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The Seven Trees and Ramapough Ethnicity

BY GARY VAN VALEN

Sometime shortly before 1910, a conversation between men from two very different worlds took place in northern New Jersey. John Dyneley Prince was Professor of Semitic Languages at Columbia University. A member of New York's intellectual elite, with a BA from Columbia and a PhD from Johns Hopkins, he had participated in an archaeological expedition to Mesopotamia before writing his doctoral thesis on Assyriology. His talent for linguistics allowed him to make contributions in the study of many non-Semitic languages, and later led him to become an expert in Slavic languages. From 1891 onward, Prince lived at Ringwood Manor in Passaic County, New Jersey, and his election to the New Jersey Assembly in 1905 marked the beginning of a political career, which lasted several decades (Scannell 1919; Manning 1945; Pares 1946). While living in northern New Jersey, he became interested in the Jersey Dutch dialect and began interviewing the few people he could find that still spoke it. He described one of his informants as "William De Freece, a negro (mixed with Minsi Indian), *aetat.* [aged] 75, a laborer on the Hewitt estate at Ringwood, Passaic County, NJ, an excellent authority on the negro variant of the dialect" (Prince 1910, 460).

One example of Jersey Dutch offered by De Freece was the following series of verses

thought to be able to cure rheumatism, which Prince called a "negro charm":

*Altäit än zômer
Stât de zûve bôme
äske'n äike än äI de lāng vōrbāi
Kän nît rolle; wāt er opstāt*

Always in summer
stand the seven trees;
ash and oak and all along past they
cannot proceed. What are they standing
on? (Prince 1910, 467)

These verses have only been analyzed as folklore three times. Prince himself offered the first analysis of what he considered a "rather incomprehensible charm." De Freece explained to him, "that the seven trees symbolize the seven stars..., and that they seem to be standing on nothing. They, therefore, cannot go along. Then follows the query, as to what they are standing on" (Prince 1910, 467). Having recently been immersed in Mesopotamian studies, Prince guessed that the seven stars represented the seven planets (Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn) of Babylonian astrology. Unable to make further sense of the verses, he wrote that he was "inclined to doubt the accuracy of De Freece's text" (Prince 1910, 467) and proposed the following modification:

*Altäit än zômer
Stât de zûve bôme
äske'n äike än äI de lāng vōrbāi
Kän nît rāde wāt er opstāt*

Always in summer
stand the seven trees;
ash and oak and all along past
I cannot guess what they are standing
on (Prince 1910, 467)

Thus Prince, the university-educated linguist, assumed the necessity and right to correct the Jersey Dutch of De Freece, the uneducated, nonwhite laborer, adding that his change "makes sense of the text at least" (Prince 1910, 467). Actually, Prince's "correction" and his misidentification of the seven stars only further obscured the probable meaning of these verses.

Using Prince's data, linguist John Holm analyzed De Freece's language as a possible example of a Dutch Creole, citing several common characteristics of Creole languages. Nevertheless, Holm observed that the small amount of evidence recorded by Prince was insufficient to definitively identify De Freece's speech as a Dutch Creole. Holm reprinted De Freece's verses on the seven trees with two new insights. First, he suggested that the seven stars referred to by De Freece should be compared with the Gullah and Bahamian Creole English phrase "seven

star,” meaning the Pleiades. Second, he considered the verses to be a riddle, comparable with others recorded from the Caribbean and West Africa (Holm 1989).

Folklorist David Steven Cohen offered another interpretation of De Freece’s charm in 1995. Like Holm, he considered it to be a riddle, and wrote, “The answer to the riddle is that the trees are stars, which explains why they are standing on nothing” (Cohen 1995, 38). He compared De Freece’s seven stars to the one large and six small stars incised on a calabash from a Rio de Janeiro museum, which art historian Robert Farris Thompson identified as a Kongo cosmogram, and Cohen postulated that De Freece’s charm “may well have been a survival of the cosmological belief system of the Bakongo people that ascribes a magical significance to the motif of seven stars” (Cohen 1995, 38).

