



The Choctaw Blowgun

On a crisp fall morning, a Choctaw boy glides almost noiselessly through the underbrush, arriving at an oak tree, full of acorns. Leaning against the tree's trunk in utter stillness, the young hunter's thoughts creep through his mind about his family at home, who are depending upon his skill to provide them with some fresh meat. Not long after he becomes stationary, the birds resume their singing. Eventually, some squirrels venture back

out onto the limbs of the tree above him, collecting acorns for their winter stores. When one of the squirrels moves into an open area on a branch, the hunter begins raising a straightened, hollow piece of river cane. He raises it very slowly; so slowly that an observer wouldn't even perceive its motion; so slowly that the squirrel does not notice as the cane points at him. The chirping of the birds is momentarily quieted by an almost cough-like sound, as the hunter exhales a short blast of air into the hollow cane, sending a dart rocketing out of the hollow cane and upwards towards the squirrel. There will be meat in the stew tonight!

The blowgun, eloquently dubbed "the breath of death," by some English speakers, is a weapon that Choctaw hunters have been using to bring down small animals including squirrels, rabbits, and birds since time immemorial. Some, including the author, still hunt with the ancient Choctaw blowgun today.

Blowguns have been developed and used by a number of Indigenous groups around the globe. Generally all of these blowguns, including the Choctaw version, function on the same basic ballistic principles. The blowgun itself is a hollow tube, much like a section of pipe. The blowgun dart consists of some type of hard, pointed shaft with fluffy material wrapped around its base. When the dart is placed in the breach of the hollow blowgun, this material plugs up the hole. When the hunter blows on the breach end of the blowgun, the dart is forced through the gun and outwards at a high velocity.

The Choctaw term for blowgun is "uski hlumpa" (Byington 1915:360), which literally means "pierced cane." The cane selected for Choctaw blowguns is mature, has a large diameter,



Fig. 1: A 100-year old Choctaw blowgun (NMAI #018871.000).



Fig. 2: 100-year old Choctaw blowgun darts, fletched with thistle down (NMAI cat# NMAI #242285.000)

and is as close as possible to being perfectly round in cross section, even near where the branches attach to the main stalk of the cane. Functional Choctaw blowguns are usually 6 to 9 feet in length. Shorter blowguns are easier to take through the woods, while longer implements are more powerful, if the hunter has sufficient lung capacity to fill them.

After the cane is cut and the branches removed, the cane must be carefully straightened to form a good blowgun. This is done by holding each crooked area over hot coals until the heat makes the cane pliable. Each crooked part is individually straightened and held in place until it cools, then the next crooked area is worked on, until the cane is completely straightened. River cane is naturally hollow, except for the solid node areas, spaced at regular intervals down the cane's length. One hundred years ago, Choctaw blowgun makers would punch out the nodes of green cane, using a sharp-pointed skewer made either from the root end of a long, narrow shoot of cane (Nash 1960:3), or from a hardwood sapling. One such implement can be seen today in the collections of the National Museum of the American Indian (cat. #018889.00). These implements would be forced down the length of the cane, punching out one node after another until the cane was completely hollow down its length. Today, some Choctaw blowgun makers accomplish the same thing by heating up a pointed piece of steel rebar until it glows orange, and burning out the nodes. Then, the

rough edges of the rebar are used to sand out any rough areas that may still exist on the interior of the blowgun. After the interior of the blowgun has been hollowed out and smoothed, its ends can be cut off at a node to reduce the chances of them splitting.

Today, a beautiful 100-year-old Choctaw blowgun can be seen in the collection of the National Museum of Natural History (cat. # E304038). Unlike most cane available today, the cane from which this blowgun is made is perfectly round in cross section, with no flat edges. Even after 100 years, the blowgun is still absolutely straight.

The Choctaw term for blowgun darts is "shumo holutti" (Byington 1915:335), meaning literally "fletched with thistle." As

with the Choctaw term for blowgun, this term alludes both to the material and form of the darts. Blowgun darts intended for hunting are usually made from splints of hardwood or yellow pine. These splints are carefully shaved down to have an even, round cross section, and sharp point. Choctaw blowgun darts of a century ago were sometimes more than 20 inches in length (Laubin 1991:164). Fine darts with intricate twists can also be made from flat splints of river cane (Nash 1960:5), although these light-weight implements are usually better for target practice than hunting.

As the Choctaw name for blowgun darts implies, the bases of darts are often fletched with thistle down (e.g. Bossu 1768:103). To do the fletching, a thin piece of string is attached to a notch cut in the base of the dart shaft. This string is wrapped around the shaft in a spiraling fashion, binding down tufts of thistle down to the shaft. Pieces of deer hide, cloth (Bushnell 1909:18), and short lengths of cotton thread have also been used to fletch Choctaw blowgun darts. Today, some blowgun dart makers tease apart cotton balls and use the fibers as fletching material. To keep the fletching from extending over the back end of the dart and potentially getting caught in the shooter's mouth, the ends are sometimes trimmed off. This was traditionally accomplished by sliding a newly made dart into the blowgun, and then using hot coals to burn off the fletching material that protruded out the base of the blowgun (Nash 1960:5). The Euro-American literature contains no documentation that Choctaw blowgun darts were ever poisoned. In hunting small game, these large darts are more than affective without poison. However, some Choctaw oral historians in Mississippi maintain that far back in the past, Choctaw blowgun darts were tipped with poison, and that they were sometimes used on the battlefield (York 2012:129).

While men did make some use of the blowgun in the past, it was primary a weapon for boys, who are said to have been quite deadly with it out to 20 yards (Romans 1777:77). In shooting, many Choctaw blowgun hunters hold the blowgun with one hand near the mouth, and the other slightly farther down the gun. Darts are fired with a short, very forceful blast of air. In hunting, it is best to use the blowgun at a close enough range that the animal cannot see the dart coming. In the hands of a practiced marksman, a Choctaw blowgun is an extremely accurate and effective weapon that still provides meat for some families.

© BISKINIK, August 2012



Fig. 3: Tvshkachito with blowgun (Bushnell 1909: plate 20).



Fig. 4: Choctaw youth with blowgun and darts (Boisseau 1847).