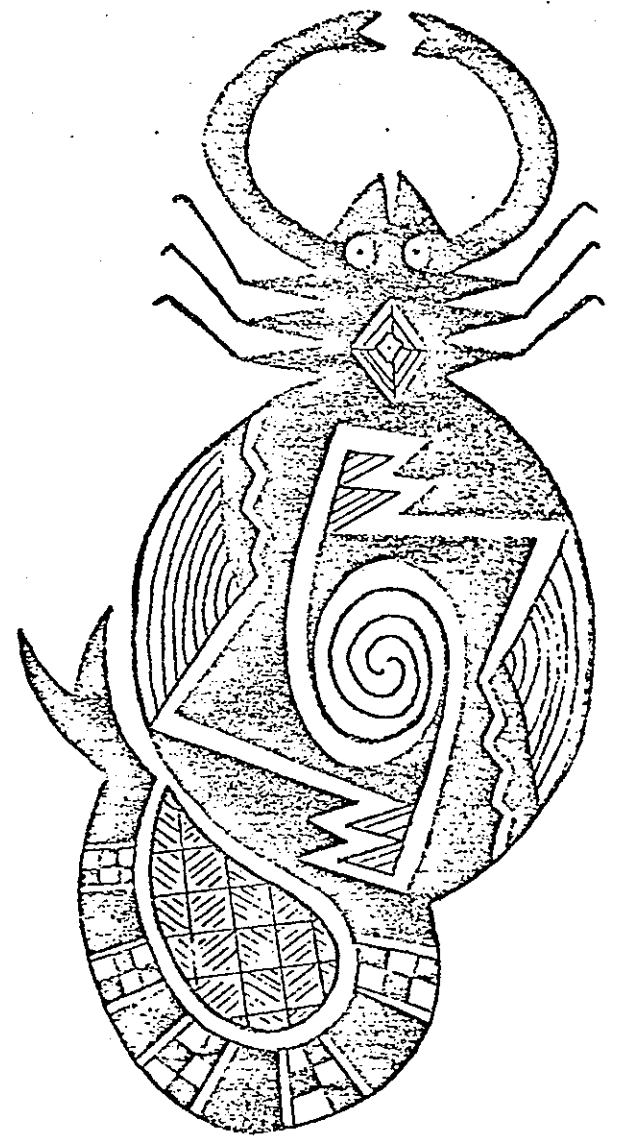
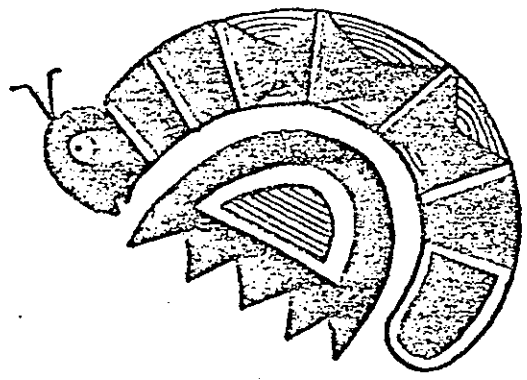
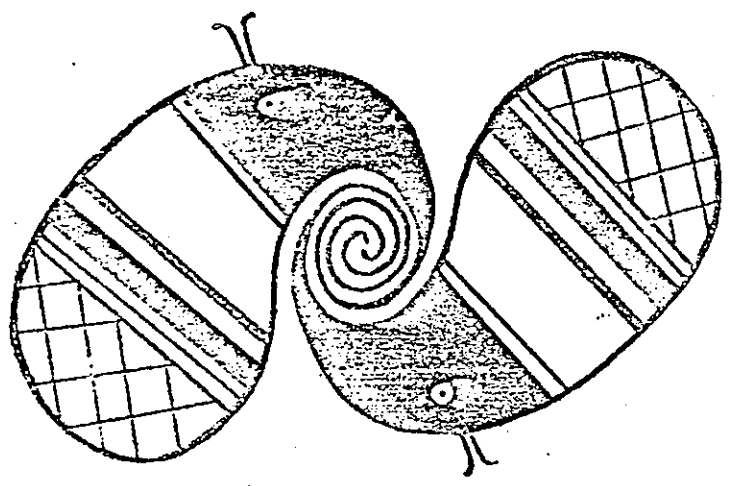


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AN ETHNOENTOMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE OF THE
SOUTHEASTERN INDIAN BELIEF SYSTEM

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Introduction

The Indians of the Southeast had undergone thousands of years of adaptation to the environment of the area prior to the arrival of the Europeans. Those Europeans who first encountered the Amerinds hardly took time to record or notice many of the details of Indian life, for they were too struck by the more profound cultural differences between themselves and the "Savages" to record routine activities.



