



Making Choctaw arrows



Figure 1
Deadly Southeastern war arrows.

Previous editions of *Iti Fabussa* have presented information about the Choctaw bow and arrow in action (1/10), Choctaw “arrowheads” (7/11), and the process for making a traditional Choctaw bow (10/10). The next two editions of *Iti Fabussa* will add to these previous articles by focusing in depth on Choctaw arrows and how to make them.

As many readers can probably already surmise, a traditional Choctaw arrow is a lot more than just a stick with feathers tied on one end. The traditional arrow is part of a complex weapon that also includes the bow and bow string. All three must be finely tuned to each other to work effectively. To produce an accurate shot, the arrow itself must have the correct length and stiffness for the particular bow that it is fired from; the arrow must be the right weight, and this weight must be properly balanced to keep it from tumbling; the arrow must have the correct aerodynamics to fly straight; and the tip must be properly suited to its intended function. A traditional arrow is a deadly weapon, no question about it, but it is also very much a piece of art.

In the Choctaw language, an arrow is known as “oski naki,” or *iti naki*.” The first term translating literally as “cane projectile” is used if the arrow shaft is made from river cane. The second term, translating as “wooden projectile,” is used if the shaft is made from any type of wood. Traditional Choctaw arrows are made in several different types, depending on their intended uses. The most common types include arrows for war/hunting large game, for hunting small game, and for bow-fishing.

Choctaw archers of the past used the same type of arrows both for war and for hunting large animals. Today some Choctaws still use them for hunting deer. These arrows are long and heavy. Usually, their arrowheads have sharp edges, designed for creating a bleeding wound in anything unfortunate enough to be hit by one. Contrary to Hollywood movies, it is usually not possible to pick up a random war arrow and know what tribe made it. However, it is often possible to tell what region of the country a traditional arrow comes from. This is the case with five of the earliest surviving war arrows from the Southeast (Fig. 1). Currently housed at the Peabody Museum on the Harvard University campus, they were collected in Georgia before 1828 (note-Georgia Territory included what is now Mississippi and Alabama until 1796). These very well-made arrows are probably either Choctaw or Creek in origin. Their shafts are made from hardwood shoots from a bush or tree sapling. The arrows are fletched with three turkey wing feathers that have been split and trimmed. The quills of these feathers were glued down to the arrow shaft along their lengths, and their ends were wrapped in animal tendon covered in glue. The large points of these arrows are made of carefully shaped deer antler. The arrows are painted in red and black, colors that Choctaw traditional thought associates with war and death.

A different type of Choctaw big game / war arrow is in the collection of the Red River Museum in Idabel (Fig 2a). This arrow is made from a straightened piece of river cane. It has no fletchings at all. The arrow tip is made from a rolled piece of metal. Rolled metal points, like the one on this arrow, are known on Choctaw sites dating back to the 1730s. Arrows of this general description were being used by some Mississippi Choctaws until at least 1900 (Fig 2b), and by some Oklahoma Choctaw hunters into the mid-1900s. The unfletched arrow is a deadly weapon at close range, but generally not as accurate for distance-shooting.

Some of the Choctaw arrows intended for small-game hunting have wide, blunt tips. These heavy, blunt-tipped arrows strike an animal with a lot of force and stun it, but do not puncture the skin. Such an arrow is preferable in skunk-hunting, to a sharp-tipped arrow, which might penetrate the animal’s scent glands. In squirrel hunting, the blunt arrow can also be preferable, because it is less likely to get stuck in a branch at the top of the tree. Blunt arrows have also often been used in bird-hunting. An Oklahoma Choctaw blunt arrow from a family collection appears to be made from a dogwood sapling (Fig. 3).

A different type of arrow was often made for bow-fishing. Two quivers of fishing arrows, collected at Fort Washita in the 1850s, are housed at the Oklahoma History Center in Oklahoma City. Although labeled as Chickasaw, these arrows (Fig. 4a), are probably very similar to some of the fishing arrows made by Choctaw people at that time. The shafts of these arrows are made from lightweight plant shoots that have a pithy center. The arrow tips, carved from hardwood, have multiple points and deep barbs. This design makes it difficult for the arrow to come out of the fish, and can aid in pulling it out of the water. Another style of Choctaw fishing arrow is housed at the National Museum of the American Indian SRC in Suitland, Maryland.. This arrow (Fig. 4b), from Mississippi, has a river cane shaft, a metal point, and a thin string attached to the shaft and wrapped around it. This string was probably used to help retrieve the arrow and fish out of the water.

Please stay tuned for next month’s edition of *Iti Fabussa*, which will present the traditional process for making a Choctaw war arrow with stone tools.



Figure 3
Choctaw blunt arrow from a family collection.



Figure 4
A) Closeup of Chickasaw fishing arrow points. B) Choctaw fishing arrow from Mississippi.



Figure 2
Three Choctaw cane arrows with rolled metal points. “A” is from Oklahoma, “B” and “C” are from Mississippi.