

Iti Fabussa



How important was bow and arrow to our ancestors?

Question: Dear Iti Fabussa, I know that our tribal seal has a bow and arrows on it, and I have seen bows for sale at the Council House gift shop and other places around Choctaw Nation. How important was the bow and arrow to our ancestors and what were they like?

Answer: For centuries, bows and arrows in the hands of skilled Choctaw men protected our communities from military attack, supplied meat for our families, and provided important animal products like hides. For a significant period of time, the bow has been intertwined with our history, Tribal identity, and prosperity.

Many early Choctaw oral traditions mention the bow (e.g., Bushnell 1909:32-33; Mould 2004:85-88). At least one of these depicts the bow as a supernatural gift given to us at a certain point in our history (Claiborne 1880:519).

Archaeology also tells us that Choctaw people have used the bow for a very long time, but that we did not always have it. Before about 700 A.D. most ancestral Choctaw hunters and warriors used spear throwers known as “atl-atls” However during

the 1,100 years spanning 700-1800 A.D. nearly every Choctaw warrior had a bow.

An early Choctaw Freedman’s bow, Tuskahoma Council House Museum

A good idea of the way our ancestors used the bow and arrow to protect themselves is given in the chronicles of the de Soto expedition. In the 1540s, Hernando de Soto lead an invading Spanish army through what is now the Southeastern United States. They faced our ancestors on the battlefield and wrote about them:

They [the Natives] are never quiet but always running and crossing from one side to another so that the crossbows or the arquebuses [guns] can not be aimed at them; and before a crossbowman can fire a shot, an Indian can shoot three or four arrows, and very seldom does he miss what he shoots

at. If the arrow finds no armor, it penetrates as deeply as a crossbow (Elvas 1993:59 [1557]).

At the battle of Mabilla, a Choctaw-speaking archer shot an arrow through the hardwood shaft of a lance held by a Spaniard (Rangel 1993:294 [ca. 1540]). Only an extremely powerful bow and archer could do this. An Apalachee man (a tribe related to the Choctaw) shot an arrow at close range that entered a horse’s chest and nearly passed through the animal length-ways (Garcilaso 1993:235 [1596]). Another Apalachee man shot a single arrow through two thicknesses of chainmail (Spanish armor) and a tight-weave basket at a distance of 150 paces.

Later generations of Choctaw soldiers used bows on the battlefields of the American Revolution and the American Civil War (Lees 2002:5-6). Although no longer a military weapon, today, some Oklahoma Choctaw hunters use traditional Choctaw archery tackle to hunt deer.

To be effective, Choctaw archery equipment represents a skillfully crafted and well-balanced match between the bow, arrow, and all of their parts. Today, most Choctaw speakers refer to the bow as *iti tanampo* or literally “wooden gun.” An older Choctaw name for “bow” may be *tanamp shibata* (Byington 1915:341). Most of the surviving old Choctaw bows are straight when unstrung, and D-shaped when strung. Made of all wood, these D-shaped bows appear to have originally had two forms. War bows were as tall as the archer and very powerful. Hunting bows, sometimes also used for shooting fish, were perhaps a foot shorter and less powerful. Interestingly, the bow on the Choctaw Tribal seal is not a Choctaw-style bow. The shape of its limb tips identifies it as an English bow.

Oksak vpi (hickory) was probably the bow wood most commonly used by our ancestors in Mississippi, although many other hardwoods such as *ukof vpi* (persimmon), *kampko* (hackberry), and *iti kvfi* (sassafras) were probably also used. Upon arriving in Oklahoma, most Choctaw bowyers started to use *kuti lvkna* (bois d’ark) (Byington 1915:470, 358, 213).

In the Choctaw language, the bow string is called “*tanamp shibata isht talakchi*” (Byington 1915:341). Bow strings were most often made from shredded fibers of animal tendon, rawhide from small animals such as red squirrels, cleaned intestines, and plant fibers such as the inner bark of the mulberry tree.

A bow is almost useless without an arrow that has been carefully matched to it in terms of stiffness, length, and weight. Choctaw arrows are traditionally made from *oskish* (switch cane), and shoots from several types of hardwoods, probably including *hakchulhkvpi* (dogwood), *iti kosoma* (sourwood), and *iti hishi halupa* (yaupon

holly) (Byington 1915: 307, 131, 213, 212).

In the Choctaw language, arrows made from cane are referred to as oski naki, literally "cane projectile." Wooden arrows are referred to as iti naki. Many arrow points were made from chipped flint, shaped deer antler, scales from the garfish, and carved wood. Most Choctaw arrows that were not intended for fishing, had feathers attached to their back ends in several different styles.

From surviving photographs, it appears that early Choctaw archers drew their bows by pinching the arrow between the thumb and forefinger and pulling the bowstring back with the ring and middle fingers. Multiple arrows were held in the bow hand for rapid firing.

Traditionally, archery skills were passed on to Choctaw youth through formal training (Bossu 1771, cited by Swanton 2001:124). Bow-making skills were honed through contests and rivalries between bow-makers.

Today, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma maintains its traditional archery skills and knowledge through bow shoots held every second Saturday at the Tushka Homma Council House Grounds beginning in March. Please come and learn how to make and use these amazing tools of our ancestors!

Much, much more information is available on the history of Choctaw archery. Please call 1-800-522-6170 ext. 2216.

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