

"Tying the Knot": Marriage Traditions in Cherokee Society

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Abstract

Many changes have taken place throughout Cherokee society. With the influence of the white man and the introduction of Christianity into everyday life, many of the traditions of Cherokee culture were stripped away or modified to great extents. The marriage of the Cherokee people was one way these new ideas were clearly seen in society. Before Christianity came into their culture, the Cherokees enjoyed a courtship, marriage, and family life unique to their society. Following the impact of Christian missionaries, many restrictions were placed on the Cherokees. Even today, the Cherokee people face many of the changes that have resulted from these outside influences.

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Introduction

With the influence of Christian missionaries and modern ways of living, the Cherokee nation has been in a constant state of change. Among the changes that the nation has experienced is the transformation from traditional styles of Cherokee marriage to more Christianized methods. This change envelopes nearly every aspect of marriage in the Cherokee nation. From the use of dances, feasts, and festivals as a means of courtship to the marriage ceremony itself and on to family life following the ceremony, all parts of Cherokee marriage have been influenced by Christianity.

Prior to the missionary involvement in Cherokee life, the native people enjoyed their own unique way of life. According to Thomas Mails, "Under the direction of the village leader, all men and women cooperated in the working of every section. Men toiled in the fields, hunted, fished, built the houses.. .Women ruled the house, and their many duties included caring for it [and] raising children.. -⁵¹ Everyone had a job to do within the Cherokee nation, and they were expected to perform their tasks well.

While the work of the individuals was important, leisure time was of equal significance. This time however was taken very seriously. The men would often participate in ball-play games in which only males were allowed to take part. Women were chosen to sing, dance and cook for the players. Dances and feasts also occupied leisure time. William Gilbert stated, "In most of the dances both men and women participate, but only men are allowed to lead and do the singing for the dancers."² These dances also served as an important social event for courtship between young clan members.

¹ Thomas E. Mails, *The Cherokee People: The Story of the Cherokees from Earliest Origins to Contemporary Times* (Tulsa: Council Oak Books, 1992), 41.

William Harlen Gilbert, *The Eastern Cherokees* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), 257.

Following Christianity's introduction into the Cherokee nation, gender roles became reversed. Traditionally, Cherokee society was centered on the woman. As time passed, the man became the head of the household in accordance with the Christian ways of living. Even the people's traditional way of life began to disappear as their lives became more Christianized. Missionaries began to build churches and encourage Cherokee attendance. Some accepted the changes with ease; others, however, were somewhat hesitant concerning the new ways that the white man brought to them. The conventional ball games and dances were slowly fading out. It appeared that everything about Cherokee society was changing rapidly and, in some cases, quickly becoming white.

With the influence of Christianity on the Cherokee nation, many of the traditions of marriage were lost. Because marriages were not as legally binding among the Cherokees as they were among the white people, any documentation of marriage and family life were difficult to record. In fact, 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 anticipated that an individual would have many lovers. According to Sarah Hill, "Some took partners for love and life, others changed marriage partners with ease and frequency, and none suffered punishment for divorce or adultery."³ The Cherokee nation was made aware 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. **Historiography**

Thomas E. Mails is one of America's most prolific authors dealing with the history of Native Americans. In his book *The Cherokee People: The Story of the Cherokees from Earliest Origins to Contemporary Times*, Mails delivers an account of the Cherokee way of life. He provides much information concerning courtship, marriage, and family life. He even ventures into the causes of change that took place among the Cherokee people. Throughout his account of Cherokee culture, Mails covers nearly every aspect of Cherokee society spending much of his book focusing on marriage rituals. He points out that "elders who formerly were reluctant to talk are opening up to retell legends and remembered tales."⁴ Mails reveals how the old traditions and new ideas have joined together as one to create a new Cherokee society.

Theda Perdue has written several works concerning the Cherokee nation. She is a professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In her book *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1838*, she gives a full description of not only how important the role of Cherokee women was during this period but also how that role transitioned over time. Women were often overlooked in the history of the Cherokees. She believes that women's positions in Cherokee society were the most important and should not be so easily looked over. According to Purdue, "Native American women exist in the historical shadows. We know little about their lives, how historical events affected them, and the cultural changes that reshaped their world."⁵ She delves into a subject not often examined and brings to the surface many important details about women's position in Cherokee culture.