Holm and Cohen both looked for an African or African diaspora origin for the verses, a position that is open to question. Although riddles are common in African diaspora folklore, De Freece’s verses do not resemble their standard form: a short and purposefully perplexing description of something followed by an even shorter explanation (see Courlander (1996) for examples). Thompson also described the stars on the Brazilian calabash as meteorites and equated them with the Kongo ancestor spirit *Pai Velho*, details which are nowhere reflected in De Freece’s text or comments (Thompson 1984). Although Prince preferred to identify the verses as a “negro charm,” he noted De Freece’s mixed African American–Native American ancestry. William De Freece was a member of a small ethnic group from both sides of the New York–New Jersey border, known pejoratively from the 1870s to the 1970s as the Jackson Whites, and renamed as the Ramapo Mountain People by Cohen in 1972–74. They adopted the name Ramapough Mountain Indians in 1978, and were recognized as the Ramapough Indians by the New Jersey and New York state legislatures in 1980 (“Summary” n.d.).

Implications for Ramapough Ethnicity

These verses hold implications for ideas of Ramapough ethnicity, which have been contested for over 200 years. Their multiracial origins were poorly documented, so that different interpretations have been given to the relative importance of African American, Euro-American, and Native American ancestry. Members of the group identified themselves as Indian as early as 1760 (Cohen 1972; Cohen 1974). Outsiders saw Ramapough origins as a mystery to be solved and offered theories between the 1870s and 1920s that the people were descendants of runaway slaves, Hessian deserters, black and white prostitutes of the British army, Tuscarora Indian migrants, Lenape (Delaware) Indian groups, or various combinations of these. Cohen was able to dismiss the first four of these theories as folk legends through his thorough historical research. He found compelling evidence in colonial records that the first people bearing the typical Ramapough surnames De Freece, Mann, and Van Dunk were free pioneers of color, descended from Dutch men and African women. These families moved from Manhattan to the Hackensack Valley and finally, along with members of the colored De Groat family, to the Ramapo Mountains (Cohen 1972; Cohen 1974). Cohen congratulated himself and was congratulated by other scholars for having solved the “mystery” of Ramapough origins (Cohen 1972; Collins 1972; Henige 1984).

When it came to the question of possible Lenape origins, Cohen considered existing evidence and even presented new evidence, before essentially dismissing it in favor of his Dutch-African theory. Although Cohen uncovered the evidence that John De Fries listed himself as Indian on a militia roster in 1760, he went on to state: “This does not necessarily mean he was an Indian. He might have been trying to avoid the unfavorable attitude most whites had toward free blacks and mulattoes” (Cohen 1974, 42), and more bluntly, “he may have wanted to pass as Indian rather than be considered black” (Cohen 1972, 263). While admitting the pos-

sibility of some intermarriage with Lenapes, he wrote that “it probably could not have involved more than one or two individuals or there would have been more documentary evidence” (Cohen 1974, 42). He compared the herb cures and folk remedies known to the Ramapough with those used by the Lenape, and declared that they “may be the only survivals of authentic Indian culture in the culture of the Ramapo Mountain People. But they cannot safely be taken as evidence of Indian ancestry because both European and African settlers in colonial America borrowed many herb cures from the Indians” (Cohen 1974, 206). He admitted that some cures may have been borrowed from Native Americans, but stated that associated folk beliefs were “closer to the European tradition of witchcraft than to the American Indian tradition of shamanism” (Cohen 1974, 176). Cohen summarized that, “Notwithstanding some folk remedies and herb cures which may have been borrowed from the American Indians,” the Ramapo Mountain People’s culture was basically Christian and European, not Native American (Cohen 1974, 196). Although a Ramapough informant told Cohen that “most of the people up there in the beginning were Indians,” and that they had intermarried with two Dutch men (who brought the Dutch language to the people), the scholar decided that the Ramapough claims of Indian ancestry served only to deny African ancestry (Cohen 1972, 265).

