

Iti Fabvssa

The Making of a Skirt

Since March of 2018, the Historic Preservation department staff and tribal members have been working together to learn about Choctaw textiles that go back thousands of years. Through this community effort, we learned enough to create a completed an vlhkuna, a skirt, modeled after a 1700's bison wool and plant fiber skirt. According to an anonymous French chronicler writing in the mid-1700's, Choctaw women made "a fabric, partly of [bison] wool, and partly of fibre from a very strong herb which they spin. This fabric is double like two-sided handkerchiefs and thick as canvas, [about 22.5 inches wide and 33.75 inches long]."

The first step towards making the skirt was to use the 1700's description to help us plan for the materials and steps in the project. We determined how much yarn we needed, what size the skirt would need to be for the model, what pattern we would use, and how we would use the bison and plant materials together. We decided to use dogbane as our plant material. While it appears to be a simple stick, dogbane is a widely used native textile material in the Southeast and across North America. In the end, we needed about 400 yards of dogbane yarn, 2-ply or doubled. This likely took about 450 stalks of processed dogbane. As for the yvnvsh hishi, or bison wool, we needed 250 yards of 2-ply or double yarn. This ended up taking only about a third of the wool from one hide.

In order to get our materials for the project, we had to find these, process them, and spin them. The dogbane came partly from the Nan Awaya Heritage Farmstead in Antlers, Oklahoma and partly from the Morton Arboretum in Naperville, Illinois. The dogbane from Illinois was nearly twice the size of that in Oklahoma and would be more like the size of the plant in our homeland where the soil would allow for more growth.

Some of the dogbane sat out before and after harvesting on the grass and was exposed to the weather. This helps break down the bark and free the fiber for later use. Others we processed just with our hands. All of this had to be separated from the inside of the stalk and then arranged and spun into a single yarn. Then, to make the yarn stronger, we doubled these yarns and spun them together. For the bison hair, we used a blade to cut the hair from half of a hide. The other half of the hide we removed the hair by soaking the hide in water and wood ash for several weeks. This loosened the hair and then we pulled the hair from the hide. The hair was then washed and carded (brushed) and spun like the dogbane yarn.

Once we had enough yarn to start with, we set up the skirt to begin the next step: twining. First, we measured out lengths of bison yarn to form the vpi, warp, and then arranged the cut lengths onto a dowel rod. This rod was hung from the ceiling or laid so the yarn hung down freely. The skirt was then ready to be twined. In order to twine, we took two long pieces of dogbane yarn and twisted them together around each hanging bison yarn on the dowel rod. This process is an older form of weaving and can be used to make clothing, bags, shoes, and baskets. We twined two loose cloths the same size and laid them side by side, joining them at the waistband. This was based off the skirt description from the

1700's and gave the skirt an airy and soft texture. The skirt finishing had looped edges and a fringe at the hem with a long braid to tie it up.

The best way to learn is to make. It is hard to understand just how much hair is on a bison or how many dogbane stalks it takes to produce a garment until you process them with your own hands. The skirt is beautifully soft, warm, and drapes nicely. Many modern spinners consider bison hair impossible to spin by itself. Bison down is short and does not have as much grab as sheep's wool. However, several of the group contributed to processing and spinning bison yarn for the skirt. It takes practice and patience to learn to spin this fiber, but the challenge is a testament to the imponna, skill and knowledge, of the many Choctaw makers before us. We also learned that dogbane is a fiber that does not handle friction well. When having to redo some weaving, it was clear that the fiber grew weaker. Again, women had to know their materials and their craft, being sure not to make mistakes that would cost time and materials.

Making the bison-dogbane skirt was part of a larger project to show the rich textile history in Choctaw lifeways for thousands of years. Consider that each woman and community had their own spin on each item they made and each item had to have been made by multiple hands coming together on a project. Each item made was a unique creation, and innovation continues to be a part of that process today. We learn, make, and use textiles as part of learning about our identity and appreciating the incredible skill of our ancestors. See past Iti Fabvssa articles at <https://www.choctawnation.com/history-culture/history/iti-fabvssa> to read about other crafts and textiles that our ancestors passed down to us. The Historic Preservation department has been coordinating textile classes, presentations, and projects since 2018. This item is just one of five twined skirts that will be on display in the upcoming Chahta Nowvt Aya Cultural Center. Contact Jennifer Byram at jbyram@choctawnation.com or 1-800-522-6170 ext. 2512 for more information about Choctaw textiles and how you can get involved.



Part of the textile group with the near-completed skirt and bison in the background who also contributed wool to the project.



The finished skirt will be on display at the Choctaw Cultural Center in 2020.