



# Spiritual beliefs and rituals

## A collection of early written references

**Dear Iti Fabvssa:** Could you elaborate on the spiritual beliefs and rituals, as well as the roles our ancestors played in Choctaw traditions before they became Christianized?

**Response from Iti Fabvssa:** Spirituality was a crucial element in the lives of our ancestors, and we thank you for bringing up this important topic. Answering your question is challenging for three reasons: First, some elements of Choctaw spiritual beliefs were and still are very personal in nature, and are not appropriately translatable into a newspaper column. Second, the spirituality of our Choctaw ancestors varied somewhat between different communities and families. Third, Choctaw interpretations of spiritual beings and events seem to have changed and developed from generation to generation. Accordingly, what follows is a collection of early written references that give snapshots of what communities and individuals believed and chose to pass on.

Nearly all sources state that early Choctaws believed in one single Superior Being, known by different names to different Choctaw people. These include “**Nanapesa**” (Spiritual Law-Giver), “**Nanishtahullo Chito**” (Something highly revered), and “**Hvshtvhl**” (probably from **hashi-hvt atahli**, meaning “the sun’s established order”) (Wright 1828:179).

Ancestral Choctaw people did not actually worship the sun, as some people have implied, but rather the sun was seen as a hole in the sky, through which God’s eye watched the earth (Byington 1915:148). Governing matters of war, it was said that as long as the sun shone on a person, this person would prosper; when it ceased shining on that person, he would die. Some Choctaws conceived of the moon as the sun’s wife, and the stars as the sun’s children.

In the traditional Choctaw mode of thinking, fire is an earthly representative of the sun. Some Choctaws called it **Luak Hashtahli Itichapa** (Fire, the friend of God) (Wright 1828: 179-180). Accordingly, fire was given a great deal of respect. Certain things were not done or said around it, or burned in it.

Conversely, after a successful hunt a particular organ from the animal was burned in the fire (c.f. Romans 1999:137), probably as a gesture of thanksgiving.

Traditionally an individual with the title of **Tishomjiko** (servant chief) was responsible for arranging community dances, ceremonies, and feasts (Anonymous 1918:58). Through the year, a variety of spiritually significant dances were held. Most of them were named after important animals (c.f. Anonymous 1918:68). Many of these could be described in today’s terms as a stomp dance. The biggest Choctaw celebration and most important spiritual event, the Green Corn Ceremony, was held when the corn began to ripen (Adair 1775:325; Swanton 2001:225-226). This was a time of fasting, thanksgiving, personal reflection, and stomp dancing. At this time, people forgave each other for their wrongs, extinguished the community’s fires, and rekindled them. Most Choctaw communities chose to hide their ceremonies and traditional dances from European observers, both through seclusion and by transforming them into today’s Choctaw Social Dances.

Traditional Choctaw cosmology includes a number of spiritual entities in addition to the Supreme Being. One of the benevolent beings is **Ohoyo Osh Chishba** (Unknown Woman), who some stories say brought corn to the Choctaws. Another group of supernatural beings is known by two different names: **Bohpulli** (Throwers) and **Kowi Anuk Asha** (Forest Dwellers). These are small human-like creatures who are responsible for teaching medicine to **Alekchi** (Choctaw doctors), who, in turn, use it to cure Choctaw people from their ailments. However, these same beings are also known for playing mischievous tricks on people. Some Choctaw individuals drew upon benevolent supernatural power to serve as **Hopaii** (prophets) to direct the people. Others used supernatural powers to make rain, often employing a boiled herb, dances and songs (Romans 1999:138-139)

In traditional Choctaw thought, the beings

described above are opposed by a group of sinister spiritual entities. **Nalusa Chito** (big black thing) is roughly equivalent to the devil in Christian thought. **Oka Nahullo** (Something holy in the water), are human-like who live under the water, have light-colored skins, and sometimes capture people. **Nalusa Falaya** (something long and black) resembles a man, but has small eyes and long, pointed ears, and frightens people. **Hashuk Oka Hoiya** (grass water drop) is a glowing orb that travels at night and will lead people away if they follow it. **Ishkitini** are people who use supernatural powers to harm others and are able to take the shape of a horned owl.

In traditional Choctaw thought, a person has **shilup**, or spirit, and a **shilombish** or shadow. When a person dies, the shilombish leaves the body and may haunt the earth as a ghost. The shilop remains on earth for a few days. For its benefit, relatives burned a fire at the spot of death or in front of the deceased’s house for several days after death. Eventually, the shilup would make a long westward journey to the **Shilup Iyakni**, or (Land of Ghosts) (Cushman 1899:363). Most shilup would go to a warm, sunny pleasant place that abounds in game and wild fruit, to spend eternity in happiness. The shilup of murders, and perhaps others, would go to a second place that is cold and sunless, either a landscape filled with briars and thorns, or a stagnant cesspool in a river.

The remains of ancestral Choctaw people were treated with a great deal of respect. It was and is still believed by many that disturbing human remains can bring a haunting by the deceased person’s ghost. Seeing a ghost can foretell impending death. In Choctaw thought, they can disguise themselves as foxes or owls. Nightmares were sometimes attributed to a deceased person’s ghost entering the thoughts of a sleeping person (Wright 1828:183).

Much more could be written if space allowed, but for this we refer you to the sources below and the Choctaw elders or alekchi with whom you may be in contact.

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1999[1775] A Concise Natural History of East and West Florida, edited by Kathryn Holland Braund. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.

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