Witch Dance of the Natchez Trace: The Native American Legends of Witches

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The Natchez Trace, or Old Trace, played an important role in American history as well as Native American history. The Native American people lived along the Natchez Trace as well as used it for trade and traveling. There are numerous sites now for tourists to stop by and view a vital part of Native American history. One site along the Natchez Trace is known as the Witch Dance. The Witch Dance is full of stories of bandits, witches, and mysterious deaths but there is underlying information that is unfortunately left untold. Although the Witch Dance is infamously known as the death place for the ghost stories of the Harpe brothers, many people don’t realize the history behind the ghost stories of witches told by Native Americans.

To illustrate, for centuries religion has been very important to Native American tribes. They have ritual dances, ceremonies, and legends about their origins. Legends were not written down in books by the Native Americans, but rather passed down from generation to generation by storytelling. Since European contact we now have written records of some of the Native Americans superstitions, faiths, and myths. Superstitions or supernatural beliefs are not as common in the Indian tribes today as they were hundreds of years ago. The original inhabitants of the Witch Dance area were the Hopewell Indians but later were believed to join the Choctaw and Chickasaw tribes (Weiser, 2013). Not much is known about the Hopewell Indians because they lived so long ago and when they were introduced to Europeans they were almost wiped out so they joined other tribes to survive. When someone joins another tribe they become part of that tribe and identify with that tribe instead of their former kinships.

Although each tribe is unique, they share some of the same beliefs about the supernatural. The Choctaws were strong in their beliefs in the existence of hattak holthkuna, witches (Cushman, 1999). The Choctaw tribes are known for their superstitions in the supernatural and blaming such unexplained events on witches. Akers and Donnas (2013) study found the following:

The world of the Choctaws in older times also included supernatural beings that could manifest themselves as human, but were, in fact, creatures that were not human. Disasters were caused by witches, and witchcraft was blamed for all sorts of adverse events, accidents, or illnesses. Choctaws believed that the sole aim of a witch was to bring chaos, disorder, and destruction on a community, and they were thought to have supernatural powers. (p. 63)

Additionally the Choctaws have many legends that have been passed down from generation to generation by storytelling about witches. They believed witches had the ability to disguise themselves as humans but were creatures of the night. According to Akers and Donnas (2013) there is a legend called the *Skate’ne* (an owl) which is an oral Choctaw legend that tells the following:

A long time ago on a beautiful summer day, the children were out playing throughout the neighborhood. Then an old, old woman came up to the children and told them that she was their great-great-great grandmother. They laid out a quilt for her to sit on and she asked where their father lay when he went to sleep at night. They told her and then they talked about many other things. That night, the old woman crept into the house and entered the room where the children’s father slept. She took a knife from under her apron and cut his head off. She then put his head in her basket and began to walk down the road out of the village and onto the path through the woods. After a while, she met a bear who asked her “What do you have in that basket, Old Woman?” She told him that it was full of poison and that if he looked upon it he would become blind. The bear went on his way. The days passed and the woman kept on the path through the woods. Suddenly she was stopped by two wildcats. One of the wildcats asked “What do you have in that basket, Old Woman?” She told them it was full of poison and they would go blind if they looked upon it. Ignoring the old woman, one of the wildcats grabbed the basket from the basket from her and saw she had a head. After seeing the head, they ran into the woods. There they decided this was the person who was killing all of the animals and people in the villages. So they planned to intercept the old woman along the path and kill her before she could kill anyone else. When they caught her, one of the wildcats went into the woods to get a club while the other one stood guard. The old woman said to the wildcat standing guard that his friend knows that if he kills me then he will have good luck forever so you should not wait on him and kill me yourself to have good luck. The wildcat agreed and went to go find a club. When he turned back around he watched as the old woman transformed herself into a skate’ne (an owl) and flew away before he got back. He realized the old woman was not a human being at all but a witch. (p. 102-104)

 Furthermore there are several tales in some of the Native American origin stories that describe people as being witches. Since most Indian tribes are peaceful people they fear the supernatural that has the power to do evil. Witches are described by most tribes as evil beings who only do harm. According to Lankford (2011):

In the Origin of Maze, a southeastern Native American legend, tells a story about two boys who are hungry so they ask their mother. While the mother goes inside the house to get the boys something to eat they secretly watch her. There they saw her fill empty baskets with corn and beans by rubbing her belly. They knew immediately that their mother was a witch and if they ate any of the food she was going to give them that they would die so she had to be killed. After they killed her they set out to clear the ground in front of their house but instead they only cleared seven little spots. This is the reason why corn only grows in certain places instead of everywhere around the world. Then they dragged her body around the seven spots twice, which is the reason why the Indians work their crops twice. (p. 151)

Likewise, another Native American tribe that have superstitions about people being witches are the Navajo. Even though they are different tribe’s miles apart, they have similar beliefs regarding people beings witches. The Navajo’s attitude toward witchcraft directly related to Navajo myths, ceremonies, and judgments about human nature (Carmody, Carmody, 1993, p. 95). Witches are seen as evil creatures that only want to do harm to the people around them. In most tribes if someone is suspected of being a witch and caught, they are most likely killed. The fear witches had over the Native American tribes is apparent. They are spoken about in their history as well as part of their superstitions.

Also, Native American tribes consist of communities within their tribes. These communities are important to the structure of the tribes and kinships. At birth, some people are capable of some form of supernatural power such as seeing visions. Paper (2007) found, “a person who uses spiritual power to better him or herself is considered a danger to the community, a sorcerer or witch” (p.70). Alternatively many people may get shamans and the belief of witches confused. Both are claimed to have supernatural powers but how they use these powers are what sets them apart. Shamans are also known as a medicine man who uses his powers to heal the sick while witches bring death. According to Hultkrantz (1979), “if the medicine man is defined as a person in possession of supernatural power it is difficult to draw the line clearly between him and any other individual who has obtained the protection of the powers” (p. 85).

In conclusion, the Witch Dance along the Natchez Trace is a historical site where people can learn more about the legends of witches in Native American legends. The Witch Dance is full of interesting information involving the history of the United States as well as Native American history. Although many people are well informed about the bandits along the Old Trace and the death of Meriwether Lewis, our nation could benefit from learning more about Native American culture. Native Americans throughout the years have made a great impact on the United States with their wisdom and knowledge of the land. Americans of all ethnicities should be well informed about the different tribes and cultures that have been around for centuries.

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