



# Ancient Choctaw burial practice

## Question:

My name is Skylar and I am a seventh-grader in Texas. I am also a member of the Choctaw Nation. I have a list of questions that I am doing for a project about the Choctaw funeral rite of passage and bone picking.

Here are my questions:

1. Do any Choctaw people still practice the bone picking ritual?
2. How did the Choctaw practice this ritual during the Trail of Tears?
3. What was the gender of the bone pickers?
4. What did the bone pickers do with the bones after they were done with their job?
5. How does the Festival of Morning of the Dead compare to bone picking?
6. How was this an important rite of passage?
7. What is a Choctaw funeral like today?
9. Do you see any similarities between funerals today and funerals of long ago?

Thank you! I appreciate any help you can give!!!

## Dear Skylar,

You have brought up some good questions about an important part of Choctaw traditional culture, or for that matter, of any culture; how to say “goodbye” to loved ones when they pass away. For some, talking about death and burial is uncomfortable, but death is a part of life, and helps define us as mortal people.

In traditional Choctaw thought, a living person has “shilombish,” or spirit, and a “shilup” or shadow. When a person dreams at night, it is because his shilombish has left his body, and traveled to the place he was “dreaming” of, returning before he awakes. When a person dies, both the shilup and shilombish leave the body. The shilup may haunt the earth as a ghost for a very long period of time, while the shilombish remains on earth for a few days or months before making a long westward journey to Land of Ghosts (see Wright 1828; although his definitions of shilup and shilombish are exactly the opposite of how Choctaws use the words today). In the distant past, when a person died, relatives burned a fire at the spot of death, or in front of the deceased person’s house for four days. This was for the comfort of the shilombish while it was still on earth, in hopes of keeping it from being angry (Folsom in Cushman 1899:363-364). It also served as a focused time for the close family members who sat up day and night tending the fire to begin the psychological process of dealing with their loss.

Bone-picking was just part of an elaborate burial and mourning process that was followed by most Choctaw communities in the 1700s, and by some ancestors at a much earlier date (Galloway 1995:300-305). There appears to have been some variation in the details of how different Choctaw groups did it, but the basic prac-

lice was similar. After a person’s death, female relatives washed the body and dressed it in the person’s best clothes. Male relatives began erecting a scaffold roughly 30 feet in front of the deceased person’s home. The scaffold was like a small bark cabin, which at least sometimes had walls and a roof. It was supported on four to six forked posts that lifted it at least 6 feet off of the ground. The body was placed up on this scaffold to keep it up out of the reach of animals. A fence was built around the base of the scaffold to keep children from coming near. Items that the person used in life were placed with them on the scaffold, the belief being that they would be able to use them in the next world; a bow and arrows were common for a man, clay pots and jewelry for a woman. A bear skin or blanket was laid on top, and the body and items left there.

Wooden benches were built at the foot of the scaffold, on the east side, for mourners to use. Close family would come sit on the benches several times a day and cry and mourn for the deceased. If people visited the family, they too would come mourn. Even when away from the scaffold, close relatives of the deceased would keep a silent, reverent attitude. They would not participate in dances or stickball, and they would not wear jewelry or anything else to brighten their appearance. The period of mourning often lasted for four months, and often longer for highly respected people.

In at least some communities, the “bone pickers” were called “na foni aiowa” in the Choctaw language, meaning literally “bone-gatherers” (Halbert n.d.). Mostly men filled this respected role, although some women did as well (Anonymous 1918{1755?}:252). These individuals had special tattoos that made them recognizable, and they grew the nails long on their thumb, forefinger, and middle finger. When the bone pickers determined that the mourning period had been long enough, they set a date for the “big cry”, on which friends and family of the deceased would gather at the scaffold. Here they had one last wail and remembrance of the deceased person. Then, the bone picker would climb the scaffold and use his or her fingernails to strip off the remaining flesh from the bones, fully cleaning them. While this process may sound strange or disgusting to some readers, it is arguably no more strange or disgusting than the details of modern mortician work; it is just different. The work of the bone picker was accompanied by the appropriate songs and religious rites. Lastly, the skull would then be painted red, and the bones packed in a box that would be given back to the family. Sometimes the removed flesh was buried in the ground; sometimes, it was left on the scaffold, which was then set on fire and burned (Milfort 1802; reproduced in Swanton 2001:174) along with the deceased’s possessions. Sometimes instead of burning the possessions, the family would give them away to the Euro-American traders (Adair 1775:129). Often a man’s horses or dogs were also killed, the belief being that they would accompany him into the next life.

