

In caves throughout the Middle & East Tennessee area there are many glyphs drawn of the Sun and woodpeckers. While there is a remarkable wealth of glyphs in caves throughout this region, these are among the most common images. This is also the region where I believe the Yuchi lived for some time before Contact. The Yuchi have a long tradition of reverence for deep dark caves (*s'akaba xiga*), and much historic evidence places them in this region. In order to demonstrate some connection, I decided to see what might be encoded in the Yuchi language with respect to the woodpecker as a symbol.

It is well known that the Sun was a potent symbol among the Yuchi, who are of course known as the Children of the Sun. Jan Simek has noted that the woodpecker is a common cave glyph, with an uncertain meaning (Sullivan, 2011). Later, during the maelstrom of the struggle for this continent in colonial times the woodpecker would become a symbol for war, as the red feathers were used on the red sticks carried to war. However, this earlier time was a peaceful era, I would maintain – and so there must have been another meaning here. There is some tradition of the woodpecker as a psychopomp, and like the raptors and cranes much revered among the Yuchi. The woodpecker is still revered as a messenger among the Yuchi.

A brief survey of the Yuchi vocabulary retrieves some eight different words for woodpecker(s)-- more than for any other type of creature. Most creatures only have one or two names. This is somewhat reminiscent of the Eskimo and their many names for snow and ice. So, why so many? -- this generally is due to the importance to the culture. Let us look at the etymology of these names for woodpecker for what that importance might be.

## Names for woodpecker:

Yuchi name	Morpheme meanings	Specific reference
<i>S'a sk'wisk'wine</i>	earth-squeal-squeal-small	
<i>Skwi'skwi ne</i>	squeal-squeal-small	redheaded woodpecker
<i>S'a swis'ine</i>	earth-squeal-small	
<i>Sempa</i>	grub/mushroom-pop	
<i>Ya'papa ne</i>	wood-popping-small	small speckled woodpecker
<i>Xkwi'xkwi ni</i>	large-squeal-squeal-small	large woodpecker
<i>Se'khwa khwa ni</i>	sing/shake shells-small	woodpecker undesigned
<i>S'a pa pa</i>	earth-popping	

## It Is All About Sounds

Morphemes of importance here are derived from *skwiha* (squeal), *papaha* (popping sound), *x'a* (large), *khwa khwa* (shake shells- from tie-on/hang). It is quite clear that the morpheme deconstruction reveals an etymology of repetitious sound (drumming/singing). The woodpecker is here deemed important because of its drumming and singing. It is all about the sound. Just as the Sun glyph so oft appears at the twilight point where light fails to penetrate any further into the cave, the woodpecker glyph is a symbol to commence singing or drumming, or that an important message follows.

A woodpecker gorget then would likely be worn by a singer, drummer, or a messenger. It is now rather clear that the woodpecker was most likely a messenger symbol. Between the reverence in tradition and the etymology of the names, this would be most consistent conclusion.

**As a further side note:** The term pawpaw for the tree and its fruit has been widely ascribed to the Spanish as derived from papaya. I would disagree in part. While this may indeed play a role in its acceptance, I would assert that the term comes from the Yuchi who call this tree *pahpah*, and that it was accepted because of the Spanish familiarity with the papaya. Pawpaws make a loud popping noise when stepped on or crushed. A Yuchi village near the southwest side of Oak Ridge, Tennessee appears on old maps as Pawpaw town.

(“America’s Ancient Cave Art” by John J. Sullivan in the **Paris Review** as condensed in the **Slate** web site: <http://www.slate.com/id/2288619/> )



## TN Cave Art

Quadrant Sun

Woodpeckers