Since the Southeast lacked the cities of silver and gold of the so-called "high cultures" in Middle and South America, Europeans quickly came of the opinion that Indians were certainly inferior, if not sub-human. It is no wonder then that the early historical accounts attribute little wisdom or intelligence to the Indian. The paucity of information concerning the native inhabitants of the Southeast is also in large part due to what Murphy (1968:1) calls an "historical accident." The rapid depletion, or total extinction, of Amerind populations immediately after European contact left many groups without even as much as the incomplete and ethnocentric accounts written by early settlers and missionaries that were afforded some "savages."

Later settlers began to understand, or at least appreciate, some of the Indian customs. This is evidenced by the adoption of many Indian ideas about nature, folk cures and notions of illness, recipes and ways of cooking, as well as modifications in clothing and architectural styles (Crosby, 1972). Southern folk culture, with so many borrowings and influences from Indian traditions, persists even today, though now in the possession of a dangerously small number of bearers. It has only been in the past decade or so--perhaps the result of a general awakening to the near extinction of this folk knowledge--that scientists have begun to discover that many of these folk traditions indicate a very accurate knowledge about plants and animals and are, indeed, founded upon what we today have rediscovered and called "scientific principles."

In the relatively sterile, air-conditioned, insulated and padded world of modern man, it is easy to overlook the profound impact of such environmental factors as insects. Due to what Edward Hall calls modern man's sensory depravity and blandness (1969:45), it is especially difficult for us to weigh the importance of such ubiquitous creatures as insects upon peoples of simple technology. Yet their impact was great, and, since insects were an environmental force that had to be reckoned with daily,

it is not surprising that insects would of necessity play a key role in the belief systems of the Indians. This paper attempts to consider the Indian myths and traditions that involve insects. Such a reanalysis of available data from an ethnoentomological perspective can offer valuable insights into the place of insects in the belief system of the Indians of the Southeast, and furthermore show that these groups had a sophisticated, complex, and accurate knowledge of insects and insect behavior.

Preliminaries

The geographic area dealt with in this paper is that of the "Southeastern tribes" (Swanton, 1946:10; Hudson, 1975:4). This classification is based upon political considerations, as well as linguistic and cultural similarities. The Southeast in aboriginal times was certainly not a homogeneous area. Yet most of the intraregional differences were quantitative rather than qualitative (Murphy, 1968:50); thus the similarities within the area outweighed the differences and a regional pattern is clearly indicated (Murphy, 1968: 50-51; Swanton, 1946:1-10; Hudson, 1975:2-9).

The term "insect" will be utilized in this paper in a modified Linnaean sense. Technically, "insects" are those invertebrates in the Order Insecta. Most entomologists, however, tend to incorporate other related Orders such as Arachnida (spiders, ticks, scorpions, daddy long legs, mites), Chilopoda (centipedes) and Diplopoda (millipedes) into their studies (See Borror and DeLong, 1964:6-36, 46-55; Ross, 1966:25-49). This is appropriate, for these are all Orders of the Phylum Arthropoda and closely related anatomically, physiologically, and behaviorally. The term "insect" as used in this paper does not, therefore, conform strictly to the standard taxonomy, but does reflect practical scientific usage.

It is also important to point out that the scientific term "insect" does not necessarily coincide with the folk classification of insects in standard usage today by peoples of the Southeast. Many people would probably recognize a category of "creepy-crawly," which would subsume half of the known animal species of the world. Thus the category "insect" is a contrived one, a convenient agreement within science, and should be treated as such.

There is insufficient documentary evidence to determine the native taxons used by the Southeastern Indians. It is probable that their system was elaborate, complex and carefully correlated with the key characteristics deemed important to distinguish certain insects. With certainty one can say that the average Indian knew considerably more about his environment, including insects, than the average person living in the Southeast today. The only extensive insect folk taxonomy developed for any North American Indian group has been compiled by Wyman and Bailey (1964; see also Wyman and Bailey, 1952:97-103) for the modern Navaho. Other insect taxons for a few current Indian tribes have been treated in a limited way under the broader heading of "ethnozoology" (See Conklin, 1972, for a complete bibliography up through 1971).

Though documentation is scarce concerning the Southeast Indians' belief systems, several very important Spanish, French and English documents have been preserved. These were written by early explorers and missionaries who were themselves dealing intimately with all the environmental rigors of the Southeast. Many manuscripts may still remain undiscovered in European

archives. There remain others that are untranslated and analyzed. Therefore, there are still prospects for further ethnoentomological investigation.