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After the bones were cleaned and placed in the box, a huge feast was held by and for those who knew the deceased. The bone picker served the food. After the feast, the family and mourners would take them to the family's charnel house, known in Choctaw as "hatak illi foni aiasha" (Byington 1915:139). The charnel house was a rectangular structure, raised up on poles about 6 feet above the ground. It had a roof, but was open at its two long ends (Adair 1775:183). The box of bones would be deposited here, to sit alongside other boxes containing the bones of previously deceased family members. At this point, the family ceased mourning, letting go of their deceased loved one psychologically and spiritually and beginning to move on with their own lives. Thereafter, the deceased was considered to no longer be a part of this world, and his name was never spoken again, except sometimes by children, who were quickly hushed.

When a charnel house became filled with boxes of bones, the family would return and remove them. Men from the *iksa* or "moiety" opposite from the family, would pile these boxes up (Israel Folsom in Cushman, 1889:367), and cover them with earth, forming small, conical earth mounds. In the 1700s, some Choctaw communities had a Celebration of the Dead every year in November (Bossu 1768:96), or perhaps bi-annually (Byington 1829:350). This was a time when families went to the charnel houses, remembering and mourning the loss of those who came before.

Choctaw burial practice has changed and developed through the years. In most Choctaw communities, bone-picking stopped sometime shortly after 1800. However, one account (Claiborne 1880:493) maintains that some Choctaw families were still following the practice in the 1830s at the beginning of the Trail of Tears. According to it, families whose deceased were on scaffolds at the time their neighbors left on the Trail of Tears, elected to temporarily stay behind in Mississippi to finish the mourning process.

In the early 1800s, a few Choctaw families began burying their loved ones in exactly the same way as their Anglo-American neighbors. Others began practicing a new form of burial, "Fabvssa Halat Akkachi," or "the Pull-Pulling Ceremony" (Cushman 1899:228). Although bone-picking was not a part of it, the new ceremonies were led by the same people who had formerly been bone pickers. They were now called "Hattak Illi Chohpa," which refers to their role in serving the funeral feast. Instead of placing a deceased person on a scaffold, as had been done previously,

they buried him or her in the ground in a sitting position. Six red-painted poles were stuck vertically in the ground around the grave. One of these was taller than the others and had a white flag tied to the top. Family members came to the graveside daily to mourn. When a sufficient time had passed, the poles were pulled out of the ground and placed in the woods. As in earlier times, a large feast was held, after which the family ceased to mourn. Pull-pulling was practiced by some Oklahoma Choctaw into at least the 1840s (Benson 1860:294-295), and by some Choctaw communities in Mississippi into the 1880s.

In Oklahoma Choctaw communities, by the late 1800s, it was common for a family to prepare the body of a loved one and lay it in state in a church, or in the person's house for four days. Different branches of the person's family took turns sitting up with the body each night. Afterwards, the body was buried in a marked cemetery, with a preaching service and Choctaw hymns. The person's eating dishes were taken to the cemetery and broken over the grave, so that no one else would use them. Some believed that a person's spirit would stay on earth for a year after their death to make sure that their family was going to be okay, before they passed on into the next world. A small house was built over the grave to keep the spirit warm and dry during this year. For a year, all of the possessions of the deceased person were kept in the house of his family, just as they were during his lifetime. After the year passed, and the spirit moved on, all of that person's possessions would be given away, with everyone taking something as a remembrance of that person. Thereafter, the mourning period ceased (LeRoy Seally, personal communication 2011).

Today, some Choctaw families still hold a wake when a loved one passes away, and many believe that a deceased person's spirit returns to say goodbye to loved ones before it makes its journey into the next world. A few families, particularly in Mississippi, still practice the centuries-old tradition of burning a fire for a few days after a loved one's passing. Most Choctaw funerals are held in a church with services similar to the services held by other Americans, except that some of the songs and preaching may be in the Choctaw language. Often the service is followed by a large meal, with traditional Choctaw foods.

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