A creation myth is a cosmogony, a narrative that describes the original ordering of the universe. A given culture’s cosmogony or creation myth describes its sense of how the cosmos (order, existence) was established. Just as individuals and families are preoccupied with their origins, cultures need to know where they and the world they live in originated. So it is that virtually all cultures have creation myths (Leeming and Leeming 1994). The story behind all creation myths is simple but absolutely essential: we have what we have now because of what happened then. This is why we value the past and tell stories of the world’s beginnings over and over again. We see our existence as rooted in the world’s origin. If we lose touch with the past, we don’t just risk the loss of an engaging, entertaining tale: it’s the whole cosmos that’s at stake, and we with it (Krupp 1991).

In preliterate cultures, insects were important as participants in creation myths. Worldwide, cultures give insects a role in the creation of the world. There are at least two possible explanations for this widespread phenomenon. One is that the creative activities of insects are readily visible (i.e., webs, tunnels, nests, etc). There may also be an innate recognition of the relative evolutionary age of insects, a recognition of the ancient origin of arthropods (Berenbaum 1995). The occurrence of insects in creation myths is similarly explained by Hogue (2003) who wrote, “Insects figure prominently in the creation myths of many cultures. The widespread recognition of insects in this role probably stems from an innate recognition of insects as ancient members of the living world that must have been present at its creation or soon thereafter.”

One type of creation myth describes the emergence of a people into this world by way of one or more underworlds. In emergence myths, the earth is described as containing within itself all of the potencies of life. The basic motif of these myths is not how the earth came into being, but the symbol of the earth as the source of all life and forms. Humans and the forms of life are as seeds within the body of the earth. The birth of man and the world are described as a metamorphosis in which the individual progresses from the nonhuman forms of life through the various worlds until becoming a human being in a human world. The symbolism of Mother Earth is present in the emergence myth, but the male element is given no prominence (Long 1963).

Insects in the Choctaw Emergence Mythology

Ron Cherry

**Fig. 1.** A great kiva at Chaco Canyon, NM. Symbolically, a kiva is the place and process of emergence (Krupp 1983). Insects and spiders play several roles in the emergence mythologies of Native Americans of the American Southwest.
Among many American Indian tribes of the southwestern and southeastern United States, and among the Huron–Iroquois of the Great Lakes region, the first human beings are believed to have emerged from an underworld: from a hole in the ground (southwest and southeast) or from a cave (Huron–Iroquois). The myths relating their experiences during and after the emergence into the upper world are often long and detailed. The southwestern tribes (Pueblo, Navajo, and several Apache groups) are concerned with what happened during the actual emergence and locating the spot where this occurred. The southeastern Creeks and other groups are more concerned with the migration account of their wanderings after their emergence (Leach 1984).

The emergence mythology of Native Americans of the American Southwest has been covered extensively in various anthropological and mythological literature (Fig. 1). In entomological literature, the ethnoentomologies of the Hopi and Navajo of that area are the best documented. The actions of the Spider Grandmother (Fig. 2) are important in the origin of the world in Hopi mythology (Hogue 1987).

![Fig. 2. Spider Rock at the Canyon de Chelly National Monument in Arizona was named by the Navajo for Spider Woman. This monolith rises a spectacular 264 m (867 ft) from the floor of the canyon.](image)

In the Navajo emergence myth, lower worlds are worlds of one color peopled by animals, including insects such as ant people and beetle people; these lower worlds also represent the loci of human evil. Insects are important as couriers and explorers during the passage through these worlds. In the last (fourth) world, the wanderers hold a council and resolve to mend their ways; and the First Man and First Woman are born (Long 1963).

