

# Comparing creation stories

BY PAULINE S. JOHNSON

In this activity, students compare creation stories from three peoples — Cherokee, European, and West African — that met in colonial North Carolina. The first part of the lesson can be done individually or cooperatively in a jigsaw or in small groups. The end of the lesson is a class discussion or a short written assignment (homework or a bellringer the day after the lesson.)

## Learning outcomes

- Students will read and analyze three creation stories
- Students will evaluate the impact these different views may have had on the various cultures

## Teacher preparation

### MATERIALS REQUIRED

- Copies of the three creation stories:
  - “How the World Was Made<sup>1</sup>” (Cherokee)
  - “The Creation and Fall of Man, from Genesis<sup>2</sup>” (European/Judeo-Christian)
  - “The Golden Chain<sup>3</sup>” (Yoruba/West African)

Students can access the creation stories in any of three ways, depending on how you set up your class:

- A computer with internet access for each group, *or*
- copies of each creation story for one-third of the class (if doing the jigsaw method), *or*
- copies of each creation story for half the class, if doing the small group method
- A copy of the creation chart for each student.

## **CLASSROOM TIME REQUIRED**

30 minutes if doing the jigsaw method, 50 minutes if doing the small group method.

# Procedure

## **GROUP WORK**

First, have the students work in groups to read and analyze the creation stories.

### **Jigsaw method**

1. Determine how many small groups would work in your classroom (4 to 5 students per group). Use that number in step 3. (For example, imagine there will be 6 groups).
2. Give each student a copy of the Creation Chart.
3. Have the students count off by the number of groups you will use (“Count off one through six”).
4. Tell each student to write their number on the back of their chart.
5. Split the class into three large groups and have them move into large discussion circles.
6. Give each group copies of one of the three creation stories or several computers with internet access and assign one of the stories.
7. Allow the students 5 to 10 minutes (this will depend on the reading ability of your students) to read the story. Then have them fill in the appropriate column of their creation chart; discussion in the large group is to be encouraged. The teacher should move between the groups. A sample teacher copy of the chart is included, below.
8. After the students have completed this, have them look at the number on the back of their charts and to move to the new smaller groups. (It is mathematically possible, though not probable, that a group would be missing one of the stories, so you may need to make some adjustments.)
9. The students will share their creation stories with the rest of their small group. They will each fill in the chart as the other students describe their story and share their chart.

### **Small group method**

1. Divide the class into groups of four or five.
2. Give each student a creation chart and each group several copies of the creation stories that you have copied or two computers with internet access.
3. Ask each group to read the three creation stories and to fill in the chart. The groups are expected to work together and share their ideas. This will take approximately 25 to 30 minutes.

## **FULL-CLASS DISCUSSION**

Then, reconvene and discuss the stories as a class.

1. Have a short discussion about the similarities and differences between the stories [all stories begin with water as the pre-earth scenario; the West African and European stories have divine intervention; European story has humans designed to dominate nature]
2. Pose the following questions as a discussion starter *or* as a short written assignment. The written assignment can be a short homework essay or a bellringer activity for the beginning of the next class period.
  - “How might the differences that you see in these views of the role for humans affect these cultures when they meet in the Americas?”
  - “How might it affect their differing view and treatment of the land?”

## Assessment

The first part of the lesson will be assessed by the participation of the students in their groups and by the completed creation chart (see the teacher version, below, for a sample of a completed chart).

The discussion or written questions should include at least the following information:

- The Indians would seem to have a more cooperative relationship with the land, plants, and animals. The Europeans, and to a lesser extent the West Africans, would see the land, plants, and animals as theirs to exploit. In the European view, nature is theirs to use. The West Africans saw the world as being created so that Supreme Being and other heavenly creatures to assist those upon it. This would seem to say that plants and animals were for the use of the “clay creatures” that had been brought to life. Such differences would have made understanding the fundamental relationship to earth and other living creatures extremely difficult for the other cultures to grasp as it was so basic to each civilization.
- As will be discussed later in the digital textbook, the European view of land ownership and the Indian view of everyone owning the land would play an important part in the difficulties between the cultures. The students may not grasp that exact idea, but should realize that there were fundamental cultural differences that would play a major role in the relationship between the two worlds.

