

## Mississippi Choctaw: Food and Fiber Pre 1830's

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**The Choctaw Indian Nation**, a Muskogee tribe also known as Chakchiuma, or Chatot, traces its roots to the Mississippi Valley and parts of Alabama. The Choctaw Indians' origin legend is a fascinating one: the tribe had been traveling through rough terrain and dense forest for months, carrying the numerous bones of their dead; this task had taken its toll on the living, who grew more fatigued with each passing day of their seemingly unending journey. Soon they came upon a creek, which the Chief decided they would use as their camp for the winter. When the warmer weather came, the tribe was healthy from rest over the winter, and an abundance of food that was found from the surrounding area, so they decided to make the creek their permanent home. Overlooking the creek was a steep hill with an indent in one side, which the Choctaw named, "Nunih Waya", meaning: "Productive Mound". Nunih Waya is also often referred to as "The Mother Mound"; from this, the Choctaw village got the name "Nanah Waya". (7)

The Mississippi Band of the Choctaw Indians used their surrounding natural resources to a full extent. They grew food in the soil; the trees provided food and fuel for warmth and drying techniques. Their homes were made from the trees and grasses that were surrounded their villages. The clothes were made from fibers found in the vegetation and the animal skins. The entire animal was used, with meat and the bones fashioned into tools and weapons.

The Choctaw were a Matriarchal society, which explains why they liken abundance from nature to a mother's care. Woman had different roles when it came to everyday life, doing most of the farming and taking care of the family. They owned the land used for farming. The men were in charge of protecting and clearing their land along with harvesting game from the forests. (3)

The Choctaw farmers farmed the rich, friable soils of the river areas and flood plains, where wooden, stone, and bone garden tools easily worked the soil. The Choctaw farmers girdled the trees to help prepare the land for crops by eliminating unwanted shade. Using a stone ax to cut around the base of the tree did this. This would cut off the supply of nutrients to crown, killing the tree over a length of time. This also helped to dry the wood while it was standing, making it easier to be burned. After the tree was dead, it could be easily dropped and cut into the lengths needed by the tribe. Some of the native trees that could be found in that area in this time period included Red Maples and River Birch, along with different types of nut- producing trees like Oak and Hickory, from which the tribe harvested throughout the year. (1) The nuts from these trees could be eaten outright or dried and stored. Choctaw Indians were also fond of the oil that they could extract from nuts, which was done by pounding the nut into small pieces, which were then boiled. As the liquid cooled, the oil would congeal on the top, and skimmed off. This would then be used for cooking venison and other meat dishes, along with being adding flavor to cornbread. (2)

Corn was planted depending on the weather. Choctaw lived in the South, and began planting crops in early- to mid spring. They usually had two plantings of corn per year; the first when there was no threat of frost, and the soil could be worked easily. This planting produced early corn, which can stand cooler weather and ripens earlier. Four or five weeks later, the tribe could plant late corn. (5) Spring was ideal for planting this food staple, as animals of the forests were more likely to feed on the abundance of other plants. Two smaller planting runs, as opposed to one large crop, allowed for the corn to be made into flour, or stored more easily.

The Choctaw used many different types of tools, made mostly of animal bone or wood. A sharp-pointed digging stick served as the common tool for making small holes for planting. They also used a peg to help remove the husks from ears of corn, and some may have used seashells to loosen the kernels from the cob. They also used pestles and mortars to thresh corn, beans, and other crops. Indian women used baskets to winnow the threshed corn and beans. (1)

## **WOMEN ROLES**

### **Care of Game**

Choctaw men traveled into the forests that surrounded their homes and villages to hunt. Women prepared the meat and hides.

Before tanning hides, the women had to remove all remaining flesh from the skin. They used sharpened shoulder bones to scrape the meat and fat, then punched small holes in the hide and soaked it in water for several days. This was to soften the skins, and help remove the last of the fur. The exception was with larger skins, such as those from large bear and buffalo, which were used as blankets in the winter. Excess water was squeezed, and then tanned, using a mixture of crushed bear brains and water (6). Finally, the hide was stretched and left to dry over a pit of burning corncobs, dried animal waste, and rotten wood, which burned slowly. The smoke from the cured the hide. Once both sides were cured, it was ready for use (2).

### **Fields**

Women were also in charge of planting and working the fields, working the small vegetable gardens near their homes, also preparing corn meal and flour. Women worked to raise a variety of crops including tobacco, corn, beans, sweet potatoes and pumpkins.

