

ABORIGINAL TO THE CAMERA

At what state did you separate yourself from your "Great Mother"?

Change?

Survival?

"Someone is going to get to go; Ahh! Yes.. You are here" and get to love you and get to hug you!"

“Long Man” or “Long Person” for a river. We tend to do this with the idea that Indians had some “primitive” idea of the river as a god of some kind. The fact is, the name and idea of a “Long Man” only occurred in some Indian cultures, in specific contexts.

Cherokee Indians do have a name for the conscious spirit of a river or stream, whose voice is said to speak in the waterfalls and rapids. Such a spirit is called **Bᵀ EᵀᵅW (yvwī gvnaḥita)**, a long man or long person. In a 1900 report, ethnographer **James Mooney** referred to this being as a “river god,” but that seems to be a lazy and inaccurate comparison. I’ve found no evidence that Cherokees worshipped or sacrificed to these beings. Rather, they believed (and I suppose still believe) that a river has a consciousness, the wisdom of great age, and a capacity to teach lessons to receptive humans.

Mooney describes a ritual designed to improve the character of young children. A Cherokee parent would take a plant having small seed cases that stick to clothes — now commonly called “**hitchhikers**” — and mash some of it to a pulp. This was mixed in a small bowl with water taken from a waterfall, a place where the Long Man was always speaking. The “hitchhiker” plant was expected to give the child a more retentive memory and a steadier temper. The river water would also aid the child’s memory and intellect, because a river can “seize and hold anything cast upon its surface.” What’s more, because the river water came from a waterfall, the child might be able to hear and retain valuable lessons that only a Long Man can teach.

1

It would be absurd, of course, to talk of fishing or swimming in the Long Man. The idea of a conscious river spirit applied to ritual contexts. For everyday use there is the everyday word (**egwani**), “river.”

2

Even within a ritual context, talking of a Long Man would probably not make sense outside of the Cherokee culture — or it would make the wrong kind of sense. For instance, the Cherokees shared many ideas and beliefs with their **Creek** neighbors, but there is no evidence that they shared the idea of a river spirit called Long Man. On the contrary: a literal translation of **Cherokee (yvwī gvnaḥita)** into **Muskogee** (the principal Creek language) gives a term with a very different meaning. In Muskogee, a “long man” is **isti japko** ;Spelled; (**este capko**) and it means “giant.”

So one could certainly tell tales of a “Long Man” in Creek culture. But instead of a wise old river spirit, these tales would refer to a frightening mythic giant. Just another example of the overlooked variety of cultures that we hide under the blanket term “**Native American.**”

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