

Iti Fabvssa

A Year in the Life Series

For the next calendar year, *Iti Fabvssa* will be presenting a new series titled, “A Year in the Life.”

Focusing on the time period around 1700, the next 12 articles will follow the traditional Choctaw calendar, providing a glimpse of the activities that our ancestors were up to during each month.

These articles are excerpted from a new book titled, “Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge,” by Ian Thompson, which will be published by Choctaw Nation later this year.

This month’s edition of *Iti Fabvssa* begins the “A Year in the Life” series by exploring the traditional Choctaw calendar.

Over 15,000 years, our ancestors built a series of civilizations within the Choctaw homeland (present-day western Alabama and eastern Mississippi).

Over that span of time, they developed an advanced knowledge of how to draw the resources needed for life from the ecosystems around them in an adaptable sustainable way that could be renewed year-after-year.

The Choctaw calendar represents one part of that knowledge.

The Choctaw calendar is divided into two parts, a warm season, **Toffa**, and a cool season, **Hvshstula**. These two seasons are separated from each other by the spring and fall equinoxes and are divided into months.

Originally, Choctaw communities kept a 13-month calendar based on the phases of the moon (Adair 1775:74; Byington 1852:83; Claiborne 1880:489).

The Choctaw word for month, **hvshi**, is the same as the Choctaw word for the sun. However, given the fact that the calendar is based on the phases of the moon, the Choctaw word for “month” probably comes from the phrase **hvshi ninak aya**, *the sun that travels at night*—the Choctaw way of saying “moon.”

Several sources indicate that, unlike today’s calendar, which ushers in the New Year during the winter, the New Year came in the early part of fall for the Choctaw calendar.

This was because fall is the time of year when oral traditions indicate that the Choctaw people were first created (York 2012:18).

More specifically, the Choctaw New Year, as well as the first month in the Choctaw calendar, began on the first full moon after the fall equinox.

By today’s calendar, the fall equinox occurs between September 21–24 in different years, so each year, the Choctaw New Year would have begun on or shortly after that date.

As far as we know, the first time that the months of the Choctaw calendar were written down was in the 1852 Choctaw Definer.

By that point in time, the Choctaw homeland had already been ceded to the United States through Treaty and thousands of Choctaw people had been relocated to present-day Oklahoma.

As a result of these and other changes, some of the knowledge concerning the details of the calendar had been lost or confused.

The list given in the Definer, provided by one or several Choctaw individuals, includes the names for 13 Choctaw months. This list includes a month named **Luak Mosholi**, *Fires Extinguished*. The name of this month refers to the Choctaw Green Corn Ceremony.

Besides being the most important spiritual activity of the year, this may be when Choctaw communities adjusted the 354-day lunar calendar each year to keep in step with the 365 1/4-day solar year.

The list of months given in the Definer is complete, but from the names, they appear to be out of order from the natural seasons.

In 1981, a 13-month calendar was presented, which rearranged these Choctaw months to make them match the natural seasons (Green 1981).

Back in the 1850s, two other Choctaw individuals had provided alternative lists of Choctaw months for inclusion in the Choctaw Language Dictionary.

These lists included the original month names, excluding, **Luak Mosholi**.

In 2002, a group of elders working with the Choctaw Tribal Language Program (Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians), adapted a list of 12 Choctaw month names, originally provided in 1854 for the Dictionary by a man named Ilapintvbi (Byington 1915:146).

These cultural elders rotated the original list, so that the month names match up with the seasons. The Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians adapted these months as their Choctaw calendar.

In 2012, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma adopted this same calendar. In order to avoid the confusion of presenting yet another version of the Choctaw calendar, the Year in the Life Series will be based on this currently accepted version.

The next twelve articles reconstruct the Choctaw seasonal round as it was in 1700. This has been done by combining information from a variety of different sources in order to put together a detailed, coherent account that proceeds through the whole Choctaw calendar year.

These individual sources come from different Choctaw communities that may have done things somewhat differently during different years.

Thus, what follows may tend to generalize a seasonal round that probably differed slightly from year to year and from community to community. We hope that you enjoy reading about what our ancestors were up to, month-by-month, as we experience the same seasons.

Editor's Note: For Iti Fabvssa stories you might have missed please visit ChoctawNation.com and click on History & Culture.

Choctaw Month

Chafo Iskitini Hvshi
Hohchafo Chito Hvshi
Koichito Hvshi
Koichush Hvshi
Watonlak Hvshi
Mahli Hvshi
Tek Ihvshi
Bihi Hvshi
Bissa Hvshi
Kafi Hvshi
Takkon Hvshi
Hoponi Hvshi

English Translation

Little Hunger Month
Big Hunger Month
Panther Month
Wildcat Month
Crane Month
Windy Month
Women's Month
Mulberry Month
Blackberry Month
Sassafras Month
Peach Month
Cooking Month

Rough Equivalent

October
November
December
January
February
March
April
May
June
July
August
September