

# FRIENDS OF THUNDER



Folktales of the Oklahoma Cherokees

Jack F. Kilpatrick and Anna G. Kilpatrick

Foreword by Robert J. Conley

tained from the Europeans. Since we are dealing here with a people who see no particular inconsistency in eating ganûts' out of Wedgewood or murmuring a spell to ensure the success of a real estate deal, we offer no comment.

*The Uk'ten' Caught with a Chain*

I am going to tell about the Uk'ten'. This is what I told you about—the Uk'ten'. This is the way I heard it: it was a snake—huge, mighty (now I heard somebody tell about this):

In the ocean, very deep, they saw him lying there. He looked very small, like a lizard would look down in the water, and he had horns like a deer would have. That's the way they saw him.

So they made a strong, long chain. They threw it down in the water, and it caught his horns. Then they got several teams of oxen, and the oxen pulled until his head was above the water. He struggled and pulled all the oxen back. They all fell into the water.

He had deerlike horns. He was a spotted snake with rattles like a rattlesnake. He was spotted like a snake, but he was very huge. I suppose that there is one today who looks like that.

That's all I know about this Uk'ten': he was like a snake, but he had horns like a deer; and upon the horns was where they caught him; and they had a chain, and they had oxen to pull him. (Yes, he pulled the oxen into the water.) He was very much like a snake—just like a rattlesnake, spotted."

From what I have heard, I think that's the way he looked.

That's all I know.

*Yan'sa*

## The Friendship of Thunder

The noblest, most moving myth that we heard in our collecting travels was the beautiful relic of the lost national cosmology that deals with the eternal question of the choice between good and evil. It is fitting that the hero-symbol is not that of a man, but that of a child. The choice was made in the innocence of youth, not through

knowledge but through pity; and the reward was not power, but love.

Our first version was fragmentary. But Yan'sa's telling of the myth, his magistral Cherokee infused with a biblical simplicity and elevation, fell upon the ears with the runic dignity of a bard's recitation of Beowulf; and clothed in the subtleties of an incomparable skill, Siquanid's recounting evoked the breathless atmosphere of the medieval geste told in the shadowy nook of the castle fireplace.

The concept of the guardianship of Thunder over the people with whom he plighted faith in that dim time at the beginning of things is an emotional reality to the Cherokees. They speak of their cosmic friend, Thunder, with the deepest tenderness and reverence.

A corrupt variant of this myth is in MMOC (pp. 300-301) and a sketchy Creek loan-version is on record in SMTS (pp. 7-9), but the complete text of this majestic and touching story, one of the greatest of all American Indian myths, has never before been committed to paper.

### *Thunder and the Uk'ten' (I)*

Long, long ago when they were telling stories, they said that the Uk'ten' was living.

The Uk'ten' and Thunder had a fight. So the Uk'ten' built fires, and Thunder was thundering and making rain, trying to put them out. The Uk'ten' thought that he was going to win this fight, but Thunder overcame him.

Thunder used Lightning to win his fight, they said when they were telling stories long ago.

*Tsiwôn'*

### *Thunder and the Uk'ten' (II)*

I don't know very much: now I'm very old. I have forgotten a lot, although I've heard a lot of talking that was done long ago about the beginning of things.

For instance, everything used to talk long ago. And also when they were bringing up their boys long ago there were supernaturally wise men, and they also used bows and arrows all the time.

Here is one thing that I have heard about that I have stored away: Thunder and water work together when it rains; and since Thunder is always with us, he and we work together.

Long ago there was a boy out walking, hunting with his bow and arrows. He was on the top of a rough, rugged hill. From where he was, he heard, somewhere down below where it was even more rugged, a thundering, and he was very anxious to find out what caused it.

In looking for it, he arrived down in the valley, and in the roughest place [there] Thunder and an Uk'ten' (he was from the sea) had hold of each other in a fierce fight. Thunder was underneath: the Uk'ten' was so long and so strong—that's why he was able to overcome Thunder.

The boy looked at them fighting. (It was thundering very low.) When the boy was seen, when Thunder looked at him, Thunder said, "Nephew, help me! When he looks at you, he will kill you!"

And then the Uk'ten' said, "Nephew, help me! When he thunders, he will kill you!"

They both kept saying these things.

Because Thunder was being bested, the boy felt sorry for him. He decided to shoot at the Uk'ten'. When he shot the Uk'ten', he [the Uk'ten'] was weakened. Then a second time he pulled his bow. The Uk'ten' was weakened even more and Thunder was becoming stronger. He made his thunders louder, and on the fourth thunder, the fiercest ever heard, he killed the Uk'ten'.

Thunder won, and the boy had helped him [to win]. That is the reason why to this day it thunders [all] around us: we [Thunder and man] are still together. A human being helped him.

Thunder is not fierce, but is very friendly and kind of heart because he knows that it was a little boy who saved him. (But he can become fierce if he does not like something.) He is really

very friendly because he knows that it was a human being who saved him.

If the Uk'ten' had overcome Thunder, if Thunder had been shot, I suppose that the Uk'ten' would be lurking about everywhere. I wonder what it would have been like: Thunder would have killed us whenever it thundered, and an Uk'ten' can kill you just by smelling you.

*Yan'sa*

### *Thunder and the Uk'ten' (III)*

This is the story of when an Uk'ten' and Thunder had a fight. Some people tell it a little bit different. When I hear other people tell it, sometimes it [their version] seems better. This one [version] I know is a little bit similar [to the version of Yan'sa], and others have told it before. The older men used to tell this one [version].<sup>10</sup> This one tells about how the Uk'ten' and Thunder first found each other.

In olden times there were two boys. They used to hunt all the time with bows and arrows. Sometimes they killed birds and squirrels, sometimes rabbits and many [other] smaller animals.

