Early political structure

Question:

What was the Choctaw political structure like at the time of Chief Pushmataha?

Todd

Answer:

Dear Todd,

In the past, just like today, the political structure of the Choctaw Tribe reflected the makeup of the communities that sustained it. The political structure was designed to support the values commonly held between these communities and to direct their interactions with each other and with non-Choctaw groups. It has always adapted and changed to fit the needs of each new generation.

Pushmataha (1764? -1824) served as a Choctaw Chief during the first decades of the 1800s. Before this time, Choctaw government was decentralized with individuals and settlements having a great deal of leeway in making their own decisions. Sometimes, this saw different Choctaw towns supporting opposing parties during military conflicts, and even fighting each other in the Choctaw Civil War (1747-1750). By Pushmataha's time, this decentralized form of government was slowly being shaped into a structure with leaders who could speak for the Choctaw people as a whole.

From the earliest written texts on the subject (1702), and still during the early 1800s, the Choctaw Tribe was comprised of three geographic and political districts (Galloway 2008:74). Ahepvt ("Potato eaters") was located in the northeastern part of the Choctaw homeland, Okla Falaya (literally "Long People," referring to the geographical shape of the district) was located in the west, and Okla Hannali "Six Towns" was located in the south (Halbert 1901). Each of the three districts had a Miko, or "Chief." Pushmataha was Chief of the Okla Hannali District from 1800-1824. During many of the same years Apukshunnubbee was Chief of the Okla Falaya District, and Moshulatubbee was Chief of Ahepvt District.

Each of the three Districts maintained their own fires (see March's edition of Iti Fabvssa for the traditional importance of fire to Choctaw communities), and normally functioned autonomously. However, they consulted with each other on external matters that affected the whole Tribe (Clairborne 1880:490). In the 1700s, the French began referring to one Choctaw leader as the "Principle Chief." This reflected the their own concept of a "King," but the position was not recognized within Choctaw society itself until immediately before the Trail of Tears. Nevertheless, during times of major war, a single leader, such as Pushmataha, would emerge to temporarily coordinate

Buffalo horn spoon carried by Hopaii Iskitini, "Little Profit," while he fought in the War of 1812, under Pushmataha. (Oklahoma Historical Society)

the efforts of Choctaw forces (Galloway 2008:75).

Each of the three Choctaw Districts was itself made up of many large and small settlements. According to early documents (c.f. Anonymous 1918[1755?]:54-55) the political structure within each Choctaw village consisted of several positions. The village chief presided over the village, welcomed visitors, and represented the village in dealings with other Choctaw villages. The village Tvshkamiko, or "warchief," presided over war endeavors. He was assisted by two Tvshkamikushi "little war chiefs," who served as his lieutenants. The Tishomiko, or "servant chief," acted as the speaker for the chief and arranged dances, feasts, and ceremonies. Men holding the office of Tishomiko, often became village chiefs. In reality, this structure of leadership organization probably varied somewhat between villages, but the above positions appear to have been a widespread Choctaw form that was maintained into the early 1800s.

Within traditional Choctaw society, men were further divided into four political ranks, which were given relative preference in decision-making meetings. The first rank was comprised of individuals holding the offices just described, these were the leaders. The second was, Hattak Holitopa or "Beloved Men," respected elders who carried the traditions of the Tribe. The third rank was Tvshka, or "warriors," individuals who had proven themselves in battle and received a war name (this is the origin of today's Choctaw surnames that end in "abi," meaning to win or kill). The fourth rank was Hattak Himitta, or "Young Men," males of any age who had not proven themselves in battle.

In traditional Choctaw society, leadership often followed through family lines. Up until at least 1820, it is clear that Choctaw leaders relied upon their Iksa, or "clan," for support, and that the Iksa were a major political factor that obligated their members to certain duties (see Swanton 2001:78). For example in the traditional Choctaw judicial system, when an individual was accused of a crime, a trial was held in which members of his Iksa were his defenders, while those of the opposite Iksa served as prosecutors (Wright 1828:225). Still, a potential leader's personal merit and popularity were the most important factors in his rise to leadership. This is evidenced in the life of Pushmataha himself, whose family origins were and are unknown.

For a young Choctaw man, the path up the political scale could begin with proven success in men's activities, such as stickball and warfare. It continued with success in local leadership positions, such as leading a war party, or speaking for the village chief. With success in these roles, a person could become a village chief by popular consensus. Under the right circumstances, a successful and popular village chief could become a District chief.

Meetings of the Choctaw government were highly symbolic and spiritual events. Major decisions at the village and Tribal levels were made in a council of leaders. It appears that important matters were discussed either around a fire, or when the sun was shining brightly (see January's Iti Fabvssa for an explanation of the importance of this in Choctaw thought). If the meeting was to discuss civil matters or peaceful relations, symbolism involving the color white was prevalent. If the meeting was to discuss war, the symbolism involved the color red. Before speaking began, a pipe was passed between participating parties, the belief being that the tobacco smoke would carry their words up to God. During the meeting, speeches were delivered and, as time allowed, all individuals' points of view given on the matters at hand without interruption. After listening to the talks, the leader gave his opinion, which was usually approved by the council (Clairborne 1880:491). Such council meetings were often lengthy, and accompanied by stickball games and dances.

