



Iti Fabussa

Choctaw Family

Last month, the writers of Iti Fabvssa received a request from a reader asking us to write an article about the way Choctaw families were organized in the past and about the roles of the different family members. The following presents what we know about Choctaw families as they were 100 years before the Trail of Tears.

The Choctaw family has always existed within the larger parameters and world view of Choctaw society.

In the 1700s, Choctaw society was divided into two parts, or two moieties that functioned together. For example, members of one moiety assisted members of the other moiety through the mourning process when a family member died.

Similarly, when Choctaw people were tried for murder, one moiety was the prosecution, the other the defense. Choctaw men and women had to select their spouse from the moiety opposite to his or her own. In bringing the two moieties together under one roof, marriage created balance in Choctaw society.

This is reflected in the Choctaw term for family “chuka achafa,” which literally means “one house.”

A husband and wife lived together under one roof, but the arrangements were often different than in Euro-American society. The couple generally lived near the wife’s family or sometimes with her parents. At times in the past, there was a taboo against a Choctaw man making eye contact with his mother-in-law. If they lived in the same house, a partition was set up to keep this taboo from accidentally being broken.

Because of men’s dangerous responsibilities on the battlefield and in hunting, there were more Choctaw women than men. Choctaw society addressed this problem by allowing a successful man to marry multiple wives if he so desired, although many men chose to marry only one woman. Men who married multiple wives most often chose sisters. Sisters married to the same man never lived under the same roof, but sometimes lived in adjacent houses. Occasionally, a man would marry unrelated women, and keep multiple households with them in different villages.

When a man with multiple wives died, each woman considered herself the head of her own household. Marriage was consensual, and could end as informally as a woman setting her former husband's weapons outside the home, or it could last for a lifetime.

When children were born, they inherited their mother's moiety; in essence this was equivalent to the way that we inherit our father's family name today. At Tribal functions, the children took part in the activities of their mothers' moiety, while their father took part in the activities of his own moiety. If a mother died, the children went to live with her family, rather than with their living father, in order to stay within their own moiety.

A husband and wife did not refer to each other by name, because to do so would have been considered disrespectful. Instead, they would use "ahattak" (my husband), or "satekchi" (my wife). If the couple had children, they would refer to each other as "my child's father" or "my child's mother."

Having never heard them spoken, children often did not know their parent's names, referring to them simply as "aki" or "sashki" (my father or my mother).

Choctaw family structure was much broader than today's concept of a nuclear family; it reflected the community-based lifestyle of a Choctaw village. Children referred to their mother's sisters and father's brothers' wives as "mother." All of these women were of the same moiety as the biological mother and children.

Although a mother would usually be closest with her own biological children, all of the women that a child called "mother" ultimately had some responsibility for raising that child. Mothers were responsible for making sure that their households had food every day, making sure that their homes were in good repair, tending their family's agricultural fields, and educating their daughters. Daughters would spend most of the day with their mothers, observing and later taking part in their daily activities, and through the process, learning the many skills necessary to one day take care of their own households.

Children referred to their father's brothers and mother's sister's husbands as "father." All of these men were of the opposite moiety as the children. A father was responsible for protecting his community and family on the battlefield. He was also responsible for hunting to provide meat for his wife(s) and children. However, the most important male figures for children were their mother's brothers, which they called "amushi." Because they were of his own moiety, a man had more of a role in raising and educating his sister's children than his own. Choctaw uncles were responsible for correcting their nephews, although discipline was quite light compared to European standards. Uncles, or respected elder men would spend daylight hours with male youth, supervising games and contests between them that would sharpen their skills for survival on the hunt and in battle.

As boys matured, they were taken on hunting trips with their fathers or uncles, and eventually began to participate in Tvshka Chipunta, or small defensive units that patrolled Choctaw lands.

The traditional Choctaw family system may be a bit different from what most of our readers are used to seeing, but it shares many similarities with the traditional family structures of other Native American communities as well as other groups from around the world.