Cohen may well have had the best of intentions. Working during the era of the War on Poverty and the Black Pride movement, he thought he had found truths that would set the Ramapo Mountain People free: free from prejudice and free to take pride in their own “lost history refound” (Cohen 1972, 263). Some Ramapoughs were pleased with his interpretation of their history, but by claiming that there was little to no evidence of Native American ancestry or culture, he contradicted what many other Ramapoughs had believed and continued to want to believe (Cohen 1972; Cohen 1974).

In response, the people identified themselves as Ramapough Mountain Indians, sought state-level recognition, and took the

first step in applying for federal recognition in 1978–80. In 1990 and 1992, they submitted further documents in their application for federal recognition as Indians, which if achieved, would have entitled them to federal benefits, including the right to operate casinos under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act (IGRA) of 1988. A long and bitter legal process ensued, in which the Ramapough charged the Bureau of Indian Affairs' Branch of Acknowledgment and Research (BAR) with racism, and BAR officials made veiled allegations of attempted bribery by a supposed Ramapough representative who asked, "what it would take to 'walk the papers through the process'" ("Summary" n.d.). At the same time, Atlantic City casino owner Donald Trump made clear his opposition to federal recognition of his possible competition, even filing a federal lawsuit in an attempt to have the IGRA declared unconstitutional. In the end, the Bureau of Indian Affairs did not deny that the Ramapough were Indian but refused them federal recognition as a tribe, because they had failed to demonstrate an unbroken history of tribal organization (Maillard 2003; McCulloch 1994; "Summary" n.d.).

After the case for recognition had run its course, Cohen published his opinions of Ramapough history once again in *Folk Legacies Revisited*. He restated his earlier conclusions and criticized those who did not accept his interpretation as "anthropologists, folklorists, and historians who take the position that there are no objective historical facts" (Cohen 1995, 6); he considered only documentary evidence to be historical fact. He called anthropologist James Clifford's critique of his own work a "deconstructionist approach, which views historical facts as irrelevant" (Cohen 1995, 15). To Cohen, those historical facts were his own genealogical research, which he said proved that the Ramapough "descend primarily from free blacks and who have only a legendary claim to early Indian ancestry" (Cohen 1995, 15).

No one can study the Ramapough people without taking Cohen's work into consideration. As a professional scholar who devoted years to the intensive investigation of Rama-

pough history and culture, his conclusions carry much weight. He did more than anyone else to permanently dispel the pejorative names and myths of origin attached to this group of people. Nevertheless, his theory of Dutch-African colored pioneer origins can be questioned insofar as it systematically minimized Native American cultural contributions and negated the possibility of Native American ancestry. A reconsideration of William De Freece's so-called "negro charm" shows that it could more properly be labeled a "Lenape charm" and examined as evidence of both Lenape culture and ancestry among the Ramapough.

The Seven Stars and the Seven Trees

De Freece's identification of the seven trees with the seven stars is the key to the Lenape connection. As Holm surmised, the seven stars are the Pleiades. This cluster of jewel-like, blue stars set in the shoulder of the constellation Taurus the Bull has inspired folklore on every inhabited continent. Several peoples around the world have used the seasonal motions of the Pleiades to mark the start of a new year (Ceci 1978; Lévi-Strauss 1983; Wonderley 2009; Winkler 1970). In North America alone, folklorist Stith Thompson identified 17 different indigenous groups with an "origin of the Pleiades" story (Thompson [1929], 1968). Stories that explicitly link trees to the seven stars, as De Freece did in explaining his charm to Prince, are relatively rare, but folklorist John Bierhorst noticed the pattern of an "origin of the Pleiades with tree motif" among the Lenape, Iroquois, Wyandot, Cherokee, and Natchez people of North America (Bierhorst 1995). The Quiché Maya of Guatemala and the Noongaburra people of Australia also include trees in their Pleiades stories (Bassie-Sweet 2008; Park 1966).

