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The Social Fabric: Deep Local to Pan Global

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Reawakening Chahta Nan Tvnna (Choctaw Textiles)

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Abstract:

Choctaw people have crafted textiles from the land for thousands of years. Native to Mississippi and Alabama, U.S.A., the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma resides today in the Southeastern part of the state and numbers over 200,000 citizens. This paper comes out of the tribe's Historic Preservation department's work in conjunction with community efforts to reawaken Chahta nan tvnna, Choctaw textiles. By piecing together disparate parts of the Choctaw textile narrative, the Choctaw community is creating new textile work that recalls the ancestors and brings the identity of Chahta nan tvnna to new generations of Choctaw artisans.

Introduction

This is the story of Chahta nan tvnna, Choctaw textiles. Choctaw people have crafted textiles for thousands of years. Yet despite a long history of making, few have told our textile story as it unfolded and then lay dormant for generations. Thanks to efforts in the Choctaw community across the United States, the story of Chahta nan tvnna is coming back into focus. Native to Mississippi and Alabama, the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma (CNO) resides today in the Southeastern part of the state and numbers over 200,000 citizens. Rooted in work done through the CNO Historic Preservation department, this paper covers an initiative to reawaken Chahta nan tvnna, Choctaw textiles. Our textile work takes part in ongoing efforts to support our community and our identity by promoting our traditional arts for future generations of Choctaw people.

As a Choctaw tribal member, I began learning about our textile traditions in 2014 while studying at the University of Oxford. There my lifelong passion for textiles found an outlet in the study of a fingerwoven and beaded bison hair bag at the Pitt Rivers Museum.¹ Through this study, I caught a glimpse of the textile traditions of my Choctaw ancestry which incorporated the use of fingerweaving and bison wool. In 2016, through remarkable circumstances, an internship with the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation department gave me an opportunity to begin researching traditional textiles from a tribal perspective. Over the last three years, what began with the premise of creating a report on Choctaw textiles has flourished into the opportunity to facilitate a community of textile artisans working to revitalize the art together. Across the nation, our Choctaw community has begun to call for more resources on clothing and textiles. Our textile story continues to unfold, an artistic extension of our sovereignty ready for reawakening.

This paper starts by acknowledging the sleeping tradition of Choctaw textile making. The first section will cover what we know of these textiles from the 1700's and earlier through the lens of archaeological records and ethnographic accounts. The next section will focus on the post-contact period during the late 1700's and the 1800's which reveals textiles in the context of the shifting landscapes and identities of the Choctaw Nation. This ultimately demonstrates that while

¹ For the mentioned fingerwoven, beaded bison hair bag, see object 1884.69.15 at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, <http://objects.prm.ox.ac.uk/pages/PRMUID128943.html>.

frayed, the continuous thread of Choctaw textile making would not be cut short. Finally, an overview of an ongoing project in the Oklahoma Choctaw community brings us full circle to the generations of makers we intend to honor with our current textile initiative.

Recognizing the limitations of space and the unavoidable gaps created by time, space, and historical trauma, the scope of this paper is not an exhaustive history of Choctaw textiles. Even so, the narrative of Choctaw textiles and its story of survival can and should be told through tribal knowledge, ethnographic accounts, archaeological records, and continued learning from the materials and techniques of countless generations of Choctaw artisans. In our research, we do not consult funerary items out of respect for our ancestors. Ours is a living, traditional culture and any items from burials are the sole property of those individuals.

Sketch of the Thruston Tablet by William Holmes, 1891.

Belts, Bayou La Combe, Louisiana: Louisa Celestine 1941. Frank G. Speck Papers, American Philosophical Society.

