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Authors

Francis, John D.
Loftin

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Eastern Cherokee Creation and Subsistence Narratives: A Cherokee and Religious Interpretation

John D. Loftin and Benjamin E. Frey

Much has been made of the apparent conflict between postmodern assumptions of the uniqueness of religious experiences and the notion of religious experience as universal.¹ Traditional Cherokee religion provides a potential lens through which we might resolve this conflict, hinging on the holistic nature of Cherokee thought. Although Cherokee epistemology honors and upholds polarities—light and dark, morning and night—it also accounts for the power of the liminal. Indeed, Cherokee cosmology assumes the inherent individualism and interconnectedness of the universe, predicated on the community value *SGUCB46D.I* (*detsadatliyvesdi*): “struggle to hold onto one another or cling to one another.” The value conjures the image of people in a circle holding hands. Just as each individual has the responsibility to stand on their own, each also has the assurance that they will be helped up if they should stumble and fall. As a unit, we each have subjectivity, and within the universal, our inflections may differ. Hence, we seek to make sense of the world and each other by exploring both contrast and interrelatedness.

As scholars such as Christopher B. Teuton, Sara L. Snyder, and Sarah Muse Isaacs have shown, storytelling and oral performance are among the primary tools for this investigation within Cherokee epistemology.² This article enumerates and embodies a Cherokee-centered framework in examining traditional Cherokee stories. We contend that the seemingly intractable division between postmodern scholars rejecting all

JOHN D. LOFTIN is a historian of religions and a lawyer who has represented the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians for the last fifteen years. He has taught American Indian religions and federal Indian law at Elon University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. An enrolled member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, BENJAMIN E. FREY is a linguist and assistant professor of American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He reads, writes and speaks Cherokee.

comparison and those affirming it can be mediated, if not synthesized. Studies that seek to understand religion on its own terms need not be based on a theological and universal vision of the sacred, but neither do they require a study of difference that risks becoming solipsistic. Both extremes are problematic and neither serves the academic study of Native Americans, and, hence, religion as well. Our studies should give proper attention to similarities as well as differences, and structural continuities as well as historical transformations. By virtue of being human, we can understand much about one another, no matter how far apart in space and time. In order to unveil an understanding that does justice to both, this essay addresses Cherokee legends from the perspective of the Cherokee and religious studies at different moments.

Interpretations of Cherokee epistemology and worldview must take seriously the *sui generis* status of religious experience and expression. Put another way, if studies of Cherokee religion are to be sensitive and intelligible to Cherokees, then they must employ methods and theories commensurate with the data. While it is true that Cherokee religious experience and expression is occasioned by historical conditions and events, it is equally true that their historical being arises from their spiritual life. Each is necessary, but neither exhausts the meaning of the other. Eastern Cherokee sacred narratives concerning creation and subsistence are still told and their sacred significance is still lived by many Cherokees. Most Cherokees are very spiritual at heart and their traditional stories carry religious meanings that cannot be reduced to social, psychological, political, or economic dimensions. Indeed, it may be reasonable to say that Eastern Cherokee identity is grounded in their mythic apprehension of the world.

Cherokee Robert Thomas described the Eastern Cherokee as largely Christian beginning sometime after the Civil War, a conflict that significantly disrupted the Cherokee way of life.³ As is well known, Cherokee Christianity embodies many aspects of traditional Cherokee religious experience and expression.⁴ In addition, Eastern Cherokees continue to inhabit aspects of an ancient religious world that seamlessly weaves together the spiritual with many dimensions of everyday life. Despite James Mooney's dire 1890 prediction of the loss of Cherokee religion, Eastern Cherokees still speak the language, tell sacred stories and narratives, play the ball game, practice traditional medicine and conjuring, hunt game, farm, gather wild plants, create basketry and pottery, observe ancient birth customs, help one another according to community tradition *SSY* (*gadugi*), obscure their private names, and participate in various ritual performances and dances.⁵ Moreover, traditional Cherokee narratives link religious life with nature's forms and rhythms, history, and modes of subsistence in a way that does not reduce one to the other. Cherokee sacred narratives (myths) embody meanings, values, and purposes that help form Eastern Cherokee identity at a fundamental level. This paper concentrates on stories, often also called legends, of creation, hunting, and farming.

The principal written source of myth narratives comes from Mooney's *Myths of the Cherokee*, published in 1890 when the traditional Cherokee religion had declined considerably due to devastation by Old World disease, numerous wars with the British and Americans, and the influence of Christianity. Nevertheless, Swimmer and a handful of other elders, medicine men, and women gave well over a hundred different

myths. Interestingly, the vast majority of the myths collected by Mooney describe why various plants, animals, and birds display the characteristics that one observes in them to this day. After reviewing the voluminous corpus of Cherokee myths, including those still told today, one point is clear: Cherokee Indians discuss their origins primarily in mythical, as opposed to historical or scientific, terms.

The mythical Cherokee orientation to the world does not mean that Cherokees are unaware of time as a linear unfolding of events; rather, the historical notion of time which stresses sequential events was obscured in favor of a mythical perception of timelessness. This does not mean that their religion is static; indeed, the Cherokee's religious orientation has seen many changes, especially after contact with the English. At the same time, Cherokee myth incorporated many of those transformations.

