

ITI FABVSSA

Bissa Hvshi: Blackberry Month

This article is part of a series entitled "A Year in the Life." Focusing on the time period around AD 1700, this series follows the traditional Choctaw calendar through a year, with each article providing a glimpse of the activities that our ancestors were up to during each month. This information is excerpted from a book, soon to be published by the Choctaw Nation, which is entitled "Choctaw Food: Remembering the Land, Rekindling Ancient Knowledge."

In the Choctaw calendar, Bissa Hvshi, Blackberry Month, roughly corresponds to June. June brings the summer solstice and the long, hot, and humid summer, punctuated by thunderstorms. This month is when the blackberry and plum seasons reached their peaks. It also kicked off the seasons for picking huckleberries and maypops.

When the corn crop in the communal fields (planted in April) was about three feet tall, it was hoed for a second time. Some Choctaw varieties of corn produce suckers. These are secondary offshoots that come up from the roots of the plant, but do not produce corn. Called apatali in the Choctaw language, they were removed from the bases of the plants during the second hoeing. By this point, the growing corn stalks in the evenly spaced hills formed rows called tanchi hina, or corn roads. After the second hoeing, beans were planted along the edge of the corn hills. This timing allowed the corn to get large enough that the bean vines would not damage it. Additionally, runner beans were planted away from the corn stalks on bean poles made of river cane. These structures were called tobe isht abehla. Four to six beans were planted at each pole, which would make two to four vines. Bush beans may have also been planted between the corn rows.

At the same time the beans were planted, or perhaps slightly later, isito, winter squash, was also planted between the corn rows. As the season continued, the broad leaves of these aggressive plants would spread over the ground, shading it, outcompeting weeds, and holding onto soil moisture. Sunflowers, hvshi, were likely planted along the edges of the fields where they would not shade out the other plants.

Fieldwork was a critical responsibility for the prosperity of the community. It was physical labor, but it was not the drudgery that one might imagine. According to a firsthand observer; "In sober fact, on account of its social features, there being unlimited opportunities for gossip, the Indian [Choctaw] women, banded together in the cornfield, really looked upon their labor there as a kind of frolic" (Halbert nd.).

Women were not the only ones who helped tend the fields. Boys hunted rabbits and other small animals that threatened the crops, using small bows, blowguns called uskilhumpa, and rabbit sticks, called atalhpi. The young hunters looked for the glistening eyes of the rabbit,

hiding in the shadows under the greenery. With the blowgun, Choctaw boys almost always hit their mark out to 20 yards.

Men also did limited deer hunting around the villages during the growing season. If a man happened to kill a deer near his home, he would leave it where it fell, breaking the limb tips of bushes on his way back to his house. Upon arriving, he would simply point in the direction of the deer to his wife, whose woods skills were sufficient to get on a horse, follow the trail of broken branches, and bring the kill back home. By retrieving the deer herself, the woman avoided a social custom that would have required the man to share the kill immediately with his neighbors until it was gone. Of course, if someone came to the house asking for a meal, the man would still be obligated to share. During the warm season, men and boys also made summer hunting trips for squirrel and other small game. One favorite location was Fvni Yakni, Squirrel Land, an area that stretched for 20 miles east of present-day Philadelphia, Mississippi.

Sometime around Blackberry month, Tanchusi, the variety of little corn planted two months earlier in the house fields, would have come into the milk stage. In the early 1700s, this was the season for the Green Corn Ceremony, known in Choctaw as Luak Musholi, Fires Extinguished. The Green Corn Ceremony was a time of purification, of giving thanks, and of renewal. Somewhat different versions of the Choctaw Green Corn Ceremony were conducted at different times and places. In the early 1700s, the Choctaw Green Corn Ceremony involved extinguishing all the fires in the community. The community participated in a fast, called hullochi. Women cleaned out their cooking hearths, cooking vessels, and culinary dishes, and the community cleaned the dance ground located at the center of the village. They took medicine given by a Choctaw doctor. Community members forgave each other for all wrongs committed, with the exception of murder. A new, pure fire was built by religious specialists. Coals from this fire were taken to all of the hearths.

Thereafter, a portion of the new corn crop was burned in the new fire; the community broke their fast and conducted sacred dances.

Reportedly, some Choctaw communities made their laws during the Green Corn Ceremony and leaders preached to their people about appropriate moral conduct. Only after the Green Corn Ceremony did the community begin to eat fresh produce from their agricultural fields. Fresh ears of Tanchusi were eaten green or cut off the cob and put into stews.

Summer was the primary season for war. Before the expansion of the hide trade, Choctaws rarely invaded the lands of other Tribes, finding it more honorable to face enemy warriors defensively rather than attack non-combatants in their own country. Small defensive platoons called tvshka chipunta patrolled Choctaw country, attempting to intercept enemy war parties before they could strike. While the men were away at war, the women sang, atvlwvchi, war songs, calling upon the Sun and the Sacred Fire for the success of their loved ones. Summer was also the prime season for stickball, a sport that was sometimes used to settle disputes instead of going to war.