Ties to Our Neighbors, Our Land, and Traditional Society

Choctaw oral histories situate our people in the Blackbelt prairie in the late Pleistocene era, over 11,000 ago. Southeastern North American native populations shifted, migrated, and restructured many times. The clear-cut ethnic groups seen on maps and in accounts represent thousands of years of deeply complex lines of ancestral traditions, lands, and relationships. Considering this shared experience and the limited record of perishable items like textiles in Southeastern archaeological records, the research of Choctaw textiles requires casting a wide geographic net. European and archaeological textile accounts of Choctaw as well as Natchez, Chickasaw, Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee tribes, to name a few, hold rich applications in the understanding of broader Southeastern textiles. Using an understanding of Choctaw traditions, language, colors, materials, and traditional designs that have persisted allow for a culturally relevant reading of the breadth of materials and items across the Southeast found in generations of Choctaw art. Pieces like the Thruston tablet of Sumner County Tennessee, hundreds of miles from traditional Choctaw homelands in Mississippi and Alabama, contain strong visual links to characteristic Choctaw motifs.² The tablet suggests various woven cloths which feature circular and scroll designs, both strong elements in Choctaw artistry. Ancestral Choctaw art from sacred sites like Moundville, Alabama and art in modern made bandolier belts both incorporate these scroll and circle designs, informing us of a larger understanding of Southeastern and Choctaw-related native aesthetics and design. The belts are a part of living culture and tradition, worn by Choctaw

² William Henry Holmes, "The Thruston Tablet," *American Anthropologist* 4, no. 2 (1891): 161-166.

male leaders. In Choctaw, a language full of descriptive textile words, we call this an isht vskufvchi, a belt, made with shikvillili, small white beads, and na humma chulhata, a strip of red stroud.³

Choctaw traditional lifeways are grounded in the Choctaw homelands. Our food, our vessels for carrying and cooking, our weapons, our maps, our hunting grounds, our stories, our sacred places and origin stories are all inseparable from the land. One cannot address Choctaw textiles without rooting it in the materials that come from the land. Choctaw society is traditionally matriarchal and as such women were the owners and managers of the land. A highly sophisticated agricultural people, Choctaws cultivated many heirloom crops over thousands of years. Women as the givers of life were the caretakers of the land and fields. When it came to clothing, women were the makers of cloth and wore largely plant based clothing. Fiber resources from bark, bast, and leaves included dogbane, stinging nettle, milkweed, pawpaw, red mulberry, bear grass, rattlesnake master, and yucca among others. There were also animal fibers available in the Southeast including bison wool, possum, and rabbit hair. Men as the takers of life in Choctaw society wore more buckskin and animal products.

This map shows the Choctaw area of interest from the homelands in Mississippi and Alabama to the Choctaw Nation in Southeastern Oklahoma today. Map by CNO Historic Preservation Department, 2014.

Through the harsh realities of colonization, consecutive events disrupted the Choctaw way of life and separated us from the traditional methods and materials of textile making. From the 1700's onward, Choctaw people were consistently pushed off traditional homelands with one broken

³ Choctaw definitions and spellings are from Cyrus Byington, *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 46: A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government, 1915).

treaty after another. The 1830's Trail of Tears and removals that spanned into early 1900 forced our people from the homelands and into Indian Territory, what is modern day Oklahoma. In this way, the negative cultural impacts of colonization meant that the pattern of interacting with the land was fragmented. Our people arrived in a new land without the same gathering spots and natural resources that had fueled our life and our craft for thousands of years. For an art so entwined with the land, this would be a traumatic loss for textiles. Recognizing our history, the ongoing textile work is a powerful step on the path to regaining our culture and identity.

Clay with spaced, plain twined textile impressions from a Choctaw-French village site in Kemper County, Alabama. Courtesy of Tennessee Valley Archaeological Research, 2016.

Plain twined structure. Rows can be spaced apart as an open fabric or compressed as a weft-faced fabric. Drawn by CNO Historic Preservation Community Liaison and Choctaw artist Joseph Wolf.

Early Legacy of Textile Makers

Archaeological study into the limited records of textiles in the Southeast has been covered by a few dedicated textile experts. Their work highlights the breadth and depth of the tangible records of the Southeast focusing on qualities such as final twist direction of the yarns in a cloth and prevalence of various twined structure in villages across the region.⁴ One of the most prolific resources for textile study in the Southeast comes from pottery. Pot sherds from a variety of vessels provide a window into the cloth used in ceramic production. For example, the making of salt pans involved digging a shallow hole in the ground, laying cloth over this hole, using the form of the hole to shape the vessel, allowing the pot to dry, and finally lifting out and peeling the cloth away from the vessel.⁵ The fired salt pan preserved a negative image of the cloth used. Hundreds of years later, sherds of used and broken pottery found in the archaeological record show the impressions of textiles produced in these villages. These artisans often reused old clothing for the pottery process which meant the impressions on the vessel also revealed the repairs done to the worn cloth. Sherds in ancestral Choctaw Beckum Village, Alabama, dating back to 500 C.E. to 1250 C.E. give an image of everyday textiles in this region. In the 1940's, nearly 1,500 textile impressed pottery sherds were excavated from this site. The makers of these

⁴ For extensive archaeological data on Southeastern textiles, see the works of Elizabeth Temple Horton, Mary Spanos, and Penelope Drooker, among others.

