

A Research Paper On The
ORIGIN AND TRANSLATION OF THE NATIVE AMERICAN WORD
“TALAKO”

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1) Scope and Purpose:

“Talako” is the name taken by the Marin Council’s lodge of the Order of the Arrow, the National Honor Society of the Boy Scouts of America. The Talako Lodge serves the Marin Council #35 in the San Francisco Bay Area of California. While a scholarly approach has been taken to assure accuracy, the spirit of this research is as a genealogical study of one’s own family. The purpose therefore is to examine the historically believed origin of the word “talako” and, if found disproved, to determine and authenticate the true origin and translation of that word. (Superscript numbers ^(#) in parenthesis refer to the Bibliography at the end of this paper.)

2) Brief History of Talako Lodge:

Marin Council's first camp in the Sierras was Camp Pahatsi located close to Soda Springs near Donner Pass. In 1941, the Tribe of Pahatsi was established. During the 1940's, all Scouts who went to camp were inducted in to this organization. This camp area was in use through 1949.

In 1950, Marin Council acquired Camp Marin Sierra which is located off of Highway 20, near Highway 80. Because of this change, a new name was to be selected for the tribe. According to information on the Lodge’s prior website ⁽¹⁴⁾, an adult Scouter in the Council who was half Cherokee was responsible for the name selection of "Talako," credited at that time as meaning "high eagle" in Cherokee. Thus, the "Tribe of Talako" took the eagle as its totem - the eagle being the highest rank in Scouting.

3) Historic Origins:

a) Cherokee Origin:

- i) Source: From information found on the Lodge’s prior website ⁽¹⁴⁾ for over fifty five years the Talako Lodge’s documentation asserted that the word “talako” was from the Cherokee Nation language and translated to English as “high eagle”.

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ii) Cherokee Origin Disproved:

(1) The Cherokee Language Training Coordinator ⁽⁴⁾ at the headquarters of the Oklahoma Cherokee Nation states that “it (talako) is not a Cherokee word for eagle”. Further, she wrote that the correct “Cherokee words for ‘high eagle’ are ‘ga-lv-la-di u-wo-ha-li’ ”.

(2) Two separate Cherokee online dictionaries confirmed that the English word “eagle” translates to “u-wo-ha-li” in the Cherokee language. They are at:

www.powersource.com/cocinc/language/animals.htm and a more complete one at

www.geocities.com/SunsetStrip/Stadium/7075/chokeee/chokeeeDictionary.html

b) Other Possible Origin: In a book “75 Years of Scouting in Marin” ⁽⁷⁾ there is a statement: “The O.A. in Marin . . . is an outgrowth of the Tribe of Talako, a Choctaw word for ‘high eagle’.” The authors do not state their source for this statement. The remainder of this paper examines the possible origins in the Choctaw language.

4) Choctaw Origins:

a) Brief History of the Choctaw People: The Choctaw Indians are the most numerous branch of the Muskogean language group. Legends tell that the Choctaw people originated from “Nanih Waya”, a sacred hill about forty feet high having a base more than one acre, located in what is now Winston County, Mississippi. “Nanih Waya” means “Productive Mound” and is often referred to as “The Mother Mound”. In historic times, the U.S. classified the Choctaw as one of the “Five Civilized Tribes” and they inhabited the region which is now southeastern Mississippi and extreme southwestern Alabama.

The Choctaws were the first of the five great southern tribes of the U.S. to be moved to Oklahoma by the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830. Over 20,000 Choctaws moved on this long journey, with many of the Choctaw people not surviving this removal on what has come to be called “The Trail of Tears”. Today these people constitute the Oklahoma Choctaw Nation.

Several thousand Choctaw remained in Mississippi to form what is today named the “Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians”. They were officially recognized as a tribe by the U.S. Government in 1945. Thus there are two tribes of Choctaw Native Americans.

b) The Muskogean Language group also includes the Chickasaw, Creek, Seminole and Natchez Native American languages. Of these, Chickasaw is very similar to Choctaw. As is reported further however, there are words in the Seminole and Creek nations that differ from and offer options to the translation of “talako” in the Choctaw language.

