

Iti Fabvssa  
Trial by Fiber: Mulberry Bark

Last June, we ran an article on a bison hair textile made by our ancestors in honor of the naming of the bison as the national mammal of the United States. Now, in preparation for the spring and the fiber harvest season to come, we invite you to work with us to rediscover another of our ancestors' fiber sources: mulberry bark. 18<sup>th</sup> century writers observed that our ancestors collected mulberry in the spring: "to make mulberry-bark mantles they go into the woods in search of shoots or sprouts of mulberry which come from these trees after they have been cut down. The shoots are from four to five feet tall. They cut them before the sap is gone."<sup>i</sup>

Our Choctaw ancestors knew how to masterfully extract and use the remarkable fibers available in our homelands for their clothing and everyday needs. Later, other materials like sheep's wool and cotton, both non-native fibers, were introduced through exchange with European settlers or other native tribes. Trade became immensely prevalent and Choctaw women were so adaptable and skilled that they incorporated the new fibers, tools, and techniques quickly. Native plant fibers largely fell out of use by the early 1800's. However, we have accounts from the 1700's of the incredible plant fiber clothing and textile work our ancestors were doing up to that turning point.

The methods for preparing mulberry bark and using plant fibers varied. Of our ancestors, one writer noted that "[Choctaws] prepare a kind of cloth out of the bark of a species of *Morus*, and with its root dye it yellow."<sup>ii</sup> *Morus* is the scientific name for the plant group that includes all the mulberry tree species. The fiber of the 'bihi vpi,' or the mulberry tree, comes from the 'hakshup anukvka,' the inner bark.<sup>iii</sup> If you peel off the bark of a mulberry shoot, you will find that under the layer of brown and green bark lies a layer of long, fine white strands that extend the length of the shoot. These strong, smooth fibers are the part of the plant used for textile and clothing work. When Choctaw grandmothers worked with mulberry, they "put its inner bark in hot water along with a quantity of ashes and obtain filaments, with which they weave a kind of cloth not unlike a coarse hempen cloth."<sup>iv</sup> Other tribal communities prepared the mulberry plant in another way to make the fibers usable. One man described the Natchez taking off the bark, drying it in the sun, and pounding it till only the fibers remained.<sup>v</sup> Finally, they left this in the dew to bleach it; their clothing of mulberry bark fiber was a fine white.

In order to turn the fiber into a yarn, an artisan may use an 'ashvnatvli fabvssa,' a spindle of wood or cane and a clay weight. With her spindle, she spins the mulberry fiber into a stronger, continuous thread to create the textile. Of most importance, the word 'vpi' refers in this case to the warp or the yarn that makes up the length of a woven fabric.<sup>vi</sup> 'Vpi' also refers to a stalk or stem. The two meanings of 'vpi' may reveal an inherent connection between a plant stem like mulberry shoots and the collection of fibers that make a cloth. Finally, the weaver arranges the 'vpi,' or strands of mulberry bark yarn needed for the project, on the 'atvna,' or the loom. The 'atvna' provides the frame from which she will fingerweave her yarns down and together into cloth.

Our grandmothers also used mulberry bark fiber for feather work. Irish fur trader James Adair wrote of the Choctaws in the 1700's who made

turkey feather blankets with the long feathers of the neck and breast of that large fowl – they twist the inner end of the feathers very fast into a strong double thread of hemp, or the inner bark of the mulberry tree, of the size and strength of coarse twine, as the fibres are sufficiently fine, and they work it in the manner of fine netting. As the feathers are long and glittering, this sort of blankets is not only very warm, but pleasing to the eye.<sup>vii</sup>

During the time period of these records, women and young girls generally wore more plant fiber clothing than men.<sup>viii</sup> As you can see in Figure 4, women wore an 'vlhkuna,' a skirt often made of plant fibers, and a 'kasmu,' a feather cape like the blankets described by Adair above.<sup>ix</sup> The cloth was reported to be so sturdy that some accounts suggest the Spanish used gifts of native shawls for sails<sup>x</sup> while others "[recommended] it for floor and table-carpets."<sup>xi</sup> Choctaws and other Southeastern tribes in this time period dyed and decorated bark clothing. It could be red, white, or yellow; painted with designs, adorned with tassels, feathers, and the like; or even woven with another type of fiber like bison hair.<sup>xii</sup>