Insects in the Belief System

Ants, grasshoppers, spiders, and water beetles have important roles in the creation myths of the Southeastern Indians. According to the Louisiana Choctaw legends, recorded by Bushnell in 1910, grasshoppers and men were created at the same time and in the same sacred place called Nane chaha. The legend is as follows:

"Soon after the earth (yahne) was made, men and grasshoppers came to the surface through a long passageway that led from a large cavern, in the interior of the earth, to the summit of a high hill, Nane chaha. There deep down in the earth, in the great cavern, man and the grasshoppers had been created by Aba, the Great Spirit, having been formed of the yellow clay.

For a time the men and the grasshopper continued to reach the surface together, and as they emerged from the long passageway they would scatter in all directions, some going north, others south, east or west.

But at last the mother of the grasshoppers who had remained in the cavern was killed by the men and as a consequence there were no more grasshoppers to reach the surface, and ever after those that lived on the earth were known to the Choctaw as eske ilay, or "mother dead." However, men continued to reach the surface of the earth through the long passageway that led to the summit (of Nane chaha) and, as they moved about from place to place, they trampled upon many grasshoppers in the high grass, killing many and hurting others.

The grasshoppers became alarmed as they feared all would be killed if men became more numerous and continued to come from the cavern in the earth. They spoke to Aba, who heard them and soon after caused the passageway to be closed and no more men were allowed to reach the surface. But as there were many men remaining in the cavern he changed them to ants and ever since that time the small ants have come forth from holes in the ground." (Bushnell, 1910:526-527).

Grasshoppers (Tetrigidae and Tettigonidae are the major Orthopteran pests in the Southeast) were one of the major insect problems for the Indian. This myth not only explains why grasshoppers would seek such destructive revenge on man, but also justifies the ravenous attacks by the insects upon the important agricultural commodities of the Indian. It is still believed by modern Indian groups that grasshoppers are sent by witches to destroy crops.

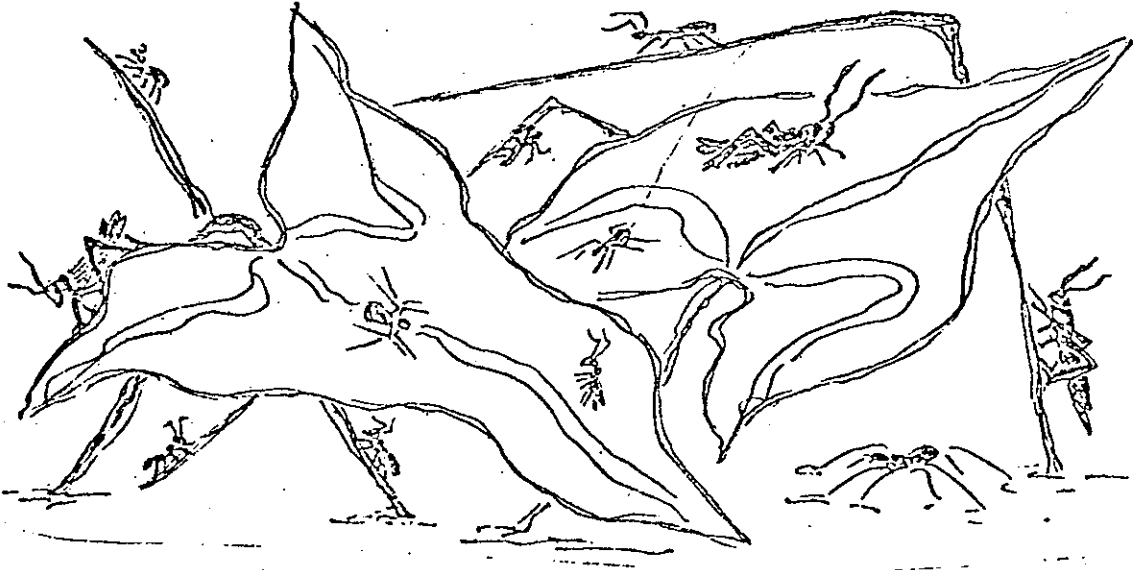
Ants are also important in this creation myth. Since ants come from below the earth, they are seen as being invaders of the upper world. By virtue of being from two parts of the world--upper and lower--ants were considered anomalous to the Indian. Ants were feared because they were denizens of the lower world and, therefore, associated with witchcraft.

