



Tsali (“Charlie”), a Cherokee prophet
Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall
(Events described: 1811-1812)

The narrative presented here was written in the 1830s by white Americans Thomas McKenney and James Hall as part of a collection of biographies of indigenous leaders. McKenney and Hall recount the preaching of a Cherokee prophet named Tsali, a name pronounced similarly to “Charlie,” by which he was also known. McKenney and Hall call him “Charles.” Tsali was one of a number of prophets who, in the years leading up to the War of 1812, encouraged indigenous peoples between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River to resist colonial encroachment. Other such prophets of the period included Hillis Hadjo (of the Muscogee, a.k.a. Creek, nation) and Tenskwatawa (Shawnee nation). Tenskwatawa’s brother Tecumseh is mentioned at the end of this narrative.

McKenney and Hall recount a dramatic confrontation between Tsali and a Cherokee leader known as Major Ridge. “Ridge” is a partial English translation of his Cherokee name; he went by “Major” after fighting alongside US troops during the Creek War of 1813-14. Ridge was part of a Cherokee faction who favored assimilating to Euro-American ways. Other Cherokees in that faction are recognizable in this narrative by their English names: John Harris and Jesse Vaun. As the narrative begins, Ridge has recently returned from an embassy to Washington DC, where he and other Cherokee spokesmen had rejected an offer from President Thomas Jefferson to exchange Cherokee lands in the southern Appalachians for land in the Louisiana Purchase, west of the Mississippi.

Shortly after the return of Ridge from Washington, a great excitement occurred among the Cherokees on the subject of civilization. Heretofore [...] the intermixture of a half-breed race, the vicinity of the white settlements, the visits of the missionaries, and the almost miraculous intervention of Sequoyah had all contributed to infuse the spirit of civilization. But, though many were converted, the great majority remained wrapped in the impenetrable mantle of barbarism, unaffected by these beneficent efforts or regarding them with sullen apathy or stupid suspicion. [...] But what, previous to the period at which we have arrived, had been merely doubt or disinclination, now began to assume the form of opposition. Some of the Cherokees dreamed dreams, and others received, in various ways, communications from the Great Spirit, all tending to discredit the scheme of civilization. A large collection of these deluded creatures met at Oostanalee town, where they held a grand savage feast and celebrated a great medicine dance, which was performed exclusively by women wearing terrapin shells, filled with pebbles, on their limbs, to rattle in concert with their wild, uncouth songs. An old man chanted a song of ancient times. [...]

At this opportune crisis, a deputation from Coosa Wathla introduced a half-breed Cherokee from the mountains, who professed to be the bearer of a message from heaven. His name was Charles. He was received with marked respect and seated close to Ridge, the principal person present and who, though he deplored the superstition that induced the meeting, had thought proper to attend and ostensibly to join in the ceremonies.

The savage missionary did not keep them long in suspense. He rose and announced that the Great Spirit had sent him to deliver a message to his people; he said he had already delivered it

to some of the Cherokees in the mountains, but they disbelieved and had beaten him. But he would not desist; he would declare the will of the Great Spirit at all hazards. The Great Spirit said that the Cherokees were adopting the customs of the white people. They had mills, clothes, feather beds, and tables—worse still, they had books and domestic cats! This was not good—therefore the buffalo and other game were disappearing. The Great Spirit was angry and had withdrawn his protection. The nation must return to the customs of their fathers. They must kill their cats, cut short their frocks, and dress as became Indians and warriors. They must discard all the fashions of the whites, abandon the use of any communication with each other except by word of mouth, and give up their mills, their houses, and all the arts learned from the white people. He promised that if they believed and obeyed, then would game again abound, the white man would disappear, and God would love his people. He urged them to paint themselves, to hold feasts, and to dance—to listen to his words and to the words the Great Spirit would whisper in their dreams. He concluded by saying: “If anyone says that he does not believe, the Great Spirit will cut him off from the living.”

This speech, artfully framed to suit the prejudices of the Indians and to inflame the latent discontent of such as were not fully enlisted in the work of reform, caused a great excitement among them. They cried out that the talk was good. Major Ridge perceived at once the evil effect that would be produced by such harangues [...] He rose in his place and, addressing the tumultuous assemblage with his wonted energy, said, “My friends, the talk you have heard is not good. It would lead us to war with the United States, and we should suffer. It is false; it is not a talk from the Great Spirit. I stand here and defy the threat that he who disbelieves shall die. Let the death come upon me. I offer to test this scheme of impostors!”

The people, mad with superstition, rushed upon the orator who dared thus to brave their fury and rebuke their folly, and would probably have put him to death had he not defended himself. Being an athletic man, he struck down several of the assailants but was at last thrown to the ground, and his friend John Harris [was] stabbed at his side. Jesse Vaun and others rallied around him and, beating back the crowd, enabled him to rise; and at length, an old chief had sufficient influence over the infuriated savages to quell the tumult. As the tempest of passion subsided, the fanaticism which had caused it died away. The threat of the pretended messenger of heaven had proved false. His challenge had been accepted, and the daring individual who had defied him lived, an evidence of his imposition.

The storm of fanaticism passed on to the Creek nation, among whom dreams were dreamed and prophets arose who professed to have talked with the Great Spirit. The daring and restless Tecumseh, who had traversed the wilderness for several hundred miles for the purpose of stirring the savages to war against the Americans, appeared among the Creeks at this juncture and artfully availed himself of a state of things so well suited to his purpose. Besides bringing tidings from the Great Spirit, he brought assurances from the British king and greetings from the Shawnee nation. The Creeks rose against their chiefs, broke out into war against the United States, and, having surprised the frontier post of Fort Mimms, massacred the whole garrison, without distinction of age or sex.

These events occurred at a period the most gloomy in the history of our frontier settlements, the most hapless in the melancholy record of the destiny of the red man. The jealousies between

Great Britain and America were rapidly approaching to a crisis, and the prospect of a war between these nations opened a wide field for the turbulence of savage passion and the craft of savage intrigue. The extensive frontier of the United States, from the lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, became agitated. Emissaries, prophets, and mercenary traders were at work in every direction, having various interests and purposes, but alike bent upon setting all the elements of discord in motion.

Source: Thomas L. M’Kenney and James Hall, “Major Ridge,” in *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* [...], vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Edward C. Biddle, 1836), 191-193, https://archive.org/details/bp_1342118-3. Free eBook from the Internet Archive.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Additional paragraph breaks and an additional sentence break inserted for readability. Spelling and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions, including the spelling of the names *Tecumseh* and *Shawnee* (which appear in the source publication as *Tecumthe* and *Shawanoë*). The capitalizing of *Great Spirit* replicates the usage of the source, as does the use of lowercase for the racial labels *white* and *red*.

This edited excerpts from McKenney and Hall’s book are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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