

The Cherokees

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Cherokees] received us with great kindness. . . . And After them, we found the Falls of Niagra the most interesting object of our journey."³⁴

The customs—especially concerning marriage—of eighteenth-century Cherokees have long been both incomprehensible and intriguing to historians. As described by Adair and others, Cherokee marriage ceremonies of this period were brief and simple. The ritual merely entailed the exchange of gifts, in lieu of vows, between a bride and her groom, and lasted but half an hour. Meeting at the center of the Town House, the groom gave the bride a ham of venison and in exchange received from her an ear of corn, whereupon the wedding party danced and feasted for hours on end. The groom's gift of venison symbolized his intention to keep his household supplied with game from the hunt, and the bride's ear of corn signified her willingness to be a good Cherokee housewife.³⁵

The fact that Cherokees frequently made three marriages within one year struck eighteenth-century white men as peculiar. Adair's comment was that Cherokee women, "like the Amazons . . . divorce bed-fellows at their pleasure."³⁶ But William Fyffe seemed to approve and even envy the Cherokee husband's privilege of punishing a wife for incontinency as he saw fit.³⁷

Deploring the Cherokees' practice of admitting women to their war councils and of giving them freedom accorded women of no other red race that he had known, James Adair accused Cherokee men of living under petticoat government. Henry Timberlake, too, in his *Memoirs*, refers unenthusiastically to the Cherokee custom of permitting women chiefs (usually successors to chieftain husbands) to decide the fate of prisoners and, by the "wave of a swan's wing, deliver a wretch condemned by the council, and already tied to the stake."

³⁴ Williams, ed., *Early Travels in the Tennessee Country*, 433-38.

³⁵ Adair, *History of the American Indians*, 127; William Fyffe to Brother John, *loc. cit.*; Timberlake, *Memoirs*, 65.

³⁶ *History of the American Indians*, 146.

³⁷ William Fyffe to Brother John, *loc. cit.*

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The Cherokees' war habits were a source of interest to both Fyffe and Timberlake. Fyffe observed that when it was decided among the chiefs and headmen to strike the war trail, the "war hatchet" was sent to all the towns in the nation and to all the Cherokees' allies. Whereupon, "there's nothing heard but war songs and howlings."³⁸ To prepare for war, the warriors blacked their faces and streaked them with vermillion, and dressed their hair with feathers while the chief struck the war pole with his club and sang the war song. As recorded by Timberlake, the chief's war song began as follows:

*Where 'er the earth's enlightened by the sun,
Moon shines by night, grass grows, or waters run,
Be 't known that we are going like men, afar,
In hostile fields to wage destructive war.*³⁹

When finished with his song, the chief led his warriors to a site selected by him for the exchange of ceremonial war dress for that of actual war. Awaiting the arrival of the warriors at this site were Cherokee women who had in their possession the warriors' oldest breechcloths and blankets. The warriors, after donning these articles of apparel, delivered to the women their ceremonial clothing and, as observed by William Fyffe, then headed down the war trail "like a string of geese," with the chief in the lead.

The Cherokees' torture of war captives upon their return from these raids was a custom deplored by eighteenth-century white men. The laceration of a prisoner's flesh, the ripping off of his toe- and fingernails, and the subjection of the mangled stumps of his extremities to fire before ending his life were tortures too horrible to contemplate. However, well-read white men, recalling the Spanish Inquisition, prayed that in time the Cherokees might be delivered from this dark practice, even as the Spaniards had been.

Lieutenant Henry Timberlake, for one, was permitted to see another facet of Cherokee life that presumably diverted his mind from

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Memoirs*, 56f.

their heinous torture of captives. The following account by Timberlake of the Cherokees' treatment of their own indigent members contrasts oddly with Cherokee cruelty:

When any [of their people] are hungry, as they term it, or in distress, orders are issued out by the headmen for a war-dance, at which all the fighting men and warriors assemble; but here, contrary to all their other dances, one only dances at a time, who, after hopping and capering for near a minute, with a tommahawke in his hand, gives a small [w]hoop, at which signal the music stops till he relates the manner of taking his first scalp, and concludes his narration, by throwing on a large skin spread for that purpose, a string of wampum, piece of plate, wire, paint, lead, or anything he can conveniently spare; after which the music strikes up, and he proceeds in the same manner through all his warlike actions; then another takes his place, and the ceremony lasts till all the warriors and fighting men have related their exploits. The stock thus raised, after paying the musicians, is divided among the poor.⁴⁰

But obviously the Cherokees' unique method of helping their weak and indigent was not inspired by religion. White men among them reported that eighteenth-century Cherokees had no formal religion to guide their actions. William Fyffe's comment was:

Some of them have a confused notion of good and evil spirits but seem more attentive to the latter, than to apply to the former. They're strongly affected with dreams & run to their conjurers for an explanation, they likewise depend on their conjurers to foretell to them what success they'll have in Hunting & all their concerns. They [the conjurers] also act as their physicians using charms & conjuration tho' they have a universal Remedy which they use for all Disorders which is to put the sick in a close hutt [a Cherokee hothouse] in which is placed a large stone. This is made very hot and water thrown on it till by the steam & his own sweat the patient is well soak'd & then they hurry him to the nearest river and throw him in. . . . This is the remedy for their acute Disorders, but they're said to be more skilled in the vir-

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

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tues of vegetables in the cure of Lues Venera & other chronic disorders.⁴¹

As in all matters pertaining to their life, conjurers or Adawehis held important positions in the Cherokees' government. Custom decreed that Adawehis be present at every council to prevent evil spirits from entering the Town House, the seat of government. Wearing animal or bird masks, the Adawehis also served as the chief's counselors, and by signs, portents, and ancient formulas directed his movements.

