

## Iti Fabvssa



# Green Corn Ceremony

### **Question:**

To the folks at Iti Fabvssa:

I was wondering when the last Luak Falaya / Green Corn Ceremony was held in the Choctaw Nation and if there is or has been a movement to reinvigorate this ceremony among our people.

**Sincerely,  
Brandon**

### **Answer:**

Dear Brandon,

Over the last few months, Iti Fabvssa has received several inquiries about the Choctaw Green Corn Ceremony. In an attempt to effectively respond to these, we're going to give you the long answer to your question:

The "Green Corn Ceremony" is the most important social and spiritual event in the traditional seasonal round of the Choctaw and other Tribes that are Indigenous to what is now the Southeastern United States. Held at the ripening of the corn crop in late July, it was and is a time of community-building, rekindling friendships, reconciliation, purification, restoring balance, making new beginnings, and giving praise and thanksgiving to God.

It appears that in the Choctaw language, Okissa, or "fast," was probably the term most widely used in the past to refer to the "Green Corn Ceremony" (see Byington 1915:296), although Tanchushi Hilha "young corn dance" (Wright 1937:378) may have been used to describe the accompanying dances.

The specific elements of the Green Corn Ceremony varied between Choctaw communities, but they share basic parts that date back unknown centuries in what is now the Southeastern United States. Even as early as the mid 1700s, James Adair noted that the Green Corn Ceremony was no longer being practiced in the Choctaw communities that he observed (1775:325). This was likely because of the population loss and stress these communities were facing at that time as a result of being pulled into an ongoing military conflict between the French and English (Pesantubbee 2005:126-127). Still, the Green Corn Ceremony survived among some Choctaw communities, and in the 1830s, it was carried from Mississippi, over the Trail of Tears and re-established in Oklahoma.

The Choctaw Green Corn Ceremony has received much less written attention than the equivalent ceremonies of other Southeastern Tribes, like the Muscogee (Creeks). This is because Choctaw practitioners made a concerted effort to protect it from outside observation and interference, sometimes stopping the entire proceedings if they felt threatened by an observer (Bushnell 1909:22). Today, just as in the past, some of the parts of the Choctaw Green Corn Ceremony are pri-

vate in nature and not intended for publication. The following respectfully excludes these details and draws mostly from published sources.

The best written description of a Choctaw Green Corn Ceremony comes from an account by Lucy Cherry, a Choctaw born in Skullyville, OK, in 1869 (Cherry 1937:382-385). Her words portray a Green Corn Ceremony held at Cavanal in the Sugar Loaf Mountains, probably in the late 1800s:

Preparations began a week before the event, with men hunting deer, squirrels, and bear, and killing hogs and cattle; green corn was also harvested from the fields. The families gathered up the food they had obtained, along with many of the household furnishings and headed for the Dance Grounds.

The Green Corn Ceremony lasted four days. The first day was filled with setting up camp and re-establishing connections with old friends who had come for the occasion. Food was cooked and eaten in common. On the second day, everyone fasted, while the Choctaw doctor, Alikchi, administered herbal drinks to participants that purged their bodies. Afterwards, males and females were bathed separately in a purifying herbal solution. That night, participants went to sleep without eating. Sometime during the third day they broke their fast with a feast. That evening, the main part of the Stomp Dance was held. Its beginning was announced by a beating drum. A man took a place on the dance ground near a central fire and prayed in the Choctaw language, thanking God for the blessings that the community had received. Then, the dance began, around the fire. A male caller led the vocal portion of the dance, and was echoed by the other male dancers. Females danced with a skillful double step, keeping the rhythm using turtle shell rattles fastened to their lower legs (according to Cherry the men also had the shells fastened to their upper legs). The dance lasted until sunrise. The fourth day of the Green Corn Ceremony was spent in visiting friends and relatives and in breaking camp.

In the traditional Choctaw way of thinking, every part of the Green Corn Ceremony has spiritual significance. As mentioned by Cherry, the dances for the Green Corn Ceremony, as well as some others held during different parts of the year are traditionally conducted on a Dance Ground. A Dance Ground is a special area prepared by an Alikchi who beseeches God to bless it. A new Dance Ground can only be started with the assistance of the staff from a previously established Dance Ground.

