

Iti Fabvssa: Dyeing for Color

What colors are you wearing today? Do you think our ancestors wore these colors 300 years ago?

Choctaws have long dressed in beautiful, unique clothing.

For hundreds and thousands of years, our people used a variety of plants, minerals and techniques to color our handiwork. These pieces were not just functional, but also aesthetically pleasing.

The process of dyeing is complex, yet rewarding and speaks to the refined artistic eye of Choctaw makers. The process of dyeing was just one of many steps in making clothing for our Choctaw ancestors and required very special ingredients: native Southeastern plants containing rich colors.

Our relationship to the land is tied in with a strong understanding of the resources we have. Our homelands were rich in plant resources and these are a precious part of making colorful textiles and other artisan work.

An early account about our people described how “[Choctaws] prepare a kind of cloth out of the bark of [mulberry] and with its root dye it yellow” (Romans 1776).

The March 2017 ‘Iti Fabvssa’ featured mulberry bark yarn, but the plant’s root is also good as a dye. Southeastern native dye plants include black walnut, hickory, bois d’arc, poke, bloodroot, sumac, sassafras, dock, onion, oak and mulberry.

From tanned hides, to basketry, to fabric, Choctaw artisans dyed animal and plant products shades of black, brown, yellow, orange and red; purples, greens, and blues could also occur.

Very traditional colors often used were black, white, red and yellow. The Choctaw language has many words for the dye process like laknvchi, for dyeing yellow, lusachi, for dyeing black, hummvchi, for dyeing red, lusakbichi, for dyeing brown, or okshauvshlich, for bleaching a material.

The coming of Europeans to North America and the Trail of Tears had a huge impact on the dyes available to our people in the 1700s and 1800s.

During this time, new dye plants like indigo for blue and madder for red were brought in from other parts of the world.

Choctaws traded for these plants, or grew them in gardens, dyeing with them to create new colors in their clothing.

While the introduction of European dye sources were incorporated in Choctaw clothing and textile work, these did not replace the need for natural dyes.

With the move from the homelands to Indian Territory later on, our access to the plants and landscape shifted.

While we still knew many of the land resources in our new territory, we had to find new places to gather, adapt to the different materials native to the area and deal with the loss of some of our precious natural resources and knowledge over time.

Using dye plants is an old and effective method to color material.

The necessary elements for dying a textile include water, a container, heat, dye material (bark, roots, flowers, stems, leaves, etc.), and finally the material to dye.

In addition, many people use a mordant. A mordant is the ingredient that makes the dye chemically bond with the textile, to help the color last through washings and exposure to light.

Mordants could be found as tannins in bark or nut hulls, in alum, or in metals like iron, copper and tin.

For our ancestors, these mordants likely came from the iron in the pots that contained the dyebath, or naturally the dye of barks or nut hulls.

A dye could come out a different color every time if any part of the process is different.

Choctaw women making, coloring and decorating their clothing or basketry would have been able to make a huge variety of color shades.

In interviews with Choctaws in the 1930s, a few individuals recalled specific plants and processes they, or their mothers used for dyeing and making clothing.

One woman described her own dye process as follows,

“I used to save the juice from poke berries so that I would have dye and red paint all year when the berries were out of season. To make a dye that won’t fade you have to put salt or [copper] in the solution. Red Oak bark solution makes a rather purple color. With indigo you make all shades of blue, green walnut hulls make a tan or brown color and just the other day I colored a few things with walnut hulls” (Cherry 1937).

Choctaw women applied dyes to yarn, woven fabric, or even painted them on cloth surfaces to create patterns.

Tom Colvin, a Louisiana native and master basket weaver, recently shared several traditional Choctaw recipes for dyeing river cane.

When Tom came to Choctaw country, he gave a dye workshop where we used sassafras roots, bloodroot and black walnut hulls to dye textiles.

Throughout our history, our people have created incredible art with great expertise and knowledge of our natural resources.

The Historic Preservation Department holds monthly workshops to collectively learn traditional textile techniques.

If you have knowledge to share about traditional textiles or would like to join us in learning about our precious traditional textile arts, please contact Jennifer Byram at jbyram@ChoctawNation.com or at (800) 522-6170 ext. 2512.

References

Cherry, L., 1937. Interview with L. W. Wilson. , 17, pp.367–386. Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, Norman, Oklahoma.

Romans, Barnard. A Concise Natural History of East and West-Florida. New York, 1776.



Sassafras root dyebath



Black walnut hull dyebath



Dyeing with bloodroot



Tom Colvin and participants
of the dye workshop