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Water and Cherokee Healing

Lisa J. Lefler

There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.
—Wendell Berry, *Given*

Introduction

One of the many rewards of working with indigenous populations is getting to experience a cultural and historical worldview much different from my own. Even though I grew up near many Cherokee people in our rural, mountainous, biologically diverse region, my language and European heritage did not allow me the same understanding of the world around me. There is much of my culture and history that is shared with that of the Cherokee people, but the bottom line is that I grew up white and an English speaker. My Cherokee friends and peers had a great advantage over me in understanding this beautiful, rich, and ecologically unique place, with thousands of years of experience and adaptation to inform them. Their language and culture allowed them the knowledge of being a part *of* that place, not just *from* that place. In this chapter, I hope that we find a common ground where those of us from the colonizing dominant culture will reflect on one of our most common natural elements—water—and will take away a more “Native science” or indigenous perspective of that which is a part of us and part of everything around us. As physicist David Bohm wrote, “The generic thought processes of humanity incline toward perceiving the world in a fragmentary way, breaking things up which are not really separate (1996, xvi-xvii).”

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Recognizing the importance of water to all people in all places, the United Nations declared the beginning of The Decade of Water in 2005. Water is vital and many have said even more important than food. Experts say that about three days is the maximum one can survive without it (Binns 2012). Accessible, potable, and sufficient water is of increasing concern worldwide as issues of climate change, development, and population growth continue to be important. Water has always been understood as an element as essential to survival as air. Even more intimately, at the atomic level we are water. The Colorado Water Information website states that “the human body is more than 60 percent water. Blood is 92 percent water, the brain and muscles are 75 percent water, and bones are about 22 percent water” (2013). The Free Drinking Water website notes that “the human brain is made up of 95 percent water, blood is 82 percent and lungs 90 percent” (2013). We know how important water is for our survival, but this paper will look at how water is part of us physically, culturally, and even spiritually. Water not only represents life and sustainability of life, but is an element universally symbolizing renewal and cleansing. The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians has long understood water’s importance and has provided many mechanisms culturally to exemplify water’s sacredness.

For the mountains of Southern Appalachia, water is the essence of life for *all* that live there. A temperate rain forest, this region relies on vast systems of branches, creeks, streams, and rivers that channel mountain valleys and hollows. They are places of residence for mystical creatures, which the Cherokee, who have lived in the region for more than ten thousand years, have described in their oral histories and stories.

However, only in the last two or three decades have inhabitants of this region, both Cherokee and nonnative, become increasingly concerned about the availability of water. They are concerned about water

quantity and quality and the properties culturally and historically associated with it and that water be accessible to them for both the mundane and sacred activities in which it has heretofore been used.

As a person of Appalachia, my mother reminded us often that the most sacred of places were mountaintops and where water flowed. To her, these were places to be close to God and close to the best evidence of the beauty of his creation. We would sit in streams, turning over rocks for larvae that made their houses under them. We would seek out turtles and salamanders and crawdads and dam up the creeks to play in. We would fish for food and for pleasure and would seek out the waterfalls and rivers to “be still,” and watch, and meditate. People who grew up here relied upon the land and water, not only for a living, but for much more. We relied upon the water for a familiarity of place and a reassurance that our lush, green mountains would always be here.

The Cherokee, the longest continuous inhabitants of this region, explain that their emergence into this world came from a place called Kituwah, which rests along the Tuckasegee River. It is considered *the* Mothertown and is a place of tradition and ceremony. On the Harvard University Pluralism website, Cherokee elder Tom Belt refers to it as one would the Vatican, as “the holy of holies” (2013). It is no accident that Kituwah is a river town. It is nestled in a valley where seven mountaintops can be identified surrounding her, and the river flows to and from this town, reaching out to a myriad of other Cherokee towns, carrying people and products.

The Pluralism Report from Harvard University states:

One of the most sacred aspects of the Kituwah site is its proximity to the Tuckasegee river. Early Cherokee people settled there because water has always been a very important part of the Cherokee worldview. “The water is a living breathing thing. It has life, has spirit, and we

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honor him,” Dan Taylor, a representative of the Cherokee Museum, said. He elaborated: “The Cherokee were baptists before there were any Baptists,” in reference to a ceremonial purification in which every child took part, shortly after birth. The river’s ceremonial significance was also reserved for the end of life, when people would gather there for funeral prayer, and where, according to some accounts, the priest was able to tell whether the death was caused by witchcraft. It is likely that the placement of Kituwah mound was determined by the river, because where it stands the river bends and forks. This forking was crucial for early Cherokee, who used one side of the river for bathing and ceremony, and the other for drinking. (2013)

