



Over the next few articles, the Iti Fabvssa will reflect on each division of our executive branch of government; Legal & Compliance, Commerce, Strategic Development, Integrated Services, and Tribal Services. While our needs today are different than in the past, many of these services have deep roots in our Choctaw history. This article will focus on the Legal & Compliance Division of the Choctaw Nation. Of all the current divisions of

government, Legal & Compliance may have the deepest roots. Within today's Choctaw Nation, this division is made up of the Government Relations, Legal, Public Safety, Risk Management, and Land, Title & Natural Resources.

Before European arrival, the Choctaw ancestors enjoyed God-given sovereignty within their Choctaw homeland. At that time, Choctaw society was made up of two iksa, or moieties. Social rules dictated that a Choctaw person could only marry someone from the opposite iksa, this meant that both iksa were present in each Choctaw community and household. Our ancestors maintained their own system of laws that reflected the greater good of the community and not one individual. The laws were enforced by the clan system and the concept of "eye for an eye." If someone committed a crime against a member of another Tribe, or a member of another Choctaw clan, revenge might be taken against any member of that Tribe/clan. When a crime was committed against another Choctaw person, the case was tried between the two iksa, with the person's iksa acting as defense and the other as prosecution. When someone was sentenced to die for a crime, he never ran, because he knew that with the iksa system, his closest relative would have to die in his place if he sought to escape justice. Executed by a relative, a condemned man accepted that his death would prevent revenge from spiraling out of control within the community.

With the events of European contact that brought about military invasion, disease, and slaving raids, Choctaw sovereignty and system of governance was challenged. As more outsiders began to come into the Choctaw Nation, the Ikisa could no longer enforce the law as effectively. In response to the changes and to strengthen our communities, Choctaw leadership adopted a new system. During the mid to late 1700's, we shifted our three cultural regions into political districts, the Okla Hannali, Okla Falaya, and Okla Tannip, each led by a district Miko. There was also an Fvni Miko, or Squirrel Chief, who took on the role of a community ambassador, representing the interests of non-Choctaw individuals in the community during times of decision making. The three District Chiefs could more easily come together to represent a unified Choctaw people in negotiations with European nations. While our first constitution was passed in 1828, our three District Chief political system lasted until 1859.

In 1820, the District Chiefs organized the first Choctaw Lighthorsemen who had the authority to judge and carry out punishment within the Choctaw Nation. This continued through 1838 with the establishment of the Choctaw Court System, after which the Lighthorsemen carried out the punishments dictated by the Choctaw courts. The Lighthorsemen were members of the communities, who were chosen out of respect and involvement in the community. They assisted the community in times of need and served in various capacities.

When we look at our history, we can see that the Legal & Compliance division of the Choctaw Nation, carries on these ancient functions today through the Government Relations, Legal, Public Safety, Risk Management, and Land, Title & Natural Resources departments. Brad Mallett, Senior Executive Officer of Legal and Compliance, states that “the mission of Legal and Compliance is to protect people, property, and sovereignty.”

Stepping forward into the present, Land, Title & Natural Resources comes from a community ethic of protecting our land and resources. As our ancestors had social rules within their communities, they also understood the rules of land stewardship they needed to follow to keep their way of life sustainable. Their agricultural fields were often planted on the most fertile soils alongside waterways. They understood that after so many seasons of planting, they would need to rotate to a new field. Fields were sometimes allowed to go fallow to let the nutrients and microbiology replenish before using the land again. They would use brush fires to clear areas for growth of river cane and other plants we used often. As with our fields, we also understood that hunting and fishing had to be carefully managed.

In the past, our ancestors held our land together as one people. As the land around them began to be managed by others, our people had to adapt. Today our Risk Management and Land, Title, & Natural Resources departments handle much of how we manage our land. Through these departments, the Choctaw Nation ensures that the land is managed sustainably and honors the preservation methods, policies of protection, passed down by our ancestors. Even in recent history we reached a historic water settlement between Choctaw Nation, Chickasaw Nation and the State of Oklahoma. Today the Choctaw Nation provides hunting and fishing licenses for tribal members to regulate the hunting activity on Choctaw lands, at the same time protecting wildlife populations in the region. These departments also help maintain our land and natural resources that allow us to grow livestock like bison and cattle.

Today, we have representatives within the Choctaw Nation that carry on the basic roles of the Choctaw District Chiefs and Squirrel Chiefs. Our Government Relations department continues this tradition in working with our local, state and federal governments. This Department negotiates and represents the Choctaw Nation on the frontline, engaging the White House, Congress, state and local governments. Joshua Riley, a Tribal Policy Analyst, explains that, “Sovereignty is our ability to be a self-governing nation. Sovereignty boils down to a group of people deciding for themselves, and free from external control, how their society should flow and function.”

While the Choctaw Nation’s legal and public safety departments have been modernized, we still rely on the same ideals on which our Iksha and Lighthorsemen systems were built. Today, our

Legal and Public Safety departments continue to strive to protect our Choctaw sovereignty and freedoms that our ancestors enjoyed in years past. We have a Probation Department that has improved upon the state program, successfully allowing us to better mentor and grow our members that ask for help. Within Public Safety, Tony Bryant and Joe Hankins describe the Probation Department as being the “Uncle” in the branch because they receive community members that are in need of assistance. They mentor, lead, and teach our members to follow a new track in life. Bryant and Hankins see sovereignty as a tool to protect our way of life and culture through their Department.

Sustained by our long line of tradition, the Legal & Compliance Division is comprised of elders and young people, women and men with the mission to uphold, serve, and protect our sovereignty established by our ancestors. We have a Government Relations Department who is building relationships with members on a national scale demonstrating the importance of what we are doing as a Nation.

Our sovereignty was given by God to us to give us the ability to live our fullest quality of life. Today, Choctaw Nation’s sovereignty is acknowledged through the treaties we signed with the United States and other nations. The services that Choctaw Nation provides its membership demonstrates our sovereignty because we are able to operate independently for the good of the Nation. By looking at the way Choctaw people have governed ourselves throughout the history of our nation, we can see the way we used our sovereignty to better the lives of our people over time. In the words of Brad Mallett, “Legal & Compliance is here to support the Nation in effectively meeting those responsibilities so that sovereignty will continue to be protected.”

In the upcoming articles, we will reflect more on the ways that the Divisions of the Choctaw Nation Executive Branch carry on ancient and important functions to the benefit of our community today. For more information, please contact Anthony Hill at 580-924-8280 ext. 2749 or at anthill@choctawnation.com. To read past issues of the Iti Fabvssa, including articles on the Lighthorsemen, visit <http://choctawnation.com/history-culture/history/iti-fabvssa>