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A Search for Songs Among the Chitimacha Indians in Louisiana

By FRANCES DENSMORE

CONTENTS

	PAGE
The Chitimacha tribe.....	5
Details of field work.....	6
Reminiscences by Benjamin Paul.....	8
Concerning his grandmother, who was a medicine woman.....	8
Postiyu, the medicine man.....	9
Foretelling the high water in 1882.....	10
The custom of blessing the seed corn.....	10
The medicine man who brought snow and ice.....	10
Beliefs concerning the wild canary and the woodpecker.....	11
Legends related by Benjamin Paul.....	12
The origin of the flute.....	12
The making of the first pirogue.....	12
The old couple that turned into bears.....	13
The old couple that turned into deer.....	14
Miscellaneous notes.....	14
Literature cited.....	15

ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES

1. 1, Bayou Teche. 2, Pirogue beside Bayou Teche.....	16
2. 1, Benjamin Paul. 2, Christine Paul, wife of Benjamin Paul.....	16
3. 1, Benjamin Paul's house. 2, Delphine Decloux's house.....	16
4. 1, Delphine Decloux. 2, Live oak in Delphine Decloux's yard.....	16

A SEARCH FOR SONGS AMONG THE CHITIMACHA INDIANS IN LOUISIANA

By FRANCES DENSMORE

THE CHITIMACHA TRIBE

Two derivations are suggested for the name of this tribe. Dr. J. R. Swanton states (in correspondence) that the name may be derived from sheti, their name for Grand River, and imasha, "it is theirs," or "they possess," transmitted through the Choctaw. Gatschet attributes the origin of the term to Choctaw, chuti, "cooking pot," and imasha, "they possess," the name meaning "they have cooking vessels" (Handbook, 1907, pt. 1, p. 286). "At the present day they call themselves Pantc pinanka'nc, 'men altogether red'" (Swanton, 1911, p. 337).

Dr. Albert S. Gatschet says:

The Chitimacha came into notice soon after the French settled Louisiana, through the murder by one of their men of the missionary St. Cosme on the Mississippi in 1706. This was followed by protracted war with the French, who compelled them to sue for peace, which was granted by Bienville on condition that the head of the murderer be brought to him; this done, peace was concluded. [Gatschet *in* Handbook, 1907, pt. 1, p. 286.]

Swanton states:

This peace was concluded late in 1718. . . . When we first get a clear view of the whole Chitimacha territory we find them divided into two sections, one living on the Mississippi or the upper part of Bayou La Fourche, the other on Bayou Teche and Grand Lake. It is possible, of course, that this second division was the result of a reflux from the Mississippi in later times, but the Chitimacha themselves maintain that they have lived there always. . . . In 1784 we learn that there was a village of about 27 warriors on the La Fourche and two others on the Teche. One of the latter was under Fire Chief, . . . and was 10 leagues from the sea, while the other, under Red Shoes, was a league and a half higher up. . . . The La Fourche band is probably the same that settled later at Plaquemine and of which one girl is said [1907]¹ to be the sole survivor. The remnants of the Teche band are located at Charenton, where they are still to be found.

This tribe was officially recognized by French and Spanish governors of Louisiana and its territorial integrity guaranteed. An act of June 19, 1767, signed by Gov. W. Aubry, recognizes the Chitimacha nation and orders the commandant at

¹ Swanton, John R., in correspondence.

Manchac to treat their chief with respect. Another act, under signature of Gov. Galvez, at New Orleans, September 14, 1777, commands the commandant and other subjects of the Spanish Government to respect the rights of these Indians in the lands they occupy and to protect them in the possession thereof. . . .

The material culture of this tribe was similar in most respects to that of the Indians along the lower Mississippi. It was distinguished from them principally by the increased importance of food obtained from the waters and the decreased importance of food from land animals. If we may trust the early French writers, the Chitimacha and other coastal tribes were less warlike and more cowardly than the tribes higher up the Mississippi.

