Choctaw baskets

By a request from the editor, this month's edition of Iti Fabvssa focuses on Choctaw river cane basketry. This important traditional artform combines native materials, intricate weaves, and attractive colors, drawing upon creative inspiration and a profoundly deep tradition, to form something that is Choctaw to its core. For centuries, basketry has been a visible, functional art in our communities, and today it is also prominently featured in museums and galleries across the nation and the globe. Cane basketry is the traditional artform for which Choctaw people are most widely recognized today, and is something in which we can and should take pride.

An early Choctaw pointed basket, National Musuem of the American Indian.

Choctaw double-weave trunk basket (three views) ca. 1830-1850.

Choctaw basketry has ancient roots. Some preserved pieces of basketry found in Florida date back 7,000 years, while another fragment found in Louisiana could be as much as 12,000 years old. Even the lesser 7,000 year date indicates that today's Choctaw basket makers are descended from a line of no less than 350 generations of Native Southeastern basket-makers!

Each generation has made its own contributions to basketry, and the art has changed and developed through the centuries. Rare surviving 1000-year-old basketry fragments from the Southeast (Neuman 2006) show that the art was extremely advanced in terms of fineness, complexity, and design. One of the earliest written accounts (ca. 1720) specifically referring to Choctaw (and Chickasaw) baskets describes them as "masterpieces," and indicates that many of them were so fine and well-made that they could hold water and were sometimes used as eating dishes (Catesby reproduced in Swanton 1946:604). Surviving Choctaw baskets from the 1800s, like those of today, have a more open weave, but still show a high level of artistry and technical proficiency.

A general Choctaw word for basketry is tapushik; specific Choctaw words exist for all of the different basket forms. Most Choctaw baskets are made from river cane, called "uski" in the Choctaw language, although palmetto "tala" has also been used by Choctaws living in the southern part of the homeland, particularly when cane is difficult to get.

Cane was an important resource to our ancestors, who developed many uses for it, including blowguns, arrow shafts, matting, construction material, shields, flutes, knives, and food. Basket makers located their favorite cane patches that produced cane with the qualities they desired. Good cane for basketry was found on islands near the banks of rivers and creeks. In fact, one of the creeks located in what is now Noxubbe Co., Mississippi, was called "Oski ai almo", meaning literally "cane there gathered" (Halbert n.d.). This was only one of many places that our ancestors collected their cane.

Sometimes, these cane patches were at a distance from where people lived, so basket makers set up cane-harvesting camps, usually during the cool season. An excellent description of an early-style camp has been provided by Tom Colvin (2006). The temporary houses in camp were essentially lean-tos, with a wooden framework and thatching, tied together with beargrass, which grows in the same area as the cane. The camp's inhabitants went out and cut cane that was mature-enough that it no longer had the sheaves in the stalks. Tall canes were preferred, with the greatest distance possible between the nodes. After a bundle of cane was cut and gathered, it was split lengthwise into pieces, a process known in Choctaw as "oskashiba" (Byington 1915:329). A knife made of river cane was used to strip away the underlying plant material from the outer skin of the split cane. It was this outer part from which the baskets were made. The stripped outer skin was then trimmed to have a consistent vertical width. These thin pieces were then rolled up into spools called "uski tvpa afohli" (Byington 1915:566) and dried for storage. Cane debris was thrown unto the roofs of the camp structures, making them more rain-proof.

Some types of Choctaw baskets have colored patterns, made by weaving different-colored strips of cane into the basket. In addition to the natural cane, the colors on early Choctaw baskets include brown /black, yellow, and red. The brown and black probably came from the black walnut tree. Yellow dye was made by digging the roots of the dock plant in the fall, pounding them up with a mortar and pestle, and boiling them in water. The red dye was made dying cane with dock root, then burning equal parts of red oak bark and black gum bark into ash, mixing them with water to form a paste, and then putting the paste of the yellow-dyed can. Over time, the alkalinity of the ash would turn the yellow dye to red (Bushnell 1909:14). The dye absorbs darker into the interior side of the cane, and so this part is always faced outwards on baskets. Beginning around 1900, many Choctaw basket-makers began to use commercial dyes.