Choctaw leaders met with the leaders of other Districts, or of other Tribes, they employed a standardized greeting, which included the words, "Holitopa chia-hoke," meaning "you are very beloved." Today, this has been shortened to the common Choctaw greeting "Halito". Sometimes adoption ceremonies were held between the Choctaw leaders and those of another group as a means of fostering positive diplomatic relationships (see O'Brien 2008b:161). This sometimes involved adoption of the outsiders into a Choctaw Iksa, and swapping the fire of a Choctaw District with the fire of the other group. Choctaw representatives are documented to have carried a District Fire several hundred miles for this purpose when first establishing formal ties with the United States (speech by Chief Tobocah in Martin 2008 [1786]:243).

The power of a Choctaw leader lasted only as long as his support from the people. This support was fostered by his skills as a leader, his charisma, and his ability to give gifts to his followers (O'Brien 2008a:104-105). He rarely or never had the power to force his people to act against their will, even in wartime.

The political roles of Choctaw men were complimented by those of the women. Recognized as givers of life, women traditionally had a great deal of power in Choctaw society. Iksa membership was handed down through the female, rather than male line. Women were the major food producers and property owners, and it is probable that they traditionally had a great deal of say in the distribution of resources within the village. Choctaw women also traditionally accompanied their men on diplomatic missions and took part in the associated ceremonies. Mikos are said to have kept their wives informed about what happened at council, and upon a Miko's death, his wife sometimes temporarily filled his position (Swanton 2001:100). Nevertheless, by Pushmataha's time, women's formal leadership power within Choctaw society had diminished as a result of interactions with Euro-American groups who believed women were incapable of filling such important positions (Pesanatubbe 2008:82-85).

The years of Pushmataha's service as chief encompass major events in Choctaw history and rapid changes in Choctaw society. On an economic level, the Choctaw export economy shifted from heavy involvement in the fur trade to becoming focused on cattle production and the southern plantation economy (Carson 2008). Militarily, Choctaw warfare shifted from small skirmishes of the type that had occurred for millennia, to major protracted battles. On a political front, France, Spain, and England ultimately gave up their century-long claim to the Choctaw homeland, and were replaced by the United States. This meant that individual Choctaw Districts and towns could no longer pit multiple Euro-American nations off against each other in treaty negotiations, but rather that the Choctaw Tribe had to speak with a unified voice. At the same time, U.S. citizens who began pushing in on Choctaw lands and to demand Choctaw land cessions. Attempting to understand their viewpoint is one reason that some chiefs began welcoming Protestant missions and educating their children in boarding schools during these years. All of this helped set the stage for a new brand of Choctaw chiefs, including Greenwood Leflore and David Folsom, who rose to power after Pushmataha's death. Only six years after his passing, the last of the Choctaw Homeland was ceded to the United States; the Trail of Tears began; and a whole new chapter was opened on Choctaw history and government.

Works Cited

Anonymous
1918 (1755?) Translated by John Swanton. An Early Account of the Choctaw Indians. Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association 5(2).

Carson, James
2008 Native Americans, the Market Revolution, and Culture Change. in Pre-Removal Choctaw History: Exploring New Paths, edited by Greg O'Brien, pp. 183-199. The Civilization of the American Indian Series. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Claiborne, John
1880 Mississippi as a Province, Territory, and State: With Biographical Notices of Eminent Citizens. Volume I. Power and Barksdale, Jackson.

Halbert, Henry S.
1901 District Divisions of the Choctaw Nation. In Report of the Alabama History Commission to the Governor of Alabama, edited by Thomas McAdory Owen. pp. 375-385. Brown Printing Company, Montgomery.

Galloway, Patricia
2008 Choctaw Factionalism and Civil War, 1746-1750. in Pre-Removal Choctaw History: Exploring New Paths, edited by Greg O'Brien, pp. 70-102. The Civilization of the American Indian Series. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Martin, Joseph
1786 Choctaw Negotiations with the United States at Hopewell, South Carolina (Journal) in Pre-Removal Choctaw History: Exploring New Paths, edited by Greg O'Brien, pp. 103-122. The Civilization of the American Indian Series. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Pesantubbee, Michelene
2005 Choctaw Women in a Chaotic World: The Clash of Cultures in the Colonial Southeast. University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque.

O'Brien, Greg
2008a Protecting Trade Through War: Choctaw Elites and British Occupation of the Floridas. in Pre-Removal Choctaw History: Exploring New Paths, edited by Greg O'Brien, pp. 103-122. The Civilization of the American Indian Series. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

2008b The Conqueror Meets the Unconquered: Negotiating Cultural Boundaries on the Post-Revolutionary Southern Frontier. in Pre-Removal Choctaw History: Exploring New Paths, edited by Greg O'Brien, pp. 148-182. The Civilization of the American Indian Series. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman.

Swanton, John R.
2001 Source Material for the Social and Ceremonial Life of the Choctaw Indians. Reprint. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.

Wright, Alfred
1828 Choctaws: Religious Opinions, Traditions, Etc. Missionary Herald 24:178-183, 214-216.