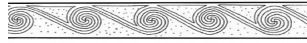


Iti Fabussa



Chahta Amptoba | Choctaw Traditional Pottery (Part 1)



Figure 1: Bvnaha Bread cooking on the fire in a Choctaw clay pot.

Choctaw society. As the years go by, Choctaw elders pass away, and the parts of their knowledge that they have not passed down to the next generation, fade with them. This knowledge is often replaced by things borrowed from the dominant society around us. There is nothing wrong with living as other people do, however when all Choctaw knowledge is lost, the choice to live in a Choctaw way will be gone, too, and

Choctaw identity itself will die. With the passing of elder after elder, it sometimes seems as though a total loss of all that is Choctaw might eventually become a reality. If it does,

Choctaw descendants will lose a heritage, and the world will lose a unique way of living and being that is very important.

Fortunately, because of culture's fluid nature, this doesn't have to be a one-way street.

Choctaw traditional culture is not something that can only be lost; it can also be revitalized, strengthened and created anew for the world we live in today. All of these are active processes that require effort. However, many Choctaw people actively work every day to support these things by passing on Choctaw language, wisdom, or whatever else they have to offer to the next generation.

For the next four months, Iti Fabussa will focus on just one positive and current story about Choctaw people who are working and succeeding to revitalize an important part of

Choctaw culture that was once nearly lost: traditional pottery. This month, will present a little bit about the importance of pottery in

Choctaw culture. Next month will describe the materials and processes used to make the pottery. The following month will describe the firing process. The last month will showcase today's Choctaw traditional potters who are reviving this ancient art and helping Choctaw traditional culture to grow into the 21st century.

Traditional pottery is complex. The following is an account from oral history, as told by Dr. Kenneth York, of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, that explains how Choctaw people first learned

Culture is fluid by its very nature. It changes and adapts and is shared from one group of people to another. For many generations now,

Choctaw people have found ourselves interacting with a much larger American society all around us. Traditional knowledge, language, history, and traditional culture are what allow

Choctaw people to maintain a unique identity even while being a part of the larger non-

the process for making it:

A Choctaw basket weaver was experimenting one day in an attempt to make the baskets water proof. The artisan placed some wet clay inside one of the baskets and set it to dry.

Another artisan came by and saw the mud in the basket and threw the basket with the wet clay into the hot fire. Obviously, the basket burned and turned into ashes, but the clay that apparently had taken the shape of a bowl had been fired by the hot coal and ashes. That is how the Choctaws learned how to make and fire pottery and pots (York 2012:108).

Archaeological research tells us that in the Choctaw homeland, an area that encompasses present day Mississippi, western Alabama, and northwestern Florida, the advent of pottery dates back 3,000 years. This means that

Choctaw pottery has been shaped and developed by the hands of more than 100 generations of potters. Each of these generations contributed something new, changing and developing the tradition through time.

Choctaw traditional pottery is both a survival skill and an artform, but it has an inherent depth of meaning that goes beyond either of these by themselves. The basic raw material in the pottery is clay, or earth, which is considered a sacred entity in the traditional way of thinking. The potter shapes this earth with his or her own knowledge and skill to make a finished pottery vessel. This vessel then supports people's lives life by cooking food, or whatever other tasks it has been made for. Of the many connections that traditional Choctaw people have with the land, pottery is perhaps the most direct.

Because of its malleability and adaptability, traditional pottery is an ideal medium for artistic expression. Many ancestral Choctaw potters went far beyond the bare essentials needed to make a utilitarian pot, creating a variety styles, forms, decorative designs, and colors. Some functional pots were made to look like animals or people; some had rattles built into them so that the pottery made noise when it was moved, and some were burnished so smooth that they looked like glass. Choctaw traditional pottery is a functional art.

One-thousand years ago, Choctaw people were using pottery



Figure 2: A Choctaw human effigy bottle in the fire.



Figure 3: Grape dumplings in a Choctaw Trail of Tears-style eating bowl.

for cooking, storing, and eating food, preparing medicines, dyes, and textiles; they used pottery as musical instruments and weapons, and for everything in between. Pottery was something that many of our ancestors literally talked over, laughed over, and tripped over nearly every day of their lives. It was used for so many things over such a

long period of time that it became intertwined with nearly all aspects of Choctaw traditional culture.

From the perspective of today's Choctaw potter, traditional pottery is an embodiment of sacred materials, traditional knowledge, traditional culture, Tribal history, community, identity, and artistic expression. It involves connections with family past, present, and future. Finished vessels are functional and often beautiful pieces, but they also represent all of the many other aspects of

Choctaw traditional life, with which pottery intertwines. When Choctaw people revitalize pottery, they are strengthening all of these other aspect of Choctaw culture.