

Iti Fabussa



The Choctaw Sweat Lodge

Hello,

My name is Ronnie. I would like to know if Choctaws ever participated in hot rock sweat lodge ceremonies; also any information you have on this.

Dear Ronnie,

Thank you for your interest and your great question. Over the last month, several people have written in to ask about the Choctaw sweat lodge, so this seems like a very appropriate time for us to write about it.

As you know, sweat lodges are small structures that are designed to trap steam and heat inside of them, in order to make the people occupying the lodges sweat. Like a sauna, the purpose of the sweat is to make a person's body release impurities and ease pain and other conditions. Often, in a Native American sweat lodge, the physical process of sweating is accompanied with prayers and spiritual supplication, sometimes combined with herbal and other forms of traditional medicine.

Sweat lodges and healing sweats are common elements in the traditional lifeways of many Native American tribes located in the Arctic region of Alaska, all the way down to central America, and many places in between. This includes the Choctaw. Today, pan-Indian ceremonialism incorporates the Plains Indian sweat lodge, bringing it to Native communities located in urban and other areas from coast to coast.

The sweat lodge has been a part of Choctaw traditional culture for a very long time. Archaeologists working at the Bellefonte site in north-eastern Alabama, not too far from Choctaw county, uncovered the remains of a sweat lodge that dates back almost 1,000 years (Futato 1977). In all likelihood, the use of the sweat lodges in the region dates back quite a bit earlier than that.

From oral history and written descriptions, we know that Choctaws in the past conducted sweats for several specific reasons. It was common for fatigued hunters and warriors, upon returning home, to do a sweat in order to relax their bodies and regain their strength. Choctaw doctors also used sweats to relieve patients with colds and a wide variety of aches and pains.

From the best information we have, it appears that the forms of sweat lodges differed in different Choctaw communities, likely as a result of the available materials and personal preferences. It is probably no coincidence that the sweat lodge has been known by several different Choctaw names including "anuka," meaning "the inside," and "alasha," meaning "a place of sweating" (Cushman 1899, Byington 1915). The process of using heat on the body itself is sometimes referred to as "shila," "to bake."

One form of traditional Choctaw sweat lodge is the hot rock type that you mentioned in your question. As described by an early French writer (anonymous 1755) the sweat lodge, which would accommodate seven people at a time, resembled a little cabin, four feet high, and eight feet in diameter, covered with buffalo hides or blankets. These sweat lodges were located near the center of a village and supervised by a Choctaw doctor. "Balls" were heated in a fire outside of the lodge until glowing red, and then brought in. Water was dipped on them to create the steam. Sometimes, herbs were also boiled, with the steam carrying

the medicine to the patient's pores and lungs (Bossu 1768). After about 45 minutes, the participants would go quickly out of the lodge and dip in the coldest water available, to seal their pores and invigorate them.

A second type of traditional Choctaw sweat appears to have used no steam at all (Cushman 1899). The sweat lodge was made of logs, plastered with mud, and nearly airtight. The sweat lodge had one small door. For use, a fire would be built inside the lodge until it was sufficiently heated. Then, the coals would be racked outside. The patient would go inside the lodge, and the small doorway would be sealed. The heat would cause the patient to sweat profusely. Afterwards, the patient would plunge in cold water.

A third and probably later version of Choctaw sweat lodge was in common use in some places into the late 1800s, and probably after (Halbert n.d., Simpson Tubby in Swanton 2001:236). For this type of sweat, a hole would be dug in the ground large enough to hold one or several pot(s). Medicines would be put in the pot, which would be heated on an above-ground fire. After being heated, the pot would be removed from the fire and set down in the hole. A framework of slats would be placed over the pot. Sometimes, the patient would lay down over the slats and a blanket draped over him to hold in the steam. Other times, only the effected part of the body would be held over the steaming pots and sealed in with the blanket.

Today, many Choctaws continue the practice of the sweat lodge. In a few places, it is done fairly traditionally. In others, the lodges are fairly pan-Indian in the way that they are run. The practice at such a lodge may resemble the following: before the ceremony takes place the patient will make up to 10 tobacco ties. The colors of the ties may be black, white, yellow, red, and sometimes blue. The colors used are determined by the ailment the patient suffers from. Usually it is appropriate to offer strong tobacco to the supervising Choctaw doctor. Today, some sweat lodges are made to face the west (although this probably wasn't often the case in the past). The patients will enter in from the single door and file in to the left. The sweat itself consists of four sessions, which usually take up to an hour and a half. The first session is about five minutes long with low steam intensity. The next session will also be five minutes but the intensity will be increase. The third session will last for 25-30 minutes with high steam intensity. The final session is 30 minutes long with very high steam intensity. If the patient gets too hot, he may lie down on the floor. Prior to entering the sweat lodge, the Choctaw doctor may give a panic code that the individual may use if they need to leave the sweat.

Today, as in the past, many Choctaws participate in the sweat lodge for the perceived health and spiritual benefits that they derive from it. An ancient but developing practice, it connects Choctaws with our ancestors as well as the other Tribes around us. Thank you again for your question, Ronnie.

Note: A bibliography of references cited in this article is available at the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Dept.