The Cherokee, however, admired the "warlike proclivities" of ants, and the "ant clan" was an important one in many tribes (Gilbert, 1943:185). Ant mythology seems to permeate Indian belief systems throughout the Americas. "Ant people" were among the first to inhabit the dark underworld. The Emergence myths recorded by Bushnell (1909) record that the first people of the earth were all insect people and the different colors of ant species account for the different colored races of man.

Another insect associated with cosmogonic myths is the water beetle (Hydrophilidae and/or Gyrinidae). These insects were particularly anomalous to the Indian, for they are equally at home under the water as well as on the surface. Often they are also attracted to lights or fire at night (Borrer and DeLong, 1964:277-282). The Choctaw conceived of the earth as a great island floating in a sea of water. Cords hanging from a sky vault of solid rock held the earth in suspension. The following myth explains how this came to be:

"When all was water, the animals were above in Galunlati, beyond the arch; but it was very much crowded, and they were wanting more room. They wondered what was below the water, and at last Dayunisi, "Beaver's Grandchild," the little Water-beetle, offered to go and see if it could learn. It darted in every direction over the surface of the water, but could find no firm place to rest. Then it dived to the bottom and came up with some soft mud, which began to grow and spread on every side until it became the island which we call the earth. It was afterward fastened to the sky with four cords, but no one remembers who did this."
(Mooney, 1972:239)

The notion that the water beetle could dive to the bottom of a body of water and bring up soft mud is an excellent example of the sophisticated knowledge the Indians must have had about the habits of insects. Water beetles do indeed create little soft mud cells on the shore of pools and streams wherein



pupation occurs (Borror and DeLong, 1964:280). The morphology of the water beetle may also be significant. The shape of the water beetle is a near perfect oval, with a lateral division being formed by the elytra. Thus a perfectly straight line is formed three-quarters through the center of the oval. A case could be made to suggest that the Indian may have held the water beetle in special esteem by virtue of its shape. The barred-oval, a sacred symbol to the Southeastern Indian, may have been seen in a natural manifestation in the water beetle.

This may not be such a far-fetched notion, for the water spider (Pisauridae, commonly called the fishing spider) is seen throughout the Southeast represented on shell gorgets (MacCurdy, 1913:402-403). The "cross and circle" motif is very common and represents "sacred fire" (Swanton, 1942:210; Waring, 1965:35). The water spider has a design on its thorax reminiscent of the cross and circle. The water spider also has an anomalous nature because of its ability to walk on land as well as on water. This explains why these creatures are important in Indian mythology. The water spider is attributed with bringing fire to the tribes. Fire was a very important commodity to the Indian:

"In the beginning there was no fire, and the world was cold, until the Thunders, 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 swim or fly attempted to go after the fire, but all failed according to the Cherokee myth recorded by Mooney (1972:240-241; also 309). In desperation, the water spider volunteered.

"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 could be no trouble to get over to the island, but the question was, How could she bring back the fire? 'I'll mänge that,' said the Water Spider; so she spun a web 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 "tusti" bowl referred to in the myth is the egg sac normally carried by the water spider under the cephalothorax of the female. This is a distinctive trait used by entomologists today in field identification of Pisauridae (Borror and DeLong, 1964:645-646).

It is in association with disease, and therefore witchcraft, that insects are most important in the belief systems of the Southeastern Indians. In the famous Cherokee myth of Kanati and Selu ("The Origin of Corn and Game"), bedbugs, fleas, lice and gnats were released by Kanati from jars

in a cave to punish his evil boys. "They screamed with pain and fright and tried to beat off the insects, but the thousands of vermins crawled over them and bit and stung them until both dropped down nearly dead" (Mooney, 1972:244). The insects mentioned here must have been considered some of the most pestilent species, and were believed to have been released into the world because of man's evil actions. This seemed justifiable and reasonable to the Indian for another reason also: the insects were seeking revenge for the cruelties and injustices they had suffered from man. In the myth about the "Origin of Diseases and Medicine" (Mooney, 1972:250-252), this is explained most clearly. In a special council, with Grubworm (the grub of Allorhina nitida says Mooney, 1972:308) as chief, the birds, small animals, and insects sought reprisals for the wrongs they suffered at the hands of man:

"They began then to devise and name so many new diseases, one after another, that had not their invention at last failed them, no one of the human race would have been able to survive. The Grubworm grew constantly more pleased as the name of each disease was called off, until at last they reached the end of the list, when some one proposed to make menstruation sometimes fatal to women. On this he rose up in his place and cried 'Wadan! (Thanks!) I'm glad some more of them will die, for they are getting so thick that they tread on me.' The thought fairly made him shake with joy, so that he fell over backward and could not get on his feet again, but had to wriggle off on his back, as the Grubworm has done ever since."
(Mooney, 1972:308)

The anger of the grub worm might have been due to the utilization of this insect as a food by the Indian. Throughout the Americas, Indians rely upon grubs of various insect species as a source of protein and fats (See Swanton, 1946:81, 252, 277, 295; Lawson, 1937:290-291). The grub of Allorhina nitida is an especially large and fat one, and is commonly seen curled on its side. The spiral form of the curled grub might have been of special symbolic importance to the Indians, for the "spiral" is seen in much iconography (See Waring and Holder, 1965:9-29) in the Southeast.

