



Choctaw Tattoos

Tattoos (“hakshup inchuwa” in the Choctaw language) are a fairly popular topic at the Choctaw Nation historic Preservation Department. Staff are contacted at least once a month by people who are interested in learning about Choctaw tattoos. Some just want to add to their general knowledge of Choctaw traditional culture, while others may be interested in getting tattoos that express their Choctaw identity or that connect them with ancestors who wore tribal tattoos in the past.



Fig. 1, Choctaw warrior with painted face and tattooed neck and torso (De Batz ca. 1732).

For our ancestors, tattoos had a deep significance. Young men had to earn the right to wear a tattoo by overcoming an enemy on the battlefield. After returning home, such a young man would be given a warrior name and tattoos so that everyone saw him would recognize him as an accomplished warrior who had risked his life to protect his community. Back on the battlefield, a tattooed warrior would be immediately recognized as a powerful fighter. He might be avoided by some enemies, but others who wished to test themselves or who enjoyed a good fight, might very well seek him out. Southeastern tribes made their tattoos by first tracing the designs on the skin, using charcoal to make the designs visible. Then, a bone needle or a garfish tooth was employed to put many small punctures in the surface of the skin within the area that had been traced, until the blood started to flow. Right after the punctures were made, the skin would be rubbed with a pigment. Some of this pigment, would become lodged in raw, exposed portions of the epidermis, making a permanent, colored design in the person’s skin. One of the most common pigments was made from the soot that is created when pine sap burns. This made a bluish tattoo. Other tattoos worn by Southeastern warriors were red or black. Being tattooed in the traditional way usually made people physically sick for a few

days (Du Pratz 1758).

It was common for a proven Choctaw warrior to have his family symbols tattooed on his stomach, chest or arms. Unfortunately, we don’t know a lot about the specific designs of these tattoos. To the author’s knowledge, only one surviving depiction exists of a tattooed Choctaw warrior (Fig. 1). His tattoo is a simple geometric design that goes around his neck, and down onto his chest. It is possible that other Choctaw warriors may have had much more elaborate tattoos, like their Muscogee neighbors to the east. William Bartram described Muscogee warrior tattoos in the following way: “...commonly the sun, moon, and planets occupy the breast; zones or belts, or beautiful fanciful scrolls, wind around the trunk of the body, dividing the body into many fields or tablets, which are filled with representations of animals or battle...” (1853:19).

Warriors were not the only members of Choctaw society that wore tattoos. Women from the Sixtowns district commonly wore blue facial tattoos that consisted of straight lines running from the corners of the mouth down the side of the chin (Fig. 2). Choctaw bone-pickers also had their own distinguishing tattoos, or possibly brands. Presumably, the bone-picker tattoos were distinct from those of the warriors, but we currently know absolutely nothing about their specific design.

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Fig. 2, Sixtown’s Choctaw women with facial tattoos (Bodmer 1834).