The Cherokee homeland is a land marbled by water. The Oconaluftee River flows down the mountain some five thousand feet and meets with the Tuckasegee River. People identify where they live by names like Bunches Creek, Adams Creek, Goose Creek, Soco Creek, Fisher Branch, and farther out in tribal lands of Graham County, Snowbird Creek and Buffalo Creek. Across the mountains in Macon County, the ancient mounds of Nikwasi and Cowee are bordered by the Little Tennessee River and upriver, the Cullasaja. Other regional rivers reflect the legacy of Cherokee culture by names such as Chatooga, Cheoa, Hiawassie, Nantahala, and Nolichucky. It is no wonder, then, that water would be an element not only important but central to the belief and healing systems of the Cherokee.

Cherokee Healing Rituals

Historically, most Cherokees built their houses close to water, easily accessing water for reasons from maintaining hygiene to conducting ceremony. Most who have lived among or studied Cherokees quickly

recognize the phrase “going to water.” This ritual has been associated with traditional Cherokee practices since at least ethnographer James Mooney’s research at the turn of the twentieth century.

In “Notebook of a Cherokee Shaman,” by Cherokee anthropologists Jack Frederick and Anna Gritts Kilpatrick (1970, 105-6), rivers where Cherokees would go to water were referred to as “the long person.” Rivers were imbued with spirit, medicine, and longevity. The website of the Cherokee Nation refers to this as “the Long Man.” It states, “The river, or ‘Long Man,’ was always believed to be sacred, and the practice of going to water for purification and other ceremonies was at one time very common. Today the river or any other body of moving water, such as a creek, is considered a sacred site and going to water is still a respected practice by some Cherokees (2012).”

The Kilpatricks point out that “the ‘going to the water’ ritual may contain details and procedures that reflect the ‘personal preferences of the medicine man’ and would be precipitated by particular needs of the client” (1970, 93).

As most healing rituals of the Cherokees involve participation of the client, the ritual reflects principles of reciprocity and an exchange of communication between the medicine person and the person in need of assistance. This dynamic of partnership and the quality of relationship can bear greatly upon the outcome of their work. Unlike expectations of Western medicine to do what the doctor tells you or just take a pill and get better quickly, the Cherokee process of healing involves dual participation and expectation to heal from within and an expected length of time for healing to take place. It involves inclusion of natural resources and the spirit of those resources to make one well.

The Kilpatricks continue to discuss “going to the water” and provide a brief ritual: “The client traditionally stands at dawn at the verge of running water, facing east. The medicine man, standing

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directly behind his client, states the latter's name and clan and then in a low voice recites the text, after which the client stoops and laves his hands and face. This procedure is enacted four times. The entire ceremony is performed upon four consecutive mornings" (1970).

Again, these are rituals of process, context, and precise language use. Water is both a vehicle of medicine and of spirit. It is also part of the larger context in which medicine is administered. Depending on the purpose, where water is gathered is important. A specific place meant for a type of medicine or in a place that lies in a particular geographic spot where water is gathered can be essential. When to gather water can refer to everything from time of day to time of year or season. The reasons why, where, and when water is collected are determined by the medicine person.

Anthropologist Ray Fogelson mentions in his reference to Eastern Cherokee ceremonies, "In the fall three additional ceremonies were observed. The First Great Moon in mid-October was a medicine dance. It was believed that falling leaves infused local streams and rivers with healing power. Local community members under the supervision of a medicine man would immerse themselves in the curative and protective waters. Medicine men bathed privately to renew their strength for the following year" (2004, 349). Sometimes a specific place along a river would be designated by a sign (i.e., a petroglyph) showing where medicine water should be collected.

According to *The Payne-Butrick Papers* of the early to mid-nineteenth century, "the ground on the banks of rivers and on the shore was more holy than that back from the water. The Indians always had their houses of worship, council houses and ceremonies near water. But the ground under the water was still more sacred than that on the shore" (Anderson, Brown, and Rogers 2010, 237).

The Payne-Butrick Papers also record the importance of water in dreams. "In case someone in a family is sick, and some other member

in the family dreams of a stream of low, clear water, the one sick is sure to recover, but if the stream is rising and full, either the sick person or someone else is soon to be very sick.” The papers also note, “To dream of seeing water rising round a house is a sign of sickness, but if it falls away without running into the house none will die; but if some of the water runs in, one or more will soon die” (Anderson, Brown, and Rogers 2010, 1-3:238-39).