SACRED NARRATIVES OF CREATION

The founding narrative on which all others are based is best described as an "earth diver cosmogony."⁶ Many Cherokee myths reference *TłłĠ* (the "long ago"), or *DƏḏHƏḐE* ("the beginning").⁷ The myths often explicitly state that, at that "time," people and animals could all communicate freely with one another. It was in this Great Time, this timeless time, that Cherokee origins took place. In "a time before there was time,"⁸ when nothing existed but the primeval ocean and animals who lived above in the seventh heaven, above the arch of the sky vault, which was made of stone. The animals wanted to know what was beneath the water, and at last they got the little water beetle to dive and see what was below. He brought up a small piece of soft mud, which began to grow and eventually became the island of land inhabited by the Cherokees, which is now called Earth.⁹

The Great Buzzard created the mountainous land of the Cherokee when he was sent out to seek dry land. He flew all over the earth, low to the ground, while the earth still consisted of soft mud. When he reached Cherokee, he became very tired and his wings began to strike the ground each time they flapped. When his wings struck the ground, he created a valley, and when his wings turned up, he created a mountain. The sun was so low in the sky that it made everything hot and eventually various animals raised the sun until it was just under the sky arch, and that is where it was left. The Cherokee understand that there is another world below this one, and that it is similar in every way, except that the seasons occur at opposite times. One can reach the underworld by streams, which ultimately flow down.

Earth diver myths like that of the Cherokees are common in North America and in other parts of the world such as India, Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Siberia.¹⁰ While each myth is tied to a particular people and a historical situation, earth diver myths share many common elements. In earth diver myths some creature, usually nonhuman, dives into a primal body of water and retrieves from the bottom a small piece of matter that grows into the cosmos. As Charles Long notes, water in these myths serves as the "unformed, unstable and pregnant reality out of which the universe comes";¹¹ in other words, water is the symbol of pre-creation, of chaos. Significantly, the primordial water of earth diving myths is totally uninhabited: it is a formless mass

representative of potential creation and potential life, as opposed to life itself. In earth diver myths, primordial water is passive and must be penetrated in order to yield life. In the case of the Cherokee, it was the little water beetle, who successfully retrieved the small piece of mud that became a great flat island, floating on the surface of primeval waters. The Cherokee existed on that island at the center of the world. The sky above was seen as a bowl of solid rock that rose and fell twice a day at dusk and dawn, so that the sun and moon could rise and set.¹² The earth was suspended from the vault of the sky by four cords attached at the four cardinal directions.

Cherokees traditionally introduced important mythical narratives by stating: "This is what the old men told me when I was a boy."¹³ Significantly, however, only two of the 125 myths and narratives Mooney collected begin with this statement. Pertaining to the religious and practical activities of hunting, farming, and healing, they are among the most basic Cherokee mythical narratives and concern Kanati, Selu, and Nunyunuwi, the mythical beings most responsible for giving the Cherokee instructions on how to hunt, farm, and properly communicate with the gods. The first is the myth of ᏊᏊᏏ (Kanati; the primordial hunter who taught Cherokee men how to hunt) and ᏚᏎ (Selu; the corn who taught the Cherokee women how to plant and harvest corn). Traditionally, Cherokee men were hunters and women were agriculturalists and this myth establishes Cherokee subsistence modalities, as well as the division of labor by gender. The second myth introduced death to the Cherokee— ᏊᏎᏊᏎ (Nunyunuwi, or Stone Coat/Stoneclad)—was a mythical witch who killed people. Eventually, the power of seven menstruating women so weakened Nunyunuwi that he could be staked to the ground. Nunyunuwi was a great ᏃᏎᏎᏎ (*ada'wehi*, or supernatural being). He instructed the Cherokee to burn him, and as he was dying, he taught the Cherokee a wide variety of medicinal songs to cure illness and hunting songs to call up deer, bear, and other game animals.

Following the instructions of their mythical beings, the Cherokee transcended linear history and experienced cyclical moments of eternity and timelessness.¹⁴ This fundamental religious experience was, and is, also practical: the gods taught the Cherokee both how to subsist and how to live an ultimately meaningful life.¹⁵ When asked about their origins, Cherokees especially reference the two myths of Kanati/Selu and Nunyunuwi. After being created, they became specifically Cherokee when Kanati and Selu taught the men how to hunt and the women how to farm. However, they became fully human only after Nunyunuwi brought death to the first Cherokee, and then taught them various medicinal songs and hunting songs. In replicating what was taught them in the long ago, the Cherokee are not only honoring their traditions, but reexperiencing the beginning of time and reliving the creation of the Cherokee people and their ancestral way of life. Compared to Western historical accounts, which prioritize "facts," the Cherokee stories of their history emphasize religious meaning.

SACRED CENTERS

The Cherokee understand that they live at the center of the world, where the creation of the world took place. By standing in the center of the world, Cherokees experience

unity with heaven, earth, and the underworld—the three vertical regions—and similarly stand situated between the four cardinal directions. The Cherokee place great importance on the fact that they reside at the pivot of the cosmos, the place where heaven, earth, and the underworld meet.¹⁶ In that middle place, they feel a spiritual oneness with the world, and hence, overcome their separation from the rest of the world, including animals, plants, geographical points, and other people.