Their houses were like those of their neighbors, i. e., they consisted mainly of palmetto leaves over a framework of poles, and like them, the houses of the chiefs were larger than those of the common people. According to Benjamin Paul, there was a smoke hole, which could be closed when the weather was bad, but, if this feature was ancient, it constituted a distinct advance on the Mississippi houses usually represented, which are generally without any opening other than the door. [Swanton, 1911, pp. 342-345. An extended consideration of the history, mythology, and customs of the Chitimacha is presented in pp. 337-361, and pls. 22-31. A comparison of the language with that of certain other tribes is presented in Swanton, 1919.]

Gatschet states:

In their aboriginal state the [Chitimacha] tribe supported themselves mainly by vegetable food; but they also ate the products of the hunt, which consisted of deer and other smaller animals. The women had to provide for the household by collecting pistaches, wild beans, a plant called kúpinu (kántak in Chá'hta), and another called woman's potatoes, the seed of the pond-lily (áktā), grains of the palmetto, the rhizoma of the common Sagittaria, and that of the Sagittaria with the large leaf, persimmons (plaquemine in Creole, nānu in Shetimasha), wild grapes, cane seed, and súccū [soco] (guspi in Shetimasha) [the muscadine]. They also planted, to some extent, maize, sweetpotatoes, and, after the arrival of the whites, wheat; or procured these articles by exchanging their home-made baskets for them.

The fishing in the lakes and bayous was done by the women, men, and boys; not with nets, but only with hook and line. They fished at night just as often as during daytime. [Gatschet, 1883, p. 152.]

The Chitimacha have intermarried with the Acadian French until small trace of Indian ancestry remains in their appearance. They take pride in the fact that they have never married among the Negroes.

DETAILS OF FIELD WORK

In January 1933 the writer visited the Chitimacha to ascertain whether any songs remained among them. This was part of a survey of Indian music in the Gulf States, made possible by a grant from the National Research Council, whose aid is gratefully acknowledged.

About 50 Chitimacha live in or near Charenton, La., a village in St. Mary's Parish about 17 miles from Franklin and a similar distance from Baldwin. This is the region known as the Evangeline country and the Indians, as stated, have intermarried with the Acadian French. The village is located on Bayou Teche and is

picturesque with old live oak trees from which the moss hangs in long festoons (pl. 1).

The study of the Chitimacha continued about a week, the writer and her sister, Margaret Densmore, staying in Franklin and going out to Charenton by automobile.

On arriving at Charenton, an inquiry was made for the home of Benjamin Paul, recognized as chief of the Chitimacha.² His house (pl. 3, fig. 1) was not far from the center of the village and was of cypress, unpainted and weathered to a soft gray. A large yard was between the house and the road. The fence was unpainted, like the house, and the gate hung by leathern hinges. Benjamin Paul (pl. 2, fig. 1) was found sitting in a comfortable chair on the porch of his house with his hat on and his hands folded on top of his cane, looking toward the gate as though expecting visitors. He showed no surprise, and said that a little bird had told of our coming. He said the bird was "a kind of canary" and always foretold the approach of strangers. The bird had predicted our coming several weeks before and Paul had mentioned it to his wife, saying that someone was coming from the west to see him. His wife said that the previous day he told her that the bird had given its peculiar note again, facing toward the west. The bird always faced in the direction from which the strangers would come, and we approached from Texas, where the music of the Alabama had been studied.

Benjamin Paul was about 64 years of age, gentle in manner and frail in health. His eyesight was almost gone. Other students have visited him, desiring to know more of the history and language of this interesting and disappearing tribe. He was said to be the only person surviving who could speak the language fluently. He pointed to a huge live oak tree beside his house and said that he had lived in the house since the tree was a sapling. Wild pecan and other trees were in the yard. Back of the house was the bayou, the ground sloping down to the water's edge. The interior of the house was of wide cypress boards, beautiful in their grain and mellowed to a soft color. A fire was burning in the wide fireplace in the front room, and there our conversations were generally held.

Benjamin Paul's wife, Christine Paul (pl. 2, fig. 2), and his niece Delphine Decloux (pl. 4, fig. 1), assisted him in giving information.³ Delphine lived on adjoining land and her house (pl. 3, fig. 2) resembled Paul's, with a large live oak in the yard (pl. 4, fig. 2). Beyond Delphine's was the home of her brother Ernest Dardin, who had taken the

² Benjamin Paul was recognized unofficially as the chief of the remnant of the band, although Gatschet stated that the Chitimacha "have abandoned the tribal organization since the death of their chief, Alexander Dardin, in April 1879" (Gatschet, 1883, p. 149).