⁵ Mary Spanos, "Mississippian Textiles at Beckum Village (ICK24), Clarke County, Alabama," (master's thesis, University of Alabama, 2006), 64-68.

ceramics had used fabrics in pottery production that had patterns of spaced plain twined, spaced alternate pair twined, and weft faced twined structures.⁶

Later archaeological sites like a 1700's Choctaw-French village in Kemper County, Alabama and the prolific ethnographic accounts of the early contact period reveal a profile of the clothing made and used during the critical generation that grappled with European contact. A textile impressed clay artifact found in the village was found wrapped around a wood post at the center of the village. Those living in the village had wrapped clay around the post and then wrapped a textile around it, leaving the image of a spaced plain twined textile. Finally, the clay had been fired. While the purpose of the clay and post at the center of the village is unknown, it alludes to the continued use of traditional textiles in prominent places of Choctaw society in the 1700's.

Technically, Choctaw textiles consisted of twined and fingerwoven items. These structures, while basic, allow for an efficient use of materials and flexible project assembly. These textiles required very few tools and left behind few archaeological records of the specific types of tools used by Choctaw women. When needed, these tools would have consisted of basic spindles and a free-hanging loom, simply a suspended rod for hanging a project from. Patterns of twined structures in Southeastern textiles include spaced plain twined, spaced alternate pair twined, and weft faced cloth. Transposing warps or varying weft spacing in these structures creates open work, decorative texture, imagery, repetition patterning, and color play in these fabrics. In contrast, the fingerwoven fabric in the archaeological record is a balanced oblique interlacing weave, though weft-faced fabrics could have been fingerwoven or twined. The oblique interlace weave is simply a plain weave fabric in which the warp meets the edge of the fabric and turns back to become the weft, as in the structure of a chain link fence. These dense fingerwoven fabrics tended to compose strips of fabric for belts or straps rather than garments.

Europeans wrote extensively of Southeastern clothing items and their production methods during the early contact period. Spindles described by Spanish explorers in 1698 consisted of "small crosses made of reeds... [with] thread and bunches of buffalo hair attached to them... [which] served as spindles or distaffs for the women."⁷ This description offers an alternative type of spindle used in the Southeast than generally used today. Later on in the 1700's, James Adair, an English fur trader living among the Chickasaws and writing on several tribes, described the way "the old women spin [fiber] off the distaffs, with wooden machines, having some clay on the middle of them, to hasten the motion."⁸ These wooden machines were spindles with clay whorls fitted to river cane or wood.

The Choctaw word *vpi* reminds us again that our textile fibers are deeply linked with the land. The definition of the word *vpi* includes both warp and also stalk, vine, tree, trunk, and mulberry.⁹ The *vpi* homonym attests to the process of using stalks of plants such as mulberry for the warp of a cloth. This connection holds even more significance considering the nature of our fiber plants:

⁶ Spanos, 4.

⁷ John R Swanton, "The Indians of the Southeastern United States," in *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No. 137*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946) 326.

⁸ James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1775), 422.

⁹ Definitions from Cyrus Byington, *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 46: A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government, 1915) 81.

the fibers run the full length of the stalk. Several of these key plant fibers of the homelands that form the warps and wefts of our cloth have processing methods recorded in early European accounts. Dogbane, called Indian hemp by Europeans, was reported to grow plentifully in the Southeast in the 1700's at a height of around six feet tall, much taller than that which grows in Oklahoma today. To process this bast fiber, "When it is fit for use, [Southeastern natives] pull, steep, peel, and beat it."¹⁰ In this process of "steeping," today called retting, one places the stalks in standing water or in a shady area and allows the stalks to rot for several weeks after which the fibers are more readily separated from the bark. Choctaws would process milkweed and stinging nettle, also native bast fibers, in a similar way.

Hand-twisting dogbane cordage with a harvest in Antlers, OK, April 2017.

Red mulberry inner bark harvested from Coleman, OK, Spring 2016-2018. Processed fiber to left and one-ply skein to right.