### SAMPLE CREATION CHART

	Cherokee	European	West African
<b>Short description of the way this culture describes the Creation of the world.</b>	All is water and the earth was created when the animals, who lived above the sky, needed more room, so the water-beetle brought mud up from the water and this became the island – Earth. Animals and plants were already there, man came later.	All was waters and God, in six days, created day and night, heaven, earth, plants, sun, moon, stars, animals, and humans.	There was the sky and the water far below. One heavenly entity, Obatala, determined to make a world and with the help of the Supreme Being, Olorun, and other heavenly entities, made earth and humans after climbing down on a golden chain.
<b>Who created the earth in this story?</b>	the Water-beetle (Beaver’s Grandchild)	God	Obatala, with help from orishas (heavenly beings) and the Supreme Being, Olorun

	<b>Cherokee</b>	<b>European</b>	<b>West African</b>
<b>Why was the earth created in this story?</b>	The animals, who lived above the sky, needed more room.	God chose to create the earth.	Obatala wanted to help beings that could live on the earth.
<b>Why were humans created in this Creation story?</b>	It is not specified in the story, only saying that man and woman came after the animals and plants.	God created man and woman, who look like Him, to have control over all plants and animals. Also, to work in the Garden of Eden.	Obatala saw his reflection in a pool and made many clay figures that looked like him.
<b>What did the creator of the humans in this Creation story see as their proper relationship to the land?</b>	While not directly stated, it is implied that humans were to live and work in a cooperative way with the plants and animals — who are anthropomorphic.	Humans were to take control of the land, plants, and animals. They were there to provide men and women with food.	The humans that Obatala created were to live in the new land and be helped by the powers of the heavenly beings, the orishas.

# Creation comparison chart

	Cherokee	European	West African
Short description of the way this culture describes the Creation of the world.			
Who created the earth in this story?			
Why was the earth created in this story?			
Why were humans created in this Creation story?			
What did the creator of the humans in this Creation story see as their proper relationship to the land?			

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## North Carolina Curriculum Alignment

### **SOCIAL STUDIES** (2003)

#### **Grade 8**

- **Goal 1:** The learner will analyze important geographic, political, economic, and social aspects of life in the region prior to the Revolutionary Period.
  - **Objective 1.03:** Compare and contrast the relative importance of differing economic, geographic, religious, and political motives for European exploration.
  - **Objective 1.04:** Evaluate the impact of the Columbian Exchange on the cultures of American Indians, Europeans, and Africans.

### National Standards

In addition to meeting objectives of the North Carolina Standard Course of Study, this lesson plan addresses the following national standards.

#### **U.S HISTORY STANDARDS**

Era 1: Three Worlds Meet (Beginnings to 1620)

Standard 1: Comparative characteristics of societies in the Americas, Western Europe, and Western Africa that increasingly interacted after 1450

#### **HISTORICAL THINKING STANDARDS**

Standard 2: Historical Comprehension

I. Draw upon the visual, literary, and musical sources

Standard 3: Historical Analysis and Interpretation

- A. Compare and contrast differing sets of ideas.
- B. Consider multiple perspectives.
- C. Analyze cause-and-effect relationships and multiple causation, including the importance of the individual, the influence of ideas.

### On the web

#### **The golden chain**

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/1.5>

This creation story told by the Yoruba of West Africa describes how Olorun (the all-powerful being) lived with heavenly beings called orishas around a young baobab tree in the sky, until a curious orisha asked permission to create something solid in the watery world below.

#### **The creation and fall of man, from Genesis**

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/1.4>

The creation story from the biblical Book of Genesis describes how God created heaven and earth, plants, animals, and people; and later how the first people were cast out of the Garden of Eden as punishment for eating from the "tree of knowledge of good and evil."

### How the world was made

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/1.3>

This Cherokee creation story, written down in the 1800s, describes how the earth was created from soft mud "when all was water."

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### Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/1.3>.
2. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/1.4>.
3. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/1.5>.

### About the author

#### **PAULINE S. JOHNSON**

I am currently the Director of a Teaching American History Grant for Buncombe County Schools, Asheville City Schools, and Madison County Schools. I have taught history and English in the seventh and eighth grades for over twenty-six years at Reynolds Middle School in Asheville, North Carolina. I am currently doing adjunct work for Mars Hill College and Western Carolina University. I have a Masters Degree from Western Carolina University and am Nationally Board Certified in Early Adolescence/Social Studies-History. I am certified to teach K-12 and I also have Academically-Intellectually Gifted certification.