Among Cherokees, as with many other Native Americans and traditional peoples all over the world, this experience of unity continues to occur on many different levels and in many different places. This concept can be difficult to understand for Westerners who view land and place as intrinsically homogeneous and secular. For example, although many Westerners feel that cemeteries contain a sacred significance, as do churches, cathedrals, or other houses of worship, they are not considered to be cosmic and geographic sacred centers. Moreover, there is no sacred place where conventional Western Christians feel, in the way that Cherokees do, that they are standing at the center of the world. To this very day a Cherokee medicine man, or conjuror, is perceived as standing in the center of the world when he invokes the power of seven levels of heaven, the four directions, and the underworld. He is able to cure disease, find lost children, and bring people together precisely *because* he is located in the “middle” of the world—DꞑC RꞑA.

According to most Cherokees, the primary mother town is YSG (Kituwah), considered to be located at the center of the world—as are the other mother towns, and, in fact, all of the Cherokee village sites. Simply by entering a village site, the Cherokee reexperienced the creation of the world, just as when the water beetle first surfaced with a piece of mud that later became the island on which they lived. The fundamental significance of Cherokee cosmogony is not lost on the Cherokee today, and such cyclical repetition of mythical narratives remains essential to Cherokee religious experience. It is, then, essential to understand that sacred centers cannot be reduced to geographical points on a compass or a map. Indeed, within any sacred territory there may be several centers because each Cherokee village was a sacred center. Moreover, each traditional village had a council house. Within the council house certain sections were designated as more sacred than others and an especially sacred place was considered to be the ceremonial center. Traditional Cherokees would experience unity with the world simply by virtue of being present in their village, and, when entering the council house during certain times that were designated for ceremonies or other sacred events, would reexperience that unity in a more powerful way.

In 1979, the Tennessee Valley Authority condemned the old Cherokee village of Chota, one of the traditional mother towns and peace towns of the Cherokee, together with various other village and burial sites, including Tellico. A few Cherokees, including a very respected medicine man, attempted to enjoin the damming of the Little Tennessee River in court. One Cherokee plaintiff, Richard Crowe, signed an affidavit which stated that the lands in this valley, including the village site of Tellico, were sacred because “this is where we began.”¹⁷ A review of the First Amendment Free Exercise of Religion cases brought by Native Americans through the years makes it clear that the American court system, however sympathetic and empathetic to the

Indian cause, has a difficult time understanding the fundamental part that the sacred center plays for American Indian people.¹⁸

Indians are not attached to the land merely because they love it and their ancestors are buried there, but love it most fundamentally because it is linked with both the creation of the world and the enduring religious custom shaping their ability to relate to the world. For example, it is only because the Cherokee conjuror is situated in the center of the world that he is able to ascend to the seventh heaven in order to communicate directly with *ᎠᎿᎠᎿᎠᎿ*, the Provider.¹⁹ This understanding enables us to more fully grasp the heart-wrenching tragedy of the Cherokee Trail of Tears in 1838. In being forcibly removed to the Oklahoma territory, the Cherokee people were not simply stripped of their land and the place where their parents and grandparents had lived and existed for some time, but were also forced to abandon their traditional access to ultimacy and transcendence. In other words, the forceful removal of the Cherokee from their sacred center disrupted and hindered their ability to relate properly to the gods.

The Cherokee word for Supreme Being is sometimes translated as the "Apportioner."²⁰ However, the Supreme Being or Creator is most often referred to as the "One Who Provides" or "Provider."²¹ Several Cherokee Indians use the term "Provider," unlike Mooney and Frans M. Olbrechts, who both translated the word *une:ḥland:ḥi* as "Apportioner," apparently linking the creator with the sun.²² Cherokees referred to the creator as "The Ancient White One" in some sacred formulas; "The Ancient White One" was one and the same as the Provider.²³ While it is true that many sources refer to the sun as "The Great Spirit" or "Supreme Being" of the Cherokee, numerous Cherokees have made it clear that the Cherokee possessed an all-powerful god prior to the arrival of Christian missionaries and that this god was not the sun, the thunders, fire, the river, or any of the many other gods in the Cherokee pantheon.²⁴

Nevertheless, Cherokees place great emphasis on the importance of the sun and the sun's earthly incarnation, fire, which received many prayers in a large number of situations. William Bartram, in 1776, referenced Cherokees ritually smoking tobacco and offering it first to the sun and then to the four directions.²⁵ Indeed, historian of religions Wilhelm Schmidt argued that Cherokees were sun worshippers.²⁶ There exists some evidence for Schmidt's view, given the numerous references to the sun in Cherokee ritual and prayer; however, those comments are contrasted with clear references to one supreme being. As long ago as 1725, Alexander Long(e) wrote, "They own a one Supreme Power that is above the firmament, and that power they say was he that made the heavens and the earth and all things that is therein and governs all things according to his will and pleasure . . . and this great king, as they called him, has four messengers that he has placed in the four winds: East; West; North; and South."²⁷

In many religions, the sky god gives birth to the world and then withdraws, becoming a largely inactive and passive *deus otiosus* (hidden god), after which there is a progressive descent of the sacred into the concrete and several lesser deities more concerned with the existential needs of humans come into focus.²⁸ In some cases, the sky god comes back as a sun god, a process Mircea Eliade calls the "solarization" of the sky god. In the case of the Cherokee, recognition seemingly oscillates between a sky

god in the seventh heaven, who is withdrawn from the world, and a more active sun god, who is at times the supreme being. Solarization may account for the apparent conflicts in the literature concerning the Cherokee sky god.²⁹