The planting was done in a very different way than today. Choctaw men first needed to clear the area of shade-producing trees, creating the massive fields that the Choctaws are known for. They used fire to clear the thick brush and any residue from last season. The burning added much-needed potash, calcium, phosphorus and magnesium to the soil, acting as a natural fertilizer to act as a natural fertilizer (8). After the men prepared the fields, the women would start to clear and work up the land using simple hoes, made of wood or bone attached to a stick with animal sinew. After they had cultivated the field, they planted corn in small mounds of soil, containing

eight to ten plants each. After the plants began to sprout, they would then plant beans, then squash.

The squash would have two purposes, not only being used for food, but it also helped to keep down the weeds by shading them out. It is also thought that the small prickly vines and leaves would help to keep animals out of the fields.

Each fall, the women would take charge of the harvest, and put them into storage for the winter months. Each family's supply of corn was stored in a crude crib raised on poles about eight feet from the ground. Fruits, nuts, seeds and roots were also gathered and stored. They ground their corn into meal with a wooden pestle and mortar, which they made by burning a hollow in the side of a fallen tree. Ironwood was often used for the mortar because of its dense property. (4)

The corn plant was so important to their economic life that they had many stories to account for its origin. According to one story it came as the gift of a beautiful woman to Choctaw hunters who shared their last meal with her. According to another story a child was playing in the yard when a crow flew over and dropped a single grain; the child planted it and in this way became the discoverer of their most important article of food. (9)

Hominy was a very important food source deriving from corn. Grinding corn with a mortar and pestle, and adding Wood Ash lye to the corn, resulted in hominy. The lye came from Wood Ash ashes mixed with water

The tribe would also have to process what ever they could gather from the forest, along with planting their crops. This consisted mostly of fruits and nuts.

George Catlin, a well-known Indian historian from the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, said:

"...the ground was almost literally covered with vines, producing the greatest profusion of delicious grapes...and hanging in such endless clusters... our progress was oftentimes completely arrested by hundreds of acres of small plum trees...every bush that was in sight was so loaded with the weight of its...fruit, that they were in many instances literally without leaves on their branches, and quite bent to the ground... and beds of wild currants, gooseberries, and (edible) prickly pear."(7)

This helps to describe not only the fruit that was available in the area that the Choctaw lived but also the type of growing conditions that they were able to take advantage of.

### **Land Ownership**

The village or cultural group claimed sovereignty over a particular area, but individual women controlled the use of specific fields. As long as a woman used a portion of land for agriculture, she had the continuing right of usage. If she stopped cultivating that land, however, either someone else would take the plot, or it would revert back to communal or village control. If the village moved, the headmen allotted new lands to the women in each lineage, or family, for farming. There were no fixed rules determining the size of a plot, or the amount of land that an individual could claim. Each woman, aided by the men in the household, could clear as much

land as she needed. While land inheritance was matrilineal, it ultimately belonged to the village. (2)

### **Baskets**

Swamp cane baskets are probably the oldest and best-recognized example of Choctaw material culture. Some of the earliest descriptions of Choctaw life refer to their use of cane for bedding, mats, and baskets. The cane used in the baskets was gathered from nearby marshy areas, and then split into four or more strips that are used to weave the baskets. Dyes were made from vegetables to make the baskets different colors, allowing a person to express themselves and identify which baskets were theirs.

Various plants were used to make colors, by crushing or boiling various parts of the plant. The fiber was then soaked in the color to allow it to absorb the color. Yellow was made from puccoon roots that were gathered in the fall and boiled. Red was also made from puccoon, also as well as sumac and fruits. Purple was made from Alder and Maple bark. Alder also produced other colors, depending on which time of year it was harvested. Bark and meat from the walnut were used to make browns, and the color black came from Post Oak ashes boiled with copper. (9)

## **Male Roles**

### **Buildings**

The men were in charge of anything that the women were not. They did the hunting, and took the lead were in politics of the tribe, war, and other activities that governed tribal society. Men made tools and built village structures, the materials all of which came from the resources surrounding them. The buildings were mostly put up in the spring and fall when the

temperatures were not as warm. This required a great deal of preparation, as the buildings were raised in a single day. Choctaw homes were constructed of wooden posts, connected with lianas and covered with mud. The roofs were made from Cypress or Pine bark, and a hole was left in each gable end of the structure to allow smoke from the internal fire to escape. (1)

