

Nanyehi: War and Peace in Cherokee History

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I intend this paper as a personal reflection rather than as academic scholarship, although I provide some further reading at the end to the historical events described herein. My sixth great grandmother was a Cherokee woman named Nanyehi, also known as Nancy Ward, who is one of the most famous women in Cherokee history. First, Nanyehi distinguished herself as a war hero. She insisted on accompanying her husband to the Battle of Taliwa in 1755 between the Cherokee and Muskogee tribes. When her husband was killed, she took his gun and killed the man who had killed her husband, then rallied the Cherokees to a decisive victory. Partly as a result of her heroism and leadership, the tribe gave her a position of power—the position of Ghigau, often translated Beloved Woman—that allowed her supreme authority to decide the fate of captives and of prisoners of war. As the Cherokee abolished clan government and adopted democracy within the tribe, the position of Ghigau was no longer recognized. Nanyehi was the last Ghigau.¹

To people versed in European and American history, it may seem unusual for a woman to hold such a position of responsibility prior to the twentieth century, but it is not so unusual in Native American history. Women raised children and most of the food, and it just seemed to make sense to the Cherokee and other tribes that women should have an input into tribal decisions. One of the first Natives to visit Europe was Attakullakulla, a Cherokee leader, and Nanyehi's uncle. He met King George II and Parliament. Attakullakulla's response could be summarized as *What is wrong with you people?* Where are the women? Why don't you have any women in leadership positions? With such a precedent, it is not surprising that the Cherokees would reward a heroine like Nanyehi with esteem and power. Later when Nanyehi was part of a Cherokee delegation to negotiate with the Americans at the Treaty of Hopewell in 1785, she said the same thing that her uncle had said in England—where are the women?

How did she do it? How did Nanyehi earn such esteem? It started out as her act of valor during war. But she continued to earn the esteem of her tribe by playing a role that was not too different from that of an Old Testament prophet. I don't believe this idea has been previously explored.

Prophets are not simply people who make predictions. They are people who make extrapolations for the purpose of inciting change. They predict what would happen if

¹ The author of the Wikipedia article about the Battle of Taliwa disputes most of the historical particulars accepted in Cherokee tradition, but does not provide references.

people continue their current trend, in the hopes that they will change what they are doing, change the trend. A perfectly successful prophet is one whose predictions fail. Alas, their predictions often come true because their people do not listen to them. Nanyehi's prophecy was, in effect, that the Cherokee people would suffer greatly by going to war against other tribes or against the whites.

Prophets, whether in ancient Israel or in ancient North America or today, are inconvenient people. They see things that others do not see. When Nanyehi saw a forest, she did not just see the trees. She heard the voices of a living forest. And prophets have an intense conviction that their message is from the gods and must be heard. I suspect that Nanyehi was an intense, serious, and inconvenient child. She was always getting lost, apparently; "Nanyehi" means "wanderer." In retrospect, people look back and think that the prophet in their midst had a special calling. This happened with both Jeremiah and with Nanyehi.

When the time came for Nanyehi to lead, she was ready. Other wives stayed in the village while their husbands went off to war. But Nanyehi, only 17 years old, went to the Battle of Taliwa with her husband Kingfisher. By killing the warrior who had shot her husband, she became a war hero, but this was also a moment of intense realization for her. The Cherokees won the Battle of Taliwa, but the father of her two children was dead. From that moment onward, her consistent prophetic message was that the Cherokees should pursue the path of peace. Every time you kill an enemy warrior, you leave a widow and orphans she said. Also, I believe her prophetic vision allowed her to see the rising tide of white immigration, and that it would be ultimately futile to resist it.

In stark contrast to Nanyehi stood her cousin, Dragging Canoe (Tsiyu Gansini). His response to white aggression into Cherokee lands was to fight. When the older chiefs, including his father Attakullakulla, along with Nanyehi, chose to make peace with the whites and to sell some of the land to them, Dragging Canoe said enough! At a council meeting, he chopped his tomahawk into the pole and said that he was going to fight the whites. The younger chiefs followed him, and for the rest of his life he led a band of Cherokees, called the Chickamaugas, who remained at war with the American whites until 1794.

Nanyehi's convictions, of the value of peace and of the necessity of working out a way of living with the whites (first the British, then the Americans) led her to make decisions that some others in the tribe would criticize as virtually treasonous. I will briefly describe three such incidents. When you think of July 1776, you inevitably think of Philadelphia and the Declaration of Independence. But on the western frontiers of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, the battles were over Cherokee land. And it was a complex situation. To the Cherokees, the British and the Americans looked alike. To the whites, the peaceful and the warlike Cherokees looked alike.