For the Cherokee, in the beginning there existed only the upper world or heaven of order and stasis, and the lower water world of disorder and change. Creation itself requires inherent dichotomies in the natural world. It has been argued that if there is a single word that characterizes the Southeastern belief system, including the Cherokee, it is order.³⁰ Today's world blends order and chaos, stasis and change, and embodies a multitude of other oppositions, such as sky/underworld; fire/water; male/female; and harmony/disharmony. Observing that Southeastern Indians had an almost obsessive concern with purity and pollution, one interpretation holds that most of their rituals were means of keeping their categories pure and discharming pollution whenever it occurred.³¹ While there is some truth to such a reading, it reduces Cherokee religion merely to a concern for purity and order. Rather, since both order and chaos were necessary for the creation of the world, traditional Cherokee religion is concerned primarily with balancing tensions related to order and chaos in order to maintain the existence of the cosmos. Cherokees recognize that reality is paradoxical and that the world exists precisely because of the interplay between the various oppositions that are in constant flux, a concept manifested in the trickster figure.

But Cherokee concerns for the balance necessary to maintain the material world are only one part of a larger story. Cherokees also seek to transcend the world and to experience the ultimacy and infinite height of the Creator, as is clearly demonstrated by a review of descriptions of Cherokee tribal ceremonies such as the Green Corn Dance and individual sacred formulae and prayers chanted and sung by Cherokee conjurors. Cherokee conjurors transcend the purely human realm and ascend to the highest (seventh) heaven, where they communicate directly with the Provider in order to achieve the needs of their patients.³² Cherokee medicine men are able to bring people together, find lost children, bring forth rain, win wars and disputes, and heal the sick precisely because they are able to directly relate to the sacred. In the myth of Stone Coat, this dangerous being taught the Cherokee various medicinal cures, among other things.³³ At least one Cherokee consultant, a conjuror, refers to Stone Coat as "Stone Coat Witch."³⁴ When a Cherokee conjuror recites, chants, or sings a sacred formula—a medicinal cure—he is repeating a prayer act that Stone Coat taught to the Cherokee in the mythical time before time. By repeating those acts, the conjuror transcends time and space and thereby cures his patient. Conjurors are able to solve everyday, real-life concerns on a practical level precisely because they are able to transcend this world.

CHEROKEE SUBSISTENCE

The Cherokee tribe traditionally inhabited no less than 125,000 square miles of mountainous land in what eventually became western North Carolina, eastern Tennessee, northern Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina, and parts of Virginia, West Virginia, and Kentucky. Historically, these landholdings have been divided into four settlements:

the Overhill, located in eastern Tennessee; the Middle in western North Carolina; the Valley in southwestern North Carolina; and the Lower in northern South Carolina. The Lower settlements consisted of a rolling plateau area, while the Middle, Valley and Overhill settlements consisted of mountainous terrain. All settlements were linked with rivers and streams: the Lower with the Savannah River; the Middle with the Little Tennessee and Tuckasegee rivers in North Carolina; the Valley with the Nantahala Valley and Hiwassee rivers; and the Overhill with the Upper Tennessee and Lower Little Tennessee rivers.

It is difficult to know exactly how many Cherokees existed at the time of first contact with Europeans. Adair mentions sixty-four villages in 1775, and Bartram mentions forty-three villages in 1790. Most observers of early Cherokees place the total number of their tribe at somewhere around twenty thousand people, but it should be noted that there is some evidence that the Cherokee had been decimated by epidemic—probably smallpox—after the Spanish came near their settlements in the middle part of the sixteenth century. Indeed, this was when De Soto explored parts of the southeast (1540) and Pardo went up into the foothills of the North Carolina mountains (1566–1568). It seems that, even though little to no direct contact was made between the Spanish and Cherokee, disease nevertheless entered Cherokee villages and reduced the population substantially by the time the English entered Cherokee territories during the first part of the eighteenth century.

Ancient hunting, fishing, and gathering techniques were used aboriginally by the Cherokee and are still used today. The bow and arrow was the most important hunting tool for Cherokee men prior to the introduction of the gun. Bows continue to be made out of a variety of hardwoods, especially honey locust and black locust. Bows were traditionally strung with bear gut, Indian hemp, or strips of stretched and twisted buckskin. Arrow shafts are made out of a variety of mountain cane, and the arrowheads were flaked from flint. The Cherokee are accurate with the bow and arrow from several yards away. The Cherokee also continue to use the blowgun to hunt squirrels, birds, and other small game. The blowgun is constructed from a hollow piece of river cane, cut seven to nine feet long. Darts are made from about ten to twelve inches and were made of hardwood and then were fletched with thistledown. The blowgun is generally accurate up to about fifty feet.

Cherokee Indians traditionally were hunter-gatherers and farmers who subsisted upon a very wide variety of foods, both wild and domesticated. At one time, wild food was more common than domesticated foods for the Cherokee and other southeastern Indians. Cherokee society usually allocated tasks by gender (men hunted and women farmed). These divisions still exist symbolically. The Cherokee divide the year into two seasons: winter (*AW—gola*) and summer (*AY—gogi*). Each of these seasons is associated with the sexes; winter is the time of hunting (and war), and therefore, the time of men, while summer is the time of women and farming. Although women would help skin the animals that were killed by hunters, hunting was, and is, almost exclusively a male activity. Among the Cherokee, men and women were often kept separate. Before and after the hunt, Cherokee men abstained from sex just as women stayed away from men before giving birth and during menstruation. During the time of their menses

Cherokee women traditionally were secluded in a menstrual hut, although apparently these fell out of use in the twentieth century.