Native Southeastern bark fibers include red mulberry, slippery elm, and hickory among others. The inner bark of the red mulberry tree, a species native to eastern and central North America, was made into a strong, white cloth. Of the Natchez people, the Choctaw's neighbors and enemies, Le Page du Pratz observed in 1758,

Pour faire des mantes d'écorce de mûrier, elles vont chercher dans les Bois des jets ou pousses de mûrier, qui sortent de ces arbres après qu'on les a abattus ; ces jets ont quatre à cinq pieds de haut, elles les coupent avant que la sève soit passée, en ôtent l'écorce & la sont sécher au Soleil. Lorsque cette écorce est sèche, elles la battent pour faire tomber la grosse; l'intérieur qui est comme de la filasse reste toute entière, elles battent de nouveau celle-ci pour la rendre plus fine; elles la mettent ensuite blanchir à la rosée. Lorsque l'écorce est en cet état, elles la filent grosse comme du ligneul ou fil à coudre les souliers; elles ces sent de filer, si-tôt qu'elles en ont assez.¹¹

While relatively thorough, the instructions still leave some questions unanswered. Current experimental archeology work in the Historic Preservation department to recover this fiber extraction method has produced a stiff, heathered-white mulberry bark yarn from retted fibers. Mulberry bark easily separates from the shoots and branches of the tree in the springtime and can

¹⁰ James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1775), 422.

¹¹ Antoine Simon Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire de la Louisiane*, Vol. 2, (Paris: Lambert, 1758), 192-193. An English translation can be found in John R Swanton, "The Indians of the Southeastern United States," in *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No. 137*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946) 453. Available online at <https://catalog.hathitrust.org/Record/000248534>.

be dried out after peeling from the stalk. Through trial and error over two years, we were able to use a combination of dew retting, pounding, and boiling the fiber with wood ash to process it from the dried bark strips. The experiments revealed the fiber's ability to reconstitute quickly in water and its tendency to return to its crispy quality once dry. The fiber's stiffness will likely subside with further pounding of the yarn and subsequent wear on the cloth. Mulberry bark fiber presents some challenges but continued spinning practice has been rewarded with a beautiful yarn full of potential and matching the high praise of 1700's descriptions.

Finally, one of the few animal fibers available in the Southeast during the 1700's and earlier was bison wool. Bison herds only moved into the American Southeast in the late 1500's and reached a peak population there in the 1700's, declining greatly over the next century.¹² James Adair who observed Choctaw fiber collection and production patterns in the middle and late 1700's wrote that "In the winter season, the women gather buffalo's hair, a sort of coarse brown curled wool; and having spun it as fine as they can, and properly doubled it, they put small beads of different colours upon the yarn."¹³ When bison were not available in the region, extensive trade routes allowed for access to bison products.

1700's Choctaw woman
By Choctaw Cultural artist Ruby Bolding, circa
2014, for Historic Preservation, CNO.

1700's Choctaw woman with a kiti, the Choctaw mortar and pestle, and close up of her twined vlhkuna, skirt. By Choctaw artist Brittany Armstrong for the Cultural Artist internship, 2018, for Historic Preservation, CNO.

¹² Erhard Rostlund, "The Geographic Range of the Historic Bison in the Southeast," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 50, no. 4 (1960): 405.

¹³ James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1775), 423.

In 2018, through the tribe's internship program, we worked with emerging Choctaw artist Brittany Armstrong to create a depiction of a Choctaw woman's 1700's style dress and other traditional arts from ethnographic accounts. The opportunity gave a young tribal member training in incorporating cultural research into her work and provided a wider Choctaw audience with access to this old knowledge through Historic Preservation educational material.

As our cultural artists illustrate, twined clothing items of the 1700's included the kasko, a feather covered mantle, and the vlhkuna, a skirt. The kasko, worn by both men and women, consisted of an open-twined new or repaired fabric with feathers attached at regular intervals. Adair described the kasko as a,

turkey feather [blanket made] 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.¹⁴

The vlhkuna, a Choctaw woman's skirt, was made of any variety of plant fibers or bison hair. Both men and women wore hide moccasins for warmth, tall moccasins for the women and short moccasins for the men. Children usually had much sparser clothing. 1700's period clothing accounts describe a net-like fringed clothing that young girls wore until their marriage.¹⁵ Sashes and bags made with twining or fingerweaving served as strong and dense utilitarian items. However, bags could also serve as decorative, ornate items. James Adair's description of bison products in Southeastern textiles included the important detail that "The Choktah weave shot-pouches, which have raised [bead] work inside and outside," the beads of course coming from a European trade context.¹⁶ David I. Bushnell's work on native uses of bison wool highlights several fingerwoven pieces in European museum collections that illustrate the types of woven work described by Adair.¹⁷

