

Cherokee mythology

This article concerns itself with the **mythology of the Cherokee**, Native Americans indigenous to the Appalachias, and today are enrolled in the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Cherokee Nation, and United Keetowah Band of Cherokee Indians.

Creation myth

The Cherokee creation myth describes the earth as a great floating island surrounded by seawater. It hangs from the sky by cords attached at the four cardinal points. The story tells that the first earth came to be when Dâyunî'sî (Beaver's Grandchild), the little Water beetle came from Gâlûñ'lätî, the sky realm, to see what was below the water. He scurried over the surface of the water, but found no solid place to rest. He dived to the bottom of the water and brought up some soft mud. This mud expanded in every direction and became the earth. According to the account recorded in 1900 by the Bureau of American Ethnology, how the earth came to be fastened to the sky has been forgotten.

The other animals in Gâlûñ'lätî were eager to come down to the new earth, and first birds were sent to see if the mud was dry. Buzzard was sent ahead to make preparations for the others, but the earth was still soft. When he grew tired, his wings dipped very low and brushed the soft mud, gouging mountains and valleys in the smooth surface, and the animals were forced to wait again. When it was finally dry they all came down. It was dark, so they took the sun and set it in a track to run east to west, at first setting it too low and the red crawfish was scorched. They elevated the sun several times in order to reduce its heat.

The story also tells how plants and animals acquired certain characteristics, and is related one of their medicine rituals. They all were told to stay awake for seven nights, but only a few animals such as owl and panther succeeded and they were given the power to see and prey upon the others at night. Only a few trees succeeded as well, cedar, pine, spruce and laurel, so the rest were forced to shed their leaves in the winter.

The first people were a brother and sister. Once the brother hit his sister with a fish and told her to multiply. Following this, she gave birth to a child every seven days and soon there were too many people, so women were then forced to have just one child every year.^[2]

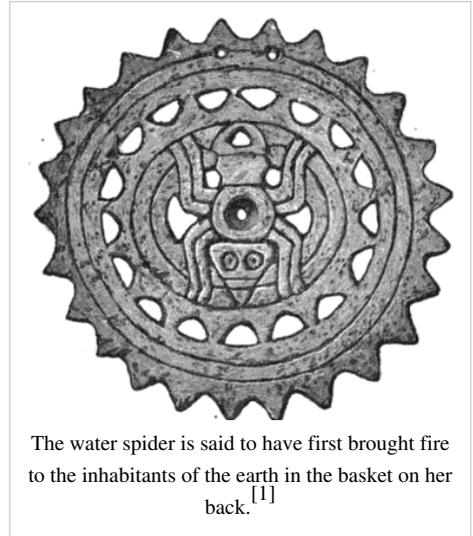
Yowa

The Cherokee revered the Great Spirit, said by some sources to be called the Yowa but in the ancient legends simply referred to as "the Apportioner," who presided over all things and created the Earth.

Great Spirit was said to be omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. She was called Apportioner and Creator, and was said to have made the earth to provide for her children.

Signs, visions, dreams

The Cherokee held that signs, visions, dreams, and powers were all gifts of the spirits, and that their world was intertwined with and presided over by the spirit world.



The water spider is said to have first brought fire to the inhabitants of the earth in the basket on her back.^[1]

Other venerated spirits

The Cherokee believed that every aspect and thing had a spirit presiding over it, but did not hold a belief in multiple gods. All figures identified as 'gods' were simply greater beings in the Cherokee belief whose names were so great there were no English words for them, and thus they were recognized as 'gods' by Englishmen. However, the Cherokee paid direct respect to and worshipped only Yowa

- Sint Holo: A horned serpent
- Tsul 'Kalu: Spirit of the Hunt
- Oonawieh Unggi ("the oldest wind"): Spirit of the Wind
- Kana'ti ("The Lucky Hunter"): The Great Hunter
- Selu ("maize"): The Corn Woman
- Nûññě'hī: The Spirit People

The thunder beings

The Cherokee held that there were two classes of the thunder beings, those who lived close to the Earth, and the holiest and most powerful of the thunder beings who lived in the land of the west beyond the Mississippi River, and visited the people to bring the rains and blessings from the South.

- Ani Yuntikwalaski: Spirits of thunder and lightning (the thunder beings)
- Asgaya Gigagei (Thunder Beings of the West): Spirit of thunderstorms, also called Asagaya Gigaei

It was believed that the thunder beings who lived close to the Earth's surface could and did harm the people at times. There were three Thunder Beings from the West in the ancient legends, a greater spirit and his two sons.

Green corn ceremony

The thunder beings were viewed as the most powerful of the servants of the Apportioner (Creator Spirit), and were revered in the first dance of the Green Corn Ceremony held each year, as they were directly believed to have brought the rains for a successful corn crop.

Evil

The Cherokee assigned a feminine personality to the concept of the personification of spiritual evil, and named her "wi-na-go" in the ancient language, and believe that mosquitoes were created when she was destroyed in ancient legends. There is also Nun'Yunu'Wi, an evil spirit monster who preys on humans, and Kalona Ayeliski (Raven Mocker). These spirits preyed on the souls of the dying and would torment their victims until they died. After which they would eat the heart of the victim. Kalona Ayeliski are invisible, except to a medicine man, and the only way to protect a potential victim was to have a medicine man which knew how to drive Kalona Ayeliski off, since they were scared of him.

Animals, plants, and disease

It was also believed that all human disease and suffering originated with the killing of animals for improper purposes, and that for each animal killed for pleasure or without proper ceremonies, it allowed a new disease to enter the physical world from the spirit world. It was also believed that the plants, in response to witnessing the suffering in the world, made a medicine to cure each sickness that entered the world in order to restore the balance of forces between the two worlds, the physical world and the spirit world.

References

- [1] Powell, J. W. *Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Part 1, 1897-98. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900. Page 242.
- [2] Sproul, Barbara C. (1979). *Primal Myths*. HarperOne HarperCollinsPublishers. ISBN 978-0-06-067501-1. pages 254-255
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