

A Choctaw sport older than stickball?!

Today, the game of Choctaw stickball is experiencing a fantastic resurgence across southeastern Oklahoma. During the summer months, this traditional sport brings youth and elders together in an exciting and culturally vibrant setting on a weekly basis. While stickball is unquestionably ancient, it is probably not actually the oldest Choctaw sport in existence.

This month, Iti Fabvssa will focus on what is likely an even older, and now little-known, Choctaw sport called “achahpi” or “alhchahpi.”

Most of the details of the achahpi game were preserved by a Choctaw man named Mehubbee. Mehubbee had seen the game played as a young man, kept an achahpi game stone through most of his life, and in 1876, as an old man, taught the game to some young Choctaws in Mississippi. Later, one of these Choctaw youth described what Mehubbee had taught him to Henry Halbert, who wrote it down (Halbert 1888:283-284). In Mehubbee’s day, the playing field “aiachahpi” was about 100 feet long and 12 feet wide, and made as smooth as possible. Brief surviving accounts indicate that in earlier days playing fields were larger and more elaborate than what Mehubbee observed. Usually these playing fields were located near the center of a village (Adair 1775:401). Clay was either brought in for the field or the topsoil was dug out to expose underlying clay. The surface of the clay was smoothed, packed down, and allowed to dry hard. Then, it was lightly sprinkled with loose sand.

Careful field preparation was important so that the game stone would roll properly. This game stone was a round, flat disk of stone, perhaps 3 inches in diameter, carefully shaped so that it could be set up on its edge and rolled a long distance, like a wheel. In the Choctaw language, these stones were known as “tvli chanaha,” literally “rolling rock.” The game stones were considered community property, and were passed down from one generation to another through time.

Achahpi was played with slightly



Iti Fabussa

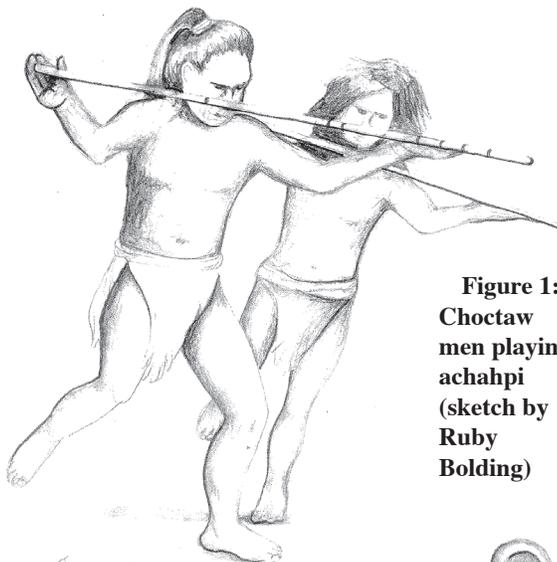


Figure 1:
Choctaw men playing achahpi (sketch by Ruby Bolding)

different rules in different times and places (c.f. Cushman 1899:190). In Mehubbee’s version, the game was played with two players (Fig. 1). Each had a 10-foot long javelin made from a hickory sapling, with a rounded point. Four grooves were cut around the javelin near its tip, two grooves were cut about 1/4 of the way back from its tip, and one groove was cut around its center.

To play the game, the players would take off at a run, with one of the players launching the stone to roll hard and fast over the playing field. The second player would then throw his javelin, followed by the first player. Each player tried to throw his javelin so that it would be closest to the stone when the stone stopped rolling. The player whose javelin lay closest to the stone scored points. If the portion of his javelin with the four grooves lay closest to the stone, he scored four; if the portion of his javelin with two grooves lay closest to the stone, he scored two; if the portion of his javelin with one groove lay closest to the stone, he scored one. If both players’ javelins were equally close to the stone, no

points were scored. The player who scored in one round would be the one to roll the stone in the next round. A game ended when one player

got to 12 points.

Mehubbee described the playing strategies used by competitors. The player who threw his javelin first attempted to hit the rolling game stone and knock it over. His intent wasn’t just to knock the stone over, but rather that in knocking the stone over, his javelin would end up nearest to the fallen stone, and he would score points. Conversely, the player who rolled the stone, would pick up his javelin and throw it, almost at the same time as the second player, attempting to hit the second player’s javelin in mid air and knock it down, thus, blocking his shot at the stone.

In the 1700s, it was common for players to play all day long, running back and forth continuously. An early English observer went so far as to call the game “running hard labor” (Adair 1775:401). Obviously, players had to be in great shape to be successful. It was usual for spectators to watch an achahpi game, and like the game of stickball, it was common for them to put up big bets on the outcome (Romans 1999 [1771]:134-135).

Achahpi is a Choctaw version of a game that was played by many tribes throughout a huge area that includes the Southeast, Northeast, and Midwest, the Northern Plains, and even some places on the west coast. English speakers usually call this game “chunkey”, which may be a corruption for the Cherokee word for their version of game “tsvgeyi.” People living in the central Mississippi valley began to make chunkey stones and create depictions of people playing chunkey as early as A.D. 750 (Morse and Morse 1999:211-212). What may be roughly made chunkey stones appear in the Choctaw homeland around the same time, and beautiful, classically carved stones began to be made after AD 1050 (Fig. 2). Clearly, achahpi was an important game to Choctaw ancestors nearly 1,000 years ago, if not more.

Seven-hundred years later, achahpi was still a popular Choctaw sport. However, the game gradually began to wane in popularity, in favor of stickball and other pastimes. Even before the Trail of Tears, achahpi had ceased being played in most Choctaw communities. Six Towns communities still living in Mississippi were the last to give up the game in around 1842.



Figure 2: A stone likely used in achahpi, before European contact, from the Lubbug Creek archaeological site, Pickens County, Ala. (2-5/8 inch diameter.)