A Changing Generation of Makers

Already these ethnographic accounts of Choctaw clothing preclude the apparent availability of foreign trade goods available to the Choctaw people. Even the first recorded contact in 1699 of Choctaw and French people, later to be allies, included the exchange of deer skins for French blankets, shirts and needles among other items.¹⁸ As time went on, Choctaws learned to use these relationships strategically for power and goods at a local and regional level. By the 1730's, Choctaws already held lively ongoing trade relationships with the French and English which were played against each other for better products.¹⁹ The clothing of the 18th century would

¹⁴ Adair, 423.

¹⁵ John R Swanton, "The Indians of the Southeastern United States," in *Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin No. 137*, (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946), 475–476.

¹⁶ James Adair, *The History of the American Indians* (London: Edward & Charles Dilly, 1775), 423.

¹⁷ David I. Bushnell Jr., "The Various Uses of Buffalo Hair by the North American Indians," *American Anthropologist* 11, no. 3 (1909): 402-412.

¹⁸ Daniel H. Usner Jr., "The Deerskin Trade in French Louisiana," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* 10 (1985): 75.

¹⁹ Stephen P. van Hoak, "Untangling the Roots of Dependency: Choctaw Economics, 1700-1860," *American Indian Quarterly* 23, no. 3/4 (Summer - Autumn, 1999): 116, accessed January 23, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1185831>.

change quickly with the growing demand for Choctaw attention and friendship and the increasing access to the quality goods Choctaws requested.

In the year 1800, the first federal Choctaw agent introduced cotton to Choctaw neighbors.²⁰ Remarkably quickly, Choctaw women were cultivating cotton alongside their heirloom crops and making expedient use of it in spinning and weaving. Historian Grant Foreman quoted a Doctor Morse reporting to the Secretary of War on Indian Affairs in 1822 that “In one year [the Choctaws] spun and wove 10,000 yards of cotton cloth. An ingenious Choctaw for a series of years raised cotton and with cards and spinning wheels made by him, he spun and wove it, and then made it into clothing.”²¹ The fervent take up of the new crop revealed qualities of these generations of Choctaw makers. Choctaw women were already adept at growing fiber plants and producing textiles; new materials were quickly incorporated into their repertoire. One need only read through Choctaw dictionaries to see the plethora of textile vocabulary and an overwhelming list of words for use with ponola, cotton.²² As Brian Carson eloquently writes, “women’s supervision of the plant world made them agents of change in Choctaw horticulture, for it was women who adopted cotton cultivation from the American traders who lived in their midst.”²³ Incorporating new materials into Choctaw ethnobotanical practices and ways of making would bring revolutionary changes to the traditional textiles of the tribe.

By the end of the 1700’s, the Choctaw homelands saw a considerable shift as the land shrunk due to several treaties and the single source of power now being the United States. While the changing power structure afforded Choctaw leaders less leverage, scattered across the 1800’s treaty conditions and negotiations between the tribe and the federal government are repeated demands for quality spinning wheels, looms, cotton cards, cotton gins, and other textile related production tools. Each tool was appropriated with a specific name in the descriptive Choctaw language. For example, Choctaw first speaker Eveline Steele explains that ahonola, the word for spinning wheel, is also used for tornado, capturing the image of rapid spinning for both tool and storm.²⁴

Notably, these tools would still have been part of the women’s realm of societal control. As such, the following requests from leaders must be taken with this in mind:

In 1801 the chiefs of the tribe requested to be furnished with... instructors employed to teach their women to spin and weave; one chief asked for cotton cards, as his people already made cloth; and another complained that a cotton gin which he had applied for the year before had not been sent to him.²⁵

Choctaw women clearly played a key role in advocating for textile knowledge and tools in this new and shifting world. These requests were even written into the 1830 Treaty of Dancing

²⁰ James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1999), 79.

²¹ Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1934), 18.

²² See Table XIX: Names of Tools used by Spinners and Weavers in Cyrus Byington, *Holisso Anumpa Tosholi: An English and Choctaw Definer; For the Choctaw Academies and Schools*, 1st ed, (New York: American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, 1852) 58-59.

²³ James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1999), 79.

