

Iti Fabussa

Choctaw Stories: The Possum and the Wolf

The Choctaw ancestors followed a way of life where they constantly interacted with God's creation.

Observing creation taught them important lessons about life, respect and humor.

These lessons were not put into books, but into stories that used animal characters to teach and to entertain.

In the Choctaw language these stories are called Shukha Anumpa, "Pig Talk." More anciently, they were known as "Possum Talk," after an animal that commonly took the role of a trickster within the stories.

From time to time, in doing historical research, the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department comes across Choctaw animal stories. The following story about Possum is one of our favorites.

In the late 1800s, a Choctaw person in Mississippi shared this story with Henry Halbert, a school teacher, who wrote it down.

It is being shared here as a result of the generosity of the Alabama State Archives, which allowed the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department to scan Henry Halbert's full, unpublished manuscript and his notes about the Choctaw people.

Below is the story's exact words translated from the Choctaw language. We hope that you enjoy.

A long time ago, as the panther was traveling through the woods, he came across a lean, starving possum. The panther said to him, "My friend you look like you are almost dead."

The possum said, "Yes, I can not live long, for I have not had any thing to eat in a long time."

The panther was sorry for the possum. He said to him, "My friend, I can fix it so that you can get plenty to eat. You know I am the deer's enemy. They hate me and would be glad to know that I was dead. Then, they would not be afraid of my jumping down upon them from a limb of a tree when they are passing underneath. Now, I will make out I am dead. Then, you bury me and then go and tell the deer to come and have a big dance around my grave."

Straightway the panther stretched himself out on the ground and feigned death. The possum dug a grave and put him in it. He then laid a soft rotten log along on the panther's body. He then filled the grave with earth; but left a small hole for the panther to breathe through.

The possum now went to look up the deer. In a little while he met a deer. He told him of the death of the panther, and told him to go and tell all the deer. All must come and have a big dance around the panther's grave. The possum now went back and sat near the grave.

After a while, a great many deer came. First, a big buck took a sharp stick and stuck it down into the grave.

The stick went into the rotten log. The buck thought the rotten log was the panther's body. He told all the deer that the panther was really dead.

The deer then began to dance around the grave. When they were dancing, the possum kept singing, "*Toshbi pullasi, toshbi pullasi, toshbi pullasi*," "He is nearly rotten, he is nearly rotten, he is nearly rotten." The deer were very glad and danced a long time.

At last the possum said, "He will catch you soon." Just as he said this, the panther jumped out of the grave and caught and killed the big buck. The other deer ran away.

The panther gave the dead buck to the possum. The possum now had plenty to eat. He ate a long time. At last, he became frightened. He was afraid the deer would come and kill him because he had been so tricky with them.

Some black birds were feeding on the leaves not very far off. They flew up and made a noise like thunder. The possum was now in great fear.

He put the deer's backbone in a basket, fastened the basket to his body and started away on a trail. At last, he came to a creek, where there was a foot log. He climbed up a bending tree that overlooked the foot log. He then took the backbone out of the basket and began to eat it.

After a while, a wolf came along. He got on the foot log and began to cross the creek.

When he was about across, he looked down in the water and saw the picture of the backbone on the water.

He thought to himself, "There is something mighty good to eat."

So, he jumped down into the water. He dived to the bottom, but found nothing but mud and leaves.

He was badly bothered and went back to the bank that he had left.

Just then, the possum said to him, "Open your mouth and I will throw into it something good to eat."

The wolf heard the voice, but did not know where it came from. He ran out on the foot log and again he saw the picture of the backbone on the water.

He jumped down again. Again he got only mud and leaves. He went to the shore again, ran around the tree and looked everywhere.

At last he lay down. He howled and threw up his head. Then, he saw the possum up in the tree. The possum again said to him, "Open your mouth, and I will throw into it something good to eat."

The wolf did so and the possum threw the backbone into his mouth. The wolf tried to swallow it, but it stuck in his throat and choked him to death.

The possum came down from the tree. He took a sharp flint and went and cut off the wolf's head and put it in his basket.

He then crossed the creek on the foot log. He was traveling slowly along on the trail when he met a gang of wolves. The leader of the wolves spoke to him and asked him where he was going.

The possum said, "I am going over to yonder hill. My grandmother is a potter. She told me to go over there to get some clay to make a bowl."

The wolves were satisfied and passed on. After a little while, the possum met a lame wolf who asked him many questions.

At last, he peeped into the basket and saw the wolf's head. He howled a signal for the wolves to return. They did so.

The lame wolf then told them of the wolf's head in the possum's basket. The wolves looked at it. They told the possum that he must die. The wolf leader said to him, "We will let you choose the quickest way to die, for die you must."

The possum said, "Over on the other side of that hill you will find a lightwood knot. You can kill me quicker with that than with any thing else."

The wolves left the lame wolf with the possum and all started off to get the lightwood knot.

When they were all out of sight, the possum said to the lame wolf, "Over on the other side of that log yonder is another lightwood knot. Go and get it and kill me before the others get back and you will become a big miko among them."

The lame wolf hobbled off after the knot. After going a little ways, the possum picked a rattlebox (*crotonia sagittalis*) and a sharp thorn and then burrowed down into a sink hole.

Soon, all the wolves, with the lame one besides, came to the sink hole.

The lame wolf had told the other wolves on their return about the possum's trick and they soon tracked him up to the sink hole.

The wolves began to grab down after him. The possum now shook his rattlebox.

One of the wolves said, "We must be wrong. This must be a rattlesnake hole." Another wolf said, "Maybe so, but no matter what he may be, drench him with your water."

The wolf obeyed, and the brine running down with the hole, struck the possum on the throat. Then, another wolf ran his paw down into the hole.

The possum stuck the thorn in it. The wolf jerked back his paw, and all now believed it was a rattlesnake in the hole and not the possum. So the wolves went away and left the possum in the hole.

In Halbert's words, "This story shows how cunning the possum is; how he can fool animals that are bigger and stronger than he is; it shows too how he got the round yellow spot on his throat where the brine wet him."

From today's perspective, this story gives us a tiny glimpse of how our ancestors entertained each other with stories about the world that they experienced.

Do you have a question about Choctaw history or traditional culture that you would like to see featured in Iti Favvsa? Please email it to jbyram@choctawnation.com.



Provided by Alabama Department of Archives and History

Henry Halbert, toward the right, is pictured with some of the Choctaw people he worked with. Halbert was a school teacher who was involved in educational work among the Choctaws in Mississippi from 1884 to 1888. A Choctaw person in Mississippi shared the story about the possum and the wolf with Halbert, who wrote it down. The Alabama State Archives allowed the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department to scan Halbert's unpublished manuscript and notes about the Choctaw people.