Sarah H. Hill is an independent scholar who received her Ph.D. in American studies from Emory University in Atlanta. In her book *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry*, Hill provides a concise account of the history of Cherokee women through

⁴ Mails, 341.

⁵ Theda Perdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700-1838* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 3.

the changes in their basket making. She examines the woman's role in not only the home but also in Cherokee society as a whole. "Women stood at the heart of hospitality. They grew, harvested, gathered, prepared, and served foods for guests in households they owned. Each meal and every visit reinforced the strands of relationships and responsibilities that bound Cherokees to one another. The common thread throughout was the identity and work of the women."⁶ Hill carefully explores nearly every aspect of a woman's role in marriage and in the home.

Few authors have solely examined Native American marriage traditions. Most scholars usually devote only a small section or chapter to the topic or just fail to mention the topic in any way. Those who have mentioned the subject have done so with much respect and reverence for the people being studied due to the quality of scholarship in which they are writing. The traditions of the Cherokee people have always played an important role in their society and the struggle to keep these traditions alive has not been easy. **Pre-Christian Marriage**

Prior to the introduction of Christianity, the Cherokee nation enjoyed a set of traditions unique to their society. Among these traditions was marriage. There existed many regulations concerning marriage, but once inside the bonds of marriage, the participants experienced much freedom. Both men and women had their own roles to play and each role was essential to the formation of a proper family.

The seven clans of the Cherokee society was a social structure determining, among many other things, who could and could not marry. The clans were composed of the Blue, Long Hair, Bird, Paint, Deer, Wild Potato, and Wolf which were important in the functioning of Cherokee society. According to Laurence French and Jim Hornbuckle, "The clan structure held the

⁶ Sarah H. Hill, *Weaving New Worlds: Southeastern Cherokee Women and Their Basketry* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 28.

Cherokees together as a people. It provided their identity and regulated marriages and mobility as well."⁷ The regulation of marriage proved to be the most important function of the clan system. Rules and regulations concerning the marriage of the Cherokees were numerous. The most important regulation determined by the clan system was that "children belonging to the same clan must never, under penalty of death, intermarry."⁸ Everyone from the same clan was considered to be brothers and sisters. Young people were also discouraged from marrying into their father's clan. The female of traditional Cherokee society held the most power within the clans. Marcelina Reed stated that "clan affiliation was inherited through the mother's line... Individuals... were encouraged to marry into either the maternal grandfather's clan or paternal grandfather's clan."⁹ This role of the clan system in marriage would remain a tradition for quite some time until more Christianized ideas of marriage came into play.

Cherokee females often had the most rules to follow concerning the timing of marriage. Because Cherokee women married at such a young age, it was important that they be prepared for their future. Females often married as early as their thirteenth birthdays if they already had a love interest. 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.¹⁰ Once this process had taken place, the female was considered a woman prepared for the challenging tasks of marriage.

⁷ Laurence French and Jim Hornbuckle, eds., *The Cherokee Perspective* (Boone: Appalachian Consortium Press, 1981), 7.

⁸ Narcissa Owen, *A Cherokee Woman's America: Memoirs of Narcissa Owen, 1831-1907*, ed. Karen L. Kilcup (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), 49.

⁹ Marcelina Reed, *Seven Clans of the Cherokee Society* (Cherokee: Cherokee Publications, 1993), 10.

¹⁰ Mails, 73.

Many social events took place throughout the year which allowed members of the different clans to come together and become acquainted. It was often at these events that young people from the various clans would meet for the first time. Dances, festivals, and feasts were the most popular social events among the Cherokee people. Of all the celebrations that took place annually, two seemed to provide the most opportunities for those looking for a mate. According to Carolyn Johnston, "The friendship dance was...an occasion for single people to meet and get together socially."¹¹ This was a dance in which the participants would act out the stages of courtship and intimacy. Another popular celebration was the Green Corn Ceremony. At this festival, individuals from various clans were brought together and given the opportunity to socialize. "Young people would meet, marriages were arranged and performed between consenting couples... Although it was not the only time of year a marriage could be performed, the Green Corn Festival was a popular occasion for a wedding ceremony."¹² This ceremony played an important part in courtship as well.¹³

