

## Westernization of the Cherokee Marriage Traditions and Distribution of Gender Roles

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### Abstract

Christian missionaries had a strong influence on Native Americans' and particularly the Cherokees' way of living, which resulted in cultural assimilation. Due to this impact and modern ways of living, the Cherokees had been in a constant state of change.

The main purpose of this article is to elaborate and understand the impact of Christian missionaries on the Cherokees lifestyle, distribution of power between the Cherokee man and woman, and the transformation from a traditional style of Cherokee marriage to more Westernized methods.

This change implies every aspect of marriage in the Cherokee community, from the use of dances, feasts, and festivals as a means of courtship to the marriage ceremony itself and interracial marriage and impact of Christianity following the massive movement of white settlers into the Cherokee territory.

**Keywords:** Gender roles, interracial marriage, marriage traditions, the Cherokee Nation, westernization

### Introduction

Before the arrival of missionaries, the Cherokees enjoyed their own unique way of life, all men and women cooperated in the working of every section, under the direction of the village leader, "women ruled the house, and their many duties included caring for it and raising children" (Mails, 1992, p. 41). The responsibilities were distributed among the Cherokee women and man, and they were expected to perform their tasks well.

Gradually, Cherokees' traditional way of life began to disappear and it became more Christianized, with the influence of Christianity on the Cherokee Nation, most of the marriage traditions were lost. Due to the fact that marriages were not as legally binding among the Cherokee as they were among the white people, any documentation of marriage and family life were difficult to record (Hicks, 2006).

Practically, the Cherokees enjoyed much sexual freedom making divorce rates very low. However, despite the low divorce rates, separation among the marriage partners was common. It was presumed that an individual could have many lovers. According to Hill, the practice of polygamy was familiar within their community, "some took partners for love and life, others changed marriage partners with ease and frequency, and none suffered punishment for divorce or adultery" (Hill, 1997, p. 28). The Cherokees realized that, according to Christian beliefs, this was not an acceptable practice. This renovation of marriage rituals was just one example of change among the Cherokees with the introduction of

Christianity. Today, a typical Cherokee family would resemble a typical "white" family with little variation (Hicks, 2006).

### Cherokee Marriage Traditions before Western Colonization

Before the Cherokees' cultural assimilation, their marriage traditions were unique to their society. There were existed many regulations concerning marriage, but once inside the bonds of marriage, the participants experienced much freedom. Distribution of responsibilities between men and women was essential to the formation of a proper family.

A social structure known as the seven clans possessed the right to decide who could and could not marry (besides many other things). The clans were composed of the Blue, Long Hair, Bird, Paint, Deer, Wild Potato, and Wolf, these clans were important in the functioning of the Cherokee society. French and Hornbuckle emphasize that the clan structure defined the Cherokees together as a people. This structure was essential for providing their identity and regulating marriages and mobility as well (French & Hornbuckle, 1981).

There were many rules and regulations regarding the marriage of the Cherokees. As Owen states, the most important regulation determined by the clan system was

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that, "children belonging to the same clan must never, under penalty of death, intermarry" (Owen, 2005, p. 49). Everyone from the same clan was considered to be brothers and sisters. Moreover, young people were discouraged from marrying into their father's clan as well. The most power within the clans was occupied by the female representative of traditional Cherokee society. As Reed points out, clan affiliation was inherited through the mother's line, clan members (individuals) were encouraged to marry into either the maternal grandfather's clan or paternal grandfather's clan. (Reed, 1993). Until the implementation of more Christianized attitudes and ideas, the role of clan system in marriage was remained a tradition.

Concerning the timing of marriage, Cherokee females often had the most rules to follow. Due to the marriage of Cherokee women at a young age, it was important to be prepared for their future. Females often married as early as their thirteenth birthdays, of course, if they already had a love interest. Hicks describes, "once a young woman was about to go through her first menstrual period, she was immediately separated from her family. She was sent to a distant location where she remained for seven days. At the end of that week, she was required to wash herself and her clothing. Anything else she had come into contact with during this time also needed to be washed. She was then allowed to return to her family and was considered ready for marriage and its responsibilities" (Hicks, 2006, p. 8).

Throughout the year, there were organized many social events which provided a good opportunity for different clan members to come together and become acquainted. Dances, festivals, and feasts were the most popular social events among the Cherokee people. All these annual celebrations allowed them to meet a mate (Hicks, 2006).

