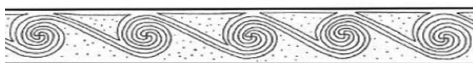


Iti Fabussa



Story of a Choctaw POW comes to light after 300 years

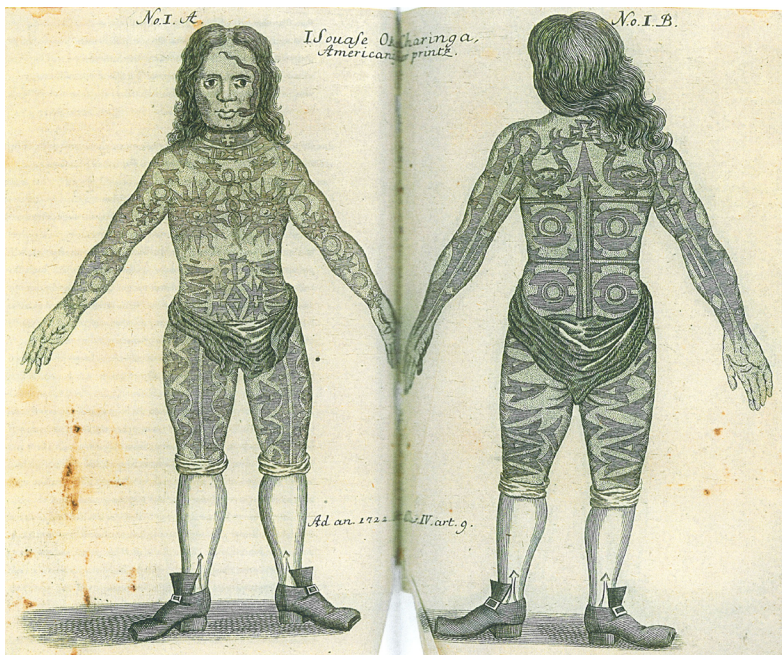
This month, Iti Fabussa presents an incredible and yet heart-wrenching story of two Native American men who were captured by enemies in what is now the American Southeast and taken to Europe as prisoners of war. For 300 years, their story was unknown, until recently when researchers managed to reconstruct it from bits and pieces found in original documents from the American Colonies and Europe. Available information suggests that one of these two POWs was probably a Choctaw man. What is presented below is a synopsis of the recently published account (Sullivan 2012), combined with insights from the “Choctaw” side of the frontier.

From a Choctaw perspective, the story would begin with a boy born somewhere in the Choctaw homeland in 1694 or 1695. He was the son of a chief and part of a powerful family. His birth name is unknown, but as a young man, he was given the name Okchalincha, which could be translated as “Brought to Life.” Growing up, he probably heard stories handed down from the days of his great-great-great-great-grandparents about a Spanish army (led by Hernando Desoto), entering the area and fighting with Tribal communities. These stories might have seemed almost unreal when Okchalincha was a young boy, because for 130 years since the Spanish left, few or no Europeans entered the Choctaw homeland. Only the deadly diseases they brought continued to rage through the area.

However, when Okchalincha was around 5 years old, a different group of Europeans, the French suddenly arrived on the Gulf Coast, very near Choctaw country. They soon set up a permanent settlement on Mobile Bay. An alliance was created between the Choctaw and the French. The French supplied the Choctaw with guns, metal, and cloth, while the Choctaw provided food, hides, and military protection for the small French colony.

Although an international alliance with France brought benefits to the Choctaw people, it also involved Choctaw communities in France’s global power struggle with England. In hopes of weakening France’s Native allies, English colonists in Carolina armed warriors from English-allied Tribes with guns and began paying them for prisoners that they could capture from other Tribes.

By around 1700, Chickasaw slaving raids, sponsored by the English had resulted in 500 Choctaw women and children taken as slaves, 1,800 Choctaw men, women, and children killed, and 800 Chickasaw warriors killed (Iberville 1981:172 [1702]). The inhumanity of the English slave trade was ultimately one contrib-



uting factor in the Yamasee War of 1715, in which Muscogee Tribes attacked the Carolina Colony and brought it to its knees, before the Cherokee entered the war and helped to save the colonists.

