



# Traditional Agriculture

## Transition to agricultural society

May was a busy month for Choctaw people 300 years ago. The height of spring would find communities working together to get their crops planted in the warm soil, anticipating bountiful harvests later in the summer and fall. As the crops ripened, there would be feasts of fresh vegetables. Later, the majority of the harvest would be dried in the sun and placed in storage bins or hung on strings from the rafters of houses, where it would remain until it was taken down and cooked sometime during the next year. Food grown in agricultural fields has long been the backbone of the Choctaw diet.

Choctaw people have been recognized as the best agriculturalists of all of the Southeastern Tribes (Romans 1770). However, our earliest ancestors were not agricultural people, but rather hunter-gatherers who lived by collecting edible wild plants and by hunting. The transition to an agricultural society was a slow and gradual one.

Choctaw agriculture's earliest roots lie in very ancient land-management practices. Our earliest ancestors were not passive in obtaining edible wild plants. Ten-thousand years ago and more, the people in what is now the Southeast regularly set fire to the woods and prairies to create a more open, biologically diverse environment, increasing the amount of edible plants that could thrive there and creating better habitat for the animals they hunted. The regularity of these fires and their effects on the local environment increased through the millennia (Fowler and Konopik 2007).

Through the regular use of fire, our earliest ancestors were able to shape and maintain wild plant communities in the state that they wanted them to be in. Although this type of interaction can be a forerunner of agriculture, it is not agriculture. An agricultural society is one that relies on domesticated plants or animals. Domestication is said to occur when people selectively manipulate the reproduction of a group of plants or animals over generations, changing their genetic makeup from that of their wild ancestors. This does not happen easily.

On this planet, there are only 10 spots where ancient people are known to have independently developed agriculture. One of these spots comprises parts of the present states of Tennessee, Kentucky, Missouri, and Illinois. The Native American communities living here, who had been gathering wild plant foods for



Sketch by Ruby Bolding

### **Choctaw women working a communal field with traditional tools.**

thousands of years, began to select plants with the most desirable qualities, save their seeds, and then plant them. Eventually, this human selection genetically changed the plants, creating new domesticated varieties with characteristics that made them better foods. Wild gourd was domesticated in this area by 3000 BC, eventually becoming today's summer squash. Sunflower was domesticated by 2800 BC, marsh elder by 1900 BC, and chenopod by 1700 BC (Smith 2006).

Our Choctaw ancestors were on the periphery of the agricultural revolution occurring to their north. They had long collected and eaten the wild varieties of these same plants and were certainly aware of their domestication. Still, they would not start growing these plants themselves until centuries later, and they would never rely on them as much as did the more northern groups (Fritz 2008:334). The reason our ancestors didn't adopt agriculture early on may be that they already produced plenty of food for their communities by using fire and other tools to manage wild acorn and nut-producing trees such as oak, hickory, and pecan. Such a form of permaculture would have required a lot less work than having to replant domesticated crops every year.

Bottle gourd appears to be the first domesticated plant grown in any abundance within the Choctaw homeland. This gourd, used to make containers, rather than being eaten as food, has a fascinating and mysterious past. The bottle gourd originated in Africa. However, recent studies of bottle gourd DNA have shown

that the variety of bottle gourd that was brought to the Americas came from Africa by way of Asia (Erikson et al 2005). Once in the Americas, the bottle gourd was spread by human communities from south to north. It was being grown in Mexico by 10,000 years ago, in Florida by 8,000 years ago, and it was fairly common in the Choctaw homeland by 2,500 years ago (Fritz 2008: 330). The spread of this ancient domesticated plant is clearly tied in with early human population movements and contacts across the globe, which are today poorly understood.

Fifteen-hundred years ago, many of our ancestors were collecting large amounts of wild plant foods and nuts, as well as growing bottle gourd, and small amounts of the plants domesticated thousands of years earlier by their northern neighbors, including sunflower, squash, goosefoot, sumpweed, little barley, knotweed, and maygrass (e.g. Scarry 2003).

According to both Choctaw oral tradition, and archaeological research, corn was domesticated in Mexico, and then brought northward. It was grown as a minor crop in what is now eastern North America as early as AD 1. However, around AD 1000 a major shift occurred, whereby corn agriculture became by far the most important source of food for Native American communities in the Southeast, including the ancestors of today's Choctaw. At this time, many communities abandoned old settlements and moved to fertile floodplains that would make the best corn fields. They also changed their village layout to make best use of these fertile soils.