Several early ethnographers write of water ceremonies conducted for a variety of reasons that may not directly involve one’s health, such as ensuring a good hunt, catching fish, or even catching a woman. For example, *The Payne-Butrick Papers* state, “During a hunting expedition all hunters must bathe, plunging seven times every new moon (Nutsawi)” (Anderson, Brown, and Rogers 2010, 1-3, 234-35). The papers go on to record medicines that must be applied and drunk, sweat houses used, plunging into the water, and times of morning and evening when these events take place.

Moravian Records

According to the Moravians during their interactions with Cherokees at Springplace Mission, they observed that “many Cherokees and other Native peoples clung to the traditional ways of traveling the waterways. The Conasauga River and its extensive tributary system supported heavy canoe travel, and many Cherokees came to the Springplace Mission in Canoes. Almost all Cherokee visitors lived in riverine communities and their historical waterway arteries provided the means for communication. The Cherokee landscape teemed with traces of artifacts of bygone peoples that had paddled the same streams centuries ago” (McClinton 2007, 1:24).

In their record, they also mention, “The Cherokees used the nearby limestone springs from the Conasauga River for purification rites before and after the ball play” (McClinton 2007, 1:24). This

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purification rite continues today and is discussed in more detail in Raymond D. Fogelson's dissertation on Cherokee stickball (1962).

Water was to be understood and treated properly as part of the world order. McClinton explains in her work with the Moravian records, "This World," where the Cherokees lived, existed somewhere "between perfect order and complete chaos." Order and predictability reigned in the "Upper World," and disorder and change characterized the "Under World." The Cherokees tried to keep things associated with opposing sections of the cosmic order separate to avoid dire consequences. For example, the Cherokees used dirt to put out fires, not water. Dirt was from This World, fire was from the Upper World, and water was from the Under World. To mix Upper World and Under World—fire and water—meant pollution, and pollution meant chaos; consequently This World had to mediate by providing dirt to extinguish fire." (McClinton 2007, 1:27)

"The Cherokees' categorization of the cosmos and their desire to keep their classifications pure produced an elaborate ritual and ceremonial system. The Cherokees valued order and believed things should stay in their place; therefore, they attached special meanings to anomalies because these occurred along the interstices of their categorical systems. Substances that belonged inside the body but were expelled received particular attention, and thus breath, blood, and saliva possessed mystical properties that healed or induced death" (McClinton 2007, 1:27).

Other intersections of this and the otherworld can occur at "portals." These are openings that allow one to stand at the cusp of the otherworld, usually *not* something recommended or desired. One such caution will come from elders who advise not to stand or go behind waterfalls as these are considered areas of such portals. There are also portals in rivers and streams, as Cherokee scholar Brett Riggs and Cherokee cultural resource officer T. J. Holland have

shared by personal correspondence (2013). The spirit world of water reflected in many petroglyphs along rivers and streams throughout Cherokee country depicts water beings as important cultural icons with meaning and value within Cherokee cosmology, their legacy etched in stone.

The importance of these entities and locations live on in ritual. In Ray Fogelson's article on Cherokee Medico-Magical Beliefs, he speaks to the issues of how those Cherokees who have been influenced or converted to Christianity consider water ceremony and symbolism.

According to one informant: "When I conjure, I go by the word of God . . . In ceremonies, I use the name of the Lord. When somebody's sick, you take him to the creek, wash his face by dipping with your hand, and wet his breast by the heart. It's like the spirit gives strength, like Baptism. He can feel it. If somebody's lost, it's up to the Creator to point the way. Sort of like prayer. If it wasn't in the power of the Creator, you couldn't make anything move. . . ." Here the ancient Cherokee rite of "going to the water" is neatly reconciled with Christianity. (1961, 220)

Ray's colleague, Cherokee anthropologist Robert K. Thomas, explained Cherokee values and worldview in his article of 1958:

In a nutshell, the Cherokee world is an ordered system. The system has parts and there are reciprocal obligations between the parts. Cherokees are a "part" and have these kinds of obligations. They have an obligation to maintain harmonious interpersonal relations and if this is done, the system works and everyone has the good life or, just another way, the supernatural is obligated to do its part. . . . This system works in relation between each man and

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the universe. Each person's "good life" gets some kind of reward. This theory is the basis of an old Cherokee medical practice. Sickness was brought about because the individual had come into conflict with something in the human, animal, or supernatural world. Then disease is brought by a person working against you, an animal ghost that you have offended or some supernatural force because a taboo has been broken. The cure is brought about by using some technique from the Cherokee store of "knowledge" to combat the sickness. Cherokee medicine can also be used positively to keep interpersonal relations harmonious and to bring one "luck." (22)

In the last several years, I have had the privilege of working with many speakers, women, and elders who are working to revitalize not only language but also ritual and protocols that were in place for the health of their women and children. In these discussions, I am reminded of the connection between our voice, attitudes, energy, and perspectives of our place in this world to health and well-being.

