

Choctaw Textiles

Picture in your mind a Choctaw woman who lived back before the arrival of Europeans on this continent. What is she wearing? If you're like most people, your mind probably just created an image of a person wearing clothing made from animal skins. There is nothing wrong with that picture; as we saw in December's edition of *Iti Fabussa*, early Choctaw people certainly did make clothing from buckskin. However, Choctaw ancestors were also highly skilled textile artists who made a lot of their clothing from cloth. We don't hear much about this today because the trauma of colonization stopped the production of Choctaw textiles long before the Trail of Tears. Fortunately, enough knowledge about Choctaw textiles still exists that the art could be brought back to life today.

Archaeological deposits show that textiles have been made in the southeastern United States for at least the last 10,000 years. In fact, evidence suggests that for much of the past, some Southeastern communities actually made and used quite a bit more

cloth than buckskin. The first Europeans to enter Choctaw country described fine textiles being made. Choctaw people continued to make textiles, known as "na tvnna" in the Choctaw language, until well into the 1700s.

Textiles are made from long fibers that can be spun into string that is then woven, twined or looped to make cloth. Choctaws used both plant and animal fibers for this purpose. A few of the fiber-producing plants in the Choctaw homeland include stinging nettle "hvshstapolha" (Byington 1915:148), milkweed "nuchi" (281), dogbane "hiloha ikhish" (Byington 1852:26) and mulberry inner bark "bihi hakshup." Stinging



Fig. 1: Milkweed stock in winter, with fibers naturally separating from bark

nettle, dogbane and milkweed are annual plants that produce bast fibers just below their outer covering (Fig 1). Choctaw ancestors harvested these fibers in the fall, and separated them from the rest of the plant material either by hand or through a controlled rotting process, known as "retting" in English. Dogbane fibers are particularly resistant to rotting. Mulberry inner bark was stripped from small mulberry saplings in the spring, and the outer bark scraped off of it. The inner bark was then mechanically broken down into fiber through pounding it and also manipulating it with the hands. Sometimes, mulberry fiber was bleached by boiling it in wood ash so that it could be dyed different colors.

Plant fibers were made into yarn either by hand or with a drop spindle (Adair 1775:453). Different techniques were used to make the yarn into fabric, but twining was the most common (Fig.2). Through time, Choctaw ancestors made shoes, robes, skirts, sashes, mats and bags from plant-fiber cloth. Some of these garments and other items were made incredibly fancy through the use of different twining and looping techniques to create complex patterns (Fig. 3), by incorporating yarns dyed different colors and by painting sections of the finished fabric. Robes, called "kasma" in the Choctaw

language, were sometimes made by attaching small turkey or swan feathers, one at a time, to a plant fiber net until they completely covered one side. The very fanciest fabrics were made by stripping off thin sections of feather quills with the vanes from one side of the feather still attached, wrapping these stripped feathers around thread, and then twining these threads together to make a garment. The result was a fuzzy, bright-

ly colored and very warm piece of clothing (Fig. 4).

Bison wool, "yvnnvsh hishi," was the principle animal fiber used in Choctaw textiles. The wool was picked up after the animals shed their thick coats in the later part of winter and spring. Bison wool is made up of five different fiber sizes, ranging from thick guard hair, to soft down (Boucher 2012). Once collected, the wool had to be washed. Fabric almost as soft as cashmere could be made by separating out and using just the down (Fig. 5); coarser, scratchier material could be made with the coarser hair (Cecil Miskin personal communication). The wool was spun into yarn, just as with the plant fibers. Bison wool is difficult to dye, but some