Courtship in Cherokee society was a very formal event. There were many different methods of marriage proposals among the Cherokee people. Mails states:

When a young man wanted to marry a certain young woman, he spoke with his parents and her parents, and sometimes with a brother from each of the participating clans, whose consent was essential. When all parties agreed, a time was set for the marriage, and the priest who would officiate was notified of their wishes.¹⁴

This appeared to be the easiest of the four techniques of proposal. A second way included the young man falling in love with a girl before her change had taken place. If this happened, the man must first speak with the girl's parents. If they consented to his wishes, he was required to

¹ Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Cherokee Women in Crisis: Trail of Tears, Civil War, and Allotment, 1838-1907* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003), 15.

² "Green Corn Ceremony," Museum of the Cherokee Indian (Cherokee) 12 August 2006.

³ Ruth Y. Wetmore, "The Green Corn Ceremony of the Eastern Cherokees," *Journal of Cherokee Studies* VIII, no. 1 (1983): 53.

⁴ Mails, 73.

keep the girl supplied with venison until she had her first menstrual cycle. Throughout this period, the girl was not allowed to marry another person.¹⁵ Yet another form of courtship required that the young man contact a female relative of the girl he wished to marry who then discussed this with the girl's mother. If granted permission, the man was allowed to share the girl's bed in marriage. The fourth and last method of traditional proposal was quite complicated. Mails states that "the suitor either devoted his services for a specified time to the parents of the maiden he was courting, hunting for them or assisting in the making of their canoes, or he offered them presents he already had, which usually consisted of clothing for the bride."¹⁶ This was a sort of purchase contract. Although the male was to do the proposing and was required to receive the approval of the bride's mother, the desired women must consent to the arrangements before the marriage took place.

For those individuals who were older and unmarried, a wide range of formulas or charms were available. These formulas were used to attract a spouse and were most often used by males. Mails stated that "late marriages were.. .common, and the persons involved in these frequently used love charms and rituals provided by medicine men or women to gain the affection of the ones they desired."¹⁷ This method was usually used as a last resort. Some formulas could have quite a negative effect on the desired. According to Raymond Fogelson, "Before it is possible to gain a woman's love, she must be made unattractive to other suitors. In short, love attraction rites may be viewed as a type of black magic in which one of the objects is to bring misfortune upon another person."¹⁸ This was typically a dangerous approach to winning the heart of the beloved. James Mooney also mentions these formulas. "In all these formulas the

⁵ Ibid., 73.

⁶ Ibid., 75.

⁷ Ibid., 237.

⁸ Raymond D. Fogelson, "The Conjuror in Eastern Cherokee Society," *Journal of Cherokee Studies* V, no. 2 (1980):74.

lover renders the woman blue or disconsolate and uneasy in mind as a preliminary to fixing her thoughts upon himself."¹⁹

The marriage ceremony itself was one of highest tradition. As mentioned before, the people of the Cherokee nation often married quite young. According to William Gilbert, "The age of consent in marriage [was] 15 for girls and 17 for boys. However, marriage earlier than these ages frequently occur[ed]."²⁰ The ceremony embodied the meaning of the society and the roles which the participants played. According to Theda Perdue, "A common early-nineteenth-century marriage ceremony symbolized the centrality of task to the construction of gender."²¹

Both the man and the woman had an equal part in the ceremony:

With friends gathered around, the groom would present a gift of meat to the bride. This symbolized his manhood and his ability to take care of her. The bride would reciprocate 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.'²²

The exchange of food took the place of the exchange of rings in the Christian ceremony. There were many other important rituals within the ceremony. Leslie Gourse states that "a wedding vase was filled with a liquid [often some sort of corn drink] important to the tribe. The vase had two spigots. The groom drank from one spigot, and the bride from the other."²³ Marriages often took place in the council house which housed the leaders and representatives of the seven tribes during council meetings. Once inside, the bride and groom would be escorted by priests to opposite ends of the house. The couple would then meet in the center of the council house near the sacred fire. Representing the couple was the bride's mother and brother and the groom's

¹⁹ James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees* (Nashville: Charles Elder - Bookseller Publisher, 1972), 379.

²⁰ Gilbert, 256.

²¹ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 24.

²² Museum of the Cherokee Indian, "Green Corn Ceremony."