One of the highest traditions was the marriage ceremony itself. As it was discussed before, representatives of the Cherokee community often married quite young. The age of consent in marriage was 15 for girls and 17 for boys. However, frequently young Cherokees married earlier than these ages (Perdue, 1984).

Marriage ceremony symbolized the meaning of the society and the roles which the participants played. As Perdue describes, marriage ceremony of an early nineteenth century embodied the centrality of task to the construction of gender (Perdue, 1984).

Both the man and the woman had an equal part in the ceremony, when all the friends were gathered around, the groom presented a gift of meat to the bride, this gesture symbolized his manhood and his ability to take care of her. The bride was used to respond by giving her groom an ear of corn, representing Selu, the mother of corn, or a pot containing food she had cooked for him. This represented her ability to take care of her husband. Then the couple would tie their blankets together, literally 'tying the knot' (Hicks, 2006, p. 11).

While discussing the issue of Cherokee marriage traditions, Worcester highlights the topic of polygamy often faced by the Cherokee people, especially after the

arrival of white missionaries. In 1829 article, following an interview with a Cherokee elder, Worcester points out how he heard that polygamy was unknown among the Cherokees, till it was introduced by white residents, hence, Worcester inquired of the old man, who told him that such a custom formerly existed, but was not frequent (Worcester, 1968).

Worcester decided to study this issue in details, and in 1831 he found out that polygamy was becoming rare, it was forbidden by law, however, due to the fact that the law was not annexed with a penalty, it had much less influence than public opinion but the law.

As it appears, despite the fact the polygamy was an issue among the Cherokee Nation, it was becoming less and less common with the influence of Christian missionaries (Worcester, 1968).

Divorce or separation was quite simple process, and it was easy to access to anyone who wished it. As Hicks describes, "the female merely placed her husband's belongings outside the dwelling if she chose to divorce him, while the husband simply moved out if he chose to initiate divorce" (Hicks, 2006, p. 15).

Those who chose to divorce would not be punished for these actions. In case if the man and woman had differences with each other they would not contend but agree to separate. If a man left the home of his wife, he simply returned to his own clan until he was remarried. If children were involved, they would remain with their mother in the residence of her clan. However, if the mother desired, she had the right to give up her privileges to the father (Hicks, 2006).

### **Interracial Marriage and Impact of Christianity**

Due to the massive movement of white settlers into the Cherokee territory, interracial marriage became more common. At that time it was apparent that Cherokee men began to take an interest in white women and white men found the freedoms of the Cherokee women to be quite intriguing. It is important to note that throughout this period, marriage between Cherokee individuals and those of African descent was also common.

While it was more common to see a white man marrying a Cherokee woman, the opposite did happen. According to Mails, "many individuals both in Cherokee and white society believed that what drew the white man to the Cherokee woman was her sense of confidence and nobility" (Mails, 1992, p. 85).

However, later it appeared that existing practice would not bring positive results. The marriage between a white man and a Cherokee woman was very complicated as all clan affiliation was thrown off course. Perdue describes that, the Indian wife of a white man usually assumed the surname of her husband as did their children, but due to the fact that the children belonged to the clan of their mother, the absence of a kinship affiliation with their father's people meant little to the children and absolutely nothing to the kinship system as a whole (Perdue, 1984).

By allowing individuals freedom from the regulations of the clans, intermarriage became a source of individualism and, in some cases, alienation in Cherokee society.

Laws created by the Cherokee Nation followed the introduction of interracial marriage in Cherokee society. "Whereas most marriages between white men and Cherokee women were legitimate, some were not. While many marriages took place out of love for one another, some marriages were not legitimate. Many white men allowed greed to take over and married Cherokee women only to gain the woman's property rights" (Perdue, 1984, p. 154). There were created the Cherokee laws which intended to protect the Cherokee woman and her rights to the traditions of her people.

The intermarriage between white settlers and Cherokee people caused many problems with the clan laws. Exactly this caused the beginning of the failure of the entire clan system. Even if the system would continue to exist, it would become much altered. Although the union of a white man and Cherokee woman was the most common interracial partnership, it was possible to see a white woman marry a Cherokee man. A very good example of this was the marriage of Harriet Gold (from a prominent Congregationalist family of English descent) and Elias Boudinot (editor of the first Native American Newspaper Cherokee Phoenix) who was part Cherokee. This union was not well-accepted among the people of either side, the protest was harsh from the citizens of Connecticut town where Harriet was from. According to Wigit, "both Boudinot and his cousin, John Ridge, later married daughters of influential Cornwall (Connecticut) citizens. The knowledge of these courtships deeply divided the town. When the knowledge of Boudinot's relationship with Harriet Gold became public, Ridge's wife, his mother-in-law and Boudinot's fiancée were burned in effigy" (Wigit, 1983, p. 12). The marriage of Boudinot to Harriet Gold in 1826 was the final straw. Despite such a great resistance, the love that these two individuals shared from one another was clearly seen. While one would have imagined this relationship to be filled with strife and controversy, it was actually a union of love and devotion (Wigit, 1983).

