

Agriculture, Forest Food and Fiber Use, and Burning Practices of the Choctaw Indians Pre-European Contact – Mid 1700's

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The Choctaw Indians were an agriculturally- centered, multi-subsistence culture. The Choctaw relied a great deal upon corn, and also cultivated beans, squash, pumpkins and sunflowers. They gathered many wild plants, fruits and vegetables from the forests that surrounded their villages. They also relied upon hunting and fishing for subsistence. The Choctaw used utilized many different natural materials in their daily living. They practiced silviculture with burning, and by saving trees and shrubs that were important to them.

The Choctaw way of life can be more easily understood once their social structure; residency patterns and village distributions are considered. Like many Native American tribes, the Choctaw were divided into clans, which were further divided into moieties. Husband and wife belonged to different moieties, and decent was traced through the woman's side. Children answered to their mother, or any male on her side of the family. The man would move to the wife's home after marriage, but would leave the wife's territory to reunite with his own clan during the hunting season. Clan unity was strengthened by activities such as feasts, dances, religious ceremonies, as well as by the numerous subsistence activities.¹

The Choctaw practiced mixed subsistence living, coupled with gender complimentary distribution of work for a consistent living. Generally the women, children, and elders did the farming and chores, while men built the houses, did wood work, and most of the hunting and fishing.²

Through periods of drought or crop failure, the Choctaw relied more heavily upon hunting, fishing, and foraging. Women, children, and the elderly, who were usually in charge of most of the farming and foraging duties, were more involved with fishing and hunting activities

during these periods. These practices insured equality in the tribe, and also insured that everyone had access to the resources available.³

Most Choctaw people were involved with some or all of the subsistence activities available. Whether or not an individual would participate depended on several factors including, but not limited to: season, age, gender, and availability of resources. Generally, men who lived in the larger villages had more time to spend with other men while hunting and fishing, and farmed less than those who lived in the more rural areas.⁴

Seasonal patterns of the Choctaw were closely related to agriculture, hunting, gathering and fishing. The Choctaw year was divided into 12 or 13 phases named for lunar or solar periods, and based on seasonal subsistence activities.⁵ According to Dr. Gideon Lincoff,

“In midwinter the fields were prepared for spring planting. After the crops had been planted in the spring and were growing well, the Choctaws dispersed to various streams and lakes, living on “fish, turtles, and fruits” until time for the Green Corn Dance in early summer. This ceremony over, they returned to the streams and lakes and remained until the time for harvesting the corn in the fall. When the corn had been harvested and stored, the men went off on their regular fall and early winter hunt, and the women, children, and old people searched the woods for nuts and autumnal fruits. By midwinter all had returned.”⁶

This seasonal cycle was, essentially, repeated yearly. During the years in which crops failed due to drought, the Choctaw would adjust their subsistence activities to include more hunting, fishing, and gathering.⁷

Choctaw villages covered vast areas, and were often so wide spread that a traveler may not even realize they were within the village borders. Villages were divided into small groups of cabins, which were often separated by vast bayous, swamps and lowlands. Each household would have its own small garden in which the women would grow tobacco, sunflowers, beans and other vegetables. The Choctaw used the vast lowlands for planting crops such as corn, beans, squash, pumpkins and melons. These lowland areas were communally owned, with any individual allowed to plant and use as much land as they wished, so long as they actively used the land. If an individual stopped planting the land for any reason other than low fertility, the land was reclaimed by the tribe, and again free to be planted by any other individual.⁸

Choctaw homes were made of pieces of wood tied together with flexible bands of cane or wood, buried in the ground for support. The wood walls were then covered with mud, with only one small door as an opening. The roof was either thatched from grasses, or made from the bark of Cypress or Pine trees. The only furniture inside the cabins was simple cane beds, which also served as tables and chairs, fire- fans made from tree limbs and sieves and hampers made from the bark of small trees for storing corn and other foods.⁹

Choctaw land rights were based entirely upon occupancy. When a Choctaw built his home and planted food, he obtained full rights to the land so long as he lived there. If he moved to a new home, his rights to the previously “owned” land were forfeited back to the nation, and anyone who saw fit to move into the home and farm the land was welcome to do so. If a husband and wife were to die with no children, the wife’s family would retain the property, unless the house had been built entirely by the man, in which case the man’s family would retain the land. If the house was built prior to the husband and wife living there, the right to the house and land would revert to person who built it, or to that person’s blood relation.¹⁰

Choctaw lands were generally well suited to their way of life. The uplands generally had poor soil for growing crops, but supported the growth of many varieties of Oak trees. These Oak forests provided the Choctaw with mast for food, as well as some protection from neighboring tribes. The trees also provided game animals with food, which meant there was usually game present to be hunted. The lowlands were very fertile, and supported the Choctaw agricultural way of life, supplying Cottonwood, Elm, Walnut, Hickory, Pecan, and Osage orange timber.