In analyzing these stories, we see that the greater the distance from the Ramapough homeland, the less they resemble De Freece's account in how they relate the trees to the stars. The Noongaburra story involves two sisters who were taken up to heaven by two fast-growing pine trees to join their five

sisters (Park 1966). The Quiché Maya tale tells how the Four Hundred Boys convinced the crocodile Zipacna to dig a hole for the central post of their house, and then attempted to kill Zipacna by dropping a large log (representing the world tree) on top of him. Zipacna survived and killed the boys by knocking their house down upon them, after which the boys became the Pleiades (Bassie-Sweet 2008). The Cherokee story relates how seven disobedient boys danced up to heaven to spite their scolding mothers, and how one boy's mother pulled him back so hard that he was swallowed by the Earth. She cried over the spot until a pine tree grew from the ground, so that "the pine is of the same nature as the stars and holds in itself the same bright light" (Mooney 1995, 258–59). The Iroquois (specifically Seneca) story is similar to the Cherokee story, with the seven boys being brothers, and the eldest falling to Earth after looking down, yet the boy is still swallowed by the Earth and becomes the first pine tree after his mother weeps over the spot (Parker 1989). In the Wyandot story, seven boys played and danced under a tree. Becoming hungry, they asked an old woman for food. On being refused, they continued dancing until they rose up above the tree to become the Pleiades (Lévi-Strauss 1983). The Natchez story features seven people who left their community, fasted for a year, and turned themselves into pine trees after deciding not to return. When white men arrived with axes, they turned themselves into rocks, and when white men began to use stone, they turned themselves into stars (Swanton 1929). None of these people can be considered as likely contributors to Ramapough culture for obvious geographic reasons, and only the Natchez story mentions seven trees that actually became seven stars. In a study of Iroquois myths, Anthony Wonderley notes that the pine tree is "peripheral to the Iroquois plot, possibly because it is foreign, a detail borrowed from the neighboring Lenape/Delaware" (Wonderley 2009, 4).

The Lenape, in fact, were in the right place to contribute to the Ramapough population, and they also told stories that equated seven trees with the seven stars. In a text recorded

by M. R. Harrington from the Unami Delaware people in Oklahoma sometime between 1907 and 1910, seven boys, who “could go above in the air and down in the ground,” left their parents (Bierhorst 1995, 98). They went to a hill, turned to red stones, and said, “If you want to see us, you can come here. Only clean people can come and see us” (Bierhorst 1995, 98). After many visits from people, the rocks were soiled by “one fellow that didn’t believe” (Bierhorst 1995, 98), and the boys removed themselves to another place and transformed themselves into seven pine trees, again saying that the people could visit them there. Being bothered by the many people who came to lie under their shade, the boys ascended into the sky to become the seven stars. They told the people: “You people can always see us up above. We will watch the frosts. In the spring when you cannot see us in the west, there won’t be any more frosts. And in the fall you can see us in the east. So you know that it is getting cold and frosts appear. We will always be in the skies and never change to another” (Bierhorst 1995, 99).

In a similar version, recorded by anthropologist Frank Speck from the Oklahoma Delaware informant Wi-tapano’xwe, seven “living men of great spiritual power” or “prophets” suddenly disappeared (Speck 1931, 171). Their whereabouts remained unknown until “pure youths” walking on a ridge discerned that the prophets had transformed themselves into seven stones (Speck 1931, 171). After this discovery, so many people went to seek the prophets’ help that they once again disappeared. Eventually, another person discovered that they had become “seven beautiful appearing pine trees,” some of which Wi-tapano’xwe said “appeared as cedars in outward appearance” in order to relate the story to a larger discourse on the sacredness and healing power of the cedar (Speck 1931, 173). Once again, the seven prophets disappeared and became “a group up above in the middle of the sky as seven stars and they are called, when they are seen, as though they were very great persons, for which reason from then on until now they never stay in one place during the year” (Speck 1931, 173).

The Pleiades thus had their origin in seven boys or prophets who transformed themselves into rocks, pine (or cedar) trees, and finally stars. Both versions of the story show concern with the movement of the Pleiades in the heavens. In the first version, they tell the people when the frosts will end in the spring and begin again in the fall through their seasonal movement, thus demarcating the growing season for crops. In the second version, their constant motion is related to their tendency to escape the demands of the people who call on them for help.