While men and boys sometimes help to harvest the cane, weaving it into baskets was and is primarily an art of women. These women have developed variations in twilling and diagonal plating

techniques to form damp cane into a variety of basketry forms for a variety of uses:

One of the oldest is the "kishi," or pack basket (unless noted, the following Choctaw basket names can be found in Byington 1915). This large, basket was carried on a woman's back with the use of a securing strap that was worn on her forehead. This was used for gathering and transportation. This type of basket was also used to move the dirt to create the earthmounds.

Oklahoma Choctaw women weaving cane basketry.

Another early basket is the "ufko," or fanner. This is a flat basket with one high end, it was used to winnow the husks from pounded corn kernels. The "ishshoha" (Bushnell 1909:8), is a flat basket with an open weave in the bottom. It was used as a sieve in the kitchen. Kishi, ufko, and ishshoha were intended for heavy work, and were not decorated with colored designs, only variations in the weave of the cane.

Tapa, and tvpishuk are square-shaped flat baskets of decreasing size, sometimes intended for utilitarian purposes, and sometimes decorated with beautiful colored designs. Topak is a handled square basket. Taposhake shakapa is an elbow-shaped basket, with a handle and two openings. Taposhake chufa is a basket that narrows from a wide rim down to a pointed base; usually, it has a handle (Bushnell 1909:15). Some of the finest Choctaw baskets are "tapushik pothoma," or double weaves. These have double walls, with different designs on the inside and outside of the basket.

Other types of Choctaw baskets have probably been developed more recently. One of these is the market basket, which has handles and can sometimes resemble a purse. Another form is the wall-hanging basket. Still others have lids and include: hampers, "sewing" baskets, and "button" baskets (See Swanton 2001:41 for additional basket types and Choctaw names).

Choctaw basketry came to Oklahoma on the Trail of Tears. Many families made utilitarian baskets for use and trade up into the 1950s. When Choctaw traditional foods and food-processing techniques that required baskets began to be given up in favor of "easier" Euro-American equivalents, the art of basketry began to be practiced by fewer and fewer Oklahoma Choctaws. Today, there are a couple of active Oklahoma Choctaw river cane basket-makers. Some other active Oklahoma Choctaw basket-makers use materials other than cane, while many other individuals have expressed an interest in working to revitalize the art. The Jena Band of Choctaw Indians in Louisiana currently has one active basket-maker. The situation is somewhat different in Mississippi, where although the demand for the old-style cooking and storage baskets has declined over the last 50 years, the market for colorful decorated baskets has expanded. Today, the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians has approximately 30-40 basket-makers. Some of these families still go out to cane-harvesting camps in the cool season, and make baskets year-round for sale (Dr. Kennith York, personal communication, 2011).

Choctaw basketry has always connected the people to the land. Today, basket-makers face a serious challenge, in that cane brakes have become a critically endangered ecosystem. Two hundred years ago, some canebrakes extended for miles, but today, it is rare to find a cane patch even 100 yards in extent. The reasons are many including the damaging effects of cattle grazing, plowing up cane habitat for farmland, fire suppression, and the channelization of streams. The loss of river cane is serious to everyone because the cane helps to filter and purify water, and provides habitat to a number of animals. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians is currently partnered with Mississippi State University to study the biology of river cane in an effort to help this important native plant to survive into the future (visit http://www.rivercane.msstate.edu/).

Today, as new generations of Choctaws learn basketry, as Choctaw people work to encourage the growth of new river cane patches, and as others work to raise the awareness of and the demand for Choctaw basketry, the future of the art is very much in Choctaw hands. As basketry shows, these hands have proven pretty able over the last 7,000 years.

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