

'Iyyi Kowa' : A Choctaw Concept of Service

With Christmas season and the coldest part of the year coming up, many are starting to turn their thoughts to helping people who are less fortunate. A willingness to help others in need, with no thought of getting something in return, is one of the more noble sentiments of the human heart. Serving others was very much a part of Choctaw traditional life. However, the original Choctaw way of serving was a little different from what we may see at Christmas time today, in that rather than being a special focus during a certain time of the year, this service was an innate part of the Choctaw lifestyle and culture, year round. This month's edition of Iti Fabvssa presents a Choctaw concept of communal service, known as "Iyyi Kowa."

In the Choctaw language "Iyyi Kowa," literally means "broken foot." This may seem like a strange name, but this term refers to those people who are injured, sick, or otherwise incapable doing essential activities. The implication of Iyyi Kowa is that those with "broken feet" will receive the assistance they need. Yet, Iyyi Kowa has roots that go far below the surface meaning, and are in fact as deep as Choctaw culture itself.

Up until around the turn of the 19th century, most Choctaw people lived in villages with family and friends, whom they saw nearly every day of their lives. Back in those times, there was no concept of land ownership or of wages or of financial debt, and there was no time clock to punch. Their mindset was such that rather than idealizing wealthy people, as we generally do today, they looked down on them as selfish individuals focused on themselves instead of the people around them. Such a person might be ridiculed as a "nan ihullo," a "lover of things." Choctaw insults don't get much worse than that.

Rather than working to amass wealth, Choctaw people of this time period worked at the task of living itself, providing the food and materials that their communities needed to live comfortably. They often made their tasks more pleasant by working in groups with laughing, joking, and the work itself building camaraderie. They worked in such teams to build houses for neighbors, to build defensive works around villages, to prepare agricultural fields, to plant, tend, and harvest crops, and probably other things too. With this manner of working, everyone was a part of the team, and given a way to contribute in line with his or her resources and abilities. With group work, community members who needed extra labor assistance could get it without being looked down on. Similarly, because sharing was viewed as better than possessing, community members in need of material items would likely receive them. All of this might seem like a lot of trouble,



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but in reality, when the needs of every family in the community had been met, our ancestors were still left with far more time for leisure, artwork, exercise, and fun than our "advanced" society allows us today. At the time, there may not have even been a specific name for this concept of communal work and service. It was probably just taken for granted as a normal behavior.

When Europeans came, they brought the teachings of Christianity, but also brought and imposed their own concept of being separate from one's neighbor. As early as the late 1700s, the U.S. agent to the Choctaws began to encourage Choctaw families to move out of the ancient villages and start setting up separate homesteads, as Europeans did. By the early 1900s, when Choctaw lands were broken up and allotted to individual people in dispersed areas, the Choctaw concept of community was dramatically changed to fit the European concept. Now, instead of seeing and working with neighbors every day, families had to be self-sufficient.

Self sufficiency had its advantages, but also meant that an injury to a key family member during the wrong time of year might mean that family couldn't plant or harvest the crops needed for its survival, or that it couldn't butcher and preserve meat for the next year. Then of course, there was always the threat of an unexpected catastrophe, like a chimney fire that could literally leave a family out in the cold.

When families of the early 1900s came into serious need, the Choctaw community would take a step back in time, to the original Choctaw concept of community service and organize an "Iyyi Kowa." On an appointed day, the community would get together and bring the needed workforce and materials to help the family meet its needs. At Iyyi Kowa, everyone had a job, from doing the work itself, to cooking for the workers, to keeping the cooking fire going. It was a time of good spirit and friendship, where people worked hard, but also laughed and upheld the other people

working with them. In the end, the work would be done; the family would have its need met, and the community bonds would be stronger. Through Iyyi Kowa, just as in the old Choctaw way, people did not look down on those who needed help, making them feel ashamed. Rather, they showed them that they were valued members of the community, and, by getting them back on their feet, empowered them to help others.

Olin Williams, today a part of the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department, grew up in the Tiak Hikia community in Mississippi, in the 1950s and 1960s, when Iyyi Kowa were still regularly hosted there. He participated in them on a monthly basis as a child and considered them one of his favorite things to do. The following interview with Mr. Williams presents some of his memories and thoughts:

What was Iyyi Kowa like? To me, it was the only event that I looked forward to because it meant that folks were going to be generous, not just with things but in labor. You saw the best in people come out. Just Choctaws being Choctaws.

What did you do at Iyyi Kowa? I did tasks that helped out the adults in what they were doing. If they needed fire, I got the wood. If they needed water, I'd get it from the well. Usually, the men worked outside. I'd help them and then get the stove wood for the ladies. In between the chores, we'd play a game of stickball or tag. If it was a hog killing, our job was to make sure the fire and the water were supplied. Hog killing was done on a cold day, so you had to be ready.

How did it make you feel? I felt useful. I felt like part of a unit. I felt like I was contributing to my own reward. I felt like that was the highest form of Choctaw social life because it brought out the best in everyone.

How could we go about bringing back the spirit of Iyyi Kowa today? I think first, we have to educate about what Iyyi Kowa means. Then, as cultural people, if we can do the service ourselves, we can recapture some of our cultural ideals. It would help bring pride back, along with a sense of community and family. Iyyi Kowa is vital in preserving our culture.

Today, many of the services once provided by Iyyi Kowa are provided by programs offered by Choctaw Nation, to Tribal members as well as the community at large. This organized system does a great deal of good, however, we should never use that as an excuse to be complacent in helping people in need on a family to family basis. There are opportunities all around us not just in December but also throughout the year. In such communal service, we have the opportunity to uncover the core of Choctaw culture in a timeless way because the value of service is the same yesterday, today, and forever.