### **Hunting**

The hunting done with weapons that they made from the forests. Their bows and arrows were made from Black Locust and Ash. Bowstrings were made from strips of animal hide, or sometimes sinew, that were stretched and twisted. The arrows were from a variety of canes, or Red Dog wood. They tipped these arrows with flint points, sharpened bone, or simply sharpened one end of the arrow. If a tip was used, it was attached with sinew and a glue, as were the feathers, made from boiled deer antlers and hooves. Nocks were carved into one end so that the arrow could rest on the string and avoid the arrow to break when the string was released. Children and younger men, to kill smaller game like rabbits and squirrels, sometimes used blowguns, which were made from cane that was found in the area. This cane was cut eight to nine feet long, and the darts were one to two feet long. The darts were made of small saplings or branches, and fashioned to act as a seal, so the gun would force the dart out.

Before the men left on a hunt, they would often pray, or chant, to ensure that they would have a good hunt with. One such chant or prayer was:

“Give me the wind. Give me the breeze. Yu! O Great Terrestrial Hunter, I come to the edge of your spittle where you repose. Let your stomach cover itself; let it be covered with leaves. Let it cover itself at a single bend, and may you never be



satisfied. And you, O Ancient Red, may you hover above my breast while I sleep. Now let good dreams develop; let my experiences be propitious. Ha! Now let me little trails be directed, as they lie in various directions. Let the leaves be covered with the clotted blood, and may it never cease to be so. You two [Long Man and Scared Fire] shall bury it in your stomachs. Yo!"-Mooney, "Scared Formulas,"(2)

The hunter is asking for the wind to be in his favor so that he can get closer to the animals that he is hunting. He is hoping that all of nature's beings favor him on his hunt. In turn for a successful hunt, the hunter would wash the game in the river and give a piece to the fire to please their spirits and to ensure that he would have prosperous future hunts.

### **Wild Game**

For the most part, the Choctaw hunted white-tailed deer. These were the most common game in the area and, made up a large part of the diet of larger game. Most hunting for deer took place in the fall while the animals were in rut. This would make the hunting a little easier because the animals would be focused on mating rather than their surroundings. They would relax some of their senses, and the Indians knew this so to take advantage of it. Oaks would drop acorns during the fall, and deer could be found feeding on them in certain areas thick Oak. The hunters were able to find these areas and take advantage of the deer's travel, making the hunt easier.

The meat was always cooked thoroughly. One method used was to spear it with a stick and cook it over an open flame, flipping the meat until it was fully cooked. Many times, small game weren't gutted; but skinned and cooked whole. Larger pieces of meat were often placed over a spit. This meat was often cubed and added to vegetable stew. (2)

### *Hunting Methods*

Indians used two methods for harvesting deer. The decoy method had one hunter hiding from deer, while using an already- harvested deer as a decoy, sometimes draping the skins over his own body in an effort to close in on the game.

The other method was known as the fire method. This involved a large group of hunters setting a small fire encircling the deer, then waiting for the game to run in their direction. (7)

Burning served other purposes, such as removal of underbrush, but it is not known if the Indians were aware of these other affects

### *Bear*

Deer were not the only animals that the Indians would eat. Bear was another animal that the Indians valued greatly. They used the bear for food but it was the highly valued fat that they really wanted from the animal. Their diets lacked the nutrients that bear fat offered and they knew that they could use it in their cooking much like the deer fat was used. They would cook the bear and other animals in the fat and make their meals that way.

These animals were all hunted in a different way. Most of the hunting was done in the winter, when the animals were not quite so active. Bear's dens were entered and the bear killed; this process was safer for the hunter. Smaller animals like squirrels, raccoons and possums were usually trapped with snares for efficiency. Turkeys, pigeons and waterfowl were very common and were often the meal of the night. (2)

## **Conclusion**

All of these things changed when the Europeans began to settle in the Choctaw area. Indians to leave these lands to accommodate white settlers. With the signing of various treaties, including the Treaty of Rabbit Creek, the Choctaw were forced on to smaller areas of land; this restricted the areas that the tribe would be able to hunt and gather. Eventually, they were removed from their native lands at the advent of the Trail of Tears. The was, for many, a fatal trip; this route to Oklahoma was a forced one for thousands of natives, as a means of relocation. Upon arrived to the new territory, they found it did resemble their old reservations; void of game with nutrient- poor soils. The Choctaw Indians believed that evil sprits inhabited these new lands. Years of suffering followed, and it would be decades before the Choctaw would return to the lands that they called home.

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