

Cherokee Society

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Essential Question: What customs beliefs shaped Cherokee society before and after contact with Europeans?

The Cherokee occupied a huge area that included present-day Tennessee as well as parts of many other states. Unlike their neighbors the Creeks and Chickasaws, who speak Muskogean languages, the Cherokee speak an Iroquoian language. This indicates that the Cherokee migrated to the southeast before the arrival of Europeans. Like all American Indians, the Cherokee were impacted by European diseases and enslavement. However, the Appalachian mountains provided the Cherokee with some protection from raiding parties. The Cherokee towns took in many refugees and soon formed the allied towns often described by British traders and soldiers: the Overhill Towns, the Middle Towns, the Out Towns, the Valley Towns, and the Lower Towns.¹ The Overhill Towns were located along the Little Tennessee River in present day Monroe and Blount counties.

Cherokee political organization at this time puzzled the British who were used to European style monarchies in which one person, usually male, ruled a territory. Cherokee government was much more complex. Individual towns were ruled through democratic consensus and led by war chiefs, peace chiefs, and religious leaders.² Additionally, the towns sometimes worked together as part of a Cherokee nation or confederation but other times would take different paths due in part to their geographic locations.³ The British also had trouble understanding the prominent role that women played in Cherokee society. Cherokee

¹ Robbie Ethridge, "English Trade in Deerskins and Indian enslaved persons." New Georgia Encyclopedia. 02 October 2017. Web.

<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/english-trade-deerskins-and-indian-enslaved-persons> accessed 07 June 2018.

² William L. Anderson and Ruth Y. Wetmore, "Cherokee Origins and First European Contact." Encyclopedia of North Carolina. 2006. <https://www.ncpedia.org/cherokee/origins> accessed 07 June 2018.

³ Boulware, Tyler, "Cherokee Indians." New Georgia Encyclopedia. 20 February 2018. accessed 07 June 2018.

society was matrilineal, meaning that family ties and political status came through the mother. Fields and property passed from mothers to daughters, and Cherokee women had a voice in political decisions as well. Cherokee women could also divorce their husbands.⁴

The Cherokee religious and world view emphasized the need for balance and harmony with the natural world and with other Cherokee. The idea of balance strongly influenced the Cherokee legal system. Before 1800, Cherokee justice was based on the “blood law” or “law of revenge.”⁵ Blood law was similar to the Old Testament concept of “an eye for an eye.” For example, if a member of the Bird Clan killed a member of the Turtle Clan, the Turtle Clan could demand the life of a member of the Bird Clan.

Cherokee society was transformed by the arrival of British traders in the late 1600s. In order to acquire European goods, especially guns, the Cherokee became important players in the deerskin trade. British traders moved to the Cherokee towns and often married Cherokee women to solidify their place in Cherokee society. For example, John Ross’s maternal grandfather and father were both white traders who settled among the Cherokee.⁶ By the 1740s, deerskins were South Carolina’s second greatest export behind rice. By 1747, the deerskins exported had an estimated worth of £57,143 sterling.⁷ South Carolina’s colonial government set the exchange rate for goods and deerskins; in 1751, a blanket was worth three buckskins or six doe skins.⁸ Many believe that the use of the slang term “bucks” to refer to money is a legacy of the colonial deerskin trade.

⁴ Anderson and Wetmore, “Cherokee Origins”

⁵ Bob L. Blackburn, “From Blood Revenge to the Lighthorsemen: Evolution of Law Enforcement Institutions among the Five Civilized Tribes to 1861.” *American Indian Law Review* Vol. 8, No. 1 (1980), pp. 49-63. Web <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068138>. 07 June 2018.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mark D. Groover, “Deerskin Trade.” *South Carolina Encyclopedia*. May 17, 2016. <http://www.scencyclopedia.org/sce/entries/deerskin-trade/> accessed Web. 07 June 2018.

