



Women's clothing

Over the last few months, the writers of Iti Fabvssa have been receiving quite a few inquiries about the type of clothing that Choctaw women wore back before European contact. In this month's edition, we'll be presenting some of what is known about the garments that were made and worn by our talented early foremothers. To do this, we'll be taking you on a trip backwards through time.

The beautiful traditional dresses worn by Choctaw women today are made from colorful cotton cloth and edged in fine ribbon work. Garments like these have been made by Choctaw ladies for several generations, but Choctaw women's wear has not always looked like this. Today's dresses are the product of a long line of development, which has incorporated a great deal of change in both fashion and material. The forerunners of today's Choctaw ribbon work dresses can be seen in paintings from the 1840s-1870s, some of which depict women wearing separate skirts and blouses with very simple, but elegant ribbon work. Choctaw women made these outfits from store-bought cloth in styles that resembled the clothes worn by their Euro-American neighbors, but they often put their own twist on it by executing Tribal designs in the ribbon work.

The origins of these cotton clothes go back to the early 1700s, when Choctaw women first began obtaining cloth from French traders. Written accounts from around this time period suggest that they first made simple, topless skirts from this cloth (Adair 1775:6-7), which resembled an indigenous style of clothing that had been worn by their ancestors for centuries.

In the millennia before Europeans entered Choctaw country, our grandmothers designed, produced and wore clothing that was both functional and beautiful. Rather than purchasing their materials, they drew upon a great deal of traditional knowledge, skill,



Lorelei Sullivan wears a Choctaw dress to greet visitors at Tribal Headquarters.

and hard work to transform natural objects into the raw materials that were needed to make clothing. The two primary materials that they used include tvlhko (buckskin) and nan tvnna (cloth) made by Choctaw people.

The process of Choctaw traditional hide-tanning is complex; someday it will be the topic of a full Iti Fabvssa article. However, we'd like to include just a little bit about it here to give some idea of exactly what all went into making our grandmothers' clothing. Soft, clothing-grade buckskin was made by carefully skinning a hide from a deer carcass, scraping off the membrane that lies on the flesh side of the hide, coating the hide in wood ash (probably) for a few days, scraping off the hair as well as the underlying epidermis and grain layer of the ash-soaked hide, putting the scraped hide in a creek for a day to wash out the wood ash, wringing the hide out, soaking it in brains to dress the hide fibers, wringing the hide out again, constantly stretching and pulling the brain-soaked hide as it dries so that

it will become soft, and finally, exposing the dry, softened hide to smoke to protect it from getting damaged by water. This produces, a soft, warm, amazing product, but it takes more than 10 hours of hands-on work per hide before one can even begin to make it into clothing. Tired yet?

Our early ancestors also produced their own cloth, ranging from coarse to very fine in texture. The fibers that they used to make it came from buffalo wool, the inner bark of small mulberry saplings cut in the spring, or from the stalks of certain annual plants including stinging hvshtapolha (stinging nettle), nuchi (milkweed), and dogbane gathered in the fall. The fibers were processed either by soaking the plant material in water until everything except the fibers started to rot away, or through manual processes that involved a lot of pounding and peeling. The fibers were then spun into yarn, either by hand or through the use of a drop spindle. Bundles of

plant fiber yarn were sometimes bleached through different chemical processes, and then colored with vegetable dyes. These were then twined by hand, into a piece of fabric, or a finished, whole garment. It appears that a great diversity existed in the twining patterns that they used. Some of it was very fancy, roughly equivalent to today's lace.

Once the materials were processed, an ancestral Choctaw woman was ready to make her clothing. In the centuries leading up to European contact, the basic unit of clothing that our grandmothers wore was the alhkuna, a type of wrap-around skirt (Swanton 1946:472). We know that Southeastern Tribes sometimes made these skirts from buckskin (Adair 1775 6-7), and at times and places Choctaws probably did too. However, our best existing source (Anonymous 1918[1755]:67-68) says that Choctaw women in the early 1700s made their alhkuna out of a piece of fabric, as thick as canvass, that was created from a combination of buffalo wool and plant fiber. The fabric is said to have been "double like a two-sided handkerchief", and to have measured approximately 54 inches wide by 160 inches long.

The garment was wrapped around the waist and tied on to make the skirt that probably went down to about the knees. Depending on the form of the garment and the resources of their wearer, an alhkuna could serve as work clothes, or be a part of fancy attire. Mississippi is very warm and humid in the summer, and this light, cool garment was usually all that our grandmothers wore during the hot season.

During the cool season, the alhkuna could

be augmented with several other pieces of clothing. One of these, a turkey feather mantle, is known as kasko in the Choctaw language (Byington 1915:225). These were made by attaching the iridescent feathers from the turkey's breast to both sides of a net. The feathers over-lapped each other and created a warm, soft, garment (Adair 1775:423). Early documents suggest that some of the kasko worn by influential people were very, very fine and beautiful pieces of clothing. Written accounts also indicate that many Southeastern women, instead of wearing a feather mantle, draped a long, rectangular piece of cloth or buckskin over their upper body, wrapping it over their left shoulder, and tying it under their right arm (Elvas 1995[1557]:75-76). It is likely that many of our Choctaw grandmothers did this, particularly if they lacked the resources or time to make a kasko.

In cold weather, Choctaw women, like their Chickasaw relatives to the north, probably wore robes made from the hides of young buffalo (Adair 1775:8).

These robes were tanned with the fur on, and were worn with the fur side of the robe against the wearer. Many of the robes worn by women in the Southeast were decorated on the flesh side with a variety of elaborate painted designs, and probably also shell beadwork.

On cold days, or when traveling through thorny patches, Choctaw women often wore buckskin pucker-toed moccasins. The long uppers of the moccasins extended halfway up the calf where they nearly met the bottom of the alhkuna. Summer or winter, one thousand years ago, or today, Choctaw women have always enjoyed accessoriz-

ing their outfits with jewelry, makeup, and hair-styling. Due to space constraints, these will have to be a topic for another time.

References Cited

Adair, James

1775 *The History of the American Indians...* Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, London.

1776

Anonymous

1918 (1755?) Translated by John Swanton. *An Early Account of the Choctaw Indians. Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association* 5(2).

Byington, Cyrus

1915 *A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language*. Bureau of American Ethnology Vol. 46, Washington.

Elvas, a Gentleman from

1993[1557] *True Relation ... [1557]*. Translated by James Alexander Robinson.

In *The De Soto Chronicles* Vol. 1, edited by Lawrence Clayton et. al, pp. 19-220. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.

Swanton, John R.

1946 *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*. Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 137. Greenwood Press Publishers, New York.