²⁴ Eveline Steele shared this at the first CNO Historic Preservation textile workshop March 3, 2018.

²⁵ Grant Foreman, *The Five Civilized Tribes*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1934), 18.

Rabbit Creek which led to the removals and splintering of the Choctaw tribe from the homelands in Mississippi and Alabama. Among the compensation by the U.S. government in return for the Choctaw homelands were 1,000 wheels, 1,000 cards, and 400 looms.²⁶ Commissary General Gibson in delegating the agents' tasks regarding fulfillment of the treaty wrote that "The looms to be of the best seasoned materials, with hand-shuttles, cast iron rag wheels, and wrought iron wrists. And in all respects of the strongest and most durable character" and the spinning wheels "of the best quality; the wood well seasoned. In fine, both of these articles to be what would be called first rate country looms and wheels."²⁷ While the U.S. agents often did not fulfill the treaty requirements, this particular focus on the quality of the textile tools suggests that they may have been an exception to this pattern.

Not only would families feel the effects of a colonial world at home and in the economic realm of trade, but young generations would find the shifts unavoidable when attending mission schools and boarding schools. Separated from their family and the old ways of life, girls in schools were re-educated on how to be a woman in the Western ways of thinking and making. Rather than weaving river cane basketry or twining and spinning native fiber cloth, girls were taught to make cross-stitch samples, sew Western style clothing, and produce cloth from cotton and sheep's wool.²⁸ Later on, some boarding schools would teach "Indian" crafts that often were more representative of pan-Indian or non-Choctaw techniques. The Choctaw girls' Wheelock Boarding School, today a museum, holds in their collection remnants of these lessons, including a loom, a spinning wheel, and photographs of students working with these tools. Even so, an early 1900's Home Economics sampler shows that a few girls at Wheelock had the opportunity to learn traditional fingerweaving. The "Indian Designs" activity page of the sampler shows the same oblique interlacing structure used in thousands of years of Choctaw textile work prior. Whether by design or simple accident, this remnant of a Choctaw style of making that hung on through the 19th century alludes to a running thread of continuity in the textile practice of Choctaw people. Southeastern native peoples continued to use weft-faced fingerweaving throughout the 1800's and the 1900's to make garters, belts, and straps.

Another element of precontact textile traditions that continued long past the Trail of Tears removal was the use of native plant dyes. Choctaw people had a rich understanding of the colors available in their homelands and knew which part of plants to use for a certain color. Traditional basket dye colors included black, white, red, and yellow, each with their own significance. These colors also happen to be some of the most accessible in nature. Although many of native colors are fugitive, some mordants like copper and alum may have been accessible precontact. Later, while some dyes like nan isht hummvchi, madder, and nan isht okchakuchi, indigo, were readily and commonly acquired at trading posts by Choctaw women, plenty of resources lay out in the gardens and forests of the new Choctaw homelands of Indian Territory.²⁹ 1930's interviews in Oklahoma by Works Progress Administration fieldworkers preserved the accounts of Choctaws

²⁶ "A Treaty of Perpetual Friendship, Cession, and Limits" between the Government of the United States and the leaders of the Choctaw Nation at Dancing Rabbit Creek on September 27, 1830, Article XX.

²⁷ Commissary General Gibson correspondence, April 10, 1833, quoted in Ethan Davis, "An Administrative Trail of Tears: Indian Removal," *American Journal of Legal History* 50, no. 1 (Jan 2008-2010): 94.

²⁸ For an example, see "Choctaw Mission School Sampler by Christeen Baker," June 9, 1830 in the Colonial Williamsburg collection and online at [http://emuseum.history.org/view/objects/asitem/items\\$0040:91718](http://emuseum.history.org/view/objects/asitem/items$0040:91718).

²⁹ Spelling and definitions from Cyrus Byington, *Smithsonian Institution Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin 46: A Dictionary of the Choctaw Language*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government, 1915) 273.

or of those who lived alongside the Choctaw community and who recalled a way of life that was passing away. Mary Alice Gibson Arendell of Choctaw and Cherokee descent recalled at age 76 that “Dyes and paints were always made at home. Many dyes were made from barks and berries. Walnut bark would dye cotton brown and silks and wools yellow. Poke berries dyed a purple but was easily washed out. Copperas was used to set the colors of different dyes.”³⁰ Most remembered these plants through their mothers and grandmothers and the berries and barks these women collected in times past. Several, however, still used these plants, available both in the old homelands and the contemporary Choctaw Nation, and recited their own recipes. While the use of old fibers like bast and bark fibers had passed away, dyes such as those made of black walnut hulls and bois d’arc persisted as reliable dyes for cotton and wool cloth.