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c) Sources of Choctaw Origins:

- i) Oklahoma Choctaw: According to Professor John Dyson ⁽³⁾ at the Indiana University, who studies mostly Chickasaw and has a secondary interest in the Choctaw language,

“The word “talhako” (spelled the old way) is Choctaw and refers to the Golden or gray eagle, as opposed to the Bald Eagle. The Oklahoma Choctaw may no longer recognize the distinction between the two kinds of eagle, but I am certain that the Mississippi Choctaw do.”

Note: At this point in the research, an effort was begun to try to identify the species of eagle because there is no official species “gray eagle” in North America. There is only the Bald Eagle, *Latin Haliaeetus Leucocephalus* and the Golden Eagle, *Latin Aquila Chrysaetos*. However there was one source that gave the informal name “gray eagle” to both of these species.

ii) Mississippi Band of Choctaw Tribal Council

Mr. Dyson’s opinion was confirmed by Roseanne Nickey ⁽¹⁰⁾ of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Tribal Council, who wrote, “I do believe Mr. Dyson is right. The word “talhako” means gray eagle in Choctaw.” The Choctaw in Mississippi also have a second word for eagle, “onssi”.

- iii) A very helpful linguistic opinion was obtained from Dr. George A. Broadwell, PhD ⁽¹⁾ at the State University of New York at Albany. Dr. Broadwell is a linguistic anthropologist with primary research interest in syntactic theory in language and cognition. His area of specialization is American Indian languages with research in Choctaw, Timucua, Trique and Zapotec. Dr. Broadwell wrote to me:

“(Talako) is listed in two 19th century dictionaries of Choctaw (Byington and Watkins) with the meaning gray eagle. It is probably Golden Eagle, because the Choctaw have another word for Bald Eagle, ‘ibalhumpa’ and another word for eagle in general, ‘onssi’.”

- iv) The entry in “A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language”, 1915, by Cyrus Byington was confirmed by Dr. Carl Masthay, PhD ⁽⁸⁾ (Linguistics) of the Society for the Study of Indigenous Languages of the Americas. He wrote:

(On pages 340 and 437) “ ‘talako’, ‘talaka’, ‘talakhatta’ : the grey eagle.”

v) Various Translations of “Talako” in Literature:

In a book by Julian Harris Salomon ⁽¹³⁾ titled “The Book of Indian Crafts and Indian Lore”, on page 389 in a dictionary of Choctaw-Mississippi words, the word “Talako” is translated as “eagle”. According to Mr. Bill Prentiss ⁽¹¹⁾ who responded from

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Florida, their very successful “Talako Indian Dancers” took their name based on the dictionary in this book.

In a bibliography of Mr. Worth F. Crouch, it describes that “an Indian community for which he volunteered gave him the Choctaw name of Talako interpreted as an old and wise leader, or gray eagle”.⁽²⁾

In articles by Rita Laws⁽⁵⁾ titled “Choosing Your Indian Name” and “Choctaw Names for Choctaw Babies”, written at the University of Mississippi, she writes that the Choctaw name gray eagle is “talako” and the word for eagle is “talako” or “onssi”. She cites two sources:

- “The English to Choctaw Dictionary”, City Council of Choctaws, 7th Edition, 1981.
- “Choctaw Social and Ceremonial Life”, Choctaw Council, 2nd Edition, 1983.

In a fiction book “Warrior’s Honor” by Georgina Gentry, there is a sentence “As a member of the Choctaw Lighthorsemen, lawman John Talako is”

vi) Spelling and Pronunciation:

The older way of writing the word was with a barred “l”: the letter “l” with a diagonal through it. This sound represents a lateral l which is like a Welsh “ll” or the Aztec “tl”: an “l” with air escaping from one or both sides of the tongue, per Dr. Dyson.⁽³⁾

Roseanne Nickey⁽¹⁰⁾ at the Mississippi Band of Choctaw wrote “the aspirated L sound is used and the English language does not have that sound so they may have just dropped it. The sound is almost like a “th” sound but the tongue is curled up on the top ridge of the mouth just behind the upper teeth and the sound comes out of the sides of the tongue as you vocalize.”