Men and Hunting

Taking place in the “long years ago, soon after the world was made,” the myth of supernatural beings Kanati and Selu lays out the origin story for Cherokee hunting and farming. Mooney notes that this was the best-known sacred myth of the Cherokee and, furthermore, that anyone who heard it was obliged to “go to water.”³⁵ It is a long narrative and a number of different versions exist.

Like other important activities in Cherokee life, hunting embodies much spiritual significance. For the Cherokee, hunting in and of itself is a religious activity. Long before the emergence of sacred narratives that describe the origin of hunting and prescribe its proper modalities, hunting occasioned an experience of the sacred through action. In the hunt, men exercise their wills against animals, which are seen as a part of a sacred world. The sacred was often refracted through and symbolized by animals. Animals, like the sacred, are similar yet different from human beings and thus they serve as concrete manifestations and symbols of the sacred. Humans experience the sacred as related yet distinct from themselves, and the same can be said of the human experience of animals. In the simple act of killing an animal, a Cherokee Indian forces his will against the sacred in order to achieve some material gain such as meat, furs, and skins. Killing an animal is a transgression against the sacred for survival and thus Cherokees approach the hunt traditionally with great humility, reverence, thanksgiving, and a certain amount of guilt.

The Cherokee traditionally hunted primarily whitetail deer, which counted for some 70 percent of their meat diet. According to the Cherokee, all deer are led by a single small, invisible, albino deer called Little Deer. Cherokees feel that, upon killing a deer, Little Deer immediately visits the slain animal and asks whether proper prayers of apology and thanksgiving were given by the hunter. If not, Little Deer may inflict the hunter with rheumatoid arthritis as punishment for his haughtiness and lack of respect. Thus, to the degree the Cherokee hunter feels responsible for the kill, he is apologetic for his transgression.

More fundamentally, a Cherokee hunter is thankful, for he recognizes that a successful hunt is primarily due to the gods on several levels. First of all, the Provider created, and Kanati controls, the deer and other animals. Without the spiritual, there would be no animals to hunt, and hence, no meat to eat and no skins and furs to keep warm. Second, a Cherokee can only successfully hunt a deer or other game animal if the right hunting conditions exist and if he possesses the requisite skill, both of which are seen as god-given. Third, all Cherokee hunters traditionally used certain prayers for a successful hunt and many of these hunting prayers were taught in the long ago to aid Cherokee hunters who properly sought game. As mentioned before, when Stone Coat was dying, he gave the Cherokee a number of songs in order to help them call up the bear and the deer. Cherokee medicine men also possessed additional knowledge

of sacred rites that could help secure a successful hunt. In sum, Cherokee hunting exemplifies a man's life.

Hunting is considered the opposite of essential female activity. Because Cherokee women can create human life internally through the blood of their own wombs, Cherokee men acknowledge the sacred power of their blood. Cherokee men revere and respect Cherokee women and particularly their ability to participate directly in the divinely creative process of childbearing. In giving birth, Cherokee women embody the power of creation and the sacred. The Cherokee perceive that children are born straight from the actual blood of their mothers. Procreation occurs when the blood and flesh of the mother combine with the sperm of the father, which is viewed as a form of uncongealed bone that later turns into a skeleton. Thus, the Cherokee understand blood ties to be the corporeal link between the mother and children, as opposed to a symbolic association.

Historically, the blood of women has often been discussed as polluting and, therefore, is prone today to a recurrently negative connotation. However, although Cherokee hunters avoid menstruating and pregnant Cherokee women, it is not because they view them in a negative light. Rather, Cherokee hunters avoid menstruating and pregnant Cherokee women because the blood of women related to childbirth and conflicted with the blood that Cherokee hunters shed through the act of killing an animal. This blood conflict creates a patent manifestation of disorder, which is anathema in Cherokee religion. Cherokee men shed blood external to themselves while hunting in the external world, whereas women gave birth in internal space through their internal blood. In one sense, through hunting, men participate symbolically in an act of birth (by producing meats and furs), while women participate in birth directly. Theda Perdue rightly notes that prior to the advent of the commercial deerskin trade, Cherokee hunting was more symbolic than economic.³⁶

Male taboos surrounding menstruating women are based on a view of menstrual blood as a potent force possessing rare destructive capacity—as expressed in the Stone Coat myth, when menstruating women were able to destroy a being that the male hunters had sullenly failed to conquer. Through Stone Coat's revelations, women's actions gave the people access to the foundations of Cherokee culture.³⁷ Still, the emphasis is not on female blood as destructive; indeed, the blood of women is the blood of birth and life, as opposed to the blood of destruction and death in the hunt and warfare. Hence, men about to embark on hunting activities are precluded from having contact with menstruating and pregnant women. Additionally, men are not allowed to have sex prior to the hunt because intimate contact with women is thought to weaken the ability of men as they undertake specifically male activities.³⁸

