



Everyday life of our ancestors

Question: Dear Iti Fabussa, what was everyday life like for our Choctaw ancestors?

Dear reader: This is a broad and complex question. Answering it is almost as difficult as answering “What is life like in Oklahoma today?” This is because our Choctaw ancestors filled many roles and stations in life, lived in different districts and villages around the homeland, belonged to one of two different *iksa* (moieties), and even spoke different dialects of the Choctaw language. Life had its own uniqueness for each individual person, and the way that people lived changed through time, just as it does today. The following discussion can only be general.

A depiction of traditional Choctaw life should begin with women. Women held a very respected place within Choctaw society. They were recognized as the foundation of the community, both because they were able to give birth, and because they were the major food-producers. Choctaw women spent a good deal of their time in and around their home settlement. They conducted most of the life-essential activities done around the house such as cooking and child-rearing, but also produced amazing works of art in the forms of pottery (c.f. Knight 1996), river cane basketry (c.f. Gettys 2006), and fine mulberry bark textiles (c.f. Anonymous 1755). Women did most of the work in house-construction, and it was women, not men, who were considered to be the homeowners. Some Choctaw women served as doctors, and a few women were so esteemed by their communities that they received the title “*Ohoyo Holitopa*” or “*Beloved Woman*” (Pesantubbee 2005).

The traditional roles of Choctaw men complimented those of the women. Most Choctaw men had three principle duties: protecting the community, hunting, and playing stickball. During the 1700s, and probably before, the Choctaws were recognized for their preference to fight defensively rather than attacking enemy villages (e.g. Du Pratz 2001:326-327 [1758]). Fighting at home for the lives of their women and children, Choctaw warriors had to be extremely skillful, and they were (Romans 1999:130 [1775]). Choctaw men trained

hard to be effective warriors, simultaneously honing many of the skills that were needed for hunting and stickball. Men did some of the heavier work around the village, like setting the posts during house-construction. Some men also served as doctors, historians, and chiefs.

Choctaw children helped their parents with some of the activities mentioned above and played games that prepared them to take on the roles of women and men when they matured.

To better understand what life was like for our Choctaw ancestors from our 21st century perspective, it is important to realize that the traditional lifeways followed by our forebears brought them into more direct contact with their natural surroundings than does the lifestyle of most Americans today. Many of the activities conducted by Choctaw men, women, and children followed the seasons of the year, and many of the Choctaw months were named after these activities or after seasonal, natural events. The passages that follow present some general information about the seasonal activities conducted by Choctaw people in the 1600s, 200 years before the Trail of Tears.

The Choctaw new year began with either the spring or fall equinox (Swanton 2001:45). It was roughly at the spring equinox that the agricultural fields were planted. Choctaw men, women and children worked together to sew the seeds of native corn, beans, sunflowers, and gourds. During the warm months, women and girls tended the fields, chasing off would-be predators like crows, and gathering wild edibles like lamb’s quarter that came up as “weeds” in the agricultural fields. Men and boys hunted small game with rabbit sticks and blowguns, providing essential protein to the diet.

The most important spiritual event and biggest celebration of the year came at the end of summer when the green corn became ripe. During this time, community members prayed and fasted, focusing on forgiveness and new beginnings.

During the fall, the men hunted large game, especially deer and bear. Women processed

the meat and other tissues, while men sometimes tanned the hides. Archaeological evidence suggests that late fall was another time of major celebration (Blitz 1993:125).

In the winter, women cooked food that had been stored during earlier months and collected ripe persimmons. Men worked on shell jewelry, tools, major projects like boats and sometimes defensive fortifications.

In the spring the cycle began again, with preparing the fields for planting.

Anonymous

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