The riparian zones along streams and rivers, as well as the streams and rivers themselves, were important sources of food, fiber, and transportation. The Choctaw had many uses for the sturdy cane that grew along stream and riverbanks and in wetland areas.¹¹

The Choctaw were primarily farmers; in fact, the Choctaw were so good at farming that they often had enough crops after harvest that to trade the excess with neighboring tribes. The Chickasaws were far less effective farmers, and traded furs and other goods for these excess crops from the Choctaw almost yearly.¹²

Choctaw agricultural life was very labor- intensive. The Choctaw used feasts, dancing, songs, myths and religion, which stressed the importance of the food gathering activities, to reduce the strain of this lifestyle.¹³

Choctaw agriculture was minimally destructive to the environment. They maintained their agricultural fields with winter burns, and by using only simple tools made from simple wooden and flint tools, or shoulder blades of bison for cultivation. The Choctaw method of planting the three sisters together in one field helped to maintain the soil by keeping erosion to a minimum. Very little soil was exposed to the elements by planting corn beans and squash together, and the various root systems also helped hold the soil in place. When a field no longer producing well, it was left fallow for up to 50 years. During this time, the field would become

overgrown with vegetation, which was used by birds, animals, and the Choctaw themselves.¹⁴ These fields would slowly regain their nutrient richness, and eventually be ready for agriculture again. New farming lands were cleared using the slash and burn methods.¹⁵ This form of land management ensured the Choctaw always had land for agriculture, and also ensured there was always land available for hunting and gathering.

The Choctaw were not an agricultural people by choice. With growing populations due to high game numbers and fertile soils for agriculture, game numbers became lower each year. As game numbers decreased, the Choctaw had to rely more on agriculture for survival, which explains why even though the Choctaw were great farmers, during periods of drought or poor crops due to flood or insect infestations, famine would sweep the Choctaw.¹⁶

Of all the crops that the Choctaw grew, corn was definitely the most important. Also known as maize, it contributed an estimated 2/3 of the Choctaw subsistence diet, which was otherwise supplemented with other crops, hunting, foraging and fishing.¹⁷

Corn was such an important crop for the Choctaw that there are several tribal legends as to its origin. Some legends suggest that a human- like entity gave the corn to the tribe. In 1996, Terry Ben gave one account,

“Supposedly, a long time ago, according to one legend, going back to Nanih Waiya, there were some hunters around Nanih Waiya at nighttime. And they saw or heard somebody crying; I think it was a lady, and so forth maybe, you know, crying.

“The woman was real hungry, and so forth, and wanted food and all that. And so, the hunt was not to well, but you know, they had a little game or whatever it

was, and so they shared the meal they had with this woman, at the Nanih Waiya area.

“And so the woman was so very thankful, and told the hunters, “One month later, on the night of the full moon, come back.”

“And so, about a month later, the two men went to the same spot on the full moon night, and there, on Nanih Waiya area, the mound area, the cave mound area, were some strange seeds. They never saw that before. And of course the item was corn—corn on the cob or whatever it was. And this was a gift from the lady, who was maybe some kind of a legendary figure or whatever it was, who was thankful; and this was a return gift.

And so that’s how supposedly the Choctaws acquired corn, via the situation at Nanih Waiya as such”.¹⁸

Because the Choctaw were so close to nature, several legends contend that corn was delivered to the Choctaw people via an animal of some sort. In 1975, Baxter York told a version of the legend in which corn was brought to the Choctaw from the Mexico region via geese.¹⁹ Another account, given in 1899, given by Ilaishtubbee allows for delivery of corn by a crow;

“A long time ago it thus happened.

“In the very beginning a crow got a single grain of corn from across the great water, brought it to this country and gave it to an orphan child, who was playing in the yard. The child named it *tanchi* (corn). He planted it in the yard.

“When the corn was growing up, the child’s elders merely had it swept around. But the child, wishing to have his own way, hoed it, hilled it, and laid it by.

“When this single grain of corn grew up and matured, it made two ears of corn.