In talking about the importance of finding a place to be calm and thoughtful, an elder in the Snowbird community shared, "One of our enrolled members had Lupus and when she felt really bad, she would go to a rock in the river where she would sit. It calmed her and made her feel better." Another woman said, "There are places along Snowbird Creek where there are trees that sit along the creek bank and those are good places to sit and 'feel better.'"

Western science has not completely ignored the health benefits of providing patients the ability to be close to nature as part of recovery. It has just taken many years of empirical evidence and categorization of types and factors in using landscape therapeutically to catch up with indigenous knowledge about the healing power of nature. Even Florence Nightingale wrote in her *Notes on Nursing* (1860) that the

accessibility of patients to see and connect with the beauty and wonders of nature were cathartic. She recommended placing patients within eyeshot of flowers or natural beauty to aid in their recovery. Studies since then have encouraging results in what is now called “landscape therapy.” For more thorough references see Shan Jiang’s article “Therapeutic Landscapes and Healing Gardens” (2014).

Related to these discussions, I asked Tom Belt, a friend and colleague who works with the Cherokee language program and elders, about his understanding of “getting well” and whether there is a connection to place. He replied, “We are related to all things as all things are related to each other. These are very real connections. Change of cycles, moon, and other natural elements were all things that needed to be noticed, just as human existence also is looked at in a cyclic way. We all change physically, emotionally, and spiritually. There is an ‘order’ to things and things happen in ways they are supposed to that we can’t tamper with.” He continued, “We were asked to drink water with medicines (or teas) in the appropriate seasons for a reason. They had value and were there to help us maintain our health. It reminded us that we are a part of the natural world, a part of that cyclical and changing dynamic.”

Gregory Cajete, a leader of the “Native science” movement explains, “We cannot help but participate with the world. Whether we acknowledge and are creatively open to the perceptions that will result, or remain oblivious to its influence and creative possibilities toward deeper understanding, is our decision. This is the perpetual trap of Western science and the perpetual dilemma of Western society: all humans are in constant interaction with the physical reality. Western science and society perpetuate the illusion of ‘objective’ detachment and psychological disassociation.” He further notes, “Native science continually relates to and speaks of the world as full of *active* entities with which people engage. Native languages are

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verb based, and the words that describe the world emerge directly from actively perceived experience. In a sense language ‘choreographs’ and/or facilitates the continual orientation of Native thought and perception toward active participation, active imagination, and active engagement with all that makes up the natural reality” (2000, 26-27). He observes, “This active perpetual engagement with the animate world was termed the ‘participation mystique’ by French anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl to describe the “animistic logic of Indigenous, oral peoples for whom ostensibly ‘inanimate’ objects like stones or mountains are thought to be alive, and from whom certain names, spoken out loud, may be felt to influence the things or beings that they name, for whom particular plants, particular animals, particular places, persons, and powers may all be felt to ‘participate’ in one another’s existence, influencing each other and being influenced in return” (Cajete 2000, 26-27).

Unfortunately, Western science devalues or discredits this view by often using pejorative terms such as *primitive*, *mythological*, or *ancestor worship* to describe these beliefs about animism and our dynamic relationship with the world around us. Johnson and Murton (2007) write, “Western people have sought to remove themselves from nature and the ‘savage’ non-European masses.” They see indigenous voices being much needed in “re/placement . . . within constructions of nature and seek to begin healing the disenchantment caused through the rupture between culture and nature in Western science.” As we experience more devastation and pollution of natural resources, more corporate takeover of human rights to water, clean air, and land, indigenous peoples are providing us with ancient knowledge systems that call for a greater understanding of how we *all* are connected to each other and we all need to examine our “localness” to what is available around us. We have displaced that local and indigenous knowledge from the reductionist, Western

scientific way of seeing the world, and many are now realizing just how critical that is to knowing how to balance, heal, and preserve that which sustains us. This Native science movement is germinating throughout Indian country, but also through those Western-trained scientific disciplines that see the urgency in utilizing these ancient indigenous epistemologies to create a better relationship with the natural world, in such disciplines as environmental health, public health, anthropology, and physics.

