Chahta Amptoba | Choctaw Traditional Pottery (Part 3)

This article is the third in a four-part series on Choctaw traditional pottery and its revitalization by Choctaw people. The two previous articles discussed the importance of pottery in Choctaw traditional culture and described the raw materials and pottery-making techniques used by Choctaw traditional potters. This article will present the traditional firing process, which magically transforms dried mud into finished, functional pottery.

It's mid-summer, and the hot sun is drying up and hardening the soil across much of Oklahoma. With enough sun and summer heat, clay soils can literally dry out as hard as bricks. But no matter how hard the soil gets this summer, when the rains wash over it this fall, it will again become soft and squishy. The same thing is true for traditional pottery made from native clay. No matter how carefully the potter builds the pot, and no matter how long the pot air-dries, as soon as it comes in contact with water it will turn right back into slick mud. For a pot to be useable, it must first be passed through a fire so hot that the clay is forever changed into a hard stone-like material that does not dissolve in water.

Choctaw people have traditionally paid very high reverence to fire. One of the ancient names for it is "luak hvshtahli itichapa," meaning "fire the friend of God." This name captures the connection that Choctaw people perceived between fire on earth and the sun in the sky, which itself was conceived of as the eye of God watching the earth. Each Choctaw village maintained its own sacred fire, extinguished and rekindled every year during the Green Corn Ceremony, or "Luak Mosholi." All of the households within a village obtained their own fires from this sacred fire. Fires were treated respectfully, and certain things were never done to them, or spoken around them. The process of pottery firing was and still is approached reverently.

Today's Choctaw potters fire their pottery on dry days, preferably in the evening, when the wind is at its calmest. The process (see photos) begins in the afternoon, when the earth on the spot where the firing is to take place is churned over with a shovel to a depth of about 6 inches. Then, a fire of hardwood is built on top and allowed to burn down to coals. These coals are churned into the loose soil, and another fire is built on top and allowed to burn to coals. This process is repeated until the heat has completely dried the soil.

Once the heated ground is dry, the remaining coals are pushed out into a ring around the dry earth. Dry, broken pieces of fired pottery are laid on the hot earth and allowed to heat up, and then to start cooling down. Pots that have been air drying for at least two weeks are set on this layer of broken pottery, where they are allowed to slowly and evenly warm. Before the coals die down, more wood is added. Slowly a small fire is built around the pots, but not allowed to touch them directly.

Pottery firing is a tricky process. If the pots are not heated very slowly and very evenly, they will break in the fire. Our ancestors had no temperature gauges to monitor the process of the firing, but they knew how to judge the temperature by paying close attention to the fire and the pottery. As the pottery heats up in a wood fire, it will turn a dark color from

Firing sequence described in text. Steps proceed from left to right and top to bottom.

absorbing smoke. Once the pottery becomes dark, it is safe to build the fire in closer so that the flames begin to touch it. As the pots are engulfed in flames and continue to heat up, they will turn a light color. This is because the clay has become hot enough that the carbon from the smoke has burned out of it. The fire continues to be slowly and evenly built up and around the pottery. As the wood burns and the pottery gets covered with coals, the clay will start to glow a dull red color. This point is usually reached about three hours after the pottery is first put into the fire.

When the pottery glows red it is at roughly 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit, and is functionally fired. Chemical reactions have taken place in the clay that drive off the water that was ionically bonded to the clay particles. Also, the clay particles themselves have begun to melt together. These changes make the clay hard and forever impervious to water.

The final color of a pot is a result of the fire's interaction on the specific minerals in the clay. A light-colored pot can be attained by using wood that produces little smoke (such as dry cedar limbs without needles) in the later stages of the firing. Pots can be made a black color by pulling them out of the fire while they are still fairly hot, and burying them in a pile of leaves to smolder. Pots left in the coals to cool in place will usually have fire clouds of light and dark on their surfaces.

Once fired, the pots are fully functional. Eating bowls can be used immediately. Cooking pots must first be seasoned with oil, then they can be set right in the hot coals and used just like cast iron.

The pottery making process developed by our ancestors is a pretty impressive technology. Today, when western-trained potters see our Choctaw potters digging native clay out of the ground or firing pottery in an open wood fire, or cooking right on the fire in traditional clay pottery, their jaws usually hit the ground in amazement. What our Choctaw potters do every day is something that many western potters think is simply impossible until they see it being done. Clearly, the Choctaw pottery process was originally developed by skilled and intelligent people. Today this same process is being revitalized by their descendants. Next month, some of these traditional artists who are bringing Choctaw traditional pottery back to life will be the focus of the fourth and final part of this series.