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Cherokee Spirituality: Progression Through Conversion and Time

When the average American gazes around at the ethnic makeup of our modern country, they will see a multitude of cultures, various languages, and a sea of beautiful colors. What that average American may not see is what is erased from this landscape. A group of people once occupied and thrived on this land and on the modern stage, their color, culture, and language are only a blip on our large radar due to actions performed against these people. Their history, language, and religion have taken on different forms due to survival and interference. What remains today is a mixture of the past and present and still exists despite the atrocities of genocide, bigotry, and ignorance. This group of people are known as the Cherokee and their spirituality and culture, although having taken many blows throughout history, remains a stronghold not only in the past but also in the present.

Cherokee spirituality is something of a mystery to the general populace due to many factors including the forced Removal of the Native peoples, the secrecy of the tribe, and the loss of history and culture that the Cherokee have experienced. The spirituality and religious aspect of the Cherokee culture is interesting as it is nothing like Christianity and in it, the Cherokee have a complex relationship with nature. The beliefs of the Cherokee people went through a destructive period brought on by the European settlers that left a permanent impression, but today, aspects of those beliefs are still very much alive.

When the stereotypes of the Cherokee people are analyzed, it is evident that chanting, dancing, and rituals are a hallmark of their spiritual culture as shown by non-Natives. Westerns depict the Native peoples of this region as savages, riding towards warfare on the bare backs of horses and in other instances, they are depicted as an all-seeing character with a special relationship with the earth. While these may be stereotypes based on a lack of knowledge, there is some truth in them. The Cherokee do have a strong relationship with the natural world and with this deeply connected relationship with the environment, comes a strong influence of nature in their religious beliefs. When you look at the story regarding the creation of the earth, nature and animals play a vital role in how the earth was shaped and made livable for the Cherokee people: As Cherokee writer Diane Glancy says in her novel *Pushing the Bear*, "The Great Spirit covered a turtle's back with mud so the land would form. So we wouldn't drown in the waters all around us" (Glancy 72). There are different versions of the story of the creation of the world, some involving the Cherokee people themselves and some only containing animals and their efforts to form a world.

Whether or not the Cherokee people themselves were involved in the creation of their world, animals play a vital role in every version of the story. Plants and animals and every aspect of the natural world are something revered by the Cherokee. They look at this world as something that was meant to be treated with respect and to not be destroyed and torn apart as their European neighbors would later do after migrating to the Americas. This relationship with nature is unfamiliar to Americans in the twenty-first century as it is something that has been suppressed along with the history of a people who practice the ways of living alongside nature.

The Cherokee people use these stories to better understand the environment around them and also as a sort of mold to adapt to when times are filled with hardship and questions. Origin

stories also provide a mold for the relationship between a man and a woman and act as an ideal for the traditional roles of men and women within the Cherokee community. There are many different versions of the story, one involving corn and another involving strawberries. In the first version, Selu, known as the Corn Mother, represents agriculture and the ability to produce and the First Man, also known as the Great Hunter, represents the role of hunter for Cherokee men. This origin story set up the traditional roles seen in the Cherokee culture: the man is seen as the hunter and the woman holds the role of the producer. Stories such as these, with their teachings, were held close to their hearts as the Cherokee people were forced to leave their home and place of their ancestors.

During the forced Removal of the Cherokee in 1836-1839, their teachings and stories offered guidance and understanding. They were ripped away from everything they had known, ripped away from a land that was precious to them, and forced to leave behind their possessions. The Trail of Tears was a horrendous act that pushed a group of people to their limits. With a homeland only in their memory and stories on their tongues and in their heart, they were faced with a new land and much loss. These stories that were passed down to them through the generations were the bulk of what they had left and were what carried them into the new territory.

The stories provided the answers Cherokee lacked when they questioned why they were being forced to leave their home. In Diane Glancy's novel about Removal, she shows how important story telling was during the time of the Trail of Tears: *"A long time ago the Cherokee forgot we were a tribe... We forgot we had a language. We forgot how to speak. That's how the bear was formed. From a part of ourselves when we were in trouble. All we had was fur and meat to give."* (Glancy 177). There are many instances where the importance of storytelling is

made evident but none more so than the story of the bear towards the conclusion of the book.

