

Chahta Amptoba | Choctaw Traditional Pottery (Part 2)



Figure 1: Choctaw potter Vangie Robinson digging clay near her home in Choctaw County.

This article is the second in a four-part series dedicated to the story of Choctaw traditional pottery, “amptoba,” and its ongoing revitalization by Choctaw people. Last month’s edition presented information about the importance of pottery in Choctaw traditional culture, past and present. This month will describe the raw materials that Choctaw potters use to make this ancient art.

Native clay has always been the main ingredient in Choctaw pottery. One Choctaw term for clay is “lukfi nia,” which literally means “fat of the dirt.” Interestingly, in the vernacular of English-speaking

potters, sticky clays are also described as being “fat.”

Choctaw pottery is formed from sacred materials. In the traditional way of thinking, both the clay and the earth that it is a part of are sacred. Some Choctaw creation stories indicate that the yellow clay from Nvnih Waiya is the raw material, from which Hvshtahli shaped the Choctaw people. Moreover, in traditional thought, the earth itself is likened unto a mother that continually supports physical life. The profound reverence early

Choctaw people had for this earth is perhaps most awe-inspiringly visible in the giant earth mounds that they built one basket load of soil at a time at some of their settlements. That same reverence is also seen in the level of care and attention that they put into making some of their earthen pottery.

Clay is a special kind of dirt that has its own unique physical and chemical properties. It can be almost any color, red, gray, brown, black, sometimes even green, but it is recognized by its sticky texture. Every natural clay has its own particular qualities and quirks. Some



Figure 3: Replica of a 2,700-year-old, ancestral Choctaw bowl. (Made by Tammy Beane.)

clays are good for making traditional pottery, others are not.

Desirable qualities include the clay being easy to shape, shrinking little as it dries, and not only staying in one piece when heated in a fire but also becoming hard and rock-like.

As Choctaw communities work to revitalize traditional pottery, potters have to locate accessible sources of good natural clays (Fig. 1). Some Choctaw potters always travel with buckets and a shovel in their vehicle so that they can dig and sample new clays that they come across in road cuts or stream crossings.

When a potter finds a new clay deposit, only enough of the material is dug to make a small test pot or two, which are then dried and fired.

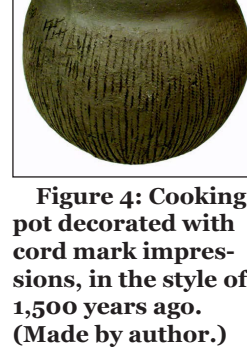


Figure 4: Cooking pot decorated with cord mark impressions, in the style of 1,500 years ago. (Made by author.)

If the clay works well in this test, then the potter can invest the time to dig and use more of it. This process helps cut down on waste, and is just one way that traditional potters respect the resource.

Once it has been dug, the clay must be carefully cleaned of roots and rocks. To make good pottery, most clays need to be mixed with tiny pieces of a hard material, known as “temper.” Temper opens up the structure of the clay so that pots made from it will shrink and warp less during drying and firing, and will be less likely to crack during firing and use.

The first ancestral Choctaw potters tempered their clay with pieces of pine needles, “tiak hishi.” When the pottery was fired, the needles burned up, leaving small voids in the vessel walls.

These voids helped prevent the ceramics from cracking, because a crack forming in the clay could not jump across the void airspace.

Ancestral Choctaw potters continually adapted their materials to their needs. Through time, their main temper preferences changed from plant material to quartz sand,



Figure 2: Choctaw potters Don Ed Little and Dan Bernier collecting mussel shells in Bryan County.

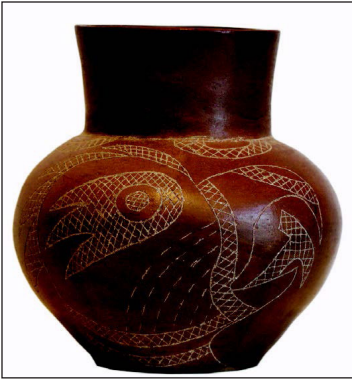


Figure 5: Replica of a 700-year-old ancestral Choctaw bottle. (Made by Ed Perkins.)

“shinuk” (ca. 500 BC), to crushed up pieces of fired pottery, “ampkoa boshulli” (AD 550), to burned freshwater mussel shell, “okafulush hokmi” (AD 1050), to combinations of burned mussel shell, burned bone, sand, grog, and charcoal (AD 1750). Each of these materials imparts different properties to the soft clay and to the finished pottery made from it.

Today, freshwater mussel shell is a favorite tempering

material for many Choctaw potters (Figure 2).

Before it can be processed into temper, the shells must first be burned on a wood fire. Thereafter, they can easily be crushed up with the fingers (see Iti Fabvssa January 2013).

The amount of temper that needs to be mixed with clay depends on the properties of the clay and the type of pots that the potter wants to make from it. Generally speaking, clay that will be used to make eating bowls, “ampo,” or effigy pieces requires a relatively low amount of finely ground temper.

Clay that is to be used for making cooking pots, “shuti,” requires relatively larger amounts of coarser temper; some cooking pots actually have more temper than clay. The large amounts of coarse temper make the cooking pots able to withstand repeating heating and cooling. The smaller amounts



Figure 6: Fish effigy bottle, in the style of 700 years ago. (Made by author.)

of finer temper for the eating bowls make the clay easier to shape and polish, and make the finished pots stronger.

Through the generations, ancestral Choctaw communities developed a variety of ceramic forms that were adapted to their needs and artistic tastes, and that went in and out of style over time.

With a 3,000-year history of change, the diversity of Choctaw and ancestral Choctaw pottery is pretty impressive (Figs. 3-8). The techniques used by Choctaw potters to make these types of pottery have included hand-shaping, coiling, molding, paddling, and slab-building.



Figure 8: Choctaw Trail of Tears-style eating bowl. (Made by author.)

When Choctaw people traveled the Trail of Tears to Oklahoma, many of them carried small clay eating bowls. A number of these bowls bore distinguishing designs that were created by using the teeth of broken sections of combs, to make fine parallel lines in the clay before it hardened (Fig. 8). This technique is almost uniquely Choctaw; few other tribes have ever experimented with it.

Once a pot is shaped and designed, it must be slowly and evenly dried in the shade to prevent it from cracking. After two or three weeks, when the clay has become light-colored and warm to the touch, it is ready to be fired.

Fire changes the clay into a stone-like material and makes pots so that they can hold water without melting into mud.

Firing will be the subject of next month’s Iti Fabvssa.



Figure 7: Cooking pot, in the style of 500 years ago. (Made by Chip Wentte.)