²³ Leslie Gourse, *Native American Courtship & Marriage* (Summertown: Native Voices, 2005), 56.

mother. The mothers' role in the ceremony signified their places as the matrilineal leaders. The attendance of the bride's brother symbolized his role as the caretaker of his sister's future children. The fathers of either family usually held little power and did not participate in the ceremony.

After the ceremony, the couple moved into the bride's home among the people of her clan. "A husband and wife... occupied buildings belonging to the wife, or rather the wife's family, and marriage did not alter a woman's right to her property."²⁴ Because Cherokee society was matrilineal, the wife usually gained the upper-hand on land ownership. If there was a separation between the couple, the man would have to leave the property belonging to his wife and return to the land belonging to his mother. The woman or her family retained ownership of their property. Despite this fact, both the man and the woman each had important roles to play within their union.

Much more is told of the woman's role in marriage than the man's role due to the fact that Cherokee society was matrilineal. A woman's household often included not only herself and her husband, but also her mother, sisters, and aunt.²⁵ The Cherokee woman ran the house and raised the children. Although women are often overlooked, they tended to hold the most power with the clans as well as their families. As Christopher Rodning stated, "Cherokee women gained status primarily as gardeners, heads of households, clan leaders, and perhaps potters and weavers."²⁶ They were the preservers of tradition. Clan membership was determined through the woman, making her a powerful individual in the Cherokee nation. She had many other duties to perform as well. According to Perdue, "In Cherokee society, home and hearth were part of a woman's domain. Whatever time she could spare from the fields was spent at the

²⁴ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 24.

²⁵ Hill, 32.

²⁶ Christopher B. Rodning, "Archaeological Perspectives on Gender and Women in Traditional Cherokee Society," *Journal of Cherokee Studies* XX (1999): 7.

homestead with other women."²⁷ She not only was the head of the household, but she was also the primary creator of those objects which have come to signify Cherokee culture, such as textiles and basketry.

The man's role was also complicated although he held much less power within the household. The man often had very little to do with the home and had limited contact with his wife and children. "The primary responsibility for discipline and instruction in the arts of hunting and warfare rested not with a child's father but with his maternal uncle."²⁸ The husband frequently felt out of place in the home belonging to his wife. It is noted that the father was "quite restricted in his activities and authority over the children."²⁹ Even though men held very little supremacy in the home, outside the home they were greatly revered. "Cherokee men gained status primarily as warriors, hunters, traders, diplomats, and stickball players."³⁰ Although the men did not control the home, property, or social status they did however have an important role by hunting and fishing to provide meat for the family.

The bond between husband and wife was not always a strong one. Each member of the couple enjoyed much freedom in the relationship. "Marriage was a partnership of equals and while there was a ceremony, there was no lifetime commitment."³¹ Henry Timberlake, who mapped the Cherokee territory in Tennessee and accompanied three prominent Cherokee leaders to London in 1762, commented on the traditions of Cherokee marriage: "I have already observed.. it is as little binding as ceremonious; for though many last till death, especially when there are children, it is common for a person to change three or four times a-year."³² This was by

²⁷ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 46.

²⁸ Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540-1866* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1979), 9.

²⁹ Gilbert, 203.

³⁰ Rodning, 6.

³¹ Museum of the Cherokee Indian

³² Henry Timberlake, *The Memoirs of Lieut. Henry Timberlake, 1756-1765* (Marietta: Continental Book Company, 1948), 89.

far not typical of the white settlers who were beginning to invade the land. Hill wrote concerning a conversation between Alexander Longe and a Cherokee priest:

When the British trader [Alexander Longe] spoke of Christian marriage uniting wife and husband as one, the priest retorted that becoming 'one flesh' with a woman meant he would be 'married to his own mother or sister.' Clans, not marriage, united Cherokees for life. "Our wives is nothing to us but mere strangers,' the priest advised, 'therefore we cannot be one flesh as you say [sic].'³³

Women as well enjoyed sexual freedom with lovers of their choice. Men were allowed to marry their lovers often giving them more than one wife, however, women were not. Although other lovers were common among the women, it was presumed that they were not to be spoken of and the man was still expected to provide for the family of his wife.