“And in this way the ancestors of the Choctaws discovered corn”.²⁰

The Choctaw raised many different types of corn each year. Growing several varieties each season served several purposes. Some varieties were more drought resistant than others, allowing them to survive and provide at least some food for the year. Growing several varieties also provided a means of insect control. One variety matured so quickly that the Choctaw were able to harvest it twice per year. A white corn was raised for making flour for breads. The Choctaw grew four different types of hominy corn. They even grew a type of popping corn that was very closely related to original tropical flint corn.²¹

After contact with Europeans, the Choctaw adopted several other fruits and vegetables for agriculture, although none were ever more important than corn. The most important of these was the sweet potato. The Choctaw also adopted hyacinth beans, several varieties of guinea corn, leeks, garlic, cabbage and watermelon. They were very fond of watermelon, but many of these crops were grown only for the purpose of trade with the Europeans. Peaches were also introduced to the Choctaw, and many peach orchards were present around villages. Grape and plums often grew near Choctaw villages, although they were not actually cultivated. These fruits were spared during the slash and burn clearing of the fields.²²

The Choctaw had several ways of preparing corn for food. Corn was usually dried before it was used in cooking. Once dry, the corn was usually crushed in a hickory mortar. The hickory was not only strong enough to be used as a mortar, but also imparted a good flavor into the food. After being crushed, corn was sifted to separate the finest matter from the courser corn bits. The courser bits were then added to water in a deer or bear skin, and boiled along with pumpkins, beans and other vegetables. After boiling, the finer corn was added to thicken stew, and ashes of corn silk or beanpods were added for flavoring. Fine acorn ashes were rinsed with water to

remove the lye, which was used for flavoring. This meal prepared from corn was called *sagamit'e*, and was the Choctaws principle food.²³

Corn was prepared many ways other than for *sagamit'e*. Corn was fashioned into bread, and was usually made with acorn lye, which imparted flavor, and helped free the seed coat from the corn. This minimized the amount of corn needed to prepare it. The flour from the corn was added to water and kneaded into dough, which was then boiled in water, or wrapped in leaves and placed upon the fires coals. Sometimes it was pounded flat, and cooked on a piece of pottery. Bread was not often made from corn because it was very labor intensive. They dried meat from deer, bear, and other game, then shredded it and added it to boiling water with whole kernels of dried corn to make a stew.²⁴

Corn was also used for food in its green stage. It was often boiled in water and eaten from the cob. Early in the season while the corn was still very tender, it was pounded into porridge. Later in the season when the corn was very mature, it was boiled, roasted and pounded into flour. This flour was added to cold water to make corn meal, another Choctaw favorite. One species of corn (*specific species name?*) grown by the Choctaw was a small corn that was dried, but not pounded, and added whole to stews with meat.²⁵

Fishing was an important source of food. The Choctaw did not use hook and line until after it was introduced by Europeans, but did make limited use of spears and bow and arrows. The most effective means of catching fish was to drag the water with a net made from brush and tied together with creepers. The Choctaw also used various plants such as winterberry, buckeye, and Devil's Shoestring (coralberry) to poison or stun fish, which made them easy to collect as they floated to the top.²⁶

Gathering was another very important source of sustenance for the Choctaw, especially when agricultural years were poor. Women, children, and the elderly performed these tasks. Many varieties of fruits, nuts, roots, and plants were gathered for foodstuff, medicine and other useful purposes. A variety of fruits and nuts, including berries, grapes, acorns, chestnuts and pecans, were stored in the house in baskets or clay pots for use in the winter.²⁷

The Choctaw gathered many varieties of wild fruits, nuts and plants from the forests and overgrown fields that surrounded their villages. Fruits gathered included: strawberry, blackberry, huckleberry, plum, muscadine, crabapple, persimmon and red mulberry. Some fruits, such as mulberry and crabapple, were dried and stored in baskets for winter, while others were eaten fresh. Muscadine was stored in water so it would remain fresh all winter. Many varieties of nuts including: walnuts, pecans, chestnuts, and chinquapins were gathered for food. Even more important were the acorns from the Post, Live, Blackjack, Water and Swamp Oaks, and the nuts from the Shagbark, Kingnut and Mockernut hickories, which were all important for making flour, oils, and drinks.²⁸

Corn, nuts, and other foods were often crushed in a wooden mortar. Burning the end of a tree trunk and then scraping away the burnt wood to made the mortar, while the pestle was often just a long stick with a heavy rounded end, though sometimes rocks were also used.²⁹

The tools used in everyday agricultural life by the Choctaw were all provided by nature. They fashioned hoes from a piece of bent wood with either a piece of flint or a bison shoulder blade attached to it.³⁰ Other tools used included spades and shovels made from cedar, and axes made with stone.³¹ The Choctaw did not use metal to create any of their tools or weapons.