The Choctaw family structure described before was adapted to the time and place, in which it existed. The way that it was set up and the way that daily activities were carried out allowed children to interact with a broad range of family members of different generations, experiences, and knowledge to draw from as they were growing up. It created a way of living such that elderly people, in looking back at their lives, had spent nearly every day working, laughing, and sharing life experiences with family. The concept of moiety provided Choctaw individuals with an extended family system, through which they could find relatives in any Choctaw village or household and receive assistance, when needed. In a time when slaving raids, attacks, and European diseases took huge numbers of Choctaw lives, this family structure, which assigned children multiple mothers and multiple male care takers, helped families to physically endure the loss of providers and continue on.

In the 1800s, through influence from missionaries and other Euro- Americans, who conceived of families as paternalist, nuclear households, Choctaw family structure changed.

The Choctaw moiety system was discontinued after the Trail of Tears; plural marriage has not been practiced since about that time, and for more than 100 years, Choctaw people have inherited their father's last name.

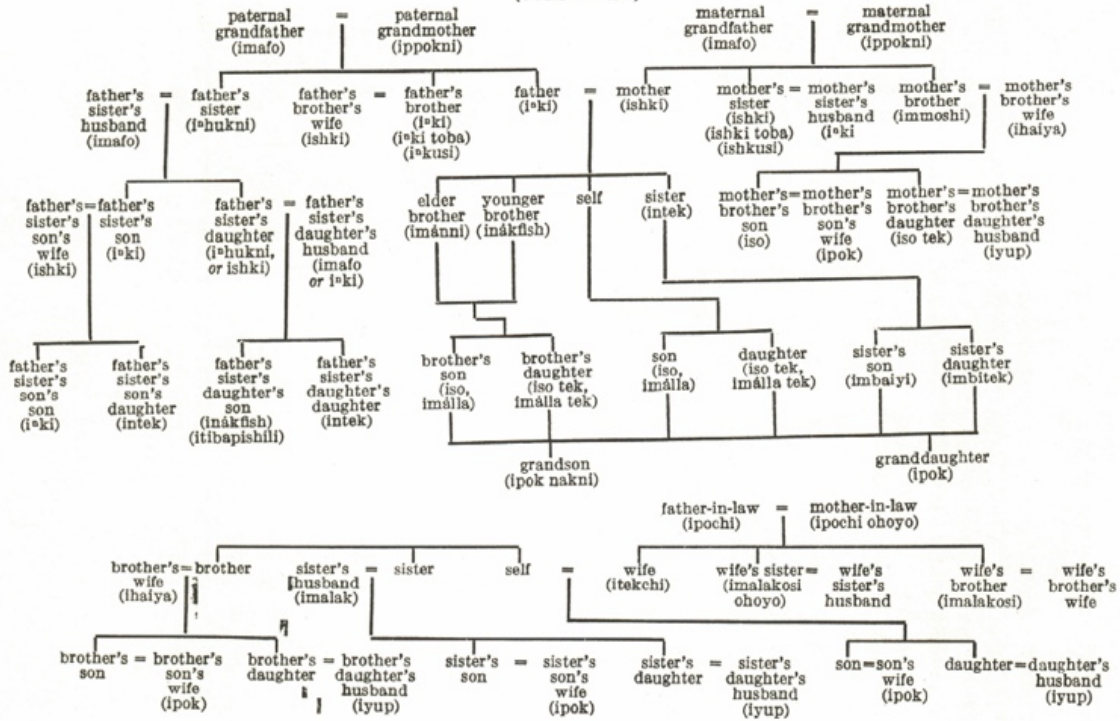
Today, the structure of Choctaw families is in many ways identical to that of the diverse people who now live around us, but a little bit of the ancient still remains. Through church, social activities, and regular phone calls, many Choctaw families maintain close ties with relatives that Euro-American society would considered to be quite distant. There are humorous and recent stories of young Choctaw people, who in talking with their grandmother, have been horrified to learn that someone they thought they might have a crush on was a sixth cousin-and vowed to marry someone from outside the tribe.

In modern Choctaw households, it is not uncommon for children, parents, grandparents, and perhaps even aunts, uncles, and cousins to live under one roof, or as nearby neighbors.

Through this, as well as participating in the larger "family" of the Choctaw Nation, we retain a spirit of Choctaw family and community that is timeless.

CHOCTAW TERMS OF RELATIONSHIP

(SELF MALE)



(SELF FEMALE)

