

CHEROKEE CREATION MYTH

The Story of Corn and Medicine

The earth began as nothing but water and darkness, and all the animals were in Galúnlati, above the stone vault that makes up the sky. Eventually Galúnlati became so crowded that the animals needed more room, and they wanted to move down to earth. Not knowing what was below the water, they sent down the Water-beetle to explore. Water-beetle dove below the water and eventually came back with some mud from below. That mud grew and grew, and finally it became the island that we call earth. This island of earth is suspended at its four corners from ropes that hang down from the sky, and legend has it that some day the ropes will break and the earth will sink back into the water.

Because it grew from mud, the new earth was very soft. Many of the birds flew down to explore the new land, but it was too wet for them to stay. Finally Buzzard flew down, hoping it was dry, but the earth was still wet. Buzzard searched and searched, especially in the Cherokee country, and finally he became so tired that his wings flapped against the ground. His wings dug valleys where they hit the ground and turned up mountains where they pulled away, leaving the rugged country of the Cherokee.

Eventually the earth was dry and the animals moved down. There still was no light, however, and so the animals set the sun passing from east to west just over their heads. With the sun so close, many of the animals were burned, giving the red crawfish its crimson color. The animals raised the sun again and again, until it was high enough that all could survive.

When the plants and animals first came to earth, they were told to stay awake for seven nights, as in the Cherokee medicine ceremony. The animals all stayed awake the first night, and many stayed awake the next few nights, but only the owl and the panther and a couple of others stayed awake all seven nights. They were given the ability to see at night and so to hunt at night when the others are asleep. The same thing happened among the trees, and only the cedar, pine, spruce, holly and laurel stayed awake all seven nights, which is why they can stay green all year when the others lose their leaves.

Humans came after the animals. At first they multiplied rapidly, and the first woman give birth every seven days. Eventually there were so many of them that it seemed they might not all survive, and since then to this day each woman has been able to have just one child each year. Among these early people were a man and a woman name Kanáti and Selu, whose names meant "The Lucky Hunter" and "Corn," respectively. Kanáti would go hunting and invariably return with game, which Selu would prepare by the stream near their home. She also would always return home with baskets of corn, which she would pound to make meal for bread.

Kanáti and Selu had a little boy, and he would play by the stream. Eventually they realized that he was playing with another little boy who had arisen from the blood of the game washed by the stream. With their son's help they caught the other boy, and eventually he lived with them like he was their own son, although he was called "the Wild Boy."

Kanáti brought home game whenever he went hunting, and one day the two boys decided to follow him. They followed him into the mountains until he came to a large rock, which he pulled aside to reveal a cave from which a buck emerged. Kanáti shot the buck and, after covering the cave, he headed home. The boys got home before him and didn't reveal what they had learned, but a few days later they returned to the rock. With a struggle they pulled it aside and had great fun watching the deer come out of the cave. They lost track of what they were doing, however, and soon all sorts of game animals - rabbit and turkeys and partridges and buffalo and all - escaped from the cave. Kanáti saw all these animals coming down the mountain and knew what the boys must have done, and he went up the mountain after them. He opened four jars in the cave, and from them came fleas and lice and gnats and bedbugs that attacked the boys. He sent them home, hoping he could find some of the dispersed game for the supper. Thus it is that people must now hunt for game.

The boys went home, and Selu told them there would be no meat for dinner. However, she went to the storehouse for food, and told the boys to wait while she did so. They followed her instead to the storehouse and watched her go inside. She put down her basket and then rubbed her stomach, and the basket was partly full with corn. Then she rubbed her sides, and it was full to the top with beans. Watching through a crack in the storehouse wall, the boys saw all this. Selu knew that they had seen her, but she went ahead and fixed them a last meal. Then she and Kanáti explained that, because their secrets were revealed, they would die, and with them would end the easy life they had known. However, Selu told them to drag her body seven times around a circle in front of their house, and then to drag her seven times over the soil inside the circle, and if they stayed up all night to watch, in the morning they would have a crop of corn. The boys, however, only cleared a few spots and they only dragged her body over it twice, which is why corn only grows in certain places on the earth. They did sit up all night, though, and in the morning the corn was grown, and still it is grown today, although now it takes half a year.

In these early days, the plants, the animals, and the people all lived together as friends. As the people multiplied, however, the animals had less room to roam, and they were either slaughtered for food or trampled under the humans' feet. Finally the animals held a council to discuss what to do. The bears experimented with using bows and arrows to fight back, but they concluded that they would have to cut off their claws to use the bows. The deer held a council and decided to send rheumatism to any hunter who killed a deer without asking its pardon for having done so. When a deer is shot by a hunter, the fleet and silent Little Deer, leader of the deer, runs to the blood-stained spot to ask the spirit of the killed deer if the hunter prayed for pardon for his affront. If the answer is no, Little Deer follows the trail of blood and inflicts the hunter with rheumatism so that he is crippled.

The fish and reptiles likewise met, and resolved that the people would suffer from dreams in which snakes twined about them. The birds and smaller animals and insects all met too, and talked long into the night about how they had suffered from the humans. Eventually they created all sorts of new diseases to afflict humans, which have since become a scourge to the animals' oppressors.

After this the plants met, and they resolved that something must be done to counteract what the animals had done. That is why so many trees and shrubs and herbs, and even the mosses, provide remedies for diseases. It was thus that medicine first came into the world, to counteract the revenge of the animals.