

Iti Fabussa



Knowledge of origins helps maintain unique identity and heritage

November is Native American Heritage Month. During this part of the year, families across the United States celebrate Thanksgiving, while locally Choctaw Nation hosts the Durant Pow Wow and sends employees to dozens of area schools to give presentations about Native American culture. At no time is Native American culture more widely visible than now, but in these colorful celebrations, the boundaries between the traditions of different Tribes can become a little blurry.

For us to maintain our unique identity and heritage as Chahta people it is important for us to be able to discern which traditions originate from our communities and ancestors, and which of them come from other sources. Over the last century, a cultural mixing has occurred, muddying the waters somewhat. Native American Tribes have been lumped together by the federal government, the general public, school textbook-writers, and Hollywood, who often do not realize the special uniqueness of each of Americans more than 500 distinct original Tribes. Also, individuals from different Tribes have created pan-Indian organizations for mutual support, where the emphasis is on being “Indian”, rather than on belonging to a specific Tribe. When Tribes begin to lose parts of their own traditional cultures through assimilation, they often replace it with elements of this pan-Indian culture. One very general result of all of the above is that “flashy” cultural elements from a few Tribes, especially those from the Great Plains, have expanded at the expense of many of the unique traditions of Choctaw and other Tribes. Today, the situation is such that many Choctaw youth envision their Choctaw ancestors living in tipis and chasing buffalo!

In this month’s edition of Iti Fabvssa, we will compare a few common parts of pan-Indian culture with their traditional Choctaw equivalents. The idea is not that one

is better than the other, but rather that by gaining knowledge about the origins of all of these traditions, we empower ourselves to better understand who we are and where we stand in the world.

Pow Wow

The early origins of the pow wow are not fully remembered, but many practitioners believe that it began several hundred years ago with the Hethushka Ceremony of the Omaha Tribe in Nebraska. The modern pow wow dates back roughly 100 years on the Great Plains; its form was influenced by Native American dance performances at Wild West Shows. The different powwow dance styles and outfits originate with different Plains Tribes. Over the last several decades, the pow wow tradition has been shared from the Plains Tribes to Tribes in other areas, including the Oklahoma Choctaw.

Choctaw Social Dance

Today’s Choctaw social dance has its origins in the old Choctaw dances performed at stickball games, the Green Corn Ceremony, and upon a war party setting out or returning from the battlefield. The distinctive traditional dress worn at these dances comes from early French clothing that was artistically adapted and altered by Choctaw people. Today, social dances can be seen at the Choctaw Labor Day festival and a variety of other cultural activities.

Tipi

Tipis are the portable traditional houses of most of the Tribes that lived on the Great Plains. Tribes located farther east, in the prairie region, often lived in more permanent houses, but also took tipis on westward buffalo hunts during the fall. Traditionally, tipis are made from bison, or more rarely, elk hide. Beginning in the 1850s, canvas

tipis began to be produced. Tipis are not a part of Choctaw traditional culture.

Chukka

The traditional Choctaw house is the “chukka”. The summer chukka (sometimes known as a “chickee”), is a thatched, rectangular, open, pole-frame structure, designed to allow the breeze to come through. The circular walls of a winter chukka are formed by sticking a series of posts in the ground, weaving them with a split river cane lattice, and plastering them with clay. The peaked roof is formed from wooden joists and park or palmetto thatching. Today, chukka can be seen in the traditional village at the Tuskahoma Council House grounds.

Indian Taco

The Indian Taco consists of a fry bread base piled with ground beef and cheese, and usually a combination of beans, lettuce, onion, tomato, and / or salsa. Fry bread has no ingredients native to the United States, but was developed by Native American people from U.S. government-issued rations of wheat flour, lard, salt, and leavening. Choctaws probably did not begin eating Indian tacos until the 1900s.

Tafula

“Tafula”, is likely a contraction of the Choctaw words “Tanchi” and “Vfula”, meaning literally “stirred corn”. The basis of the dish is hominy with broken kernels. Hickory nut oil or beans may be added, or the dish may be allowed to sit and sour. It has probably been eaten by the ancestors of today’s Choctaw for 1,000 years and it is still enjoyed at many Choctaw church meetings.

Totem Pole

Totem poles are tall cedar poles that have

been carved with a series of representational images, which can stand for a variety of meanings. These highly artistic sculptures are part of the traditional culture of Northwest Coast Tribes including the Haida and Tlingit. Although Choctaws have an ancient woodcarving tradition, totem poles are not a part of Choctaw traditional culture per se.

Earth Mound

Many Choctaw and ancestral Choctaw villages have monumental works in earth called “earth mounds”. Made by piling up basket loads of dirt, the earliest earth mounds date back at least 7,000 years in the southeastern United States. Some earth mounds were made to represent the shapes

of animals, others served as places to build important buildings or to bury the dead. The Moundville site, located in western Alabama, has 29 earth mounds, one of which is as tall as a 7-story building.

Dream Catcher

Dream catchers are part of the traditional culture of the “Ashinabbe”, or Ojibwa people from Minnesota. Originally, dream catchers were made of red willow hoops, laced with dyed plant fibers to represent a spider web with a hole at the middle. These were hung on children’s cradles, the belief being that the child’s bad dreams would be caught in the web, and the good dreams would pass through. Today, as a pan-Indian symbol, dream catchers are hung over

beds, used as earrings, and even hung on rearview mirrors. Choctaws did not start using these until well into the 1900s.

Stickball Sticks

Choctaw stickball sticks are formed by bending a long, narrow piece of hickory to form a handle with a cup at the end. Strips of animal hide are used to lace the cup up so that paired sticks can be used to catch and throw a small ball. Stickball has been the Choctaw national past time for hundreds of years. Today, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma has a team that competes against the Mississippi Choctaws in the Stickball World Series.

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