Polygamy was an issue that the Cherokee people often faced especially after the arrival of the missionaries. Samuel Austin Worcester mentions this topic in an article written in 1829 following an interview with a Cherokee elder: "I have heard it said polygamy was unknown among the Cherokees, till it was introduced by resident whites. I therefore inquired of the old man, who replied that such a custom formerly existed, but was infrequent."³⁴ In 1831, he returned to the subject mentioning that "polygamy.. .is becoming rare. It is forbidden by law, but the law being as yet without a penalty annexed, has probably much less influence than public opinion, which makes the practice highly disreputable."³⁵ Although polygamy was an issue among Cherokee society, it appears that it was becoming less and less common with the influence of Christian missionaries.

Divorce as well as separation was at easy access to anyone who wished it. "Divorce was a rather simple process. 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

³³ Hill, 30-31.

³⁴ Samuel A. Worcester, *New Echota Letters* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1968), 46.

³⁵ Worcester, 87.

divorce."³⁶ There was no punishment given to those who chose to divorce.³⁷ According to the missionaries of Brainerd Mission, if the man and woman had "differences with each other they will not contend but agree to separate."³⁸ 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.³⁹ However, if the mother desired, she had the right to give up her privileges to the father.⁴⁰ **Interracial Marriage**

As white settlers began moving into Cherokee territory, interracial marriage became more common. Cherokee men began to take an interest in white women and white men found the freedoms of the Cherokee women to be quite intriguing. Marriage between Cherokee individuals and those of African descent was also seen throughout the period. This type of marriage, however, was not as common.

While it was more common to see a white man marrying a Cherokee woman, the opposite did happen. 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.⁴¹ Many people were opposed to this type of union:

The shamans had always objected to whites marrying Cherokee women, unless the husbands came to live in the Cherokee towns and became one with the tribe and its customs.. .They did become Cherokee.. .but these whites were never pleasing to the shamans. They would not allow the wife's brother to instruct the children; as often as not they moved out of town onto land of their choice and established an independent home.⁴²

³⁶ French, 14.

³⁷ Hill, 31.

³⁸ Joyce B. Phillips and Paul Gary Phillips, *The Brainerd Journal: A Mission to the Cherokees, 1817-1832* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), 28.

³⁹ Reed, 9.

⁴⁰ Phillips, 105.

⁴¹ Mails, 85.

⁴² John Ehle, *Trail of Tears: The Rise and Fall of the Cherokee Nation* (New York: Anchor Books, 1988),

It appeared that nothing good could come out of such an accord. The marriage of a white man and a Cherokee woman was very complicated. In the process, all clan affiliation was thrown off course. According to Perdue, "The Indian wife of a white man usually assumed the surname of her husband as did their children but, since 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."⁴³ By allowing individuals freedom from the regulations of the clans, intermarriage became a source of individualism and, in some cases, alienation in Cherokee society.⁴⁴

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.⁴⁵ The Cherokee laws were created for the protection of the Cherokee woman and her rights to the traditions of her people. For example, a law passed in 1810 stated:

Resolved, That any white man who shall marry a Cherokee woman, the property of the woman so married shall not be subject to the disposal of her husband, contrary to her consent; any white man so married, and parting from his wife without just provocation, shall forfeit and pay to his wife such sum or sums as may be adjudged to her by the National Committee and Council for said breach of marriage, and be deprived of citizenship.⁴⁶

⁴³ Perdue, *Slavery and Evolution*, 51.

⁴⁴ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 83.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁶ E. Raymond Evans, ed., "Jedidiah Morse's Report to the Secretary of Wars on Cherokee Indian Affairs in 1822," *Journal of Cherokee Studies* VI, no. 2 (1981): 73.

The intermarriage of whites and Cherokees caused many problems with the clan laws.⁴⁷ This was the beginning of the failure of the entire clan system. Although 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. This was the case in the marriage of Harriet Gold and Elias Boudinot, who was part Cherokee. It was a partnership not well-accepted among the people of either side, but especially among the citizens of the Connecticut town where Harriet was from. According to Andrew 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. The marriage of Boudinot to Harriet Gold in 1826 was the final straw.⁴⁸

Yet, despite all else, the love that these two individuals shared for 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. Harriet wrote to her family:

Le[t] Harriet be remembered, though absent, I sometimes very much wish to compose one of your circle again. I do not mean that I could be placed back among you.. .but that I could sit with you as I am; with the Husband of my choice — who not only professes, but is truly worthy of my warmest affections — m[y] tjenterest love.⁴⁹

This type of correspondence continued throughout Harriet's letters as well as Elias'. Harriet refers to Elias as her "kind affectionate devoted Husband."⁵⁰ Upon the death of Harriet, Elias

⁴⁷ Reed, 11.