One Cherokee elder said, “We have been here for more than 12,000 years observing, measuring, and replicating how we interact with our environment. When we conduct ritual and ceremony, we are using our science to heal us, to provide us with *tohi*’ and to take responsibility for our place in this world” (T. B., Cherokee, 2003, pers. comm.). *Tohi*’, a Cherokee concept for well-being has multifaceted definitions relating to health and balance. Belt and Altman (2009) provide an excellent discussion of *tohi*’ with examples of how this concept reflects our relationship in the natural world. In a broader discussion of Native science, Dawn Martin-Hill situates Native understanding of the natural world, the cosmos, and how humans fit into these systems as “knowledge [that] is spiritually based and ecologically derived” (2008, 10). She cites Gregory Cajete’s work regarding indigenous epistemologies and reflects on his understanding of how spiritual laws govern the natural world and humans’ interrelated existence. She says, “He explores how ethnosience reflects the uniqueness of place and is thus inherently tied to land and expressed through language and cultural practice,” and we would include in that, tied to land and water (Martin-Hill 2008, 9).

Ceremonies and ritual, particularly those using water, are tremendously important. As mentioned previously, elders believe that water carries spirit. The “distinguished physician Deepak Chopra echoes the awe of the paradoxes of spirit: “The spirit is a real force. It’s as real

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as gravity, it's as real as time. It's equally abstract, equally as incomprehensible and mysterious and difficult to grasp conceptually" (Hammerschlag and Silverman 1997, 9). Dr. Carl Hammerschlag, a former Indian Health Service psychiatrist says, "We believe that true healing requires the participation of one's spiritual self. We believe that stories and ceremonies are the surest ways of touching the human spirit and promoting healing. . . . Science has begun to notice something that healers have always known: Feeling connected to people and things outside yourself helps to keep you healthy and assists you when you're ill" (Hammerschlag and Silverman 1997, 15).

An interesting study by Masaru Emoto has come under scrutiny by some in the Western scientific community. His studies exemplify some of the concepts expressed by elders regarding water, spirit, and the interrelatedness of water with us and all other things. In his book *The True Power of Water* (2003), he set out to record that "water changes in quality according to the information it takes in." Being the first to ever photograph water crystals in 1994, Emoto began to research the Japanese concept of *hado*, water given good energy. He says that since the human body is 70 percent water, we have a connection to water and an essence related to water that most don't fully understand:

Water is sensitive to a subtle form of energy called *hado*. It is this form of energy that affects the quality of water and the shape in which water crystals form. All existing things have vibrations, or *hado*. This energy is either positive or negative and is easily transmitted to other existing things. The thought "you fool" carries its own *hado*, which the water absorbs and displays as deformed crystals when frozen. On the other hand, when water is exposed to positive thoughts, beautiful crystals are formed that reflect positive *hado*. *Hado* is integrally woven into

the implications of water's response to our positive or negative energy. (21)

Emoto goes on to examine the shape and nature of water as it is exposed not only to human energy but also to toxins and to explore other contexts of natural water that has been interfered with. His water crystal photographs are striking and convincing.

David Bohm, world renowned physicist, worked with native elders in the last few decades of his life and found that much of Native science was completely in line with his understanding of modern physics. Not only that, but his work with natives such as Blackfoot elder Leroy Little Bear, furthered his own research. For example, his theory of implicate or enfolded order has been understood as part of constructs from his experience with Native ceremony and worldview. "Bohm suggested that, in its deepest essence, reality, or 'that which is,' is not a collection of material objects in interaction but a process or a movement of the whole. The stable forms we see around us are not primary in themselves but only the temporary unfolding of the underlying implicate order. To take rocks, trees, plants, or stars as the primary reality would be like assuming that the vortices in a river exist in their own right and are totally independent of the river itself" (Peat 2002, 140).

David Peat, student of Bohm and Little Bear and author of *Blackfoot Physics* (2002), discusses the questions regarding the building blocks of water, molecules of hydrogen and oxygen, and the fact that how they are arranged together is not fully understood. Instead, he explains that their attraction or bond, is one that can involve being "written into." He goes on to say that "the more we think of the human body, not as a machine, or a set of biological reactions, but as the physical manifestation of fields of meaning and processes of information, the more we can be open to the presence of subtle levels of energy, matter, and spirit within healing" (139).

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We can hopefully begin to take much longer measure of the Native science that Cherokee and other indigenous peoples hold true. In doing so, we may look upon our most sacred resources, such as water, more seriously and realize its quality and access is critical for everyone, physically, culturally, and spiritually.

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