How can De Freece’s phrase “ash and oak” be explained if the Native American stories of the Seven Stars clearly identify the trees as pines or cedars? The Jersey Dutch original recorded by Prince, *äske’n äike*, bears more than a passing resemblance to the Lenape word *asi’skewtaya’sak*. Meaning “bunched up,” *asi’skewtaya’sak* is one of the Lenape names for the Pleiades (Ceci 1978; spelled *asi’skewtaya’sak* in Speck (1931) and *Anschisktauwewak* in Zeisberger (1910)). The fact that De Freece was Prince’s only source for the words *äske* and *äike* means that no other informant confirmed their meaning (Prince 1910). The verses most likely originated with a person who was bilingual in Jersey Dutch and Lenape. That person may have engaged in wordplay by replacing *asi’skewtaya’sak* with *äske’n äike*, knowing that others would understand both meanings (bilingual punning). Alternately, *asi’skewtaya’sak* could have been replaced with *äske’n äike* as knowledge of Lenape died out, and people who only spoke Jersey Dutch attempted to make sense of the text through homophonic translation.

De Freece’s verses are difficult for modern Dutch speakers to translate, but those I have consulted¹ have questioned the accuracy of Prince’s translation, especially the last two lines (Tweraser 2014; Hartoch 2014). A possible original meaning of the verses is: “Always in summer / the seven trees stand; / the Pleiades are long gone; / they cannot roll by what goes up there.” As short and cryptic as De Freece’s charm is, it reveals the same preoccupation with the seasonal movements of the Pleiades in the sky found in North-

eastern Native American myths. Summer, specifically mentioned in the charm, is the season when the Pleiades are invisible in the Northeast, since they disappear below the horizon in mid-May and reappear in mid-October (Ceci 1978; Winkler 1970). Their disappearance from the night sky, which marked the beginning of the corn-planting season, could also inspire the belief that they had stopped moving altogether, hence the trees “stand” (as in “stand still”) and “cannot roll by” or move.

There only remains the question of why a charm related to the Pleiades was believed by the Ramapough to cure rheumatism. According to Speck, the Oklahoma Delaware Tribe believed that rheumatism could be caused by a person who had shaman power and who used it to harm rather than help people (Speck 1931). In Native American belief, such a witch or evil shaman could be fought by a good shaman. It would make sense, then, to appeal to the seven good shamans who had become the Pleiades, and who were additionally associated with the healing powers of the cedar, as one possible cure for rheumatism.

The ethnicity of the people who now call themselves the Ramapough Mountain Indians has long been a controversial subject. They have a long tradition of emphasizing the Native American element in their ancestry, and outsiders (both hostile and well-meaning) have a long history of denying such ancestry in favor of European, and especially African, origins. The charm that William De Freece told to John Dyneley Prince around 1900 has attracted little attention as folklore, yet it points to Lenape ancestors for the Ramapough. Like Lenape myth, the charm equates seven trees with the seven stars or Pleiades and shows a marked concern with their seasonal movements. A Lenape name for the Pleiades may have even been preserved in the charm, disguised as a Jersey Dutch phrase for trees. The most thorough scholar of the Ramapough, David Steven Cohen, once wrote that, “They identify with the American Indians, but they possess no authentic Indian cultural traits” (Cohen 1972, 260). In light of the evidence

in De Freece's charm, such a statement can no longer be sustained. ▼

Note

¹ Felix Tweraser is Professor of German and Chair of the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of West Georgia. Else Hartoch is the Collection and Research Coordinator at the Gallo-Romeins Museum, Tongeren, Belgium, and a native Dutch speaker.

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Gary Van Valen was born and grew up in northern New Jersey, and now teaches Latin American, Native American, and world history at the University of West Georgia. Reading about Iroquois star lore in Anthony Wonderley's *At the Font of the Marvelous* triggered a memory of having read a comparable example of Ramapough folklore in the Jersey Dutch language. Reminded of the topic every time he saw the Pleiades in the night sky, he decided to research and write on the Native American contribution to Ramapough folklore. Photo by Pam Partee.



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