First, during one border conflict in July 1776, Cherokee warriors led by Chief Old Abram captured Mrs. Lydia Bean. The warriors had her tied to a stake, and had the kindling arranged around her, and had already lit the fire. Along came Nanyehi, who

ordered her release. Nanyehi cut the ropes that bound Mrs. Bean and stomped out the fires.

Also in July 1776, Cherokee warriors had captured some white men. Dragging Canoe planned an attack on white settlements. It appears that Nanyehi secretly released the captives; not only that, she told them of her cousin's plans. This information provided the white settlers with just enough time to send their wives and children to safety and to be ready for Dragging Canoe's attack. During the Battle of Island Flats, Dragging Canoe was wounded and his forces retreated. He might have won that battle had Nanyehi not told the whites about his plans. Finally, rumor has it that Nanyehi had a white lover, Isaac Thomas. It was apparently this man who carried the message to the whites, warning them of yet another Cherokee raid, this time in 1780.

The war faction of the Cherokees may have been justified in seeing Nanyehi's actions as acts of treason. But the old chiefs did not see it this way, since they were doing their best to prevent war between the Cherokees and the white Americans. And we need to remember that one of the privileges of a Ghigau was to release captives. Nanyehi acted within the authority delegated to her by the tribe.

The reaction of many Cherokees to Nanyehi's actions reminds me of the way the ancient Israelites reacted to prophets such as Jeremiah. Jeremiah told the Israelites that their enemies the Babylonians would conquer them. In response, they treated him as a criminal. On one occasion the Israelites locked him in the stocks, and another time they threw him in a pit. Nanyehi was not treated in this manner. but don't think that there weren't some Cherokees who wished they could throw Nanyehi into a pit.

Nanyehi's vision of peace was partly a matter of conviction and partly of pragmatism. First, the conviction, or if you will, the prophetic vision. In ancient Israel, Isaiah proclaimed the vision of the lion lying down with the lamb and the child harmlessly playing with snakes. The beating of swords into plowshares appears in practically the same words in three Old Testament books. This was also Nanyehi's vision. "The white men are our brothers. The same house shelters them, and the same sky covers us all," she said.

Soon after she was widowed in the Battle of Taliwa, Nanyehi married an Irish trader, Bryan (or Bryant) Ward. Thereafter she was known as Nancy Ward. Later, Bryant moved out of Cherokee land and, apparently without divorcing Nancy, married a white woman and started a family.

This brings us to the pragmatic aspect of Nancy Ward's peace diplomacy. We have to honestly admit that Nancy Ward had something to gain from cooperating with the whites. She may have received special treatment as a result of her intimacy with white men. And so also her descendants. The daughter of Nancy and Bryant, my fifth great grandmother Elizabeth, married one of the leading Indian agents, later General, Joseph Martin. Meanwhile, he had a white wife and family in Virginia. Also, two of Elizabeth's daughters married prominent white men, both of them Hildebrand brothers; granddaughter Nancy (Nannie), my 4th great grandmother, married Michael Hildebrand.

Nancy Ward and her descendants got in good with the whites—and in some cases were willing to tolerate bigamy—but they did not suffer as much as other Cherokees from white encroachment and violence.

In this sense also, there was a little resemblance between Nancy Ward and an ancient Israelite prophets. Jeremiah, who prophesied the Babylonian victory over Judah, did not suffer as much at the hands of those conquerors as did the other Israelites. Jeremiah told the people to get ready for seventy years of captivity, and to make the best of it. And don't forget Jesus of Nazareth, whom some Judaeans at the time considered treasonous because he would not join the terrorist war against the Romans; instead, he said render unto Caesar what is Caesar's. Was Nancy Ward acting out of self-interest? Was Jeremiah? Was Jesus?

But there was one final step in the American defeat of the Cherokees that Nancy Ward resisted. The wars had ended; when Dragging Canoe died, after an all-night party in 1792 (not advised for a sixty year old man), no one could maintain the war against white America. When she was old, in her final speech, Nancy told the Cherokee Council to not sell out Cherokee land and move west. Many, however, did so.

Eventually, the whole tribe had to move west, except for a few who hid in the hills (whose descendants today form the Eastern Band of the Cherokee tribe). The Cherokees resisted as long as they could; the Cherokee Nation even sued the United States in the Supreme Court, AND WON. President Andrew Jackson (whose face on our \$20 bill is a disgrace to the world) defied the Supreme Court and ordered the U. S. Army to round up the remaining Cherokees. The Cherokees were kept in concentration camps, and then forced on a long winter march to what is now Oklahoma. This was the Trail of Tears.

