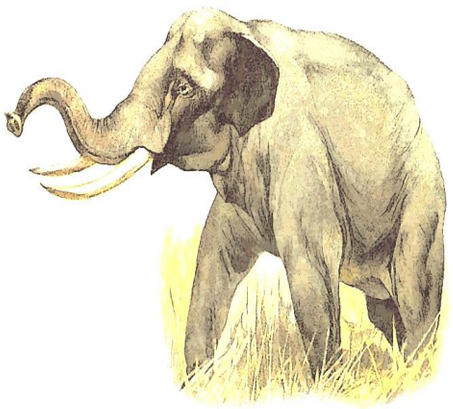
Butterfly & Elephant

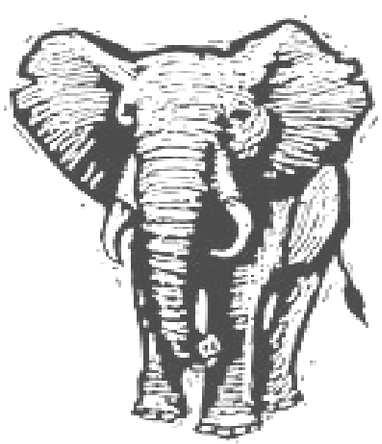
By Lee Spotted Pony Billingsley



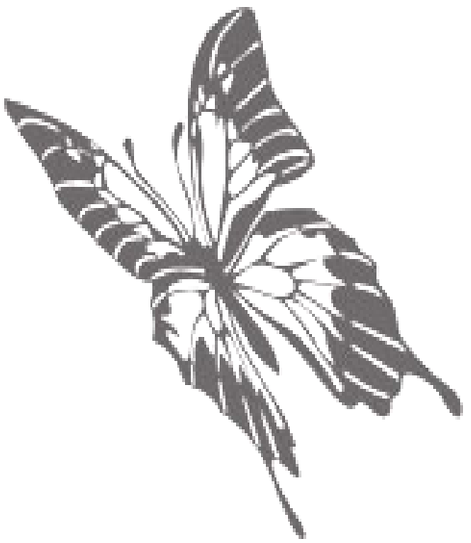
KAMAMA in Cherokee translates as both 'butterfly' & 'elephant.' What in the world? English speakers ask, what could a butterfly and an elephant have in common? There is a common factor but it is hard for an English speaker to see it.

The Cherokee language is based on verbs, action words. KAMAMA, Butterfly in Cherokee, would translate more like 'insect that flits around flowers with big colorful wings.' A butterfly is thought of in Cherokee by what it does or what it looks like.

Now look at an elephant straight on. If he flaps his big ears at you, with his long head & trunk, he makes himself look like a butterfly from that angle. He reminds us of Butterfly with his narrow body & big wings.



So KAMAMA would then also translate as a verb: 'animal that makes himself look like Butterfly.'



The English language, based on nouns, cannot describe well what an animal does or looks like. If someone asks "what is a butterfly?", we give them our definition using verbs. 'A butterfly has big wings that flap quickly as he flits among flowers.' The Cherokee speaker goes straight to the verb definition without using the noun.

It is difficult for English speakers to think in terms of verbs since the language has us thinking of nouns. We need to look behind the noun to think of its definition as a verb, an action word. When we do that, we will have the Cherokee translation.

ᒍᏅᏚᏓᏕᏍᏗᏔ - junadehlogwasdii – 'we learn there' – school

ᎠᏓᏍᎠᏃᏪᏍᏁ - adasdayvhvsga – 'place to cook' – kitchen

ᏗᎠᏫᏓᏗ - digohwelodi – 'writes with it' – pencil

ᏗᏓᏁᏓᏍᏗᏍᏌ - didalilosdisgi – 'he takes pictures' – photographer

ᎠᏫᏁ - goweli – 'written on' – paper, book

ᎠᏫᏓᏗ - gowelodi – 'writes something' – writing

ᏗᎠᏫᏓᏗ - digowelodi – 'writes with', 'to write with' – pencil

ᎠᏫᏁᏍᏌ - gowelisgi – 'he (or she) writes' – author, secretary, writer

ᏚᏃᏍᏁᏓᏍᏗ ᎠᏫᏁ - ganohilidasdi goweli – 'to hunt with' 'written on' – hunting license

Spotted Pony