

Iti Fabvssa

Big Hunger Month

This article is part of a series titled "A Year in the Life."

Focusing on the time period of around 1700, the series follows the traditional Choctaw calendar through a year, with each article providing a glimpse of the activities that our ancestors were up to during each month.

The information in these articles is taken from a book titled, "Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge," which will be published by Choctaw Nation later this year.

The November edition of Iti Fabvssa presents Big Hunger Month.

Following Little Hunger Month, came **Hohchvffo Chito Hvshi**, Big Hunger Month (roughly November). It was usually during this month that the first frost arrived in Choctaw country.

This is the season when Choctaw communities held the Feast of the Dead. In cooperation, the two **iksa** visited their respective charnel houses called **tvshka chuka**, warriors' houses.

These were the temporary resting places of the bones of their recently deceased family members. Here, on alternating days, the two **iksa** conducted the appropriate rites to honor the memory of their deceased loved ones. Then, they returned to hold a feast at the villages of the living.

When cold weather came, Choctaw women pulled out the large, river cane trunk baskets in their homes that contained their family's winter clothing.

Year-round, a man's basic article of clothing was a buckskin breechcloth, known as **apokshiana**. As it became cooler, he added a robe made from a buffalo hide or a deer hide, which was called **anchi**, or a warm cape known as **kasmo**, made from the feathers from a turkey breast.

On cold days, a man also wore short-top moccasins, **shulush**, and buckskin leggings **iyabiha**. The basic article of clothing for a woman was **vlhkuna**, a cloth skirt.

On cold days, or when traveling through rough terrain, she wore tall moccasins, that went halfway up her calf, nearly meeting the bottom of her skirt. A robe or turkey feather cape kept her warm.

Frost ended the growing season in the exposed uplands as well as the opportunity to harvest most of the remaining produce in the agricultural fields.

With fieldwork done for another year, it was time to focus on other food resources. Choctaw men made their most significant food contribution to their families through the **Owachito**, Big Hunt.

The **Owachito** began during Big Hunger Month. Seasoned, able-bodied Choctaw men made up the core of the hunting parties, but the most excitement came from the younger males who had not yet faced an enemy on the battlefield.

On at least some hunting parties, the men were accompanied into the field by their able-bodied sisters, wives and children.

These hunting parties traveled to **aiowvta**, the equivalent of today's game preserves.

Each of the three Choctaw Districts had its own. In 1700, horses had been in Choctaw Nation for only about 10 years so most parties still traveled on foot, or by canoe to the **aiowvta**. They crossed small streams with the use of rafts made from river cane.

The main Choctaw hunting parties left their well-provisioned villages around late October. This was a time of growling stomachs, during which the men were fasting and all of the travelers ate lightweight rations of parched cornmeal and/or persimmon bread.

Once the hunting party arrived at their destination and found signs of deer activity, they set up base camp made up of temporary "A" frame houses covered with sheets of stripped bark.

The ends of the house, left open, had camp fires burning near them to keep the occupants warm. While the hunters went into the surrounding landscape in search of the quarry, the women and youth maintained the camp and the women made basketry from locally harvested river cane.

For a Choctaw man, hunting was a spiritual activity and a highly cultivated skill. The most important food animal was **isi**, the white-tailed deer.

The main weapon in deer hunting was a hickory longbow with a string made of deer tendon, gut or rawhide. With these bows, Choctaw archers fired arrows made of river cane or hardwood shoots, tipped with points suited to the appropriate game.

The serrated-edged stone points could be crafted to penetrate the flesh of a deer better than a steel-tipped arrow. Together, bow, bowstring, arrow and point were a finely tuned and powerful hunting weapon.

One of the most common deer-hunting techniques was stalking. Choctaw hunters also increased their odds of success by using decoys made from the prepared head of a buck.

In stalking situations where a deer began to get spooked, the hunter used the decoy to simulate another animal to reassure the prey in order to draw it in closer.

Deer were reportedly also stalked at night with a torch, **pvla**, held behind a hunter's head. The torches were made from resin-rich pine knots, or dry wood split fine.

Hunting by stalking was a strenuous activity. Hunters often walked 30 miles in a day over difficult terrain, sometimes going great distances with no water.

It was also dangerous. The possibility of running into an enemy war party was ever-present and if captured a Choctaw hunter would be assured of an agonizing death.

Before the horse and gun became common, Choctaw hunters often used cooperative group hunting techniques as an alternative to lone stalking.

A group of hunters would encircle a large area, where deer were known to be located. Slowly, the hunters would move in, towards the center, closing their ranks. They would scare the game towards the center of their closing ring, trapping the deer in a circle where they could easily be shot.

Choctaw people acknowledged a great debt in the fact that, in order for their communities to get the meat, hides and many other products that they needed, an animal had to lose its life.

The respect that Choctaw had for these animals and their sacrifice is demonstrated in the position that the animals have in Choctaw oral stories, dances and personal names.

Respect also meant careful management and conservation. This involved careful game selection, maintaining designated hunting areas, scheduling the hunting season to minimize impact on the deer population and using the fallen animal's carcass well.

When Choctaw men returned to camp from a day spent hunting in the field, they rested, ate and gambled with each other.

A successful hunter was obligated to share his hunt with everyone else in camp, including visitors. The liver was cut into pieces and distributed to the different fires in camp to burn as a sacrifice.

The meat and other edible organs were a welcome meal, especially after all of the energy spent in walking, and being days away from the food stored in the village.

Winter hunting camps were the one setting when red meat was a standard main course in the Choctaw diet. What was not eaten fresh was cut into strips and smoked into jerky over a smoldering fire.

The duration of the **Owachito** depended on the success of the hunt and on how productive the previous agricultural harvest had been.

Whenever it was time to head back home, hunting parties would pack up the dried meat and other products. By using canoes, the items that could be taken back to the village significantly increased.

After horses were incorporated into the **Owachito**, they would be loaded up by suspending two 50 pound packs on both of the animal's sides and tying a third one on top. Extra hides would be dried and tied into packs called **isht asheha ya shoeli** for easy transportation.

A successful hunting party's return to their village was an occasion for joy and celebration. Not only had loved ones made it home safely, they brought essential food and materials with them.

Meat was distributed to the people who had stayed behind in the villages. After returning to the village, the exhausted hunters took steam baths to help their bodies recover and enjoyed some well-earned rest.

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



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A Choctaw canoe made from the trunk of a bald cypress log, approximately 5 meters in length. The blunted bow and stern are typical of Choctaw canoe construction.