³ Pauline Paul, of Charenton, La., stated in December 1940 that Benjamin Paul died October 15, 1934; Delphine Decloux died January 27, 1940; and Christine Paul died June 19, 1940.

responsibility of tribal affairs since the old chief had been in failing health. Ernest Dardin was deeply interested in the education of the children and a room in his house was fitted as a schoolroom. These three families were the nucleus of the band. They were nearest to the old customs yet they wanted the younger generation to progress in the white man's way. Others, though known as Chitimacha, were more French than Indian and it was considered useless to question them. The basketry of the Chitimacha has been encouraged and made profitable through the interest of white friends in the vicinity, and the best basketmakers were in the little group of Benjamin Paul's relatives. (Concerning the basketry of the Chitimacha, see Swanton, 1911, pp. 347, 348, and pls. 23-30.)

Benjamin Paul remembered customs that pertained to music but said that he "never was a singer and did not learn the songs." The women of his household were questioned, and they, too, did not know any of the old songs. Mrs. Dardin, a relative who was at Benjamin Paul's house during the inquiry, recalled that her grandmother used to sing to the children but they "just laughed at her." Thus, the old songs of the Chitimacha have disappeared forever. This is the first locality visited by the writer in which this condition has been found. (The research has continued from 1907 to the present time.) From the information given by Paul, however, it was possible to reconstruct some of the musical customs of the Chitimacha which were similar to the customs in other tribes. He related legends and indicated the points at which songs were formerly sung.

REMINISCENSES BY BENJAMIN PAUL

CONCERNING HIS GRANDMOTHER, WHO WAS A MEDICINE WOMAN

The paternal grandmother of Benjamin Paul was a medicine woman and skilled in the use of herbal remedies. She wanted to transfer this knowledge to him but died before he was old enough to receive it. As a child he sometimes went with her when she gathered herbs but was not allowed to watch her. It is a custom of medicine men or women to sing when gathering their herbs and he could hear her singing softly at her work. (Concerning this custom among the Menominee, see Densmore, 1932, p. 119.)

Swanton, in his extended consideration of the Chitimacha states:

Medicines were owned by certain individuals reputed to be skillful in the cure of this, that, or the other ailment—being native specialists, in other words. These might be men or women, and it is said to have been customary for them to keep their methods of treatment a profound secret until they were ready to die or give up practice, when they confided them to whoever was to succeed them. Thus Benjamin Paul's grandmother was a snake doctor, and claimed to cure snake bites of all kinds. She had communicated to Benjamin Paul her manner of treat-

ing rattlesnake bites, but he did not feel at liberty to reveal it. All knowledge of her other remedies had died with her. She also had a reputation in cases of blindness, and was reputed to have cured patients given up by white physicians. [Swanton, 1911, p. 351.]

Benjamin Paul said that on one occasion he went with his grandmother to get a certain root for a very sick person.⁴ This root was used only as a last resort, and in order to be effective it must be pulled from the ground, not dug, and it must not be broken. The medicinal part of the root grows horizontally from the main root and is about 14 inches long. His grandmother pulled the root and it broke so suddenly that she fell on her back. Weeping she said, "There is no hope." Paul said, "Let me dig it," and she replied, "It is no use. The root broke." Paul begged to be allowed to try, so she let him take her knife and he dug some of the root. His grandmother treated the patient with this root and he began to improve. Thus encouraged, she gathered more of the root and the patient recovered.

POSTIYU, THE MEDICINE MAN

One of the last medicine men among the Chitimacha was Postiyu, who lived in the Indian village at Plaquemine Bayou. Benjamin Paul was about 10 years old when Postiyu used to come to his father's house to visit. Sometimes he stayed around the village for 6 weeks. The people gave him food, and sometimes he prepared his own food, parching corn in the ashes and pounding it in a mortar until he had fine meal for his sofki. All the children liked him and ran to him. He told them stories and they would do anything for him. The parents said, "Get him anything he wants." Postiyu had a drum and used to sing war songs, corn harvest songs, and all sorts of songs, but the people only laughed at his singing. Paul remembered this distinctly.