Likewise, women ought not to associate with men while farming, in some cases even today. Molly Sequoyah, a consultant for Raymond Fogelson, confided to him that women did not want Cherokee men in the fields because growing corn was a sacred activity involving specialized spiritual knowledge, and that young men were often bloody and their presence in the corn fields endangered growing crops—a concept which clearly distinguishes the destructive blood of the hunt and warfare from the life-giving blood of childbirth and farming.³⁹

Adair wrote in 1775 that wounded warriors, particularly those with open wounds, were required to stay in small huts outside the settlement for some period of time where they were attended to only by medicine men and by postmenopausal women.⁴⁰ Adair saw a parallel between the menstrual hut and these warrior huts as both involved the shedding of sacred and powerful blood. Even though all evidence of the menstrual hut had disappeared on the Cherokee reservation in the twentieth century, as late as 1930, Cherokee women were still not allowed to cook during their menstrual periods.⁴¹ Thus menstrual huts secluded women for shedding internal blood, while the warrior huts secluded the men for shedding external blood.

It is not just that male and female bloods conflict: the blood of women is, in the end, more powerful than the blood of hunting and warfare. No hunter or warrior could bring down Stone Coat in the “long ago,” who was engaged in systematically killing the Cherokee people. It was women and women alone who could overcome the power of this supernatural being with their blood force. Although there is more than one Cherokee myth about the origin of death, in one version it was Stone Coat who brought about the first Cherokee death. To that end, he represents the evil of witchcraft, which is destructive and deadly. Only the power of female blood was strong enough to destroy this evil being.⁴² As he died, Stone Coat imparted important ceremonial knowledge to Cherokee men, teaching them how to cure certain illnesses and to successfully hunt various animals. He also left an important crystal, which Cherokee medicine men traditionally used for ritual power.

The difference between the sexes is reflected in divergent rituals at an early age. Traditionally Cherokee boys were wrapped in a mountain lion skin and fur, while girls were wrapped in a deerskin. Boys were thus linked at birth with hunting and death, while girls were symbolized by the passive and docile deer.

Women and Farming

In addition to hunting and gathering, the Cherokee were traditionally small-scale farmers who farmed three main plants—corn, beans, and squash—that would supplement the wild nuts and other vegetables that they gathered. Women originated agriculture; they traditionally gathered wild plants while men hunted, and they eventually discovered the secrets of domesticating plants, which undoubtedly amazed men. Women not only gave birth, but also generated large amounts of food through horticulture. Corn was considered the most important and the Cherokee grew both a flint, or hominy corn, and a white grain flour corn. Traditionally, they planted these in mounds about three feet apart and in between the corn hills grew traditional crops of squash, gourds, pumpkins, sunflowers. Potatoes, peas, watermelons, and other crops were also adopted from Europeans.

In planting, seven grains of corn were dropped into each hole. The Cherokee were given seven grains in the beginning by the ancestral mother of the Cherokee, Selu.⁴³ In general, the number seven was significant: seven was the number of clans, the levels of heaven, and a symbol of the cosmos.⁵⁷ Corn is considered to be directly born from blood and the womb of Selu. Indeed corn is sometimes called, “our mother” or “old

woman.”⁴⁴ In the myth, Selu gives birth to corn and beans no differently than she gives birth to people, creating corn and beans directly from her body. Cherokee men understood that women created corn from their bodies just as they gave birth to Cherokee babies, which struck the men as auspicious proof that the women embodied the creative powers of the Provider.⁴⁵ The Cherokee perceive a direct blood link between Selu and the corn, just as they see a direct link between Cherokee mothers and their children. It appeared that women literally grew these plants from their own essence, as the myth of Selu teaches. Cherokee men, no doubt, viewed early agricultural success by women with a tremendous sense of awe and fascination and noted a natural connection between all plants and women, as both were linked to the earth. Women gave birth and did so only through reliance on their own bodies; Cherokee women seemed to magically produce crops from the earth in a way that connected them to it.

The Cherokee ultimately learned to hunt by watching Kanati, a supernatural being, but Kanati does not give birth to wild animals, but simply knows where they are located and secures them for the people. Later, the children of Kanati and Selu: *DhBLIGōDY*, the Thunder Boys, ancestors of the Cherokee people, teach the Cherokee various hunting songs, which they use to call up deer, but never are Cherokee men credited with creating wild animals through their own blood; rather, Cherokee men must shed the blood of animals in order to create meat and skins for the tribe. In hunting, men had to seek wild animals in the forest, an area Cherokees did not control, and as such hunting was very unpredictable and sometimes ended in failure. Cherokee men clearly did not create the wild animals that they hunted, and they always experienced a successful hunt as being ultimately dependent on the favor of the gods; thus, much prayer surrounded the hunt.

Divisions were, however, rarely absolute. Traditionally, for example, while women cultivated and harvested small kitchen gardens, men would nonetheless help occasionally, particularly in the larger communal plots that seem to have been present in most Cherokee villages.⁴⁶ Theda Perdue has written that, while theoretically the sexual division of labor was very rigid, in reality men and women often helped one another.⁴⁷ They especially worked in tandem when clearing fields and harvesting crops. In 1835 it was common for whole towns to plant a large field in which each family got its share, and men and women would often work together in that field.⁴⁸ Between planting and harvest, Cherokee men traditionally withdrew from farm work and women did all the tending work. Women cultivated and hoed the fields with a sharpened stick or a stone mattock. Perdue notes that at the first harvest of plants, either a priest or head of the household stood at the edge of the field (at each of the cardinal points) and wept loudly, perhaps for the death of Selu, whose sacrifice made agricultural life for the Cherokee possible.⁴⁹ Then, when all of the crops were gathered, the owner of the field, perhaps accompanied by a medicine man, would build an enclosure in the center of the field and sing prayers to the Spirit of the Corn.