Wheelock Boarding School Home Economics Sampler
Courtesy of the 5 Civilized Tribes Museum, Muskogee, OK

Tulope, A Choctaw Man - Karl Bodmer, 1833 in New Orleans.
In *Karl Bodmer's America*, 1984.²⁷

Amid a revolution of traditional lifeways, the Choctaw style of dress in the 1800's attested to the fact that creative agency was alive and well. Deerskins continued to be a prominent part of dress and a common trade item. The trademark Choctaw pucker toe style moccasin, tall for the women and short with leggings for the men, was still a staple. The re-orchestration of the Choctaw wardrobe in a new Euro-Christian world was distinctly Choctaw as,

Clothing styles also expressed the juxtaposition of American styles and Mississippian meanings. Most Choctaw men continued to wear moccasins, but red cloth leggings and breechclouts as well as calico shirts had replaced buckskin garments. Silver armbands

³⁰ Mary Alice Gibson Arendell, interview by Dovey P. Heady, *Indian Pioneer Papers*, (Norman: Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma).

and wristbands as well as earrings and a nose ring completed the typical Choctaw male's outfit... [Women's] scarlet skirts reached beneath their knees, and like the men they sported calico shirts and array of silver jewelry. They wore their hair parted in the middle and braided behind, and in the part they traced a line of vermilion to represent the path of the sun.³¹

Artists throughout the period who encountered Choctaw people also recorded the unique style of dress. On April 16, 1830 Charles Alexandre de Lesueur, French naturalist and artist, met Jamy in Petit Gulph, Mississippi as he traveled down to New Orleans. Jamy wore a blue fringed hunting shirt with red garters and leggings beaded with black and white beads.³² Karl Bodmer also illustrated the distinctive dress in his painting of *Tulope, a Choctaw Man*, marking the bright reds and blues of his ensemble.³³ The garters Tulope wears would be made in oblique interlacing, the same structure used in the Wheelock Boarding School sampler.

After the initial drastic changes of the 1800's, Choctaw dress settled into prairie style dress that became the standard regalia. Our modern lore of traditional Choctaw dress refers the design back to French colonial fashions. Here the Choctaw element of this dress resides in the applique decorations: the beloved diamonds and the cross and circle motifs. These symbols hold their own stories of our relationship with nature. The diamonds are often said to represent the diamond back rattlesnake, an homage to the respect that Choctaw people hold for this dangerous friend. Others like the half diamond motif may point to mountains. The cross and circle motif are sometimes said to represent the Choctaw sport of stickball, ancestor to lacrosse. These designs, ripe with multiple meanings, all feature heavily in modern applique dresses, shirts, belts, and art and trace back to Choctaw and Southeastern art for thousands of years.

Reawakening Chahta Nan Tvnna

Today, the Choctaw Nation's Historic Preservation department frequently teaches and collects information on traditional arts. Within our community, the traditions of making rekindle a deeper understanding of Choctaw identity and connection back to our homelands and our ancestors. Ongoing research efforts include assembling the Chahta Imponna Database, a collection of skilled Choctaw artworks held in museums around the world. This effort along with work to provide our Choctaw community better access to our culture and museum collections aims to assist in the reawakening of Choctaw people to our culture and lifeways.

A growing number of Choctaws have begun to search out the traditional textile arts. For many, like Sandra Moore Riley, a Choctaw and Chickasaw genealogist and researcher, this is part of a lifelong journey. She writes that, "Since childhood I've had an intense interest in Choctaw history. I've also been fascinated with textile arts throughout my life. Being involved in the revival of pre-contact Choctaw textile arts has been very exciting. I'm honored to participate."³⁴ A major outlet for the rekindled passion for Choctaw textiles has been through a monthly

³¹ James Taylor Carson, *Searching for the Bright Path: The Mississippi Choctaws from Prehistory to Removal*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1999), 82.

³² The drawing of Jamy by Charles Alexandre Lesueur belongs to the collection of the Muséum d'histoire naturelle, Le Havre, France.