Only one form of Postiyu's magic is remembered. Paul said that Postiyu could make any horse win or lose a race. If he was bribed with whisky when a race was in progress, he would do anything. For that reason many men would not enter their horses in a race if he was around. His method of making a horse win a race was not described but he often made horses lose by the following procedure: He strewed crumbs of dry wood, like hackberry wood, across the track. The horse saw the fragments of wood and mistook them for a log that he must jump over, so he lost time and lost the race.

Postiyu had a nephew and he used to tell the boy to do this or that. One day the boy refused, saying "That's a humbug." So Postiyu took his nephew over to the bayou and said, "Take a good gun for I am going to send you to get a bear." Together they crossed

⁴ Narratives by Benjamin Paul are presented as nearly as possible in his own words, except for changes from the first to the third person.

the bayou. Postiyu made a rotten hackberry tree look like a bear and the boy was so frightened that he climbed a tree. Then Postiyu shot the rotten tree with his old rifle and said to the boy, "You see that you can't kill even a rotten tree. What would you do if a real bear came along?"

FORETELLING THE HIGH WATER IN 1882

At the age of about 13, Benjamin Paul went into the woods and cooked for a logging camp. The men were getting logs ready to "float." One day he saw some ants working in the trunk of a tree about 10 feet above the water. A bug came out of the bog and went up as high as the ants. At noon Paul showed this to his uncle, saying, "Hurry and fix a way to take out the timber for we will have high water." His uncle said, "How can that be? The paper did not say we would have high water." Paul said, "The water will be *so high*," indicating the height of the ants in the tree. "How do you know?" asked his uncle, and Paul replied, "I saw the sign in Red River." The water rose so high that it came into his house, high on the bank of Bayou Teche. This was the earliest high water remembered in the region, and there was no high water again until 1927. Paul still lives in the house, which shows the mark of the high water on both the outer and inner walls. The mark inside the house is about level with the windowsill.

THE CUSTOM OF BLESSING THE SEED CORN

In old times each family kept its own seed corn, which was "blessed" by the chief before being planted. Alex Dardin was the last chief who followed this custom and he died the year that Benjamin Paul was born, but the old people showed Paul the motion of the "blessing" and the dance connected with it. The chief also blessed the harvest before any of the grain was eaten. The same custom was observed with the first fish or game of the year. A boy was not allowed to taste the first fish or game he secured until it had been "blessed."

THE MEDICINE MAN WHO BROUGHT SNOW AND ICE

A Chitimacha medicine man, long ago, knew how to "make magic" and destroy the crops in the fields. The "beard" of the wild turkey was used in this magic which brought snow and ice. The turkey, like the eagle, was believed to have magic power and neither bird was killed by the Chitimacha. Benjamin Paul related an instance of this man's power. After the white people came among the Indians they had a fine crop. The medicine man said, "I will freeze the

white people's crop." The white missionary said, "No; that will make it hard for everybody."

The medicine man took the beard of a wild turkey, "did something with it," and next day the crops were frozen. This happened in June. The missionary went to that medicine man and said, "See; everybody is having a bad time." The medicine man replied, "Well, I have *done* it *now*."

The conditions were so bad that the white people had to send to the "old country" for food, and help the Indians. Paul added, "So the old Indians did not teach those tricks to the half-breeds."

BELIEFS CONCERNING THE WILD CANARY AND THE WOODPECKER

Benjamin Paul said, "Those who know our language can understand what the birds say. They are very tame." He understands the notes of two birds and "talks with them." One is "a kind of wild canary"⁵ that foretold the arrival of the writer. (See p. 7.) The other is a large woodpecker that foretells rain or approaching danger, especially danger from a snake. At such times its warning note is "chuee', chuee'." Before a rain this bird often makes a sound like "keriŋ' keriŋ'." This sounds like pounding on a board. Long ago the woodpecker used to make its nest in the houses and the children were forbidden to touch the nests. When the bird made its sound "keriŋ', keriŋ'," the old people said, "The bird is building a house." Another of its notes is like pulling out a nail, and as a sign of good luck or approval it says, "kee' suya."