It is important to mention the marriages between blacks and the Cherokees, which was uncommon practice, but it did rarely occur. Due to the fact that African-Americans were used as slaves in the Cherokee society as well as society as a whole, it was not acceptable to form any union between a Cherokee and an individual of African descent. Slavery was an issue that consumed Cherokee culture. Many of the Cherokee people were slave owners. Slavery was viewed the same way in Cherokee society as it was among the Southern white citizens.

Overall, we can say that in many ways interracial marriage was a blow to the traditional Cherokee society and intermarriage was not well accepted. No longer did partners enjoy the sexual freedoms in marriage that they once had with multiple individuals. Marriages now lasted longer and remained monogamous (Hicks, 2006).

## Modern Issues

With the emergence of white missionaries and integration into the Cherokee society, the Cherokee Nation experienced even more change drawing them further and further away from their early traditions. From Baptists and Methodists to Moravians and others, nearly every sect of Christianity began to force its way into Cherokee culture. Missionaries went into the villages with the hope to civilize, educate, and Christianize the Cherokee people. While one part of the Cherokees easily adopted the ways of life, others strictly fought against it. Whether culturally accepted or not, Christianity had a profound impact on the Cherokee nation. The missionaries who lived with the Cherokee were able to experience Cherokee life first-hand. What they saw, however, they did not approve of. According to Johnson, "they opposed polygamy fornication, nudity, gambling, drinking, conjuring, dancing, infanticide, witchcraft, ball play, card playing, and participation in Cherokee ceremonies such as the Green Corn ceremony. Concepts of modesty and shame about the body were strongly introduced into the culture during this time". (Johnston, 2003, p. 15). The objectives of missionaries to change the Cherokee's traditional ways, were in many ways successful. As the Christianity was introduced, the Cherokee society had to accept many new laws confirming to Christian ideas. One of the laws regulated the marriage of a white man and a Cherokee woman, it legalized marriage and prevented polygamy. New Christian ideas were beginning to flow throughout society in every way imaginable. These different methods were seen in family life as well as political life (Hicks, 2006).

Today, the Cherokee people have continued to see changes within marriage. The Cherokee Nation has not been immune to the more modern controversies that seem to be plaguing the other areas of the United States. One such controversy is gay marriage. Although homosexual partnerships were not uncommon in traditional Cherokee society, they did not usually lead to a marriage relationship.

In 2004, the Cherokee National Tribal Council passed a law banning same-sex marriage. The attorney for the Cherokee Nation Tribal Council Todd Hembree, who drafted the new law, stated that the law of the Cherokee Nation defined marriage as between man and woman, according to him, this law was important for clearing up any ambiguity, if there was any. The law also took care to clear up any misunderstandings about the Nation's existing marriage act (Nation, 2004).

## Interview with the Representatives of the Cherokee Nation

On April 22, 2016, I had an online interview with the representative of the Cherokee Nation Shawn Wright, he is Clarke American Sanders Product Line Manager at Amano Pioneer Eclipse (Sparta, North Carolina). I asked him questions concerning the distribution of

gender roles in the Cherokee community. (How are the gender roles distributed between Cherokee men and women? Who holds the leading role? Can the (power) relations between Native men and women be defined as Matriarchal or Patriarchal?).

Mr. Wright made emphasis on differences between Native and western societies. As he stated, both men and women were and in a traditional sense are still seen as equal. The clan system has almost disappeared, but there are some areas where it is still in practice. As for the kinship system, Shawn Wright stated, “you are a brother or sister to all of your mother’s family/clan and you live within their area/home. Brothers and sisters cannot marry each other. As a male to marry you move in to the area of your in-laws who have built and provided their daughter with a home” (Wright, 2016).

Woman has ownership of home and its property, this practice has always been preserved, “woman stays at home and the man leaves” (Wright, 2016). Children of the union were raised primarily by the mother’s family habits, for example, hunting and fishing were taught by the mother’s brother (his role was to provide a male child with these skills) to male children.