Okchalincha grew up in this environment. No doubt, from an early age, concepts of bravery and self-sacrifice to protect the community were instilled in him. As a young man, he must have distinguished himself in fighting for his community, and so was tattooed as a warrior, from head to toe. Through circumstances that we do not know, this warrior was later captured by an enemy force, taken hundreds of miles on foot to the

Carolina Colony, and sold as a slave to John Pight.

According to surviving records, Pight was one of the most viscous English slave traders, and was effectively banned from the colony because of the role that his abuses of Native people played in starting the Yamasee War. When he sailed for England in 1719, he took two Native American men with him, Okchalincha and a man named Tvstvnvke who was probably from one of the Muscogee Tribes.

People living in Europe during this time had a curiosity about Native Americans. Pight capitalized on this interest and the sensation caused by the spectacular dark-blue tattoos that covered the bodies of his two captives. Pight made up costumes for Okchalincha and Tvstvnvke and concocted sensational stories about their past and his own. He began charging fees for Okchalincha and Tvstvnvke to appear as spectacles at theaters and in circuses around London. Perhaps most humiliatingly, Pight brought paying customers to the men’s living quarters, to observe their tattoos and inspect them like works of art in a gallery, as they stood still and stone-faced. Pight even once had them perform a war dance at a London woodwind concert. While the sites, settings, and cultural juxtapositions must have sometimes been pretty interesting, Okchalincha and Tvstvnvke were prisoners of war, being forced to act against their will.

Neither of the Native men spoke English; Pike was the only person in their lives that they could communicate with, apparently through the Mobilian trade jargon. Pike, jealous of profits and not wanting to lose control over the men, did his best to keep them from interacting with other people. Nevertheless, the two became quite popular in London. They were entertained by nobility, given tours of London landmarks, and several times invited to an audience with King George I.

After about six months, the profitability of these spectacles

started to wane for Pight. He took Okchalincha and Tvstvnvke to Paris against their will, where he hired them out as mascots for the unpopular American Company. Thereafter, the three disappear from the historical record, but reappear in present day Germany in 1722.

Eventually, Pight got tired of touring, and boarded the two men in Dresden, attempting to sell them as curiosities to King Augustus. This situation allowed them to interact more with the local people. From the writings of these people, we start to see a bit of the human side of the two men. We learn that Okchalincha and Tvstvnvke wanted to return to their homelands, that they thought European clothing was silly, that they liked European beds and enjoyed smoking. We learn that they had scars on their bodies from battle wounds. The two were noteworthy among Europeans for their honesty. They had an excellent sense of direction, and rarely got lost, even in the streets of towns unfamiliar to them. We also learn that Tvstvnvke was learning to paint, depicting the cities that they traveled through. Okchalincha had a reserved personality, and Tvstvnvke liked to make him laugh. The Europeans who were interacting with these two men, seem to have respected them. Some expressed regret that they had come under Pight's control.

Okchalincha and Tvstvnvke had a surprisingly broad influence in Europe. They are mentioned in *The Half-Pay Officer*, an English comedy and in several period satires. They were the background for a character in the French play *Arlequin Sauvage*, and their names found their way into a Masonic ritual. Multiple paintings and statues of them were commissioned by wealthy Europeans. One image of Okchalincha (Fig. 1) survives.

In 1723, Pight sold Okchalincha and Tvstvnvke to King Augustus. By this point, they had started to learn the German language. In Pight's absence, they finally had an opportunity to freely interact with other people, and they made friends with some of the Protestant citizens of the town. Tragically, much like the Choctaw's alliance with France, this friendship pulled the two men into an international struggle between Protestantism and Catholicism. Following the encouragement of their new friends, Okchalincha and Tvstvnvke were baptized into the Protestant faith as Friedrich Christian and August Christian. This was done without the King's permission. In punishment, he decided to gift them to the Czarina of Russia, moving them to an area where they knew absolutely no one.

Okchalincha and Tvstvnvke disappear from the known historical record in October 1724 riding in a carriage, ultimately headed for Russia. Tears were in their eyes as they left their friends and headed for an area then experiencing a plague epidemic. Okchalincha was 29 years old.

In their lifetimes, Okchalincha's family members never found out what happened to him, heard the fantastic and sad story of his years touring Europe, or knew that years after his capture, he was still out there alive and wanting to come home. It is hoped that by telling his story to the Choctaw people, even 300 years later, some small measure of closure is provided and some due respect is given to Okchalincha for the difficult and also incredible path that he traveled.

Works Cited

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