The roles of insects in the Navajo emergence have been reported extensively by entomologists. In 1964 Wyman and Bailey published Navajo Indian Ethnoentomology, which should be read by anyone who is seriously interested in cultural entomology. In an extensive and analytical approach, the authors quantify and assign roles to various insects in the Navajo emergence. Capinera (1993) provides a good summary of the Navajo emergence mythology with an emphasis on the roles of insects. Arthropods in the mythologies of the southwest United States also are briefly noted in Wyman (1973), Cherry (1993), and Capinera (1995). In contrast, although insects play an important role in the emergence mythology of the Choctaw of the Mississippi area, this has been largely ignored by entomologists.

The Choctaw are an Indian tribe that traditionally lived in what are now Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana. Their first European contact was with Hernando de Soto in 1540. During the 1800s, many Choctaw were moved from their tribal lands by a Federal Removal Policy that called for the sale of all Indian land in the eastern and southeastern United States (McKee 1989). Recently, it was estimated that the Choctaw total population is 110,635, although many of these registered Choctaws are one-fourth or less Choctaw according to the Department of Tribal Registration (Haag and Willis 2001). The Choctaw have several stories explaining their origins, and Swanton (1931) provides an excellent discussion of this subject. These stories fall into two general groups: migration origins and emergence origins. The story of entomological interest concerns the emergence of the Choctaw and associated insects from the Nanih Waiya Mound. The Nanih Waiya Mound (Fig. 3) is located northeast of Philadelphia, MS. This large rectangular platform mound, measuring 25 ft high, 218 ft long, and 140 ft wide, is maintained in a state park. Associated with the mound is the nearby Nanih Waiya Cave (Fig. 4), which may be the source of the emergence myth. The following is the myth of emergence from Nanih Waiya as described by Bushnell (1910).

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, Nané 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 grasshoppers 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

![Fig. 3. The Nanih Waiya Mound located near Philadelphia, MS. In the Choctaw emergence mythology, it is this mound from which the grasshoppers and Choctaw first emerged until the passageway was closed by Aba, the Great Spirit. Picture from Tribal Archives, Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians.](image)
the earth through the long passageway that led to the summit of Nané 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 that 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 [Aba] changed them to ants and ever since that time the small ants have come forth from holes in the ground.

Associated with the Choctaw emergence mythology is another interesting story explaining how Grandmother Spider first obtained fire for the Choctaw. In this myth, the newly emerged Choctaw enter a world of darkness; however, fire is possessed by “people in the East” who are greedy and won’t share the fire. During a sequence of journeys, Opossum, Buzzard, and Crow try to steal the fire but fail. Finally, Grandmother Spider makes the journey and steals the fire, which she gives to the Choctaw. Moreover, Grandmother Spider taught the Choctaw how to use fire, how to make pottery from clay and fire, and even taught them about weaving and spinning, at which she was an expert. Even today, the Choctaw remember Grandmother Spider in a spider design with a fire symbol on her back, which is used to decorate their homes (Yolen 1999).

As a last note, during the course of the preceding myth, it is explained why opossums have bare tails, why buzzards have bare heads, why crows are black, where fire came from, and so forth. This myth illustrates that an important function of mythology, including insect mythology, is to explain how our world came to be (see Cherry 2002 for discussion).

Arthropods also play minor roles in Choctaw mythology. One story explains how bees, wasps, and snakes first obtained venom from a magical poisonous plant. In another story with several different versions, ants sew an elm with a damaged turtle's shell, explaining how turtle shells came to be composed of scutes (Mould 2004). Explaining how bees and wasps became venomous is a common theme in aboriginal mythologies. Also, the theme of industrious and beneficial ants is common in mythologies worldwide. These are examples of insects as parallel mythology, and more discussion of this topic is found in Kritsky and Cherry (2000).

In summary, Hogue (1987) noted that much of cultural entomology is found outside entomology in other fields, such as anthropology. The story of the insects in the Choctaw emergence mythology is yet another example of the rich deposits of cultural entomology buried in nonentomological sources and waiting to be unearthed to the attention of entomologists.

Acknowledgments

I thank Deborah Boykin, Archivist for the Mississippi Choctaw Tribe, for her help.

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