



The role of Choctaw fathers and uncles

May's edition of Iti Fabvssa honored Choctaw mothers. With June being the month of Father's Day, this edition is dedicated to honoring Choctaw fathers and maternal uncles. We will do this by presenting a little bit of what is known about the daily lives, roles, and personal character of early Choctaw men.

Traditional Choctaw society places a special emphasis on balance. The vital and sacred roles of women in 18th Century Choctaw society, which we described last month, were offset and balanced by the roles of men. While women were considered the givers and nurturers of life, men were considered the takers of life. For example: while women gave birth to children, men killed the enemies who threatened the future of Choctaw communities; similarly, while women grew gardens, men supplemented their family's diet with meat from animals that they hunted. Choctaw folklore likens women unto hiloha, the rolling thunder, men are likened unto malvtha, the powerful lightning that can split trees.

Choctaw girls grew into women through the sacred power innate in their bodies. Conversely, boys could become men only through years of hard physical, mental and spiritual training in order to be able to prove their worth through success in hunting, stickball, oration/debate, and most importantly, battle. Without proven success, a male would never be considered a man, regardless of how old he became. The path to manhood was a hard one; some didn't make it; some perished in the attempt, and some become hobak. Those who did become men would be recognized as persons worthy of respect; their advice would be valued in tribal council meetings; they would be sought after by young women looking for a good husband, and they would become fathers. Continued success in masculine pursuits through life might take a man all the way up to the office of chief.

Let's take a little closer look at the path of Choctaw men in the 18th Century. At birth, or shortly thereafter, baby boys would be



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given a name that often reflected a particular occurrence in their early lives, or referred to a distinguishing quality or characteristic. Young boys' beds were covered in bear or panther skins, the belief being that this would help transfer the bravery and powerful quality of these animals onto the boy as he slept. At the age of three or four, a boy would be given a bow and arrows and encouraged to practice. Boys of a little more maturity would assemble early in the morning to learn tribal history, battle strategy, and lessons in morals and spirituality from respected elder men. They were trained to be honest, generous, and to keep their emotions from controlling them. Boys were given a great deal of freedom, and often spent the day running races, wrestling, having shooting contests, hunting small animals, playing physically demanding games like stickball and achapi, and playing games of intuition, like naki luma (hide the bullet). These activities were fun, but they also developed the set of skills, physical abilities, and competency in the woods that would all be essential for the boys to one day take on the roles of men. In the evening, the boys would again assemble for stories from the elder men. As the boys grew in age, the men would begin taking them out on hunts. On these forays, boys were given a great deal of silent teaching and encouragement. As boys matured physically, they became known as "Hattak Himitta", or "young men". Theirs was the lowest of four "gradations" for Choctaw males.

War had always been a part of Choctaw life, but when European colonial powers arrived in the Southeast, they worked hard to increase dissention and war between the tribes. Beginning in the late

1600s, English-sponsored slaving and scalping raids were waged almost constantly against Choctaw communities. Choctaw society became militarized in order to survive. At least in some communities, young men were whipped with canes to teach train them not to fear pain or physical hardship. Some, of their own accord, had contests to see who could stand next to stirred-up hornet nests the longest. In their mid teens, boys might begin traveling with the Tvshka Chimpota, small defensive patrols that searched for raiding war parties within Choctaw country. With proven ability, youth might be asked to go on an occasional war party into enemy country to avenge the deaths of clan relatives, although most Choctaw battles were defensive ones.

Success in war would bring about a transformational change in a male's life.

After showing some feat of prowess against an enemy, a male became a Tvshka, or warrior, the gradation rank for Choctaw males. It was at this point that he was really recognized as a man in Choctaw society. He would likely be tattooed, and given a new, warrior name, by which even strangers would recognize him as a man worthy of respect. Many of these war names describe what the warrior did in battle, and end in the word "vbi" (generally spelled ubbee in English), meaning, "to beat" or "kill." Thus, we have "Musholatubbee," meaning "extinguishes and kills; Eyachubbe, meaning "goes and kills," and Nowabbi, meaning "walks and kills." Many Choctaw families still carry these names today, handed down from distinguished combat veteran grandfathers several generations ago. In 18th century Choctaw society, Tvshka were respected as protectors of the community, and their opinions mattered at Tribal Council.