While the writings of many early European travelers describe a fantastic cloth made of mulberry bark, we have virtually no other record of its use. Swanton, who gathered all the information he could about Southeastern tribes, found so much written about this bark fiber that he claimed that "skirts and cloaks were woven out of the inner fiber of the mulberry practically everywhere."<sup>xiii</sup> Yet no known mulberry bark clothing or textiles have been identified. Even so, the persistence of information recorded on mulberry bark cloth and other Southeastern textiles over the 18th century suggests that this was an important artisanal product of Choctaw women.

Regardless, the mulberry fiber is not the only source of bark fiber used by our ancestors. Bark fibers from the slippery elm or basswood were used by neighboring Southeastern tribes while the Choctaw word 'baluhchi'

refers to the hickory bark used in making ropes.<sup>xiv</sup> Methods for making textile cordage and ropes from other tree barks may help fill in the missing information on mulberry bark fiber.

In experiments here in the Historic Preservation department, the author extracted a small amount of fine white fibers using mulberry stalks likely harvested too late in the season. However, the fibers were extremely short and as a result did not spin together well or produce a pliable yarn. From our department's attempts, mulberry bark has only been successfully processed into soft white yarn one time. An endless number of factors can affect the process of extracting fibers from plants. As such, textile work is often unpredictable, even for the most experienced of artisans. While less often the focus of our Choctaw art, textiles are among the most ingenious artisan works of our people throughout history. We can learn the incredible textile craft again when the community takes up the work of processing, preparing, and weaving these fibers together.

If you or someone you know would like to contribute knowledge or materials to the work on mulberry bark fiber and other textiles, please contact Jennifer Byram at [jbyram@choctawnation.com](mailto:jbyram@choctawnation.com) or 1-800-522-6170 ext. 2512. We would love to hear about your experience with traditional textiles or this mysterious plant.

## References

- Byington, Cyrus. *A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language*. Swanton, John R. And Henry S. Halbert, ed. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1915.
- Byington, Cyrus. *Holisso Anumpa Tosholi: An English and Choctaw Definer; for the Choctaw Academies and Schools*. New York: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1852.
- Drooker, Penelope B. *Mississippian Village Textiles at Wickliffe*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992.
- Jones, Kenneth. *An Introduction to Choctaw Ethnobotany*. Gettysburg: Gettysburg College, 1966.
- Romans, Barnard. *A Concise Natural History of East and West-Florida*. New York, 1776.
- Swanton, John R. *The Indians of the Southeastern United States*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1946.

## Citations

- <sup>i</sup> Du Pratz in Swanton, 1946, p. 453.
- <sup>ii</sup> Romans 1776, p. 85.
- <sup>iii</sup> Jones 1966, p. 40.
- <sup>iv</sup> Romans 1776, p. 142.
- <sup>v</sup> Du Pratz in Swanton 1946, p. 453.
- <sup>vi</sup> Byington 1915, p.81; Byington 1852, p. 59.
- <sup>vii</sup> Adair 1775, p. 423.
- <sup>viii</sup> Du Pratz in Swanton 1946, p. 476.
- <sup>ix</sup> Swanton 1946, p. 472; Byington 1915, p. 225.
- <sup>x</sup> Drooker 1992, p. 75-76.
- <sup>xi</sup> Catesby in Swanton 1946, p. 453.
- <sup>xii</sup> Drooker 1992, p. 74-75.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Swanton 1946, p. 442.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Byington 1915, p. 85.

## Figures



Figure 1 Bihi vpi, Mulberry tree



Figure 2 Woman weaving on an atvna, loom. Holmes, 1896, Plate 1



Figure 3 Ashvnatvli fabvssa, spindle, with mulberry bark fiber test.



Figure 4 Choctaw woman wearing a kasmu, feather cape, and vlhkuna, woven skirt. Courtesy of the Historic Preservation department.