Dr. Broadwell⁽¹⁾ further specifies that Choctaw spelling in the 19th century was not so clear on the difference between “aspirated L” (the technical term is “voiceless lateral fricative”) and the combination letters “h” and “l” in the original spelling “tahlako”.

Suffice to say, the letter “h” has been dropped in all modern references, leaving the letter “l” to be pronounced in the English way.

vii) Other Possible Meanings of “Gray” in “gray eagle”

I researched the possibility that the use of the word “gray” might not refer to a species of eagle at all but instead might be descriptive of one who is “old” or “wise”. In the opinion of Dr. Broadwell⁽¹⁾, the inclusion of the word “gray” in the translation does not infer seniority or wisdom as it does not contain the Choctaw words for old or wise. For instance, the Choctaw word for “wise” is “hopoksia”.

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Further, the translation of the word “talako” to English includes the word “gray” as well as “eagle”. The words for the color gray in Choctaw depend on what is being described, according to Professor Dyson ⁽³⁾. The Choctaw words “hata” or “okchamali” are used however the latter is the word for green according to the Mississippi Band of Choctaws who also use the word “losakbi” for gray.

5) Other Origins in the Muskogee Language-group:

In the Seminole language and the Creek language, the word “talako” means “bean” or “pea” according to Professor Jack Martin ⁽⁶⁾ at William & Mary College. In the traditional Creek alphabet the word is spelled “tvlakok”.

The book “Northwest Florida Place Names of Indian Origin” ⁽⁹⁾ also states that “talako” is Seminole for “pea”. The Ships History of the U.S.S. Taluga (AO-62) states that the ship’s name came from the Seminole words “Talako Chapko”, translated as “cow peas”.

6) Which Eagle Is It?

a) Audubon Society: Mr. Bruce Reid ⁽¹²⁾, Deputy State Director of the Audubon Society for the State of Mississippi, officially confirmed many other sources:

- i) There is no bird named “gray eagle” in the U.S. or in the world.
- ii) There are two species of eagle in Mississippi and in the U.S.: the Bald Eagle, Latin *Haliaeetus Leucocephalus* and the Golden Eagle, Latin *Aquila Chrysaetos*.
- iii) The Bald Eagle nests and winters in Mississippi. The Golden Eagle no longer nests but there are three to five reports currently per year in Mississippi. In the 1700s and 1800s there would have been more numbers of Golden Eagles who then inhabited the plains and the forests of Eastern North America. Due to growing urbanization in most areas this bird is now a mountain-dweller west of the Mississippi. Internationally, Golden Eagles are found in Eurasia and northern Africa.

The Golden Eagle’s plumage develops as it matures with limited white or molted coloring in just a few areas in the early years. It is not until its fourth or fifth year that the beautiful golden brown color is completely prominent.

b) Choctaw Words: On the matter of there being only two eagle species that the Choctaw could have seen, Dr. Broadwell added clarification that the Choctaw have the word “onssi” for eagle in general and another word “ibalhumpa” specifically for Bald Eagle. He concludes that the translation of “talako” as meaning gray eagle likely refers specifically to the Golden Eagle. This is consistent with the conclusion of Professor Dyson ⁽³⁾ at Indiana University. (See 4. c. i.)

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7) Final Conclusions:

One of the origins of the word “talako” may have come from the Seminole Nation however their translation to “bean” in English is probably of limited use as a totem for a Boy Scout unit.

Therefore,

Based on consistent evidence from the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians Tribal Council, three university linguistic experts, four Choctaw dictionaries, several references in literary works and the confirmation of the Mississippi Audubon Society, the conclusions of this research are:

- 1. The word “talako” is from the Choctaw Native Americans. The word translates to English as “gray eagle”, not “high eagle”.**
- 2. The author has not discovered an understanding of why the English word “gray” is included, raising the question if perhaps something was “lost in translation” to English. There is no “gray eagle” species in North America, it does not infer qualities such as seniority or wisdom and does not include either of the Choctaw words for the color gray.**
- 3. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw’s language recognizes the difference in the two species of eagles present in the United States. They not only have a word for “eagle” in general but also have a specific word for Bald Eagle.**
- 4. Therefore their word “talako” most likely refers to the only other eagle species visible to the Choctaws: the Golden Eagle, *L. Aquila Chrysaetos*.**

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