Over the next 800 years, ancestral Choctaw corn farmers developed four Choctaw varieties of corn. "Tanchushi", was variety of corn that matured in just six weeks. "Tanchi hlimishko" was a yellow flint corn used to make hominy. "Tanchi tohbi" was a white corn used in making bread. "Tanchi bokanli," was a popcorn, used in entertaining visitors (Halbert n.d.)

Beans, another domesticated food from Mexico, arrived in the Choctaw homeland about a century after corn became popular. Choctaws seem to have developed several types of beans. "Bvla", was a large-sized variety (Byington 1915:87). The Choctaw terms "tohbi abelha", meaning "pole bean" and "tobi hikiny vni", meaning "bush bean", hint that varieties of both of these general forms of beans may have been grown in Choctaw communities (see Byington 1915:366). According to Henry Halbert, Choctaw beans were a type of butter bean.

Pumpkins came to the Choctaw homeland from Mexico, via Native American groups living in the Southwestern United States about that time as beans (Scarry 2008:395).

Beginning in the 1500s, contact with European colonizers brought a number of new domesticated crops and animals into the Choctaw homeland. One of the earliest was watermelons, brought by the Spanish in the 1500s, it was quickly incorporated into Native agriculture. Through the years, the Spanish also brought onions, garlic, tomatoes, peppers, hogs, cattle, and hogs. African people, brought to Choctaw country by the French and Spanish, carried okra and field peas with them. By the late 1700s, in addition to the older Native crops, Choctaw farmers were successfully raising leeks, garlic, cabbage, hogs, chicken, and ducks (Romans 1770:84), all of which are of European origin. They exported the produce back to their Anglo-American neighbors. Choctaws began raising cattle perhaps as early as the 1730s, and by the 1770s many Choctaws left their old towns and spread out onto previously unsettled land in order to better graze their livestock. By the start of the Trail of Tears in 1830, the

Choctaw cattle herd numbered about 43,000 head, with Choctaws raising more cattle per person than their Anglo-American neighbors (Carso 2005).

Today, traditional food dishes like tanchi labonna and holhponi are an important part of Choctaw life and culture. These foods that are made up of different ingredients adopted by Choctaw people at different times and from different sources, are both a tasty reflection of Choctaw history, and a testament to the skill and adaptability of the Choctaw farmer.

A list of the works cited in this article can be obtained from the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department 800-522-6170, ext. 2216.

## Choctaw agriculture: 300 years ago

It is clear that one of the factors that has always helped Choctaw agriculture to develop is exchange with groups of people living outside of the Choctaw homeland. Outside influences on Choctaw farmers were strong in the 1700s. At this time, Choctaw society supported itself with a form of native, corn-centered agriculture that had been practiced since AD 1000. However, by this time, Choctaw farmers were also experimenting with and selectively adopting a variety of new domesticated plants brought into the Choctaw homeland from Europe, Africa, and Central and South America, by European colonists. Choctaw farmers successfully adapted ancient farming techniques to some of the new crops with great success, while other issues, like keeping newly acquired livestock out of the fields, brought new challenges.

In the early 1700s, Choctaw villages were concentrated in east/central Mississippi. The availability of fertile land for farming was an important consideration in deciding where to build a village. Most villages were located on elevated land, adjacent to a stream with stretches fertile bottomland that could easily be farmed. Other than the fortified villages positioned on the eastern border with the Muscogee tribe, most Choctaw settlements were spread out, with houses located 200 yards from each other or more. Three hundred years ago, Choctaw communities maintained three types of agricultural fields: small family garden plots planted between the houses in a village, large community fields located down in the bottom land adjacent to the village, and patches of pumpkins and melons, located at some distance from the village.

Preparation of agricultural fields began far in advance of planting. Large trees were removed through a slow, patient technique that minimized back-breaking work. Men first girdled and killed the large trees by chopping through the bark all the way around the tree's base using stone bladed axes. These girdled trees would be left either to rot and fall to earth, or stand and dry out. Workers would return to the spot, a year or more later, gath-

er up fallen wood and brush, and cut down new saplings. They would pile this material at the bases of the standing dead trees and set it on fire. The fire would burn through the dry wood and fell the trees. Sometimes, parts of the fallen dry trees would be hauled off and used to keep the sacred fire burning in the village. Most of the rest would be burned up on the spot. If new saplings popped up while the field was in use, workers would cut them down, pile them up on living roots, and burn them. They would repeat the process as long as the roots kept sending up saplings. Ultimately, the traditional Choctaw method of field clearing put a great deal of rotten wood, ash, and charcoal directly into the soil, where it acted as fertilizer.