The chief function of the woodpecker is to warn of rain. In explanation it was said that the big woodpecker "would not go into the barge, or houseboat, at the time of the flood." He stayed up in the sky and his feet became very cold. As a result, his feet ache in cold, wet weather. When rain is coming he gives a call like "kwi-këkë'." "If you are on the water and hear this call you had better land and camp for there will be rain the next day."

As an example of a warning by the woodpecker, Paul said that once he went with his aunt and grandmother to gather berries. After picking some they saw a tempting berry on the top of a high bush. The woodpecker warned Paul of danger. His aunt approached from

⁵ "A small yellow bird, called *tcinto*, said to be the wild canary, was able to talk with human beings and foretell the weather. Another bird able to converse with men is a bird called *kū'nsnu*, which appears as cold weather approaches. [Paul stated further that] "While the flood prevailed the redheaded woodpecker (*cuc-kā'kōñsmōñ*) hooked his claws into the sky and hung there. The water rose so high that his tail was partly submerged and sediment deposited upon it by the disturbed waters marked it off sharply from the rest of the body as it is today. After the sea had subsided considerably this bird was sent to find land, but after a long search he came back empty-handed. Then the dove was sent and returned with a single grain of sand" (Swanton, 1911, pp. 354, 357-358).

the other side and he told her of the bird's warning but she said, "Ha! You and your bird!" As she touched the berry, a snake bit her. The grandmother came but was so frightened that she could not see the herb to apply. This is a plant with a white root that resembles the rattles of a snake.⁶ Although Paul was young, he knew this herb and said, "Here it is." He took the fresh plant down to a lake, crushed and moistened it, and put it in his handkerchief. He took it to his grandmother who applied it to the snake bite, covering it with a bandage. This was in the nature of first aid. A white doctor was consulted and said the treatment could not be improved. Then the woman was treated by an Indian doctor and completely recovered.

LEGENDS RELATED BY BENJAMIN PAUL

THE ORIGIN OF THE FLUTE

A boy sat wishing that he could make music on a piece of cane, when the supreme deity⁷ came by, disguised as a traveler. The boy gave deer meat to the deity, who showed him how to make a flute of cane and burn the holes with sharp pieces of hot wood. The flute had four holes on top and one underneath. Later he came by again and the boy had made the flute but did not know how to play on it. The deity showed him how to make music on it.

Concerning the musical instruments of the Chitimacha, Swanton writes as follows:

For musical instruments they used a horn made of cane or reed, a drum, and an alligator skin. The drum was made in ancient times by stretching a deerskin over the top of a large clay pot, but later the end of a hollow log took the place of the pot. Alligator skins were prepared by first exposing the [dead] alligator to ants until all of the softer parts had been eaten out and then drying the skin. Music was made by scratching this with a stick. [Swanton, 1911, p. 350.]

THE MAKING OF THE FIRST PIROGUE

The canoe used by the Chitimacha was a dugout, commonly called a pirogue. It is said that the knowledge of how to make the pirogue was given to the Chitimacha by their supreme deity (designated as God by the informant), who took six Indians into the woods and showed them how to fell a cypress tree by burning the trunk. After the tree had fallen he showed them how to secure a section of the right length by lighting fires under the log, and how to shape the

⁶ A connection between the appearance of a plant and its power or medicinal use was noted among the Chippewa. "A class of plants highly valued as medicines are those having a divided tap root supposed to resemble the legs of a man" (Densmore, 1928, p. 325).

⁷ Chitimacha equivalents: The supreme deity, *ku'tnabin*; the supreme deity when disguised as a traveler, *ohcuma'*; cane of which a flute was made, *piiya'*; a flute, or the sound of a flute or any wind instrument, *ha'hpkopig'*; singing or any music except that of a flute, *te'kashonkent*.

bottom and ends of the canoe by burning the surface of the log and scraping off the charred wood with a clam shell. A fire was made on top of the log for its entire length in order to make the inside of the canoe, the wood being charred and scraped so the opening would be the right depth and width. A mold of mud was laid along the upper edge of the partly finished canoe so the burning would not go too far down on the side, and the upper edge of the opening was made smooth by careful scraping. The supreme deity showed them how to do all this, so the pirogue "would be useful to the Indians in going from place to place." It was propelled by a paddle, like that used in other tribes.