⁴⁸ Andrew Wigit, "Elias Boudinot, Elisha Bates and *Poor Sarah*: Frontier Protestantism and the Emergence of the First Native American Fiction," *Journal of Cherokee Studies* VIII, no. 1 (1983): 12.

⁴⁹ Harriet Gold, *To Marry an Indian: The Marriage of Harriet Gold and Elias Boudinot in Letters, 1823-1839*, ed. Theresa Strouth Gaul (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 173.

⁵⁰ Gold, 181.

writes, "To me, the loss is irreparable.. .May God be my strength and my wisdom."⁵¹ The love between this man and woman can truly be felt throughout these statements.

Though it was also not uncommon to find instances of black and Cherokee marriages, these were rare. Because African-Americans were used as slaves in Cherokee society as well as society as a whole, any union between a Cherokee and an individual of African descent was not acceptable. 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. According to Bass, "as an Indian acquired property and became influential, he emulate wht □ le afr

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. Impact of Christianity

As missionaries began to integrate into 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. Some Cherokees accepted the new ideas with open arms; some fought against the new ways. 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. "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."⁵⁵ To many Cherokees, it seemed that the missionaries had no appreciation for their traditional ways of life. It appeared that missionaries wished to change everything about the Cherokee's traditional ways and, in many ways, they succeeded.

Due to this introduction of Christianity, the Cherokee nation saw the introduction of many new laws conforming to Christian ideas. Among these was a law regulating the marriage of a white man and a Cherokee woman. "Resolved, That any white man, who shall hereafter

⁵⁵ Johnston, 40-41.

take a Cherokee woman to wife, be required to marry her legally by a minister of the Gospel, or other authorized person, after procuring a license from the National clerk for that purpose, before he shall be entitled and admitted to the privileges of citizenship."⁵⁶ This type of law was passed to legalize marriage and prevent 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.

Due to the Cherokee's protection of their traditional ways of life, the missionaries were often accused of attempting to change the politics of Cherokee culture. There were several aspects of Cherokee society that the people did not want anyone to meddle in. "It has been customary of late to charge the Missionaries with the crime of assisting the Indians, and unbecomingly interfering in political affairs.. the Cherokees will not, by any means, permit them to have any thing to do with their public affairs."⁵⁷ For the Cherokee people, it was acceptable for the missionaries to come in to share their religion, but it was intolerable to have them intrude in their governmental affairs. **A New Way of Life**

The influence of white settlers and the arrival of Christian missionaries greatly impacted the Cherokee nation throughout nearly every aspect of marriage, from courtship to family life. The idea of interracial marriage along with new freedoms within Cherokee marriages offered the people a different way of life. Despite those who fought to keep the traditions of their ancestors alive, it seemed impossible to avoid the far reaches of more modern forms of living. With the Cherokees being oppressed by the missionaries, it appeared impossible for them to resist the changes being made. Not even the family unit remained the same. The white people desired to

⁵⁶ Evans, 73.

⁵⁷ Elias Boudinot, *Cherokee Editor: The Writings of Elias Boudinot*, ed. Theda Perdue (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), 96-97.

civilize these people by introducing them to Christian ideas. They knew where to attack the Cherokee society to force the Cherokees to conform to Christianity. According to Mails, the most effective way to accomplish this task was to "punch a hole in Cherokee religion.. .erosion would set in, and in time the dam would give way. When it went, everything else of consequence in traditional life would go with it."⁵⁸ The white people were successful in their own terms. They succeeded in changing the way in which the Cherokees lived to fit their own Christian lifestyle.

