

# TREE ORNAMENT



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## *Iti ishit shímachi*

Not too long ago, when the Choctaw families observed Christmas time, they would celebrate in such a way as to teach the children about the joy of giving. Extended families would get together and place a big holly tree, *iti hishi haloppa*, in the middle of the yard. This was their "gift" tree, *iti ná halbina átakoha* or Christmas tree. The red berries were the ornaments. All they had at that time were apples gathered by the children from the nearby apple trees. Older children and adults would use brown paper bags from the country store as wrapping paper.

They would wrap up an apple, tie it with a string, cord, or ribbon, and write the name of the person it was for on it. They then tie the "gifts" onto a branch of the holly tree. Great care was given in the preparation. They carefully washed and shined the apple. Oftentimes, some would add acorns or nuts in the bag with the apple. The children would eagerly watch to see if their name was on a bag. The brown paper wrapped gifts (*holisso yoshshomáli ábonótá*) decorated the tree. Some of the women, if they had any colorful ribbons, would tie them to the very top of the tree. After a day of playing and eating, a designated *ishtika*, began by telling of the gift giving, gifts that were provided by the creator that we are responsible to take care of. Then the *ishtika* might tell a *shokka annopa*, as a few of the Choctaw males acted out in an exaggerated fashion the story being told. Then the *ishtika* would call out the names on the *ná halbina*. The elders enjoyed seeing the joy and excitement on the children's faces as they opened their gifts. Sometimes, if available or affordable, country-store candy, *kianti*, peppermint sticks, would be given to the younger children of the families. Then they would eat some more and share more stories.

Source: Photo and article are from the Choctaw Culture Curriculum developed by the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians' Choctaw Tribal Language Program.