

## ITI FABVSSA



Over the next few months, Iti Fabvssa will reflect on each division of our executive branch of government: Legal & Compliance, Strategic Development, Commerce, Integrated Services and Tribal Services. While our needs today differ from the past, these services have deep roots in our Choctaw history. This month's article focuses on Choctaw Nation's Division of Commerce.

Breaking ground on the casino expansion in Spring 2019, the Choctaw Nation embarked on a major project to help provide for Choctaw people as well as the local economy in southeastern Oklahoma. Gaming is just one of the many business endeavors that falls under the direction of the Division of Commerce. As part of the Executive Branch, this division is responsible for the Choctaw Nation's businesses. With revenue from these projects, Choctaw leadership then makes decisions about how to spend and manage this money in ways to provide the widest possible range of services for Choctaw people and others living in our territory. While casinos, travel plazas, and commercial pecan farms are relatively new parts of Choctaw life, they are part of a long legacy of economic adaptation and participation with the wider world. The Commerce division ensures that people see Choctaws as a modern and dynamic people. We have adapted to a constantly changing landscape while holding onto the values that make us Choctaw.

Choctaw politics, economics and social life are all interconnected and informed by our philosophies of life. Generosity and reciprocity

were and continue to be core values for us. We measured the worthiness of our chiefs by their ability to make sure every family had enough food, clothes, and other necessary items to live. Generosity regarding the redistribution of food and goods was the mark of a good leader. Leaders who accumulated goods for themselves were considered poor leaders and that would lead Choctaws to no longer support them. Today's Choctaw Nation still abides by these principles although we see it in different forms.

These values of generosity also informed our historic practices of diplomacy. Prior to European arrival, Choctaws had a vast trade network ranging from the Eastern Woodlands to Mesoamerica, which brought items like corn and copper that we have since made our own. When Europeans came to the Americas and wanted to trade with us, Choctaws taught Europeans our practice of gift-giving. While the English tried to impose their economic system that centered on markets and creating products for sale in them, we chose to deal more with the French since they respected and abided by our gift-giving protocol. Over time, the relationship with the French moved from solely gift-giving into a formal trade relationship. As part of a trading economy, Choctaws provided furs while Europeans brought guns, metal tools and other finished products. While European empires competed for dominance across the globe and in Choctaw homelands, Choctaws used European competition against them. This also provided us with an opportunity to learn

from European innovations to improve our own technologies. But as European colonial power strengthened and spread across the Americas, Choctaws and all Indigenous people across the continent had to deal with the ramifications of colonialism.

Land was severely impacted by European colonialism and induced Choctaws to change their economic systems and reorganize social roles to ensure our survival. In particular, environmental changes to the availability of plants and animals that Choctaws had relied upon made getting food from hunting less reliable. European demand for fur led to overhunting and soon Choctaw hunters had to find new items to trade in order to participate in the early market economy. As a result of these changes, Choctaw men largely turned to raising livestock, moving them away from their traditional roles. Less able to rely on the land as they had done since time immemorial, Choctaws became more reliant on the market economy. Nevertheless, the shift towards greater engagement with European-style markets had a different impact on Choctaw women who had been affected by shifting social relations due to the introduction of European roles for women and men.

Choctaw women became actively involved in markets. Learning from and drawing on European traditions of cloth-making, Choctaw women innovated new methods of production and designs for Choctaw pottery, basketry and fabrics. Once Choctaws had made sure their communities had their necessities, they sold any remaining items in markets. Whether selling vegetables in town markets like those in New Orleans or firewood and cooking vessels in the countryside, Choctaw women were constantly engaged in production. Choctaw women's artisanal work created new demands for products which made them a powerful force in shaping European production practices. Their work also helped Choctaws become less reliant on European trade products. Choctaws' ability to make their own cloth became so important that in treaties, including the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek, Choctaws requested textile tools and equipment. In this way, Choctaw women were important historical actors in helping us to adapt to the market economy.

Choctaw interaction with European traders and settlers also pushed us toward agricultural practices focused on growing crops solely for sale at markets. Learning from European and American settlers, some Choctaws established their own plantations. This was vastly different from Choctaw practices of subsistence agriculture where we cultivated just enough food to help us get through lean times. Following European arrival in the Americas, our changes in economic activity were partially the result of our traditional methods of acquiring food becoming less available. In addition to changes to the land, European and American colonial powers forced us to make other adaptations that have had a lasting legacy for us today.

Choctaw participation in the market economy was also important because it helped to counter the idea that Choctaws were incapable of being a "civilized" people. European and American intellectuals like Thomas Jefferson circulated the idea that Indigenous peoples were "savages" and had no understanding of how to "properly" use land. This false claim would later justify Euro-American settlers' violent seizure of Indigenous peoples' lands. Choctaws responded by starting their own farms in order to prove Europeans and their ideas of "Indian savagery" wrong. This history of Choctaw transition into the market economy is in part why Choctaws are called one of the Five Civilized Tribes. Learning and appropriating European ideas

about markets and private property were strategies undertaken by Choctaws to help us maintain control of our lands from encroaching Euro-American settlers who wanted our lands for themselves. While this ultimately did not stop the U.S. government from removing us from our homelands, Choctaws learned an important lesson in how to deal with the changing world.

Today, the Division of Commerce, the economic arm of the Choctaw Nation's executive branch, actively engages in various economic activities to ensure that the Choctaw Nation has revenue necessary to provide for Choctaw people. In 2018, the Choctaw Nation had an economic impact of \$2,374,645,710 and supported 16,974 jobs in Oklahoma. While the production and commercial activity that defines much of modern life today is a feature of the market economy which did not exist prior to the arrival of French and British traders in North America, our ability to adapt is enduring and has ensured our survival into the present. Furthermore, just as Choctaws had extensive trade networks prior to European arrival, the Choctaw Nation's Division of Commerce contemporary successes show us how we are following in our ancestors' footsteps and how we have maintained our values throughout time.

In the upcoming articles, we will reflect more on the ways that the divisions of Choctaw Nation's Executive Branch carry on ancient and important functions to the benefit of our community today. For more information, please contact Megan Baker at 580-924-8280 ext. 2377 or [meganb@choctawnation.com](mailto:meganb@choctawnation.com). To read past issues of the *Iti Fabvssa*, visit <http://choctawnation.com/history-culture/history/iti-fabvssa>.