One of the first areas of Cherokee life to experience a major shift was that of the clan system. As the people changed, so did the laws. "The National Council passed ninety-seven laws between 1810 and 1827 that were designed to undermine old traditions and push Cherokees toward Christianity and agrarian capitalism."⁵⁹ This was the first major step in defining the new Cherokee nation in Christian terms. The new Christian ideas were appealing to most of the Cherokee people. These people saw this as an opportunity for a new belief system and the chance to change the dynamics of the family by tearing down old traditions of polygamy and rebuilding new Christian relationships. However, the clan system lost much of its power following the establishment of intermarriage into society. "The importance of clans as regulators of marriage sanctions apparently waned in the decade before removal."⁶⁰ The clans now had very little control over who could marry and who could not which caused the clan system to be nearly forgotten.

Even courtship had changed. Gone were the days of traditional marriage proposals and in came the new white ideas of the courtship during the nineteenth century. Although it was much later than the time period being discussed, one Cherokee traditionalist remembered the

⁵⁸ Mails, 191.

⁵⁹ Johnston, 54.

⁶⁰ Hill, 97.

changes that took place in courtship customs: "I guess we went more to the girls' home. We didn't take her out as much as they do today. The parents were stricter on the girls than they are today.. .We always had to take her brother or her dad with us to the movies."⁶¹ Couples no longer prepared food for their beloved or exchanged gifts. Although courtship remained a large part of society, couples could now go out to the movies or to a restaurant as new forms of modern entertainment were being created. Young people no longer enjoyed the excitement of the Cherokee dances and festivals. With intra-clan marriage becoming more and more popular, there was no need for individuals to look any further than their own community. These new ways of life were strange, yet they spread rather rapidly throughout Cherokee society.

Marriage also began to change rapidly with the arrival of Christianized methods. Ceremonies no longer held the cultural significance they once had. Following the missionaries involvement in society, many chose to do away with the traditional ceremony. "They didn't have papers to show they were married. They just went out and got a girl and came home and lived with her just like man and wife.. .the woman had to go live with the man."⁶² However, this was not always the case. Most of the Cherokee people still held ceremonies, although they resembled the Christian ceremony most often seen today. "It is pleasing to see the natives beginning to leave their old customs of taking & leaving their wives without ceremony, & in place of this adopting the [C]hristian form of marriage."⁶³ Some Cherokee individuals continued to include the old traditions into their ceremonies.

Today, some Cherokee traditionalists still observe portions of these wedding rituals. The vows of today's ceremony reflect the Cherokee culture and belief system, but are in other ways similar to wedding ceremonies of other cultures and

⁶¹ French, 70.

⁶² French, 87.

⁶³ Phillips, 46.

denominations. Today's dress can be in a tear dress and ribbon shirt, a wedding gown, or normal attire worn at a Ceremonial Ground.⁶⁴

A couple could choose to have an elder of the Cherokee community to conduct the ceremony if they wish; however, it is still required to have the proper paperwork in order.

Family life had also changed. The husband was encouraged to be a part of the household and was now expected to be the ultimate provider for his wife and children. As Johnston stated, "The matrilineal kinship structure of the Nation was gradually shifting to a patrilineal structure."⁶⁵ There was a clear role reversal that took place during this transition from traditional to contemporary. According to Mails, "The mother's brother was no longer a power in the family, and the transmission of family names had shifted from the mother to the father."⁶⁶ One Cherokee man remembers what it was like to be a child: "When I was a kid, father was the boss of the house and children were seen and not heard and even seldom seen."⁶⁷ Indeed, family life within the Cherokee nation had experienced many changes that were both good and bad.

Cherokee women likely felt the changes of culture and society most dramatically as they began to see the power they had once held transfer to the men of the community. "Because clan membership derived from women, any weakening of the practices of clan revenge, marriage restrictions, and taboos related to clan membership meant challenges to women's power."⁶⁸ With the move to more Christian practices, the women had lost nearly all of their rights and privileges. The man not only gained a place at the head of the household, but he also obtained the property rights which the woman had once held. As the powerful Cherokee men gained the upper-hand,

⁶⁴ Cherokee Nation, "The Old Cherokee Wedding," <http://www.cherokee.org/home.aspx?section=culture&culture=culinfo&cat=/182L8mTkbo=&ID=LzhPaBJ/LCM=>.

⁶⁵ Johnston, 124.

⁶⁶ Mails, 237.

⁶⁷ French, 76-77.

⁶⁸ Johnston, 54.

the women began to sink into the shadows of history. The woman, once the sole possessor of the greatest power in the family unit, was now becoming a forgotten individual.