With continued success in war, a man's prestige would continue to grow. He would be able to raise followers for his own military expeditions, and possibly earn a new war name or title, possibly going through a succession of several. The titles of such highly successful warriors often incorporated the word "humma," meaning "red" in the Choctaw language. In traditional Choctaw thought, this color was associated with warfare and military success. Thus, we have Shulushumma, "Red Shoes," and "Tvshkahumma," "Red Warrior."

Although military success was important, men were not gauged on this factor alone. With some military success, demonstrated speaking ability, intelligence, leadership, and generosity could pull a man up through the ranks respect and social power. For example, some highly honorable Choctaw titles end in the phrase "imalhtaha," meaning "it is finished to him." The name Hopaii Imalhtaha, implies that this special person had reached the height of being a profit. Such a man might have been part of the third gradation in Choctaw society, a "Hattak Holitopa," a beloved man, respected for his wisdom and spiritual power. He would be welcomed towards the inner circle of the Choctaw council.

Success in war and leadership, and proven wisdom could bring a Choctaw man all the way to the fourth and highest male gradation in Choctaw society, miko, or "chief." Choctaw society had a variety of chiefly positions, including assistant community chiefs, local community chiefs, and district chiefs. While having important family connections could certainly help a man's prestige, and climb through the different gradations, positions were maintained through merit. A slip-up could demote a Miko down to a Tvshka. Chief Pushmataha, who apparently had few living family members, is the perfect example of a Choctaw male raising through the ranks of Choctaw society solely on his own merit.

Although protecting the community was a man's most important job, to which he might be called at any instant, men actually spent the great majority of their time away from the battlefield. As before

mentioned, honored men taught and trained the boys of the community. Within the family, training and discipline of the children, particularly boys, was the duty of their mother's brother. Unlike the children's father, he was of their same iksa and clan.

Men also hunted meat for their families, and perhaps others in their iksa who had no one to hunt for them. The meat they provided was essential to the plant-rich Choctaw diet, and the hides, tendons, hooves and antlers were important raw materials. Although men enjoyed these hunts, they were not leisurely affairs by today's standards. Men often traveled many miles on foot over difficult terrain attempting to find game, and then had to stalk close enough to shoot it. Sometimes the hunts involved dangerous animals such as panther and black bear, and there was always a chance of encountering an enemy war party while one was out far from home and alone.

As alluded to above, another important male role was playing stickball. Although the game could sometimes serve as a simple pastime, contests with other villages or other Tribes could be very serious affairs, which were used in the place of warfare to work out disputes. Even without weapons, these games were hotly contested and it was not uncommon for one or several players to lose their lives before the outcome was reached.

Choctaw men made a variety of essential tools and implements for their communities. In addition to their own weapons and the paraphernalia for the stickball game, they made canoes and did woodcarving.

Before European contact, men probably chipped most or all of the stone cutting tools. They were probably also the ones who laboriously fashioned ground stone axes and made shell jewelry. At least in certain times and places, men tanned the hides that they obtained on the hunt. Choctaw men did some of the heavier jobs around the village as well, such as clearing the agricultural fields before planting, helping to set the large posts of houses, or of defensive walls around villages, and helping to harvest the fields when the crops ripened.

Some men also had specialized roles in Choctaw society, in addition to the various offices of chief. Many of the Hopaii, or prophets were men, as were many of the Alikchi. Some Choctaw men were noted and respected orators. Some of the same were entertaining story tellers and comedians.

Despite their many roles, Choctaw men of the 18th century, like women had a great deal of time for leisure, far more than most Americans do today. They spent free time playing active games and games of chance, laughing, joking, and smoking with friends, sharing time with their families, and surely some time just lounging around. They were far from being the stoic, monosyllabic, dim-witted warriors we often see pictured by Hollywood.

We owe our Choctaw father and uncles, past and present a very great deal: our very existence. The path that they have followed has not been an easy one. They mentored the upcoming generations, they represented the community, and they sacrificed of themselves, sometimes their very lives, to ensure that the Choctaw people would survive to this very day.

This Father's Day, lets remember our fathers, uncles, and grandfathers, past and present for all that they mean in our lives.

If you have any questions concerning Choctaw history or culture, please mail to Iti Fabussa c/o BISKINIK, P.O. Box 1210, Durant, OK 74702, or e-mail to biskinik@choctawnation.com with "Iti Fabussa" in the subject line.