When no flint was available for fire, the Choctaw would use two sticks of a hardwood tree to make fire. The sticks were rubbed rapidly together near a pile of tinder, usually made of tinder fungus, which grew on Birch trees, until small embers from the sticks lit the tinder.³²

The Choctaw used natural materials for jewelry also: seeds, dyed nuts or wooden beads, and berries were strung together and worn as a necklace. Bones, shells, and colored stones were also used. Feathers from eagles, turkeys and other birds were often worn in the hair. The size and number of feathers depended on the rank or special accomplishments of the wearer.³³

The Choctaw were expert basket weavers. They weaved baskets from cane that grew in the bottomlands. Basket size and shape depended on its intended use. Natural materials were used for coloring, found in the forests around them.³⁴ Yellow dye was created by boiling puccoon plant roots. Red dye was also created using the fruit of the sumac. Alder (*Alnus serrulata*) was used to create several colors of dye including: purple, lavender, red and a grayish color, depended on the time of year it was collected. Maple was also used for purple dye. Walnut bark and nut husk was used for brown, while black was created by boiling the ashes of Post or Blackjack Oak with a small amount of copper.³⁵

The Choctaw would girdle larger trees, and then they would cut and burn all the underbrush, cane and saplings. The fire would kill some of the larger trees that had been girdled. This cycle of burning the underbrush and burning the fallen larger trees would continue for several years, until the entire field was cleared.³⁷ If the Choctaw had not burned on a regular basis, these open fields and clearings would have eventually reverted back to forest, and could have been detrimental to hunting subsistence.³⁸

Burning not only cleared the land, but by using slash and burn techniques, the Choctaw ensured that many nutrients such as calcium, potassium, phosphorous and potash were returned

to the soil, and minimized the loss of nutrient due to leaching from rainfall. This was, of course, most effective in the first few years of burning when the most debris was available to burn.³⁹

The use of burning, as a tool, not only helped to clear agricultural fields, but to maintain the bottomland forests “open” condition. By burning the underbrush, grasses and sedges, and other debris of the forest regularly, the Choctaw ensured themselves of protection from neighboring tribes by destroying any surrounding camouflage. Conversely, these open areas also made it easier for the Choctaw to move between their villages and those that of their enemy during war raid parties. By creating open forest areas, the tribe ensured the continued presence of game; many herbaceous species fed upon the local plants. This has also helped control less desirable fire susceptible species. Burning created edge habitat, diversity of landscape and clear openings preferred by whitetail deer and many other important game species. Burning was also used as a hunting technique, by starting a fire on one end of a wooded area, and other hunters would be waiting on the other end for game animals to flee the flames.⁴⁰

The only areas where burning backfired on the Choctaw were in the southern pine regions. The use of fire in these regions would have opposite the effect described earlier; fires in this region would have killed the desired hardwood species, and encourage the growth of some evergreen species, especially species such as longleaf pine. Because of the use of fire by the Choctaw in this region, longleaf pine dominated an area that might have otherwise been dominated by Oak and Hickory. Although this region provided excellent weather cover for some game species, it would have held many more if it were kept in the Oak-Hickory forest.⁴¹

The Choctaw signed nine treaties in 40 years with the United States of America. The first treaty was signed in 1786, and ceded 69,120 acres to the US government. The treaty stated, in Articles II and III, that land not ceded by the Choctaw within the boundary allotted by the US

government was to be used by the Indians to live and hunt on. Although agriculture is not specifically mentioned in the treaty, the Choctaw depended heavily on agriculture for subsistence; therefore the phrase “to live” could be interpreted to include agriculture. No other treaty mentions the Choctaw right to live and hunt on their allotted lands. The final treaty, the Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek in 1830, is the only to mention agriculture. In article XIX, the amount of land a particular Indian was cultivating in their ceded Mississippi homeland was used to determine the amount of land west of the Mississippi the Indian would receive.⁴²

CONCLUSION

The Choctaw were an agriculturally- centered, multi- subsistence people who relied upon corn, beans and squash for subsistence. Their reliance on agriculture was so strong that other forms of subsistence such as hunting, gathering and fishing all flowed around the seasons for planting, harvesting, and preparing the fields for harvest.

It seems odd that the Choctaw were such an agricultural nation, and yet, they didn't have the words “agriculture” or “farming” included into any treaties they signed. A number of historians would probably agree that this is due to the fact that Indians were often naive about the wording in written treaties, and more commonly took the verbal exchanges at treaty meetings as being the final agreement.

NOTE: LITERATURE SECTION LOST DUE TO COMPUTER MELTDOWN