As Mr. Wright told me, men were used to lead the council, but “Beloved Woman”<sup>\*</sup> took part at various times as well. Accordingly, this relationship was not about the power, rather about family ties and roles. As for the marriage rituals, “Cherokee women could marry white men and there was no any taboo, as the children of that union had a clan that they belonged to. This case was not the same with males, for a Cherokee man to marry a white woman was frowned upon, as the children of this union had no family ties, they would not belong to the fathers’ clan, accordingly they were not a part of the Cherokee” (Wright, 2016).

Mr. Wright told me that this practice was challenged by his forefather Chief James Vann, who had many wives and many children, he was extremely wealthy. He was the third richest man in America and owned a southern plantation style home with imported molding and crystal. At his behest (which was quite unusual for that time) he left all his belongings to his youngest son Joe now known as Rich Joe Vann. It was a time of a cultural and political leadership crisis, “the Cherokee Tribal council stepped in and allowed all children something, my forefather’s oldest son Jesse was given a horse. His wife (wives) was to be allowed to live out all of her days in the home but they did grant Vann’s wish that his youngest son inherit the property. This was the first recorded test to the unwritten matrilineal property law and the beginning of western cultural values of the man owning and disposing of the home as he saw fit” (Wright, 2016).

Shawn Wright discussed current conditions as well and asserted that today the Cherokees live and abide by the laws of the land and that law is biased toward male dominance. “I still see parts of the old ways practiced among my friends however. Women run and pro-

vide for the home via a paying job. The man may also help support the home but the principal is the woman. Approximately 20% of the population’s full blood descendants might live in this way. The majority of gender relationships today follow the role model in place for the USA” (Wright, 2016).

Mr. Wright believes that most Native Americans hold the woman in high regard. “She is the Giver of Life – the future comes from her. I believe that in social settings Cherokees show and bestow more respect and honor upon women than I see in my non Native circles. I accept this could be my own personal prejudice but having acknowledged that I don’t think so” (Wright, 2016).

On April 30, 2016 I had another online interview with the member of the Cherokee Nation – Scott Williamson who is an IT generalist with over a decade of professional IT experience and a background in business as well.

While discussing gender roles within Native American societies, Mr. Williamson expressed his hope for a more egalitarian future. He told me that distribution of gender role varies, in some households there is an inherited male dominance, from the dominant society we see a derivation of Anglo-American/Christian tradition. “However, there are women who are family-, social-, and political leaders”, asserted Mr. Williamson. Currently, only four of the seventeen CN (Cherokee Nation) tribal council members are women (2 out of 9 in the UKB’s - United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma) along with one of the five Supreme Court Justices are women.

“In the Smith administration, the offices of the Marshal, Treasurer, and Secretary of State were held by women. But on the Cherokee Nation Youth Council, by my count from the photo online, 11 women make up the majority of the 17 total members” (Williamson, 2016).

It is important to note that, other members of the Cherokee community shared more or less identical opinion concerning the issue.

## Conclusion

The influence of white settlers had exposed differently on the Cherokee women. Some women adapted the “Civilization” program to fit their own demands and to aggrandize rather than to transform their culture; some of them embraced changes and many remained with the traditional beliefs.

Eventually, majority of the Cherokee women blended the two cultures to fit new technology and religions into the old ways of understanding the role of a woman (Perdue, 1998).

As a result of the settlement of white people into the Cherokee territory and the influence of Christian missionaries upon their lives, Cherokee community experienced many changes.

<sup>\*</sup> The title was the recognition of great honor for the Cherokee women who made a significant impact within their community or exhibited great heroism on the battlefield.



Despite accepting many changes, the Cherokees have managed to keep some of their traditions alive. They still have the option of integrating traditional Cherokee marriage rituals into the Christian ceremony which is now more commonly seen.

The marriages themselves had changed quickly. However, even with the degradation of matrilineal system, some of the Cherokee women were able to identify with their ancestors and maintain this tradition. Traditions were not difficult to maintain as long as they were taught at home.

Passing down traditions was an important aspect of life, especially among the women of the Cherokee society, "training took place in homes where girls watched female relatives make meals, baskets, pottery, beadwork, and clothing. Teaching by example, showing girls how to be mothers and sisters, daughters and wives, storytellers and traders, was a part of every relationship" (Perdue, 1984, p. 176). This was the easiest way to pass on tradition. The Cherokee people have successfully done this for many generations and continue to do so even today.

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