Nearly every human ailment not directly traceable to witchcraft is thought to be caused by insects. "The reason is plain," explains Mooney (1972:308). "There are such myriads of them (insects) everywhere in the earth and in the air that mankind is constantly destroying them by the wholesale, without mercy and almost without knowledge, and this is their method of taking revenge."

Ants, for example, were thought to contribute their "collective stings" to the witches, and grains of sand from red ant hills were useful to shamen for causing illness. A Cherokee shaman often used insects or insect parts in effecting cures. This would generally be in the form of a chant of formula (Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, 1970:86, 96) or perhaps a performance of an elaborate "extraction" ritual to remove the culprit insect from the patient's body (Lawson, 1937:30; Morphi, 1932:35-36; Greenlee, 1944). Insects were so closely associated with disease that even to dream of a louse, for example, meant impending sickness or boils (Gilbert, 1943:386).

Because of their close association with witchcraft, insects were thought to have special powers to foretell the future. A certain song of a katydid (Tettigonidae) meant death to the hearer (Mooney, 1972:311). Crickets (Gryllidae) could tell a pregnant woman if she would give birth to a girl or a boy depending upon which song was sung (Mooney, 1972:401). The song of the jarfly (Cicada auletes), which begins in mid-summer, is taken to signal the ripening of beans and the coming of the green corn (Mooney, 1972:309). The appearance of green flies (probably Calypttrata) was an omen of a good harvest (DuPratz, 1774:146-147) as was an abundance of ticks (Acarina) a sign of an abundant crop of beans (Spinosa, 1927:68; Swanton, 1942).

The power of some insects was so great that coming into contact with them or any of their parts could have profound effects. The Cherokee admired the mole cricket (Gryllotalpa) because of its flawless singing. Infants that were slow in learning to speak had their tongues scratched with the claw of the cricket "in order that they may soon learn to speak distinctly and be eloquent, wise and shrewd of speech as they grow older." The same could be accomplished with older persons, but with greater difficulty. In such a case, "it is necessary to scratch the inside of the throat for four successive mornings, the insect being pushed down with the fingers and again withdrawn" (Mooney, 1972:309). Butterfly setae (scales) were used in some cases to rub on the legs of men and boys about to go to war or to run; this was said to make them fly with the speed of a butterfly.

Dances named after insects were also widespread throughout the Southeast, and some remain in modern Indian groups. The "ant dance," "tick dance," and the "mosquito dance" are the most widespread (Swanton, 1928:523; Bushnell, 1909:22; and Gilbert, 1943:260). These dances all appear to be quite similar. Schoolcraft noted that "in general, the dances are performed with the most violent contortion of the limbs, and an excessive excretion of the muscular power" (1856:277).

Several clans, as has already been noted, chose to adopt the name of an insect. The "Ant Clan" was a widespread clan in the Southeast, possibly due to the admiration of the ant's constant activity and warring nature (Bushnell, 1909:16). Other clans in the Southeast included the Dragonfly Clan (sometimes called the Daddy Long-Legs Clan) and the Weevil Clan (See Swanton, 1946:658, table #4; Bushnell, 1909:16).

Conclusion

Insects are an important part in the belief systems of the Southeastern Indians. Not only do these creatures play considerable roles in the cosmogonic myths, but are also important in many other stories and legends. Insects are most important in the Indians' concepts about disease and curing. Many diseases not directly attributable to witchcraft are thought to be caused by insects. Because of the association of some insects with the "underworld," however, insects are also considered to be used by witches to cause man injury and harm. An analysis of myths that refer to insects indicates that the Southeastern Indian possessed a rather detailed and sophisticated knowledge about insects and insect behavior. It is for this reason that some groups chose to name their clans after insects and to create dances in their honor. It is unfortunate that more detailed descriptions of the Indian do not exist, for most certainly these would reveal that insects played a much greater role in the belief systems than is suggested in the

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