In general, most agricultural narratives concerning tubers involve the killing of a deity, while grain myths describe the primordial theft of seeds. Although corn is a grain, not a tuber, Selu is ritually killed, and Cherokee corn comes from her blood. The myth is thus somewhat provocative and defies the usual classification in resembling

the structure of tuber mythology rather than that of grain. Furthermore, hunting and farming myths oppose one another in formal terms. The agricultural myth involves a murder of or theft from a god, resulting in an increased yield of food—that is, human volition results in material gain. The hunting myth is quite different, because the rolling back of the stone cave ultimately results in less material gain, not more. In farming, things are created; in the hunt, they are collected. This difference helps account for how, in the end, hunting is a far more passive activity than farming.⁵⁰ Part of the myth represents the Cherokees' rupture from the primordial paradise, which existed soon after the creation. Just as the story of Stone Coat tells the origin of Cherokee death, so the myth of Kanati tells of the loss of paradise in the beginning, which forces Cherokee men to work by hunting for a living.

One might say that there are two levels of creation mythology, *cosmogonic* and *existential*.⁵¹ The first primordium is the time of the creation of the world itself; the Cherokee earth diver myth, when the world and its creatures were first formed, occurs in the first primordium. The myth of Kanati and Selu takes place in the second primordium, after the world is created, but before the Cherokee way of life has been established. If asked why men hunted and women farmed, Cherokees would say because they were taught to do so in the beginning. After the second primordium, Cherokee men are able to secure deer (and other game) by repeating the actions Kanati taught in the long ago. Because Cherokee women are corn and corn is Selu, by engaging in the act of farming, Cherokee women relive the long ago and experience identity with corn and with Selu.

Sacred narratives such as the cosmogony, Kanati and Selu, and Stone Coat orient the Eastern Cherokees' lifeway and establish fundamental elements of their worldview. Methods and theories employed to understand traditional Eastern Cherokee spirituality should discuss myth and history, as well as constitutive relationships and diachronic differences. While it is accurate to say that Cherokee religious experience and expression cannot be separated from historical conditions and changes, it is also true that Cherokee religious experience and expression creates their historical identity. Neither exhausts the other.

NOTES

1. See, for example, *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age*, ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Jason N. Blum, "Retrieving Phenomenology of Religion as a Method for Religious Studies," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80 (2012): 102748.

2. Christopher B. Teuton, *Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars' Club* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Sara L. Snyder, "Poetics, Performance, and Translation," PhD diss., Columbia University, 2016; Sarah Muse Isaacs, *Eastern Cherokee Stories: A Living Oral Tradition and Its Cultural Continuance* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2019).

3. G. P. Horsefly, *The History of the True People: The Cherokee Indians* (Detroit: Rick Smith, 1979).

4. See, for example, William G. McLoughlin, *The Cherokees and Christianity, 1794–1870: Essays on Acculturation and Cultural Persistence*, ed. Walter H. Conser, Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1994).

5. James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees, Nineteenth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1897–1898*, pt. 1, 3–576 (Washington, DC: GPT, 1891), rptd. in *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (Nashville, TN: Charles and Randy Elder, 1982), 239–40 (page citations refer to the reprint edition); John D. Loftin, “The ‘Harmony Ethic’ of the Conservative Eastern Cherokees: A Religious Interpretation,” *Journal of Cherokee Studies* VIII (1983): 40–45; Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). There are also new versions of old ceremonies. For example, coauthor Ben Frey witnessed a “Miss Pretty Legs” competition at the 2016 Cherokee Indian Fair in Cherokee, NC. In a 2019 personal communication, he observed: “This straightforward example of cultural continuity was interesting, but perhaps more intriguing was the Miss Pretty Legs competition. The competition, largely a Cherokee drag show, consisted of several Cherokee men wearing women’s clothing and demonstrating off-the-wall “talents,” possibly in a parody of the more standard Miss Cherokee pageants that occurred yearly alongside Miss Pretty Legs. The other noteworthy aspect of the event was the bawdy presentations and speeches of the contestants. The ribald jokes evoked laughter from the crowd, serving as reminders of the community’s social norms through intentional violation of taboos. As I watched, I realized that Miss Pretty Legs was extremely similar to what I had read about the tradition on the Booger Dance. Although the dance was typically written about in the past tense, the underlying spirit and performativity of it seemed to survive in the competition. By adapting the Booger Dance into the form of a contemporary beauty pageant/drag show, Eastern Band Cherokees had both established a form of cultural continuity that reified traditions and community norms and adapted an ancient tradition to contemporary circumstances.” At the same time, the Booger Dance, very guarded in secrecy, is still performed by Conservative Cherokees. See Bernice Bottchenbaugh, “Seneca Nation Repatriates Booger Masks to the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians,” *The Cherokee One Feather*, August, 2019.

6. Charles H. Long, *Alpha: The Myths of Creation* (New York: George Braziller, 1963); Vine Deloria, Jr, *The World We Used to Live In: Remembering the Powers of The Medicine Men* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2006).

7. Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees*?

8. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return or, Cosmos in History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 1954).

9. Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokees*, 239–40; See also *Living Stories of the Cherokee*, ed. Barbara Duncan (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

10. Charles Long, *Alpha*.

11. *Ibid.*, 192.

12. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible: The Origins and Structure of Alchemy* (University of Chicago Press, 1956).

13. Michael J. Zogry, Anetso, *The Cherokee Ballgame: At the Center of Ceremony and Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 39.

14. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. As Robert J. Conley (Cherokee) writes, “The American Indian concept of time is cyclical as opposed to the European/white American concept of linear time”; see Conley, *The Witch of Goingsnake and Other Stories* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), xi.

15. *Ibid.*; Deloria, *The World We Used to Live In*, xix.

16. Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return*.

17. *Sequoyah v. Tennessee Valley Authority*, 620 F.2d 1159 (1980).

18. John D. Loftin, "Anglo-American Jurisprudence and the Native American Tribal Quest for Religious Freedom," *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 13 (1989): 1–52; "A Hopi-Anglo Discourse of Myth and History," *Journal of American Academy of Religion* LXIII (1996): 677–93; Vine Deloria, "Sacred Lands and Religious Freedom," *American Indian Religions*, 1 (1994): 73–83.
19. Jack F. Kilpatrick, *Walk in Your Soul: Love Incantations of the Oklahoma Cherokees* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1965); Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, 431.
20. Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, 542.
21. Zogry, *Anetso*, 54.
22. James Mooney and Frans M. Olbrechts, *The Swimmer Manuscript: Cherokee Sacred Formulas and Medicinal Prescriptions*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 99 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1932).
23. Jack F. Kilpatrick and Anna G. Kilpatrick, *Run Toward the Nightland: Magic of the Oklahoma Cherokee* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1967), 73, 75.
24. Zogry, *Anetso*, 54–56.
25. Henry T. Malone, *Cherokees of the Old South: A People in Transition* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), 21.
26. Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion: Facts and Theories* (New York: Dial Press, 1931), 18.
27. Alexander Longe, "A Small Postscript on the ways and manners of the Indians called Cherokees, the contents of the whole so that you may find everything by the pages," (1975 [1725]; transcript of original manuscript from Library of Congress). Photostats and "modern version" edited, with an introduction, by David H. Corkran, *Southern Indian Studies* 21 (October 1969): 3, 11, 22–27.
28. Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. Rosemary Sheed (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 52.
29. David H. Corkran, "The Nature of the Cherokee Supreme Being," *Southern Indian Studies* VIII (1956): 27–35; *The Payne-Butrick Papers*, ed. William L. Anderson, Jane L. Brown, and Anne P. Rogers (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), vols. 1–3, 7–23, 129–30.
30. Charles N. Hudson, Jr., *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 121.
31. Ibid.
32. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 1964).
33. James F. Kilpatrick, *Walk in Your Soul: Love Incantations of the Oklahoma Cherokees* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1965); Jack F. Kilpatrick and Anna G. Kilpatrick, *Friends of Thunder: Folktales of the Oklahoma Cherokees* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1964); Kilpatrick and Kilpatrick, *Run Toward the Nightland*.
34. Personal communication, 2010, 2011.
35. Mooney, "Myths of the Cherokees," 98.
36. Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 25.
37. See *The Payne-Butrick Papers*, vol. 1, 234, vol. 2, 97; Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 84.
38. Raymond D. Fogelson, "On the 'Petticoat Government' of the Eighteenth-Century Cherokee," in *Personality and the Cultural Construction of Society*, ed. David K. Jordan and Marc J. Swartz (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990), 173.
39. Fogelson, "On the 'Petticoat Government,'" 174.
40. James Adair, *The History of the American Indians, 1775*, rptd. as *Adair's History of the American Indians*, ed. Samuel Cole Williams (Johnson City, TN: Watauga Press, 1930), 124, 125.

41. William H. Gilbert, Jr., *The Eastern Cherokees*, Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 133, Anthropological Papers, no. 23, 196–413 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1943), rptd. as *The Eastern Cherokees* (New York: AMS Press, 1978); page citations refer to the reprint edition, 212.
42. James Mooney, “Myths of the Cherokees,” *Journal of the American Folklore* 1, no. 2 (1888): 97–108, 98; Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee: Nineteenth Annual Report*, 319–20; Frank G. Speck and Leonard Broom, in collaboration with Will West Long, *Cherokee Dance and Drama* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1983 [1951], 13–16; Jenny James, “The Sacred Feminine in Cherokee Culture: Healing and Identity,” ed. Lisa J. Lefler (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009), 113–14.
43. Teuton, *Cherokee Stories of the Turtle Island Liars’ Club*, 105. Hastings Shade discusses the seven levels of heaven; see Hastings Shade, *Myths, Legends, and Old Sayings* (self-published, 1994).
44. John Loftin, *The Big Picture: A Short World History of Religions* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2000).
45. Speck, et al., *Cherokee Dance and Drama*, 20.
46. Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 18.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 18.
50. Sharlotte Neely, *This Land Was Theirs: A Study of North American Indians*, 5th ed., ed. Wendell Oswalt and Sharlotte Neely (New York: McGraw Hill, 1995), 439.
51. Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History of Meaning in Religion* (University of Chicago Press, 1969), 86–87; John D. Loftin, *Religion and Hopi Life*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 141.