The pirogue was commonly used by the Chitimacha in 1933, one being seen and photographed on Bayou Teche, back of Delphine Decloux' house. Her son demonstrated its use by paddling it up and down the bayou. This pirogue (pl. 1, fig. 2) was 14 feet long and about 18 inches wide in the middle, this being the usual size for two people. It was pointed at both ends and sharper at the stern, with a little keel. Larger pirogues would hold 8 or 10 persons.

THE OLD COUPLE THAT TURNED INTO BEARS

Long ago an old couple raised two nephews. When the boys could talk they called the old people their grandparents. One day the old woman said that she was going into the woods to get some firewood, and she went away. The children were about half grown at that time.

Late that evening the boys went to look for their grandmother and instead they saw a bear. "The younger boy said, "That is not a bear. That is grandmother." He wanted to go to her but the older boy said, "No, let her alone." The children went home and said to the old man, "We saw grandmother but she was hairy. The face and ears were grandmother's but her body was hairy."

Soon afterword the old man went for wood. Next morning the children went for wood and saw a bear that ran from them.

Later the old woman came back, and again she went for wood. The children sought her a second time and saw only a bear. Both children cried, and the older boy began to sing a song so they would forget the change in their grandmother. It was said that each song occurring in the stories had a different melody, though none was remembered.

Three times the grandparents went away, returned and found that the children had been all right without them. Then they went away a fourth time and never came back. They did this so the children would become self-reliant and able to make their own living.

Benjamin Paul said that a family called He'kaäton cannot eat bear meat because their ancestors turned into bears, and Swanton (1911, p. 354) states that some of the old-time Indians "would not eat bear meat because they thought the bear was related to human beings." Swanton also states (in correspondence) that hē'kx-atxkôn was a name for the medicine man or shaman." Two names were applied to these men, as it is said that:

Duties connected with the supernatural were performed by a class of priests or shamans called kätcmi'c in the language of the common people, but hē'kx-atxkôn by the nobility. There was at least one in every village, each of whom was accompanied by an apprentice who took his place when he died. A very famous hē'kx-atxkôn lived at Graine à Volée cove, but after his death the institution was abandoned. [Swanton, 1911, pp. 351, 352.]

THE OLD COUPLE THAT TURNED INTO DEER

An old couple lived in the woods, as in the preceding story, and the old woman went away every evening. Once she did not come back and the man said, "What has become of my wife?" It was too late for him to search for her that night so he waited until morning. Then he saw something in the woods and said, "That looks like my wife. The nose and ears are hers." But when she saw that he recognized her, she ran away. The man sang a sad song with the words, "My wife went away like a deer." (Here occurred a song.)

The next spring he did as his wife had done, going into the woods and changing into a deer. Then the oldest daughter sang a sad song which no one remembers at the present day.

A few months afterward the old couple returned and they were hairy, like deer. One of the children asked, "How did this happen?" They replied, "We had to have deer hair on our bodies." The oldest daughter said, "That is queer." Then she sang a sad song which, like the others, is now forgotten. Each of these songs has its own words and melody.

When the old couple went back into the woods they never returned. Their descendants cannot eat the meat of the deer.

MISCELLANEOUS NOTES

If a man kills a snake "a big snake will fight him all night." Such a man cannot treat those who have been bitten by snakes.

If an infant holds its hands to the fire to warm them, it is a sign of cold weather.

If you had a watermelon patch, an Indian would imitate a crippled dog and go into the melon patch. You would see the motion among the vines and say, "What is that dog doing in my yard?" In this way the Indian would locate the best melons in the daytime, then he would hide in the vines and carry away the melons at night.

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1. BAYOU TECHE.



2. PIROGUE BESIDE BAYOU TECHE.



1. BENJAMIN PAUL.



2. CHRISTINE PAUL, WIFE OF BENJAMIN PAUL.



1. BENJAMIN PAUL'S HOUSE.



2. DELPHINE DECLOUX'S HOUSE.



1. DELPHINE DECLOUX.



2. LIVE OAK IN DELPHINE DECLOUX'S YARD.