³³ Image of Karl Bodmer's *Tulope, a Choctaw Man* from William H. Goetzmann, David C. Hunt, Marsha V. Gallagher, and William J. Orr, *Karl Bodmer's America* (Omaha: Joslyn Art Museum and University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 110.

³⁴ Personal correspondence, January 2019.

workshop started in March 2018 and run through the Historic Preservation department. Leading up to the workshop, extensive research into the history of Choctaw textiles and experimental research done on fibers like mulberry bark prepared the way for a group effort. With an initial foundation to build from, the workshop was intended as a space for community learning about Southeastern native materials. Originally this workshop introduced the basics to the group, covering the narrative of Choctaw textiles and a range of materials and techniques. With continued efforts, we aim to rebuild the expertise and knowledge base of early traditional textile knowledge. Participating all the way from California, Sarah De Herrera writes of this journey,

When I learned about the traditional textiles of our ancestors it makes me feel closer to them. When I spun for the first time, I feel that it was so natural to process these fibers the plants have produced. It is as if I had been doing something I was meant to do. The process itself is meditating and calming when I weave them together into a beautiful textile. It has brought the Choctaw people from across the United States closer together because we now practice this ancient art form. Our ancestors would be proud of us.³⁵

Our textile workshop community has also grown with the timely opportunity to contribute to the upcoming Chahta Nowat Aya, the tribe's Cultural Center to be finished in 2020.

A few of the textile community members at a natural dye workshop in May 2018.

The traditional textile workshop community's task is to create a skirt based on a 1700's French account of Choctaws who made

a fabric, partly of [bison] wool, and partly of fibre from a very strong herb which they spin. This fabric is double like two-sided handkerchiefs and thick as canvas, half an ell wide and three quarters long. That serves them as a skirt.³⁶

³⁵ Personal correspondence, January 2019, with Sarah De Herrera, member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Board member of Okla Chahta Clan of California, Inc., and Miss Indian World Contestant 2018.

³⁶ John R. Swanton, "An Early Account of the Choctaw Indians," *Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association*, 5 (1918): 67-68.

The conversion of the ell measurement, roughly 45 inches, gives dimensions for a knee length skirt that comfortably wraps around the body twice. The skirt's weft will be a two-ply dogbane yarn, the anonymous writer's likely intended "herb" fiber, and the warp will be a two-ply bison wool yarn. For this project, the dogbane was collected in Antlers and Idabel, Oklahoma while the bison wool comes from a hide from Stratford, Oklahoma. The materials connect us both to our traditional homelands and our adopted home through our history of using these fibers.

Swatch of the skirt in progress with two-ply bison wool warp and two-ply dogbane weft.

Reinventing a skirt from these 1700's instructions and relearning to process and spin dogbane and bison wool 300 years after its regular use offers challenges and successes. Modern spinning standards do not universally apply to fibers like bison wool and dogbane. Ultimately, the fibers have taught us how to work with them. Our yarn may be overspun, irregular, and made by more than ten sets of hands, but therein lies its beauty as being a representation of this community of makers. The skirt project and textile workshop has proven to be an excellent learning and community building experience, bringing together many from different backgrounds within the Choctaw community. Michael and Laura Henry, among those who live outside of the Choctaw Nation and regularly travel back for the meetings offers that,

The reason we are happy to make the long drive to Choctaw Cultural Services each month to attend the textiles class is because we love meeting with other Choctaws in the group and learning from such knowledgeable people... Attending the textiles class has enlightened [us] to the many creative ways that Choctaws in the past utilized their natural resources to create beautiful and useful things.³⁷

Some of us gather together outside the meetings to process dogbane on a front porch or wash and card bison wool at home with help from a family member. We recognize that, more than a solitary activity, this textile work is richest when shared with our community.

As we retell our textile narrative, our Choctaw community creates new textile work that recalls the ancestors and brings the identity of Chahta nan tvnna into new generations of Choctaw artisans. The finished skirt will be on display in Durant, Oklahoma at the Chahta Nowat Aya

³⁷ Personal correspondence, January 2019.

Cultural Center upon its opening, a lasting opportunity to share with the Choctaw community and public at large. With greater understanding of each element of our culture, history, and lifeways, we as Choctaw people reclaim our sovereignty paved on the continuity and survival of the generations that have gone before us. Our community reaffirms the Choctaw identity with each twist of the spindle and twining of cloth that helps us remember who we are and who we will be. This is the foundation of Chahta nan tvnna, Choctaw textiles.

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