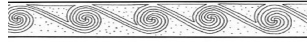


## Iti Fabussa



# The Choctaw river cane flute

### Question:

I'm a flute-maker. What can you tell me about old Choctaw flutes? How were they made? How were they used? Any information would be helpful.

Thanks, Creston

### Answer:

Flutes have been a part of Choctaw traditional culture for a very long time. In the Choctaw language, a traditional flute is called uskala. This term was actually created by combining the Choctaw words oski or "river cane" and ola "to make a sound". So, to our ancestors, the word "flute" literally meant "river cane that makes a sound". The Choctaw phrase for "playing a flute" is uskala olachi (Byington 1915:453).

In the past, Choctaw flutes were used somewhat differently than the ways that flutes, even Native American flutes, are usually used today. Records indicate that at the time of European arrival some of the more powerful Southeastern chiefs had flute players in their chiefly courts, who played flute music to welcome guests. It is likely that some ancestral Choctaw chiefs, such as Tvshkalusa, had these flute players as well. Also during this period, the early Chickasaw, and probably also the ancestors of the Choctaw, blew into flutes on the battlefield before making an attack (see Swanton 1946:628-629).

Nevertheless, over the last couple of centuries, and perhaps ever since flutes first became a part of Choctaw society, they have mostly been a tool of the Choctaw medicine people. Most notably, alikchi played flute tunes the night before and during important stickball games to help secure their team's success (Densmore 1943:128-132). There is little evidence to suggest that Choctaw flutes were traditionally played during courtship, as they were by the Plains Tribes to our west. In fact, at least some of the Choctaw men who used them made efforts to keep their flutes away from women (Howard and Levine 1990:30).

Most Choctaw flutes were traditionally made from large pieces of river cane about 1 inch in diameter. The following description for making and playing a traditional Choctaw river cane flute has been provided to "Iti Fabussa" courtesy of Presley Byington, a master Choctaw river cane flute-maker from the Idabel area:

The best season for harvesting river cane for flutes spans roughly from the beginning of October to the end of April. During this time of year, the walls are thick and the cane is strong. If it is cut during the hot months, the cane walls are thin and can collapse or crack during drying. After the cane is cut, it is allowed to dry for approximately 2 weeks before a flute is made from it.

Thick pieces of river cane are hollow, almost like a piece of pipe, except that the cane has solid sections called "nodes" that are spaced at regular intervals. The nodes are visible on the outside as small raised bands around the circumference of the cane.

The upper end of the flute is formed by cutting the dried cane off flat about six inches above a node. Two small holes, roughly ¼" in diameter are then burned through the wall of the cane, one on each side of the node. The interior of this node is left in place so that it forms



a solid wall through the inside of the flute. The outer surface of the cane between these burned out holes is indented slightly to accommodate a thin splint of cane that is tied in place between the two holes.

The lower end of the flute is formed by cutting the cane off flat about eight inches below the node mentioned in the previous paragraph. If any other nodes are present on the emerging flute, they are burned out from the base. This creates a hollow area in the lower eight inches of the instrument. Into the walls of this lower section are burned the finger holes that are used to play the flute.

Different Tribes have different traditional arrangements of finger holes. Most Choctaw flutes have two finger holes. Most flutes made by other Southeastern Tribes have from between zero and three finger holes, while the flutes made by Plains Tribes have five or six finger holes.

Choctaw flutes are played by putting the mouth over the upper end of the flute and blowing through it. As air hits the solid node, it is forced out of the upper hole and over the thin splint of cane attached to the outside of the flute. This causes the splint to vibrate and make a sound. This sound resonates through the hollow

lower chamber of the flute. The player's two index fingers can be used to plug up one or both of the finger holes. This effectively changes the size of the lower chamber of the flute, creating different sound pitches. The player can also cap the big hole at the base of the flute to get another pitch. The different pitches are used by the player as notes for creating a song (Byington 2010).

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