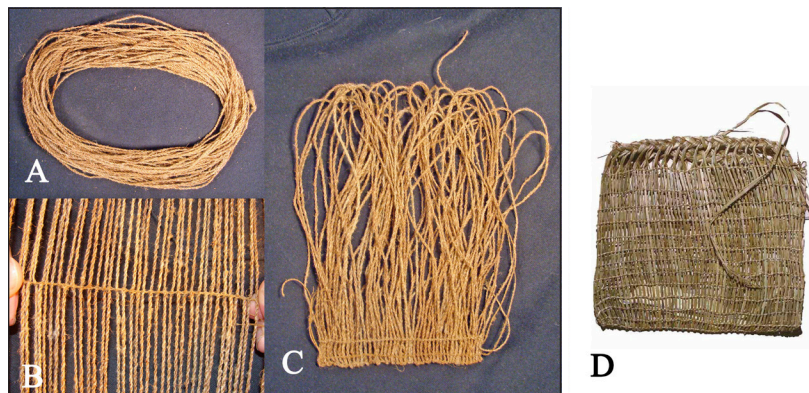
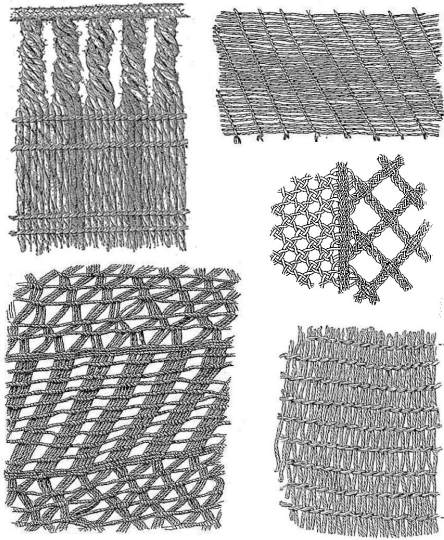


Fig. 2: Making a bag: A) 2-ply dogbane cordage, B) twining, C) half-completed bag, D) finished bag (part D from Kutruuff et al 2004)



Left, Fig. 3:
Twining techniques
from pre-contact
Southeastern
textiles (Holmes
1896 and Drooker
1992)



Fig. 4:
Feather
mantle from
Hawaii,
similar to
mantles
made by
Choctaws
(British
Museum)

sources suggest that Native Southeasterners managed to do it.

James Adair describes Choctaw women gathering shed bison wool in the winter, spinning it into fine thread, and then twining the thread to make shot pouches, which were decorated by stringing beads onto the threads as they were being twined together (Fig. 6). Some of these fancy bison wool pouches had raised work, inside and out (1775:454). Choctaw women, like women from the tribes around them, probably also made sashes, straps, leggings, and leg ornaments from spun bison wool. Choctaw women were especially known for making fancy skirts, “alhkuna,” partly from bison wool and partly from plant fiber, with different designs on the inside and out (Anonymous [1755] 1918:67-68).

To the best of the author’s knowledge, Choctaw traditional textiles have not been made since the mid-1700s, other than a few experiments here and there. In today’s rushed life, the amount of time required to make traditional Choctaw textile art is pretty extreme. But in investing this time, one starts to separate oneself from today’s mindset, gets a little bit closer to the old way of being, and brings back to life something that is Choctaw. Today, some tribes such as the Navajo enjoy worldwide recognition for the textiles that they make. Many of the pieces made by Choctaw hands a few centuries ago were finer and more complex than any Native American textile art being produced today. The art of Choctaw textiles is patiently waiting for just the right person with the interest, patience, and passion, to bring back to life this 10,000-plus-year-old tradition.

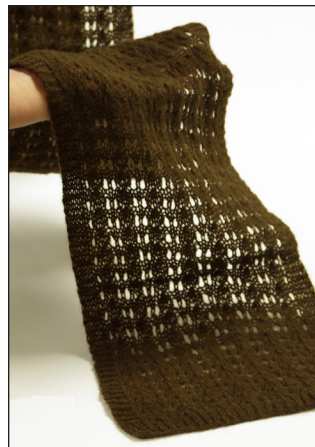


Fig. 5: A fine scarf
made from bison wool
(Buffalo Gold, photo by
Shelly Garner)



Fig. 6: 1700s bison
wool bag (Bushnell 1909)