

Iti Fabvssa



# Women – The givers and supporters of life

May is the month of Mothers' Day, and it is fitting for Iti Fabvssa to honor our Choctaw mothers for their love, talents, and their quiet, capable work that has supported generations of Choctaw families, making the very existence of the Nation possible to this very day. We will do this by presenting a little bit of what is known about the daily lives, roles, and personal character of early Choctaw women.

Before colonization, women held positions of great respect, esteem, and power in Choctaw society. Women were recognized as the givers and supporters of life. We can get some idea of the sacredness in which this role was viewed, through the Choctaw word "hollo," which refers to the feminine essence. From this term, stem other Choctaw words such as "ihollo," meaning to love, "hullochi", to sanctify, and "holitopa," beloved or holy. In the traditional Choctaw way of thinking, women in general and mothers in particular, were likened onto the earth, which makes life possible by providing gifts of sustenance, shelter, and even the physical bodies we live in. Women did the same for their families. A common name for Nvnih Waiya, the most sacred place on the landscape for early Choctaws was "Holitopa Ishki," or "Beloved Mother." Clearly Choctaw women were beloved.

Some of the virtues that Choctaw society valued highly in women and mothers are evident in common names that Choctaw women carried. A number of these names contain the word "ima" meaning "to give." For example, Hotima means, "she who looks for and gives," Pisatima means "she who sees and gives," Chumpatima, "she who buys and gives." Other common Choctaw women's names end with "ona," meaning, "to arrive here." An example is Hotona, which means "she who seeks and arrives." These and other names show us that early Choctaw women were respected for demonstrating the virtues of generosity, industry, and perseverance.

Just as today, early Choctaw women fulfilled many vital roles for their communities, families, and tribe. Central to all of these roles was that of life-giver. Expectant women were revered. Husbands fasted for them, and children who dared to poke fun at an expectant mother's growing belly stood the risk of being reprimanded severely by elders. Women secluded themselves at the time of delivery.



Photo Provided

**Choctaw women continue to love and support their families. Melissa Reich, above, reads to son Jace.**

This was considered the height of the female power, and men were not allowed in the vicinity for fear of harm coming to them and to the baby.

In traditional Choctaw society, family lines followed the female rather than the male side, exactly the opposite from Euro-American society. Choctaw individuals inherited their Iksa and clan from their mother. During tribal functions, the children sat at the fire of their mother's family, while the father sat at a separate fire with his own siblings, and the children of his sisters. The family house and most of what was inside it was considered to be the property of the women. If a couple chose to break up, the man would take his weapons and move into the house of his own family, and the children would go with the mother. If a wife died, the property went to her children and biological family, not to her husband. Similarly in the event of a mother's death, the children went with the mother's family, not with their father.

Choctaw women worked hard to support their families with a particular confidence and dignity. Women produced the majority of the food eaten by their families. Assisted by males during field-clearing and harvest, it was only fitting that women, the givers of life, had sole charge of the fields during the growing season. In fact, according to some Choctaw oral traditions, it was a supernatural woman, Ohoyo-osh Chishba, who gifted corn to the Choctaw people in the first place. Besides gardening, women gathered greens, fresh fruit, vegetables, tubers and nuts from the woods to balance their families' nutrition. They prepared and served it too. Although they got a lot accomplished, their domestic work was not that of a slave to their husbands. Far to the contrary, Choctaw women often worked in groups with singing, laughter, and gossip that made the tasks enjoyable.

Many early Choctaw women were fantastic artists. They made basic, everyday utensils and articles of domestic life with a creativity and artistry that is truly inspiring. Women were the primary creators and custodians of the Choctaw arts of basketry, textiles, and pottery. Choctaw girls practiced these arts so that they would be able to have their pick of young men for a husband when they came

of age

Women often went with their men on diplomatic missions to other tribes and to Euro-American groups. Some European commentators believed that it was a mark of savagery for Choctaw men to bring women with them, rather than leaving them at home where they would be protected. However, from a Choctaw perspective, this was simply a sign of the importance that women had in Choctaw society, and of the confidence that was placed in these women. Sometimes in order to establish friendly relationships with other groups at these meetings, a ceremony was conducted in which Choctaw women adopted individuals from the other group into their own clans, making them family. This not only necessitated the presence of women at such meetings, but also meant that they had a real say in what was taking place. Similarly, it was women who made the choice of whether or not to adopt war captives into their families, and ultimately into the Choctaw tribe.

Choctaw women often served as motivators for their families and communities, and did whatever was necessary to support them. Some women served as Alikchi, or doctors. Sometimes, Choctaw women temporarily accepted the role of chief when their husbands died; hereditary power is said to have been passed to girls when there were no male heirs.

Although it was the man's role to protect the community, fight, and if necessary, kill, there are records of Choctaw women carrying weapons to protect their families, tracking fleeing enemies, and carrying their husband's quiver of arrows and shouting encouragement to him on the battlefield. In 1541, at a place called Mabilla, a battle

was fought between the ancestors of today's Choctaw people and an army of Spanish Conquistadors led by Hernando De Soto. The Spanish chroniclers record that after most of the Choctaw warriors had fallen, the women picked up their fallen husband's and father's weapons and fought the Spanish to the last woman rather than give up their liberty and honor. To this day, the Choctaw war dance, unlike those of many other tribes, involves women as well as men.

With colonization, European ideas and ways of doing things were forced on the Choctaw people. During the 1800s, many segments of Euro-American society believed that women were intellectually inferior to men, undeserving of formal education, and unworthy of a formal vote in community decisions. The derogatory term "squaw" also came into use. Some pretty determined attempts were made to push these Euro-American views about women onto Choctaw society. It is amazing, from the vantage point of 100 years later how far things have come towards full circle, with women earning some of the rights and respect in Euro-American society, that Choctaw women have always possessed.

Our Choctaw mothers are descended from a beloved and honorable line of forebearers. Today, just as they always have, Choctaw mothers continue to love and support their families, and make vital contributions to their communities, country, nation, and the world. They are the roots that keep Choctaw society on solid ground and nurture it to help it fulfill its future potential. Holitopa hachiahoke!