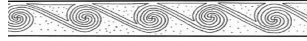


Iti Fabvssa



Choctaw smoking pipes and tobacco

Dear Iti Fabvssa,

My interest is in learning something (anything) about the historical ceremonial use of the pipe by our people. I would like to know what kinds of pipes were used, what was smoked, and in what ceremonial context. Can you help me?

Thank you - Argus

Dear Argus,

Thank you for your great questions. Smoking pipes and tobacco have been a significant and visible part of the Choctaw traditional lifeway for a very long time, but they have not received much written attention.

We'll begin with your question about what was traditionally smoked in the pipes. Tobacco is a New World plant, whose origins are not well understood, however, some varieties are known to have been grown and smoked in eastern North America at least 2,000 years ago. The Choctaw name for tobacco is "hakchuma" (Byington 1915:131). According to a Choctaw cultural authority with whom we consulted on this article, tobacco plants were traditionally planted and tended by Choctaw medicine people, both male and female. After the plants matured, their leaves were removed and stored as dried rolls, tied up with bark strips. In the 1700s, some Choctaw communities grew enough tobacco both to supply themselves, and to export it to Euro-American traders (Romans 1775:84-85).

These early Choctaw tobacco horticulturalists made a lasting contribution to the American tobacco industry. One of the traditional tobacco varieties that they developed, today known as "Perique," may be the most expensive grade of tobacco in the world. The story is that in late 1700s, Pierre Chenet, a French Canadian, emigrated into what is now St. James Parish, La., and observed Choctaws preparing a special variety of tobacco using a traditional pressure fermentation method (Ehwa 1973). They put the tobacco leaves into hollow tree trunks and pressed them with long poles, held down by weights. The pressure made the juice come out of the leaves, and they were left in this position long enough to ferment. Today's Perique is grown in the unique soils of St. James Parish and prepared using a variation on the old Choctaw technique. It has a strong taste of figs and black pepper, and it is often mixed

in tobacco blends.

Choctaws often added various ingredients to their tobacco to produce different flavors, including leaves from the sweet gum tree and the leaves of two different species of sumac. These leaves were dried and rubbed into small pieces before they were mixed with the tobacco (Romans 1775:85). In times of scarcity, Choctaws of the past, and some people still today, smoke a wild native plant called "rabbit tobacco," or *bvshuchak* in the Choctaw language (Swanton 2001: 237).

Before Removal, smoking was mostly the prerogative of Choctaw men. Choctaw society considered smoking tobacco to be unladylike, and so only a few of the older women engaged in it. In the 1800s, as Euro-American influence grew, more Choctaw women began to smoke. The uses of snuff and chewing tobacco were also adopted by Choctaw society at this time (Cushman 1899:172-173).

An old Choctaw term for the traditional style of tobacco pipe is "hakchuma shuti," literally meaning "tobacco pot" (Byington 1915:131). Pipe bowls were made from fired clay, from a kind of white limestone that outcrops on the Mississippi River, and probably other local carvable stones. A few were made from red pipestone traded in from what is now Minnesota. The earliest pipes in the Southeast were simple tubular, cone-shaped forms. A few of the pipes made during the centuries before European contact are large and very elaborate effigies of people or animals, while others were simple elbow pipes. Surviving Choctaw pipes from the 1800s suggest that the elbow pipes predominated in later years.

For our ancestors, and for some Choctaws today, tobacco-smoking, "hakchuma shuka," is approached in a spiritual way. The rising puffs of smoke are seen to carry one's words or prayers upwards to the Creator. Traditionally, Choctaw men smoked pipes in several specific settings that include: Tribal Council meetings, meetings with other tribes to establish peace, meetings with other tribes to establish war alliances, when soliciting supernatural aid, and also on informal occasions, such as meeting a friend on the trail. The following paragraphs contain a few details about these different uses:

At Tribal Councils, Choctaw men sat in



Fragments of ancestral Choctaw clay pipe bowls, (Lubbub Creek Site, Ala., 1000-1600 AD).



Choctaw clay elbow pipe (4 views), made around 1900, Bayou Lacomb, La.

three concentric circles around a central fire, corresponding with their three social rankings, Beloved Men, Warriors, and Young Men (see Iti Fabvssa 4/10). The council pipe was lit, and passed around the inner circle of Beloved Men, and was then passed outwards to the other groups. According to Henry Halbert: "To every mingo and captain was attached his official pipe lighter [the Tishomiko] who was elected by the people and who had charge of the council pipe and lighted it at the opening of a council. The council men sat in a circle and the council pipe, from which each one inhaled one or more whiffs, passed from right to left, which was supposed to symbolize the course of the sun. The pipe lighter held his office from one council to another, when he was either re-elected, or a new man elected in his place" (n.d.). The pipe was passed and smoked again at the close of the meeting.

When a Choctaw community wished to establish a peaceful relationship with another community or tribe, it sent a delegation to that group carrying a pipe, called a "calumet," by the French. According to an early writer, "This calumet has a stem about two or three feet in length, surrounded by red feathers artistically worked, and from which hangs eight or 10 black and white feathers," (Anonymous 1918[1755]:67). These eagle feathers were important as a visual symbol of peaceful intentions. A person carrying a calumet through foreign territory would not be harmed. Upon the arrival of the peace delegation, talks would proceed, and if an alliance could be arranged, the calumet pipe would be passed around and smoked by both groups. In the early days, the group who brought the pipe would choose a man from the other

party to keep it for them. This man was given the title Fvnmiko, or "squirrel chief." With it came the responsibility of representing the other group's interests with his own people, as a sort of ambassador. By the mid 1700s, the Fvnmiko position began to fall out of use, probably because the Euro-American men who the Choctaw selected to hold this office failed to understand or live up to the responsibility (O'Brien 2005:63).

When a Choctaw community wished to establish a war alliance with another group against a mutual enemy, they would send a delegation to that group, carrying a war pipe. This pipe is said to have looked very similar to the peace calumet, but its main colors were red instead of white. If the war alliance could be negotiated, the war pipe would be passed and smoked to seal the agreement.

Many Choctaw men also had their own personal pipes. Most of these were smaller and less elaborate than the council pipes, calumets, or war pipes. At least some of them had short stems of hollow river cane. These personal pipes were smoked in individual prayer or reflection. They were also smoked at times when supernatural aid was sought. When Choctaw men met each other out away from home, if one had a pipe and tobacco, it was customary for him to sit down and share it with the other travelers (Halbert n.d.). As they reached the later part of their lives, some Choctaw men chose a member of a younger generation to entrust with their pipe. Others preferred to have their pipes go with them when they passed into the next life.