⁸ Vickie Rozema, “Lists of the Prices of Goods.” *Cherokee Voices: Early Accounts of Cherokee Life in the East*. (Winston-Salem NC: John F. Blair, 2002.) 18-19. It is extremely difficult to accurately convert historical totals into modern money, however a rough estimate is that South Carolina’s 1757 deerskin trade would be worth \$12 million in today’s money.

However, the relationship between the British and the Cherokee was volatile and fluctuated between periods of peaceful trade and warfare. Colonial records show many instances of American Indians complaining to the British officials that they were being cheated by the traders. While the traders complained that the prices were set so low, they made no profit from the trade. In 1730, English adventurer Sir Alexander Cuming arrived in South Carolina with the intention of re-establishing trade with the Cherokee. Cuming may have been acting on orders from King George II, or he may have been inserting himself into the situation in a bid to gain wealth and prestige.⁹ In any event, Cuming travelled into Cherokee territory and convinced them to recognize the authority of the king. Cuming endorsed the Cherokee Chief Moytoy as “emperor” of the Cherokee who would henceforth represent the Cherokee in all negotiations with the British. Cuming also extended an invitation for seven Cherokee to visit England and renew the treaty with the king.¹⁰ The Cherokee delegation, including Attakullakulla known to the English as Little Carpenter, renewed the treaty known as the Articles of Friendship and Commerce before returning to South Carolina in September.¹¹ Treaties such as the Articles of Friendship and Commerce were part of the British plan to maintain their colonies and access to raw materials in North America despite a strong French presence on the continent. The British also traded with the Creeks and Chickasaws who had some settlements in present day Tennessee. The Creeks and Chickasaws were centered further south in present day Alabama and Mississippi respectively. The Shawnee hunted in Middle Tennessee, but mainly lived north of the Ohio River.

⁹ Ian McGibney, “Cuming, Alexander.” North Carolina Encyclopedia. 2013.

<https://www.ncpedia.org/biography/cuming-alexander> accessed Web. 12 June 2018.

¹⁰ James Mooney, (1900) *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*. Reprint. (Nashville: Charles and Randy Elder Publishers, 1980.), 35.

¹¹ McGibney, “Cuming, Alexander.”

Student Activity

Directions: Read the statements below. Decide if each statement is true or false. If the statement is false, rewrite it on the lines below.

- ___ 1. The Cherokee traded furs for guns and steel tools.
- ___ 2. The Cherokee language is similar to the language of the Creeks and Chickasaw.
- ___ 3. Women held a prominent position in Cherokee society.
- ___ 4. John Ross's father and grandfather were traders
- ___ 5. Cherokee leader Attakullakulla traveled to France.
- ___ 6. Fields and property were passed from father to son in Cherokee society.
- ___ 7. Cherokee towns were governed by war chiefs, peace chiefs and priests.
- ___ 8. Cherokee blood law was based on the idea of balance.
- ___ 9. Cherokee women could not divorce their husbands
- ___ 10. The Cherokee have always lived in the Southeastern United States.

Use the lines below to rewrite the false statements above to make them true.

Student Activity Answer Key

Directions: Read the statements below. Decide if each statement is true or false. If the statement is false, rewrite it on the lines below.

- I 1. The Cherokee traded furs for guns and steel tools.
- F 2. The Cherokee language is similar to the language of the Creeks and Chickasaw.
- I 3. Women held a prominent position in Cherokee society.
- I 4. John Ross's father and grandfather were traders
- F 5. Cherokee leader Attakullakulla traveled to France.
- F 6. Fields and property were passed from father to son in Cherokee society.
- I 7. Cherokee towns were governed by war chiefs, peace chiefs and priests.
- I 8. Cherokee blood law was based on the idea of balance.
- F 9. Cherokee women could not divorce their husbands
- F 10. The Cherokee have always lived in the Southeastern United States.

Use the lines below to rewrite the false statements above to make them true.

Students should rewrite numbers 2,5,6,9,10 on the lines below to make the statements true