This novel contains a whole cast of characters who are struggling not only with the Removal but also with familial drama and their identities. The story of the bear provides the answers they lack and an example of how to persevere during trying times. The bear is an example of a part of themselves that could push through something as trying and horrific as the Trail of Tears and a story such as this provided strength in a time when much was confusing and everything, they knew was being ripped away from them. The bear is something they could embody and hold inside of them to get through the countless miles ahead of them on the Trail.

A majority of these teachings were, and still are, instilled in the Cherokee people through the act of oral storytelling. This is not an uncommon thing to see throughout the history of the world. This way of teaching and spreading the stories of the people ensures that every member of the tribe or clan is sure to understand the teachings and pass them on to future generations. As Glancy explains, “Our voices and the meaning of our stories...To be my means to survive the night. Voices interacting...Connecting with others...It wasn’t the words...But rather the heart that went into the words...” (Glancy 155) Within these stories, one can find the principles of a culture and characteristics that set them apart from their European counterparts who do not understand their ways of living and only seek to thwart an entire culture and remain ignorant. The Euro-Americans saw no importance in the stories of the Cherokee or their spirituality. All that was seen by the Euro-Americans was a mass of land to be conquered and a people to remove. Only the Cherokee themselves truly understand the value of those teachings and what they mean not only to the individuals listening to them but also to the culture as a whole.

Without a written language, when the Cherokee people would pass on their stories, variations would appear. Dozens of variations can be found in each story which can be confusing

to non-Native people. For example, the origin story of how the world was created can be told as a water beetle diving below the surface to collect mud, while another version of the story tells of a turtle being the backbone of the earth as it was being created. James Mooney, an American ethnographer who spent time living among the Cherokee people, told another version: “The earth is a great island floating in a sea of water, and suspended at each of the four cardinal points by a cord hanging down from the sky vault...the little Water-beetle...dived to the bottom and came up with some soft mud, which began to grow and spread on every side until it became the island which we call the earth.” (Mooney 239) There are many different variations of the story and what is important is all are told with a theme of animalistic aid. James Mooney while a commonly used source can be considered problematic due to the fact that he was an outsider of the Cherokee Nation, but his sources are still valuable for the conversation.

After Sequoyah introduced a written language to the Cherokee in 1825, it became easier for outside influences to affect the Cherokee and their way of life. The written language, while connecting the Cherokee people in a new way, now made it easier for outside influences to affect the Cherokee people and their way of life. Soon, Euro-Americans took this as a way to spread their faith that they believed to be superior and began translating the Christian Bible to the Cherokee language. A chilling account which appeared in *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* records that “...the missionaries did a great work in civilizing these tribes. To them belong the credit of the Cherokee enlightenment which brought them forward as the most advanced and skilled of all-American Indians...the greatest help...was the invention of the Cherokee alphabet by Sequoyah, or George Guess, in 1825” (Collins 301). The Euro-Americans in their ignorance believed it was necessary to convert the Cherokee into a carbon-copy of themselves and that this was the only way to bring them into the civilized world. However, there were many Cherokee

people who held strong to their faith despite the efforts performed against them by a greedy tyrant forcing assimilation into a Euro-American society.

The introduction of the Christian faith was quite a transition to the Cherokee people because, on top of being another religion entirely, it has many differences. This was no doubt a difficult transition for the Cherokee people because it was so different from their traditional beliefs.

One major difference that can be seen between the Cherokee people and the Euro-Americans regarding spirituality and faith is the relationship with the earth. The Cherokees regard the earth as a living being that needed to be respected and protected. The Euro-Americans, however, looked at the earth as something that was to be conquered and made livable by their standards. The Cherokee realized early on that the earth was their home and if they only existed to destroy it rather than preserving it, they would cease to exist: According to James Mooney's findings, "When the world grows old and worn out, the people will die, and the cords will break and let the earth sink down into the ocean, and all will be water again. The Indians are afraid of this." (Mooney 239) This relationship with the earth caused the Cherokees to be extremely respectful of the land and all beings that inhabit it.

