

## **ITI FABVSSA**

### **Choctaws have long history of remembering and honoring loved ones**

November is a time of year when many Choctaw people gather together to celebrate family and food. In the past, Choctaw people referred to this time of year as Hochvffo Chito Hvshi or Big Hunger Month. It was probably called that because men were fasting for the success of their fall hunt. However, one important feast was held during this month, the Feast of the Dead.

No one knows exactly how far back in time the origins of the Choctaw Feast of the Dead lie. A number of other tribes over a pretty wide geographic area practiced or still practice their own Feast of the Dead. This suggests that it is probably pretty ancient. No longer practiced in Choctaw communities today, what we know about the Choctaw version of the Feast of the Dead mostly comes from a few things that were written down about it back in the 1700s.

Choctaw traditional culture teaches us to love the people around us. We demonstrate this love by providing our children with the things that they need, respecting our peers, and taking care of the elderly. In the traditional way of thinking, you don't stop loving someone just because they have passed away, and you express this love by taking care of their physical remains. According to the story of the ancient Choctaw migration to find our homeland, following Iti Fabvssa (the leaning pole), our ancestors carried the bones of their deceased with them on their long journey, rather than leaving them behind. Upon arriving at Nvnih Waiya, they built an earth mound and buried them.

In the 1700s, and probably long before, one of the ways that Choctaw communities honored the deceased was through the Feast of the Dead. Traditionally, death was viewed as a transition from this part of our life to the next. Choctaw people have both a Shilvp (spirit) and Shilombish (shadow). When an individual passed on, their Shilvp would travel west on the Ofi Tohbi Hina (White Dogs Road or the Milky Way) to the Shilvp Iyakni (Land of Spirits). Much of our traditional burial practice was centered around making sure our loved ones were prepared for their journey. To learn more, please look back to our December 2009 Iti Fabvssa on "Spiritual beliefs and rituals." The mourning process often lasted for months. At the end of it, a person's remains would be taken to the charnel house called a tvshka chuka (warriors' house). This acted as a temporary home and resting place for the recently deceased family member. Each iksa had its own tvhska chuka. To learn more, please look back at our February 2012 Iti Fabvssa on "Ancient Choctaw burial practice."

Choctaw communities were traditionally divided into two moities or groups of people called iksa. One iksa was known as the Beloved People, Okla Ihulahta, and the other as the Divided People, Imoklasha or Kashapa Okla. The iksa was an important part of our traditional Choctaw lifeways; it kept our society in balance, both socially and politically. "A person inherited iksa membership from his or her mother and had to marry someone from the opposite iksa. Individuals born outside the community were sometimes adopted by Choctaw women into their own iksa..." (Thompson, 2019).

During the Feast of the Dead, families and community members would gather together to remember those who had passed away over the previous year. The event lasted at least two days. On the first day, one iksa conducted the appropriate rights to honor their deceased loved ones while the other iksa supported them. The next day, these roles switched. The remains were ultimately laid to rest in low, conical earth mounds located out away from the settlements. Once complete, the living members of the community would return to their settlement and hold the feast. The Feast of the Dead is an important part of traditional Choctaw burial custom that centered on the love we have for our people. This feast was a way that the community, as a whole could honor and remember their loved ones who had passed on.

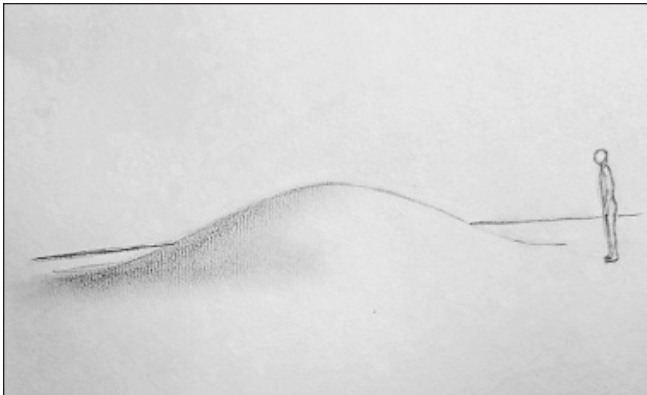
The Feast of the Dead was a common practice done by many other tribes in eastern North America. An anonymous Ojibwa traditionalist explained via personal communication, in their community the Feast of the Dead was the most important celebration of the year. It is a time when the entire community can set aside their differences and come together to eat, celebrate, and take care of their ancestors by feeding and honoring them. Wyandotte people also believe that the Feast of the Dead is the “most celebrated ceremony” they traditionally hold (<http://www.wyandotte-nation.org/>). The Feast of the Dead is also very similar to the Day of the Dead which is adapted from indigenous communities in Mexico.

This November, let us remember our family, friends, and community members who have passed on. What can we do in our homes or communities to continue to honor and remember them?

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The Milky Way over the Choctaw homelands in what is now Mississippi.



A depiction of a Choctaw Earthen Burial Mound by Joseph Wolf.