Choctaw-made gardening tools included the afore-mentioned stone-bladed axes, hoes with blades made of a mussel shell or deer shoulder bone, and digging sticks. Digging sticks resembled wooden staffs with a sharpened fire-hardened point at one end, which was used to poke holes in the ground for planting seeds, and to pry under weeds in order to uproot them. Metal axe and hoe blades were some of the first trade items brought into the Choctaw homeland by Europeans. By the mid-1700s the use of these metal tools in Choctaw agricultural fields was commonplace.

The family garden plot, was planted in March, when the ground became sufficiently warm. Opening the earth and planting seeds were considered to be very spiritual acts, which combined with adequate rain and sunlight, would do nothing less than provide the food that would sustain the community through the next year.

Special dances (Hashi Atahhli Holitobli) were performed in preparation for planting (Kennith York personal communication). Family members worked together to get the gardens prepared and the seeds in the ground. In these gardens, they planted large and small beans, field peas (obtained from Africans), the small, quick-ripening variety of corn, and probably also leeks, garlic, and cabbage (all obtained from Europeans). Garden plots were given some protection from horses and hogs (both obtained from Europeans) by fences made of stakes driven into the ground, attached to cross pieces of split hickory or oak saplings. Horses that persisted in entering the family garden plots were scolded by the women, sometimes violently.

The pumpkin patch was used for growing pumpkins, melons (obtained from Africans), and perhaps some other vegetables. Located out some distance from the village, these patches were a prime target for hungry birds and mammals. To help combat them, platforms 6 feet in height were built. During the growing season, women sat on these platforms during the day, working on handicrafts and scaring away birds or animals that tried to enter the patch.

The large communal field was not planted until May, when the woods had plenty of wild edibles to attract the birds and other animals away from the crops. A respected elder man would announce ahead of time the day that work in the communal field would commence. Everyone in the community was expected to work together to get the field planted for the mutual benefit of all. An able-bodied person who refused to help was asked to leave the village. Work, which began after sunrise, was made more enjoyable by the presence of an entertainer who came out into the field, singing songs, telling stories, and making jokes as the community worked.

The backbone of the community fields was corn, planted in hills that formed rows, spaced one yard apart. Squash, water-

melons, and sunflowers were planted in the spaces between the cornrows. Beans and peas (obtained from Africans), were also planted in these fields, sometimes on climbing scaffolds made of river cane. Unlike the family garden patches, the large community fields were unfenced. Had someone attempted to do this, their actions would have been viewed as childish, since this field was for the benefit of the whole community.

Tending the planted fields was the responsibility of the women. While this task might seem burdensome, according to a first hand observer; "In sober fact, on account of its social features, there being unlimited opportunities for gossip, the Indian women, banded together in the cornfield, really looked upon their labor there as a kind of frolic" (Halbert n.d.). In certain instances, the services of specialists were also employed as the crops grew. Rain-makers were called upon to break crop-damaging droughts. Twins were believed to have special abilities to rid fields from cutworm infestations (Cushman 1899: 272-276).

When the fast-maturing variety of corn ripened, the community held the Green Corn Ceremony (Luak Mosholi). In September, when the corn matured "Tachi Nona" dances were held (York personal communication). Harvesting would continue up until frost, combined with feasts intended to use up old food stored over from the preceding year. Families harvested their own gardens and pumpkin patches. The community worked together to harvest the communal field. After drying and preserving their share of the harvest from the communal field, families took a portion of it to the community storehouse. This food would be used by families whose crops had failed or who had run out of their own food, used to feed visitors, to assist other towns in need, and to provision war parties.

After years of use, the fertility in Choctaw fields would begin to diminish. At that point, locations for new fields would be selected. The old fields would be allowed to revert back to a natural state. It would be years before the forest canopy would return to the state it was in before field clearing began. In the interim the old fields supported crops of blackberries, strawberries, and other wild edibles that grow in areas of disturbed soil.

The communal field embodied an ideal of working together for the benefit of all. It was a Native American at its core. Sometime in the early 1700s, Choctaw farmers quit maintaining community fields, and began growing and harvesting crops as separate families, like their Euro-American neighbors. The old fields could still be recognized as cleared places on the landscape for years after. Some Euro-Americans favored these cleared areas for building their own houses, settlements, and fields. After the Trail of Tears, many of the Choctaw who remained behind in Mississippi became low wage workers on Euro-American farms and plantations, cultivating land that had been worked and improved by Choctaw farmers for centuries, but which now was controlled by someone else.

Unless otherwise noted, information contained in this article comes from Adair (1771)

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