Once the two boys were walking in a deep valley where it was very rugged and rocky. As they were walking among big rocky crags, they found a large snake lying upon a rock. This snake was large enough to eat squirrels. This snake was very lean and hungry. He told the boys to stop, that he wanted to ask them something.

"I'm very hungry," he said to them. "Would you find me some food? I'll eat birds or squirrels. When I become strong again, you can use me, or I'll help you in whatever you are doing in any way that I can for as long as we live."

So the boys decided to help him. The very next morning they brought him birds and squirrels. They brought him food many times, and he was growing stronger and larger.

Several days later they came by and brought him some more squirrels, and this time the snake was huge. Then the boys forgot

about him for awhile; but then one day they remembered him.

"Let's go by and see him," they said, "and take him some more birds and squirrels."

When they arrived where the snake was, they called him, and he came out of the rocks. This time he was enormous, and he had grown horns. As he was coming out when they called him, they saw lightning-like sparks before they saw his horns. They gave him his squirrels and birds.

The boys said to him, "You certainly are enormous now! You have grown up!"

The snake said, "Yes, but remember: we are to be friends always." (The snake was duping them because he really wanted to kill them soon.)

The next morning they came nearby. As they entered the valley, they heard some blasts in the valley. After several blasts, the blasts became fainter.

The boys said, "Someone is in trouble over there! Let's hurry and get over there! That's where the snake lives." So they hurried over there.

Soon they saw the snake. This snake that they had fed had coiled himself around something. He and Thunder were fighting. He had enveloped Thunder in his coils. The snake was wound about Thunder so tightly that Thunder could make only faint blasts. Thunder could but barely move.

"Boys! My nephews!"<sup>11</sup> said Thunder. "This snake that is coiled around me is very fierce and kills people. If you can, do something to kill him! Shoot him in the seventh spot. He'll die instantly."

The Uk'ten' cried out, "Don't! Don't! Kill Thunder instead! This Thunder is fiercer [than I]. His blasts will kill you," said the Uk'ten'. (You see, this snake that these boys fed grew up to be an Uk'ten'.)

The boys were undecided what to do.

"Don't you do it! You boys are my grandchildren, and I am

your helper! I always help you! This huge snake that said he would help you was only tricking you. He wanted to kill you. So shoot him on the seventh spot!" said Thunder.

So the boys believed it [the statement of Thunder], and with the Uk'ten' crying, he was shot on the seventh spot. The Uk'ten' fell over, and Thunder was again free.

When Thunder was free, he said to the boys, "Go back in the direction from where you came. On your way build seven fires; build them as you go. You see, the fumes from the Uk'ten' will be stopped by the first fire so that you may have time to build the second fire which then will hold the fumes long enough for you to build the third fire. By the time you build the seventh one, you will be safe—and I will be working for you while you are on your way.

"You can always depend upon me. While we live on earth, or until the world ends, we must protect and help each other," said Thunder. "I am the Ruler of all the fierce things in the world," said Thunder.

So the boys believed it [the statement of Thunder], and they did as they were told to do. They went down into the valley and escaped—so said the very old that lived long ago.

These boys began feeding the small snake, and it grew to be a huge one. There was a small river; there was a deep place in it. That's where he [the snake] was seen after he grew up. He had large horns then, and his horns were shiny and bright; his scales were dazzlingly bright. The boys had devoted a lot of time to feeding him, and he had nearly killed Thunder.

But the boys decided to believe Thunder. That's why Thunder is with us as long as we live. God made it that way: that Lightning-and-Thunder and human beings should live together. Thunder is not dangerous. Some people say that he is. It leads us to believe that they do not think about God when they say such things.

Since we have learned all these things, to invoke the name of Thunder is very useful, and that is the reason that he has helped

us. If it hadn't been for that [the assistance given to Thunder by the boys], if they [the boys] had decided to allow the big snake to live, if there were Uk'ten's all over the world, we wouldn't be living—for instance, we [those present] wouldn't be living.

That's all.

*Siquanid'*



The Cherokee husband-and-wife team who recorded and translated these folktales in 1961 helped to preserve the lore of seventeen elder Oklahoma Cherokees. This volume includes a wide variety of folklore: talking-animal stories, tales of a dragon-like creature and other monsters, accounts of little people inhabiting the hills of eastern Oklahoma, variants of European tales, fragments of Cherokee mythology and cosmology, and legends and lore of historical personages and events. The authors present the stories exactly as they were told, adding brief comments to place the stories clearly in the context of Cherokee life and thought. Musical notations are included wherever a song formed part of a story.

"Folklorists are indebted to the Kilpatricks for this collection of interesting and significant Cherokee folktales."—*Journal of American Folklore*.

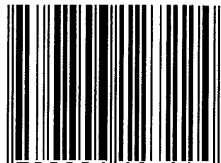
"Jack and Anna Kilpatrick sought out older Cherokees, living in the eastern Oklahoma hills, for informal interviews. They tape-recorded these conversations, some in Cherokee and some in English, and translated and transcribed later. . . . This is not a book for the specialist, but for the general reader. It should, however, prove a valuable guide to field technique for anyone who is faced with the problems of interviewing and recording material first-hand. It is a 'must' for beginning students in ethnology."—*American Anthropologist*.

Jack F. Kilpatrick and Anna G. Kilpatrick both were natives of Stilwell, Oklahoma. Jack was Chair of the Department of Music at Southern Methodist University. Anna, a descendant of Sequoyah, was in the United States Indian Service. Together the Kilpatricks wrote several books on the Oklahoma Cherokees.

Robert J. Conley, who wrote the Foreword, is the author of *Mountain Windsong: A Novel of the Trail of Tears* and *The Witch of Goingsnake and Other Stories*, both published by the University of Oklahoma Press.

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