The Cherokee began to see many new laws overtaking their traditions. New laws were being passed everyday to aid in the civilization and Christianization of the Cherokee nation. "The council enacted a law in 1825 that forbade any Cherokee from having more than one wife at any given time."⁶⁹ So many changes had taken place within Cherokee society that life had become difficult for the Cherokee people. **Modern Issues**

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. "It is my legal opinion that our (Cherokee Nation) law defines marriage as between a man and a woman," said Todd Hembree, the attorney for the Cherokee Nation Tribal Council who drafted the new law. "This law clears up any ambiguity, if there is any."⁷⁰ The law also took care to clear up any misunderstandings about the Nation's existing marriage act. **Conclusion**

The Cherokee nation has experienced many changes as a result of the settlement of white individuals into Cherokee territory and the influence of Christian missionaries upon the lives of the Cherokee people. It was difficult for the Cherokees to resist new advances and to maintain

⁶⁹ Johnston, 55.

⁷⁰ Cherokee Nation, "Council Passes Law Clarifying Ban on Gay Marriage," <http://www.cherokee.org/NewsArchives/Archives2004/06-04-10.htm>, June 4, 2004.

their own forms of tradition with industrialization and modernization surrounding them. Despite accepting the many changes brought into the nation, the Cherokees have managed to keep some of their traditions alive. Cherokee individuals 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 matrilineal degradation rapidly taking over the nation, some of the Cherokee women were able to identify with their ancestors and maintain this tradition. "In Christian marriages, men were the heads of household, but many of the families missionaries visited appear from the records to have been matrilineal and matrilocal."⁷¹ Many Cherokee citizens were determined to maintain at least a few of the long held traditions of their people. Today, many members of the Cherokee Nation are able to trace back their original clan affiliations and the man has remained as the head of the house.

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 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."⁷² 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.

⁷¹ Perdue, *Cherokee Women*, 176.

⁷² Hill, 34.

Appendix A

Indian Love Song ⁷³

Why do I walk the white line alone,
 Playing a lover's flute? By the road I
shall fall as a crumbling stone, And shall
wait there as mute. I walk the white road to
the

 Blood-red moon, Lifting my
mourning cry, She who was lost comes here
to me soon; I have willed that I die.

Blackfoot Song

⁷³ French, 163. This poem is included to give the reader insight into a young Cherokee's inner feelings and emotions on love.

Appendix B

Cherokee Marriage Ceremony⁷⁴

A priest escorts the groom to one end of the open space in the council house.

Another priest escorts the bride to the opposite end.

The couple meet in the center of the council house, near the sacred fire.

The priest stands facing to the east — toward the door of the council house.

The groom's mother stands by the groom. She holds his gifts of venison and a blanket (sometimes leather & fur were also offered).

The bride's mother stands beside the bride. She holds the bride's gifts of corn and a blanket (sometimes corn bean bread was also offered).

The bride's brother stands beside the mother. The brother, by his presence, accepts his role in being responsible for his sister and her children.

The bride and groom wear blue blankets representing their old life and ways. The officiating priest says a prayer blessing the sacred fire and the union of the two.

As he prays he asks for a long and happy life for the couple. The bride gives the groom a red and black belt that she made herself, and he puts it on.

The mothers give the gifts to their children who exchange gifts with each other. They join together their blankets symbolizing their mutual support within the marriage.

They each drink a corn drink from a double-sided wedding vase.

They drink from east to west, then from north to south giving their blessings to all the earth. The vase is thrown down and broken to seal their wedding vows as now being united as one.

The broken fragments are returned to mother earth. A white blanket is placed around their shoulders symbolizing their union.

A wedding feast is held by the entire town. The couple walk silently and alone to their dwelling place among the clan of the bride's mother.

⁷⁴ "Cherokee Marriage Ceremony" is distilled from a variety of historical references. (Cherokee: Cherokee Publications, 1997). This poem is included to give the reader a written description of what a Cherokee marriage ceremony may have consisted of.

Appendix C

Cherokee Wedding Song⁷⁵

by Dorothy

Sullivan



⁷⁵ "Cherokee Wedding Song" by Dorothy Sullivan, Cherokee artist depicting a wedding of the early 1800s (1994). This image is included to give the reader an idea of what a traditional Cherokee marriage ceremony may have looked like.

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