

**A STRUCTURAL AND
LEXICAL COMPARISON OF
THE TUNICA, CHITIMACHA,
AND ATAKAPA LANGUAGES**

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John R. Swanton

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LETTER OF TRANSMITTAL

SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION,
BUREAU OF AMERICAN ETHNOLOGY,
Washington, D. C., June 11, 1918.

SIR: I have the honor to transmit the accompanying manuscript, entitled "A Structural and Lexical Comparison of the Tunica, Chitimacha, and Atakapa Languages," by John R. Swanton, with the recommendation that it be published, subject to your approval, as Bulletin 68 of this Bureau.

Very respectfully,

J. WALTER FEWKES,
Chief.

DR. CHARLES D. WALCOTT,
Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

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By JOHN R. SWANTON

INTRODUCTION

THE languages to be discussed in this paper were spoken within historic times in territory now incorporated into the States of Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas. The principal facts preserved to us regarding their history and ethnology have been made the subject of a special paper by the writer,¹ to which the reader is referred for detailed information on those matters, the main points of which will here be dismissed in a few words.

Tunica seems to have been spoken by five historic tribes--the Tunica, Yazoo, Koroa, Tiou, and Grigra. All of our linguistic material comes from the first of these, and it is known in some degree at the present day by perhaps half a dozen individuals living on a small reservation just south of Marksville, La. Yazoo and Koroa are classed with these on the grounds of historical association and a few statements of early writers, especially Du Pratz's affirmation that Yazoo and Koroa shared with Tunica the peculiarity of employing a true *r* which the surrounding peoples could not even pronounce.² The same writer includes Tiou and Grigra in this statement, and it is practically the only evidence upon which Grigra is placed in the Tunica group. In the case of Tiou, however, we have, besides, a direct declaration of the French officer, d'Artaguette, who affirms that in both customs and language the Tiou were identical with the Tunica.³

When we first hear of them the Grigra had taken refuge with the powerful Natchez nation, where they formed one town, and in Du Pratz's time the Tiou had done the same thing. Nevertheless we have good evidence, partly from Du Pratz himself, that the migration of the Tiou had happened at a very late period, and indeed one or two cartographers place them in their ancient territory upon the Yazoo River. The remaining tribes also lived upon, or at least spent most of their time upon, the Yazoo within historic times,

¹ Bull. 43, Bur. Amer. Ethn., pp. 26-27, Washington, 1911.

² Du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, vol. II, pp. 222-226, 1758.

³ Mereness, Newton D., ed. *Travels in the American Colonies*, p. 46, New York, 1916.

their towns being close to its mouth. Tonti says that the Yazoo were "masters of the soil," by which we are probably to understand that they were the original occupants of that country.¹ The Koroa were more inclined to wander to the banks of the Mississippi and the regions westward of it as far as the Ouachita, where their more ancient seat appears to have been. Finally the name "Tunica old fields" clung to a terrain near the Mississippi River in the southern part of the county which still preserves the name of the Tunica tribe, so that there is reason to believe that their former home was farther north than that of any of the others. Indeed there is some slight evidence preserved in the De Soto chronicles that, if not the Tunica, at least peoples of Tunica speech, extended up to and even beyond the Arkansas, and that the Pacaha tribe which plays such a prominent part in the accounts of his expedition was in reality of Tunican stock. The part played by Tunican peoples in the aboriginal history of the lower Mississippi Valley would thus appear to have been very great and to render a knowledge of their position and affinities of unusual importance.

So far as we know with any degree of certainty there were but three tribes belonging to the Chitimachan group—the Chitimacha, Washa, and Chawasha. The first of these lived about Grand Lake and on the lower parts of Bayou Teche and the Atchafalaya, and from their name for the last of these, Sheti, they probably received their own. The Washa and Chawasha, who always lived near each other and remained on terms of intimacy from the first we hear of them until their disappearance, were upon Bayou La Fourche and hunted about in all of the territory between that bayou and the Mississippi, the mouth of which was in their lands. On very slight evidence I classified these in an earlier bulletin as of Muskhogean affinities,² but a manuscript sketch of the Louisiana tribes by Bienville which has since been brought to my attention states that they spoke the same language as the Chitimacha.³ Not a word of the speech of either has, however, been preserved, all of our linguistic material being derived from the principal tribe.

The Atakapan group had a wider historic range than either of the others. It consisted of a great number of small bands occupying the coast of the Gulf of Mexico from Vermillion Bay to Galveston Bay, the whole of which latter it included, and extending up the Trinity River on both sides to a point beyond Bidai Creek. The principal bands of Atakapa properly so called were on Vermillion Bayou, Mermentou River, Calcasieu River, and the lower Sabine and Neches. In the extreme northeast were the Opelousa, not far from

¹ French, *Hist. Colls. La.*, Pt. I, pp. 82-83, 1846.

² Bull. 43, Bur. Amer. Ethn., pp. 26-27, Washington, 1911.

³ *Int. Journ. Amer. Linguistics*, vol. 1, p. 49, 1917.

the modern town of that name. Their position is not beyond doubt, but an Atakapan connection is the most probable. The same might have been said until recently for the bands about Galveston Bay and along Trinity River, who were usually called Akokisa by the Spaniards. However, a newly discovered vocabulary in an old French manuscript has placed their position beyond doubt.¹ To these the researches of Prof. H. E. Bolton among Spanish documents have enabled us to add the Bidai of the middle Trinity and the territory immediately to the westward of that river, and two tribes less well known, the Deadose and Patiri, which probably lived entirely west of the Trinity.²

In the main the culture of all of these peoples did not differ materially, but that of the Tunica and Chitimacha partook of the higher or at any rate more complicated civilization of the lower Mississippi, while the Atakapa were on a much lower level, measured by our ordinary standards. The Tunica peoples had special religious houses or temples set on mounds like the other lower Mississippi tribes, and they were probably organized into exogamous clans, although of that there is no proof other than indications embodied in the terms of relationship recorded at a late date. The Chitimacha also had special religious houses and a cult which seems to have resembled in general that of the Choctaw. If the testimony of the survivors may be relied upon they also had totemic clans with matrilineal descent. The Atakapan peoples, however, seem to have been divided into a great number of small bands having little coherence, either inside or with one another. There is not the slightest evidence that they had clans or gentes and the terms of relationship preserved are such as are encountered among loosely organized peoples without artificial exogamous groups. Like the Chitimacha, their principal reliance for food was upon fish and shellfish. While they seem to have raised some corn, they cultivated the ground far less than either the Tunica or the Chitimacha. Their cultural allies were the Karankawa, Tonkawa, and other peoples of central and southern Texas lying west of them.

For our knowledge of the languages of these three groups of tribes we are almost entirely indebted to the indefatigable labors of Dr. A. S. Gatschet, of the Bureau of American Ethnology, guided by Maj. J. W. Powell, Director of that Bureau. This is particularly true of Tunica, of which scarcely a word remains outside of the material collected by Doctor Gatschet in 1886 from an Indian of the Marksville band of Tunica.

While the writer has gone over this with two or three native informants he has found it impossible to improve upon it except in

¹ See Int. Journ. Amer. Linguistics, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 49, 1917.

² Article *San Idajonso*, Handbook Amer. Inds., Bull. 30, Bur. Amer. Ethn., pt. 2, 1910.