

Reading guide: The religious world of the Cherokee

BY PAULINE S. JOHNSON

These questions will help to guide students' reading of "Maintaining Balance: The Religious World of the Cherokee¹" and encourage them to think critically about the text. The questions ask the students to consider Cherokee religious beliefs and how they may have affected interactions with the Europeans who arrived in the early 1700s.

Worksheet — Maintaining Balance: The Religious World of the Cherokee

1. Why do we know quite a bit about the Cherokee culture?
2. Describe the following and indicate what inhabited each area:
 1. Middle World
 2. Upper World
 3. Under World
3. Explain one way the Cherokees might show that they were part of their environment.
4. How would a loss in the balance of nature cause problems?
5. How does the story “The Origin of Disease and Medicine” exhibit the belief in the balance of nature?
6. Describe one of the rituals that the Cherokee performed to help maintain that balance.
7. What did the Europeans think about the rituals and festivals when they made contact with the Cherokee?
8. How do you think the beliefs of the Cherokee were a reflection of the way they lived?
9. Why do you think the Europeans had a difficult time understanding the beliefs and views of the Cherokee and other Native American cultures?

10. How might that have influenced the relationship between the Europeans and Native Americans in the early days of exploration and settlement of what is now the United States?

Worksheet: Teacher's guide

1. Why do we know quite a bit about the Cherokee culture?
James Mooney was allowed to observe and record information during the 1880s.
2. Describe the following and indicate what inhabited each area:
 1. Middle World
A flat disc of water with a floating island in the middle with four cords holding it up under a stone arch sky. This is the earth we live on — humans, plants, and animals.
 2. Upper World
Above the stone sky arch — spirits of humans and animals that protect and guide those on earth.
 3. Under World
Under the earth — bad spirits that bring problems to those on earth.
3. Explain one way the Cherokees might show that they were part of their environment.
Answers will vary. Most will indicate one of the examples from the reading:
 - *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.*
 - *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.*
4. How would a loss in the balance of nature cause problems?
Most students will indicate one of the examples listed in the reading: "They feared a loss of balance could cause sickness, bad weather, failed crops, poor hunting, and many other problems."
5. How does the story "The Origin of Disease and Medicine" exhibit the belief in the balance of nature?
Plants and animals are personally involved with human beings. Since the humans had created a bad situation, the animals and plants needed to balance it. When the animals sent too many diseases, the plants balanced it by sending some remedies.
6. Describe one of the rituals that the Cherokee performed to help maintain that balance.
Students will probably describe the "going to water" or the Green Corn Ceremony from the reading.
7. What did the Europeans think about the rituals and festivals when they made contact with the Cherokee?
Students should write that the Europeans probably did not understand the Cherokee beliefs. The reading indicates that the most likely reaction would have been to see the Cherokee rituals as superstition and magic.
8. How do you think the beliefs of the Cherokee were a reflection of the way they lived?
Answers will vary. Most students will likely indicate that the Cherokees lived closely with nature.
9. Why do you think that the Europeans had a difficult time understanding the beliefs and views of the Cherokee and other Native American cultures?
Answers will vary. Students should understand that each group had a different belief system and each believed that its own belief system was correct. Some students may indicate language difficulties. European views included a belief that God was on their side.

10. How might that have influenced the relationship between the Europeans and Native Americans in the early days of exploration and settlement of what is now the United States?

The Europeans imagined a God-given right to take land and attempt to convert the Native Americans. Students will also probably write that misunderstandings led to violence. They may have other answers.

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 1.02:** Identify and describe American Indians who inhabited the regions that became Carolina and assess their impact on the colony.

On the web

Maintaining balance: The religious world of the Cherokees

<http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/2.7>

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 world of the Cherokees. These myths show that, for the Cherokees, the world was primarily a relationship of proper balance.

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Notes

1. See <http://www.learnnc.org/lp/editions/nchist-twoworlds/2.7>.

About the author

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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.