Each Cherokee town was governed by two chiefs—a White Chief for peace time and a Red Chief for wartime. The chief in power occupied an ottoman in the “holy area” or west half of the Town House. The Red Chief or war chief, when in power, sat closer to the sacred fire that burned in the center of the Town House than did the White Chief, the Red Chief being considered the more important of the two. This of course was because war, to the Cherokees, was infinitely more important and desirable than peace.

When the Cherokees were embroiled in war, their Red Chief (Danawaga-we-u-we) was reckoned the most powerful Cherokee in the town or nation, albeit his office was more uncertain and temporary than the White Chief's. The duration of the Red Chief's office depended entirely upon the vital outcome of wars, while the White Chief's merely depended on his ability to attend to inconsequential ecclesiastical and civil matters.

Custom dictated that an assemblage of war women or Pretty Women be present at every war council. And since the war women had themselves won previous honors in wars and were the mothers of warriors, they played an important role in Cherokee war councils. Seated in the “holy area,” these women sagely counseled the Red Chief on strategy, time of attack, and other weighty matters related to war.

Seated on “sophas,” or seats, in the Town House were the common Cherokees, who at councils attentively listened to the chiefs

⁴¹ William Fyffe to Brother John, *loc. cit.*

and headmen orate for hours. "Toeuhah" or "it is true" was their comment when the orator was finished.⁴²

In ancient days Cherokee Town Houses had seven sides, one for each of the seven clans. Occupants of the "sophas" or seats were clansmen, custom decreeing that members of a clan sit together at council. Consequently, children, who always belonged to the clan of the mother, sat with their mother and her clan, and their father sat with his. But by the middle of the eighteenth century the Town Houses (or at least the ones noted by Timberlake and Bartram) were rounded in shape, albeit the symbolism of seven remained.

Detailed descriptions of both the exterior and interior of Cherokee Town Houses were recorded. But—as in all descriptions of people, places, or buildings—these descriptions reflect the moods and viewpoints of the narrators and thus frequently vary. For example, to Lieutenant Henry Timberlake the exterior of the Town House at Chota, "the metropolis of the country," had the appearance of a small mountain, its top or roof being covered with earth. "It is built in the form of a sugar loaf," Timberlake wrote in his *Memoirs*, "and [is] large enough to contain 500 persons."⁴³ But Louis Philippe referred to the same Town House as being "hexagonal" and made of logs.⁴⁴

William Bartram's description of the Town House at Cowee, in the Cherokee Middle Towns, emphasized construction:

The Rotunda is constructed in the following manner: They first fix in the ground a circular range of posts or trunks of trees about six feet high, at equal distances, which are notched on top, to receive into them, from one to another a range of beams or wall plates; within this is another circular order of very large and strong pillars, about twelve feet high, notched in like manner at top to receive another range of wall plates, and within this is yet another or third range of stronger and higher pillars, but fewer in number, and standing at a greater

⁴² Adair, *History of the American Indian*, 50; Bartram, *Travels*, 233.

⁴³ Samuel Cole Williams, ed., *Lieut. Henry Timberlake's Memoirs*, 59.

⁴⁴ Williams, ed., *Early Travels in the Tennessee Country*, 433, 438.

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distance from each other; and lastly in the centre at top, these rafters are strengthened and bound together by cross beams and laths, which sustain the roof; which is a layer of bark . . . tight enough to exclude the rain, and sometimes they cast a thin superficies of earth over all.⁴⁵

Written while he was nauseated by the tobacco which he had smoked in Cherokee Town Houses at Chota and at Settico, Timberlake's account of the interior of one is somewhat prejudiced:

The Town House in which are transacted all public business and diversions . . . [is] extremely dark, having besides the door, which is so narrow that but one at a time can pass, and after much winding and turning, but one small aperture to let the smoak out, which is so ill-contrived, that most of it settles in the roof of the house. Within it has the appearance of an ancient amphitheater, the seats being raised one above another, leaving an area in the middle, in the center of which stands the fire; the seats of the head warriors are nearest it.⁴⁶

Unlike Timberlake, Bartram does not complain of either the entrance to or "smoak" within the Town House at Cowee:

There is but one large door which serves at the same time to admit light from without and the smoak to escape when the fire is kindled; but as there is but a small fire kept . . . and that fed with dry small sound wood divested of its bark, there is but little smoak; all around the inside of the building, betwixt the second range of pillars and the wall, is a range of . . . sophas . . . in theatrical order, where the assembly sit.⁴⁷

The fire alluded to by both Timberlake and Bartram corresponded to an altar in the white men's cathedrals. It was kindled atop a cone-shaped mound of earth in the center of a Town House. The history of the Cherokees' ceremonial fire was inexplicable to men like Wil-

⁴⁵ *Travels*, 232f.

⁴⁶ Williams, ed., *Lieut. Henry Timberlake's Memoirs*, 59.

⁴⁷ *Travels*, 233.