The Cherokee also hold the belief that their ancestors surround them and help to guide them through life. Christian Euro-Americans held, and still hold, a contrasting belief that once a person dies, their soul passes on to either an eternal damnation or an everlasting kingdom. One similarity that can be seen between the Cherokee people and the Euro-Americans is the importance placed on where they are buried once they have passed on from the living world. The Cherokee believe that they should be buried in the sacred land which in a way parallels the belief

of the Euro-Americans, who believe family should be laid to rest in a grave that is placed on holy land.

Those who converted to the Christian faith created a divide among their people as their conversion caused them to sacrifice a deeper connection with the earth and a further tie with their people and ancestors. These differences were also made prevalent during the forced Removal of the Cherokee as those who were torn away from their land mourned the loss of their ancestors and their land in a way those who had converted would not mourn. However, the Trail was such a grotesque and nightmarish time for the Cherokee people that even those who had converted to Christianity struggled as their new faith could not provide the answers or comfort they lacked.

Reverend Bushyhead who was not only a character in Diane Glancy's novel *Pushing the Bear* but also a real historical figure, walked the Trail alongside his people, and like them he suffered strife and mourned losses despite being a man of a contrasting faith. As he narrates in Glancy's novel: "I could hear the turmoil of the Cherokee people...The dark nights when men had been killed for signing agreements with the government to move west...There were nights I felt nothing before me...but I belonged to faith. I had to hold on to certainty as though it was there" (Glancy 166). Putting religious differences aside, both those who practiced Christianity and those who still practiced the faith of their ancestors were both faced with such a monstrous reality that tested their beliefs

It is also very interesting how the culture of the Cherokee places a great deal of importance upon women, something not commonly seen in the Western and European cultures. Cherokee women hold a lot of power that belongs to men in many cultures, including the ability to own property, hold leadership positions in the tribe, and divorce their husbands. According to Thomas E. Mails in his work, *The Cherokee People: The Story of the Cherokee from Earliest*

Origins to Contemporary Times, "...the husband came to live in the house of the woman he married and, in regard to family affairs, was restricted...The mother's line was the primary means of tracing descent" (Mails 79). This distribution of power in the household is extremely interesting because in Euro-American culture it is very typical for the man to hold the brunt of power in the household. Of course, with the exposure to Euro-American culture and the efforts made to blend in and assimilate, the Cherokee people then moved to a domestic mold that more resembled that of the Euro-American household. (Mails). American society is very comfortable with the idea of a man leading a household and being the person with all the power. The Euro-Americans interpreted the Cherokees' matriarchal society as evidence that the Cherokee were uneducated savages. With the assimilation of the Cherokee people and their exposure to the culture of the Euro-Americans, the dynamics of the household were altered as well as the relationship with the natural world.

A recurring theme that we have seen in the belief of the Cherokee people is the importance placed on nature and the land they inhabit, and this became an issue once the Removal of the Native Americans began and the Cherokee were ripped away from the land that held such importance, a place where many generations of ancestors had been laid to rest. The Europeans disregarded this aspect of the spirituality of the Cherokee because the only importance they saw with the land of the Cherokee people was that it was simply another place for the Europeans to expand their empire and to profit from.

The Cherokee people mourned the loss of their land and disconnection from their ancestors. This was a severe loss to the people and their culture because something that had always been a principal part of who they are was ripped away from them by their alien oppressors who did not understand their ways, languages, or beliefs. It was a cold separation that

is still being dealt with today as the Cherokee people still have not regained their land and much of their history and ideologies have been lost and destroyed by European settlers and time itself.

Despite the history of oppression and Removal, the Cherokee have rebuilt their nation and reclaimed their culture. They dwell on reserved territories where they have lived since their Removal but when you look at their rightful homeland, the only remnants that can be found are historical museums and government-owned property. To keep their culture alive, the Cherokee rely on story-telling, rituals, and dance. Although occupying only a little piece of our modern stage, the Cherokee still remain despite the constant threat of outsiders unwilling to tolerate or learn their ways.

The spirituality of the Cherokee has taken blow after blow, but throughout that fight, it has become stronger. Through wars between tribes, priests with only conversion on their minds, and a bloody Removal that spanned hundreds of miles, the stories and traditions that were so important to a culture became the lifeline that got them through those horrendous times and today, they celebrate their faith and traditions with as much strength and love as their ancestors did before them. Their spirituality holds strong and because of it, the Cherokee people and their faith still remain.

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