

Cherokee Society

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

The Cherokee occupied territory that covered present-day East Tennessee, western North Carolina, and northern Georgia. 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 Native Americans, the Cherokee were impacted by European diseases and slave-trading practices. However, the Appalachian Mountains provided the Cherokee with some protection from slave-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. The Overhill Towns were located along the Little Tennessee River in present day Monroe and Blount counties.

Cherokee political organization 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 priests. 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.

The British also had trouble understanding the prominent role that women played in Cherokee society. Cherokee 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.

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.” 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, Chief John Ross’s maternal grandfather and father were both white traders who settled among the Cherokee. 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. South Carolina’s colonial government set the exchange rate for goods and deerskins; in 1751, a blanket was worth 3 buckskins or 6 doe skins. Many believe that the use of the slang term “bucks” to refer to money is a legacy of the colonial deerskin trade. 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 Native Americans complaining to the British officials that they were being cheated by the traders, while the traders complained that the prices were set so low that 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. 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; a leader 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. 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.

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.

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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
