

Maintaining balance: The religious world of the Cherokees

BY KAREN RALEY

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In the area we now call the United States, native peoples once depended on their natural environment for survival. Of course, not all environments in North America were the same, so many different cultures, languages, traditions, and practices developed, each reflecting the different peoples' relationships to their different environments. In spite of this, some similarities existed among Native American religions.

One native culture that we know a great deal about is the Cherokees, or *Ani'-Yun'wiya*, "the real people," who lived for hundreds of years in parts of present-day Tennessee, Georgia, South Carolina, and North Carolina.

We know about the Cherokees partly because, in the 1880s, Cherokee elders in the North Carolina mountains allowed a white man named James Mooney to observe and record information about their culture. The Cherokee myths that Mooney gathered and wrote down in English help explain the world¹ of the Cherokees. These myths show that, for the Cherokees, the world was primarily a relationship of proper balance.

The Cherokee view of the world

To the Cherokees, the Earth was a flat disc of water with a large island floating in the middle. The Earth hung by four cords — one each in the north, east, south, and west — from a sky arch made of stone. This was the Middle World, where the plants, animals, and humans lived.

Above the sky arch was the Upper World. This was where the guiding and protective spirits of humans and animals lived. These spirits could move from the Upper World to the Middle World and back to help the humans keep balance and harmony on the Earth.

Below the Earth was the Under World of bad spirits. Bad spirits brought disorder and disaster. They could rise to the Middle World through deep springs, lakes, and caves. When

these spirits caused trouble, Cherokees called on the spirits from the Upper World to help restore balance and harmony to the Middle World.

Balance in the environment

Everything in the Cherokee environment — from corn and tobacco to eagles, deer, and snakes to fire and smoke to creeks and mountains — had an intelligent spirit and played a central role in Cherokee myths as well as daily practices. Native peoples did not view themselves as separate from their environment — they were a part of it.

Like other native peoples, the Cherokees did not try to rule over nature but instead tried to keep their proper place within it. A healer might listen to the spirit of a plant to find out what disease that plant could cure. A hunter might pray to the spirits of animals for guidance and forgiveness.

In order to respect and cooperate with all of nature, the natives found ways to conserve its parts. When Cherokees gathered medicinal plants in the forest, they harvested only every fourth one they found, leaving the other three to grow undisturbed for a future use.

All of these practices contributed to the balance of their world. The Cherokees believed that if the balance of nature was upset, everyone would have trouble. They feared a loss of balance could cause sickness, bad weather, failed crops, poor hunting, and many other problems. Humans were responsible for keeping the balance within themselves and between the animals, the plants, and other people.

One of the myths Mooney collected, “The Origin of Disease and Medicine,” illustrates the idea of keeping balance:

In the old days, the animals and plants could talk, and they lived together in harmony with humans. But the humans spread over the earth, crowding the animals and the plants out of their homelands and hunting and killing too much. The animal tribes called a council to declare war on the humans. They each selected a disease to send to the humans that could cripple them, make them sick, or kill them. When the plants heard what had been done to the humans, they agreed this action was too severe and called a council of their own. They agreed to be cures for some of the diseases the animals had sent.

In this myth, when the humans destroyed the balance of nature, the animals tried to regain it. But they went too far, so the plants tried to restore the balance by stepping in and helping the humans.

Cherokee religion

The Cherokees looked to the guiding and protective spirits of the Upper World to help keep balance and harmony on the Earth. They also maintained order on the Earth by participating in daily prayers, rituals, and seasonal ceremonies.

One ritual, called “going to water,” was performed on many occasions — at the new moon, before special dances, after bad dreams, or during illnesses. Going to water cleansed the spirit as well as the body. The ritual was performed at sunrise. Cherokee men, women, and children would face the east, step into a river or creek, and dip under the water seven

times. When they emerged, they would be rid of bad feelings and ready to begin anew, with a clear mind.

The annual Green Corn Ceremony also symbolized a fresh start. It was held each year at harvest time. First, any unused corn from the previous year's harvest was collected and burned. Afterward, the town's sacred council fire, which had been used for the past year, was put out. A new fire was then started, and the community gave thanks and forgave each other for all their quarrels and crimes of the past year (except murder). Finally, the women, who were the farmers in the Cherokee culture, presented the first of the new year's corn harvest. A feast began, and so did a new cycle.

Native American peoples did not use a word such as "religion," but, as you have read, every part of their world had a sacred connection or religious meaning. Their ideas of religion were everything to them. They believed the world should have balance, harmony, cooperation, and respect within the community and between people and the rest of nature.

Cherokee myths and legends taught the lessons and practices necessary to maintain natural balance, harmony, and health. Cherokee songs, dances, stories, artwork, tools, and even buildings expressed the moral values of their culture. The Cherokee homeland and its mountains, caves, and rivers also carried symbolic meanings and purposes.

European arrival and Christianity

The religion of the native peoples was so different from the Christian religion of the Europeans that early explorers, settlers, and missionaries did not see native beliefs as a religion. The white Christians did not understand, for instance, the sacred meanings behind "going to water," festivals of thanksgiving, or rituals for maintaining balance. These native practices looked like childish magic and evil superstition to the Christian Europeans, who usually regarded the natives as "savage heathens."

Almost from the time the Europeans landed, they had tried to get the natives to abandon their traditional, tribally held hunting grounds so they could have more land for white settlement. After the Revolutionary War (1776–1783), the United States government began to develop a "civilization" policy, which was intended to convert the natives to Christianity and to pacify them.

During all this time, the Cherokees had allowed several different Christian denominations to establish missions in their area. Some of the Cherokees accepted Christianity. Many were eager to learn English and other skills the missionaries taught so they could understand the white man's world. They hoped that if they could read and understand white documents, they could help fight the efforts of the whites in taking their tribal lands.

But their hopes did not save the Cherokee Nation². By the 1840s, almost all the Cherokees had been removed to territories west of the Mississippi River — only about one thousand remained in their old homeland.

In time, the New Testament of the Christian Bible was translated into Cherokee and written in the Cherokee syllabary. Scriptures, hymns, and services also began to be spoken in the Cherokee language. Still, communities blended older Cherokee values like respect and sharing into the practices of their new Christian churches. Some of the traditional Cherokee healers even became ministers or elders in Christian churches.

Today, about ten thousand Cherokees live in North Carolina. Most of them are Christian, but traditional ideas can still be found in the use of traditional plants for healing, dances that reinforce the Cherokee identity, references to some of the old sacred Cherokee sites, and a festival that is held each year at Green Corn time.

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Notes

1. *World*, in this sense, means not the physical world but the way people think about it -- the set of ideas and beliefs people hold that help them make sense of the world around them. Sometimes this is also called a "worldview."
2. By 1830, some of the Cherokee had already begun to create a new, modern society governed much like the United States. This was the Cherokee Nation. Its leaders hoped that the residents of this new nation would quickly adopt parts of the local white culture so the natives would not risk removal.

About the author

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Karen Raley formerly taught history and women's studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, where she studied Cherokee environmental history as a doctoral student.