One woman on this trail, about 27 years old, was Nannie Hindebrand's daughter Elizabeth, my third great grandmother, married to James Pettit. I found Elizabeth's grave recently in the Ft. Gibson, Oklahoma, Cherokee cemetery. Her daughter Minerva, a little kid on the Trail, later married a man who had also walked the Trail as an orphaned child, Lewis Hicks. They were my great great grandparents.

And this might perhaps be a last little bit of evidence that Nancy Ward's family received some benefits from their cooperation. Lewis and Minerva must have grown up thinking that the Cherokee relocation to Indian Territory was a good thing, and that President Jackson had been right to order it. Who knows, maybe Elizabeth and her children, and Lewis, suffered less on the trail as a result of their cooperation. Maybe they got to ride horses or something. No one knows. (I do know that our family inherited no particular wealth from them.) All we know is that they named one of their children, my great grandfather, Andrew Jackson Hicks. They named their child after the president who had caused the Trail of Tears.

There was a limit, however, to the amount of compromise that my Cherokee ancestors were willing to make. When Elizabeth Hildebrand Pettit, my third great

grandmother, learned that her white husband had a white family down in Mississippi, she sued him for bigamy in the Cherokee Supreme Court in 1829—and won.

Nancy Ward also introduced many white technologies into Cherokee culture. The Cherokee already had agriculture—they raised corn and beans and squash—but they began to adopt the practice of raising cattle, especially for milk. Apparently Nancy Ward asked Lydia Bean, whom she rescued from the fire, how to make cheese and butter. Nancy saw that this would benefit the Cherokee.

Nancy Ward would be satisfied to hear that many of the wars of the nineteenth century have been replaced by peace. Here are three examples:

1. When we hear about the Battle of Taliwa, between the Cherokee and Muskogee tribes, the response of modern Muskogees and Cherokees is *Huh? What was that all about?*
2. Today, whites and Native Americans are no longer fighting, although this has resulted more from conquest and intermixture than from justice or resolution. As Angie Debo wrote, after the Trail of Tears there was a second conquest of the Cherokees, when Oklahoma state officials broke the law to steal Indian Territory and Oklahoma land away from them. Oklahoma state officials tricked my grandfather, Edd Hicks, out of his Cherokee land allotment. But, at least, intertribal war is over, as is war between whites and Native Americans.
3. Today, the nations of Europe, which were locked in war during and after Nancy Ward's lifetime, including the bloodiest war in history just a few decades ago, now work together almost as a unit, the European Union—which recently won the Nobel Peace Prize. The people of France and Germany may look at World War II and think *What was that all about?*

Nancy Ward would be glad to hear that, in many cases where peace seemed impossible, it was eventually achieved.

Both the instinct of war and the capacity for peace are part of evolved human nature. They never neutralize each other; they are both always present, always next to one another like strands of color in marble. I feel both of them all the time. So do you.

Who was right? Dragging Canoe or Nanyehi? It is clear from the fragmented historical record that neither the path of war nor the path of peace worked out for the Cherokee. And this is exactly the dilemma we face today. We still do not know what the right course of action is in Syria.

In one sense, we need to walk the path of war. Today this war takes the form of working for social change, opposing the oppression that large corporations impose upon us and upon the poor people of the world. I do this by teaching and writing books and

articles, and by encouraging students to free themselves as much as possible from control by large tobacco, food processing, and financial corporations. Words are my bullets.

But I also try to walk the path of peace, which is a wholeness, not just an absence of conflict. When I see the violent people around me, those who are arrogant and abusive in this ecosystem of the Earth, I often think that it would take a hundred people like me to counteract the evil produced by just one of them. And this is true, if I just plod along in my peacefulness. But if I inspire others, as Nancy Ward did, to work for improvement in the world, then I can perhaps have even more of an effect on the world than do the arrogant and evil people. This is what I try to do in my teaching, writing, leadership, and all my relationships with others. One of my guiding lights on this path is my ancestor, Nancy Ward.

And it is for this reason that whoever proclaims the path of peace must do so as a vision of what is good and right, rather than as a purely pragmatic course. Nancy Ward's vision of peace was not merely self-serving. It was a vision that she carried from childhood, when she heard the little voices in the stream and susurrus of the leaves. She consistently called for peace. She never said it was simple or easy. But it is the only path we can ethically pursue if we believe in a Great Spirit of love. Sometimes it works, as it did with Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and sometimes it doesn't, as with Neville Chamberlain who failed to prevent World War Two. The world still hears the voices of Gandhi and King, but does not hear much about Nancy Ward. Every culture needs, and probably has, a prophetic voice of peace. As a member of the Cherokee tribe, I want Nancy Ward's voice to be heard.

Further Reading

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