At the center of the Dance Ground is a fire, considered sacred by practitioners. Some early Choctaws apparently called it Luak Hash-tahli Itichapa, or "Fire, the friend of God" (Wright 1828: 179-180). Around the central fire is the dance area, usually cleared free of brush and debris by fasting individuals before or during the early part of the Green Corn Ceremony. Outside of the dance area, are four brush

arbors, set in four cardinal directions, to form a square. Each of these is assigned to representatives of one of the Tribes of the Four Mothers Society (see below). Camp houses may be located beyond the arbors for family to prepare food.

At the Green Corn Ceremony, dances are usually done in parts of four, and proceed counter-clockwise around the fire. Through the night, new callers arise to lead dances until the sun comes up. Two early commentators / participants stated that the dances used by the Choctaw were basically the same as those of the Cherokee, Creek, and Chickasaw (Cherry 1937:382; Wright 1937:377). One writer has succinctly drawn together how practitioners view all of the above: "Southeastern People believe that the Stomp Dance grounds is analogous to a church, the songs being prayers, and that those prayers travel with the smoke up to the Creator" (Sharp 2007:3).

In the past, it appears that at least some Choctaw communities made their laws during the Green Corn Ceremony, and that leaders preached to their people about appropriate moral conduct (Swanton 2001:225-226). Many of the Tribes that host equivalents of the Green Corn Ceremony extinguish all of the fires in camp during the event. After rekindling the fire at the center of the Dance Ground, practitioners use its coals to re-light all of the other fires, focusing on forgiveness and renewal. That the same practice was followed by at least some Choctaw communities in the past may be evidenced in Hashi Luak Musholi, the name of a summer month in the Traditional Choctaw calendar, which means "fires extinguished" (Byington 1915:146-147).

In the late 1800s, at the same time Cherry was participating in the Green Corn Ceremony described above, traditional Choctaw people were facing increasingly forceful pressure to assimilate into surrounding Euro-American society. Seeking support, some Choctaw traditionalists joined with their counterparts in the Cherokee, Creek/Seminole, and Chickasaw Tribes to organize the Four Mothers Society. The purpose of the society was to hold onto traditional Tribal lifeways and values, expressed in part through the Green Corn Ceremony. At roughly the same time, Choctaw communities residing in Mississippi and Louisiana were also holding onto their traditional dances and Dance Grounds. However, by the early 1900s, the Choctaw Green Corn Ceremony largely fades from written reference, with one exception.

This community was made up of a group of Choctaws who left Meridian, MS on December 14, 1902. They were lead by James, Arnold, a resident of Ardmore, who, through deception, intended to sell them as slaves once they reached Oklahoma. That winter, 10 of these Choctaw people died as a result of mistreatment. An ensuing investigation by the Department of the Interior freed the survivors and saw them given land allotments near Ardmore (Levine 1993:393-394). This community opened the Yellow Hills Dance Ground, which remained active until 1937.

In 1951, Murial Wright, herself a Choctaw, wrote, "Choctaw tribal dances are no longer held in Oklahoma" (Wright 1951:118). However, beginning in the 1970s, elders who had participated at Yellow Hills Dance Ground formed the Choctaw-Chickasaw Heritage Committee and revitalized many of the old dance styles that they had enjoyed as youths. At roughly the same time, similar initiatives to revitalize Choctaw traditional dances were underway near Idabel, OK, and Philadelphia, MS (Howard and Levine 1990:15). Through this, traditional Choctaw dances were taken out their original contexts of the Green Corn Ceremony, or the stickball game, or the celebration at the return of a war party, and transformed into social dances that publicly express Choctaw identity in an ethnically mixed society. All

of this has given rise to the Choctaw Social Dances seen today during the Labor Day Festival and other Tribal events.

Today, like the traditional dances, the Choctaw Green Corn Ceremony continues to exist. In 2007, after a 70-year hiatus, a new Choctaw Dance Ground was opened on the Tuskahuma Council House Grounds. Choctaw people and members of other Tribes regularly meet there for Stomp Dances, feasts, and other traditional gatherings.

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