

ALABAMA-COUSHATTA TRIBE OF TEXAS

BELIEFS, TRADITIONS, AND SACRED PRACTICES

The People of the Piney Woods — Two Nations, One People, Surviving in the Big
Thicket

The Alabama and Coushatta walked from Alabama through Mississippi
and Louisiana into the deep East Texas Piney Woods
over more than a century of forced westward movement.
They carried their ceremonial fire, their sacred ball game,
their clan system, their language, and their medicine traditions
through every displacement.
The Big Thicket held them.
They are still there.

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A Note on Sacred Knowledge and Community Respect

The Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas has maintained many aspects of their sacred tradition as community-held knowledge not intended for public dissemination. This document presents what tribal members and cultural representatives have shared in public contexts — the ceremonial structure and purposes, the cosmological framework, and the cultural heritage. Specific prayers, specific sacred songs, and the most restricted ceremonial content are not included here. The Alabama-Coushatta people are a living community, and this document is written in the spirit of honoring their survival, not of extracting their secrets.

Introduction

The Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas — the only federally recognized Native American tribe in East Texas — represents the sustained survival of two closely related Muskogean-speaking nations who, through more than a century of displacement from their original Southeastern homelands, found a permanent home in the dense pine forests of what is now Polk County, Texas. Today, approximately 1,100 tribal members maintain a reservation of approximately 4,600 acres in the Big Thicket region — the extraordinarily biodiverse forested landscape that provided refuge when no other space remained.

The Alabama (Alibamu — meaning 'vegetation gatherers' or 'those who clear land' in their own language) originally inhabited the territory of present-day central Alabama, along the Alabama River. The Coushatta (Koasati — the origin of the name is debated, possibly meaning 'white cane' or 'reed place') lived to the north and west, along the Coosa and Tennessee Rivers. Both peoples are members of the broader Muskogean family — the same linguistic and cultural group as the Creek, Choctaw, and Chickasaw nations — and shared closely related languages, clan systems, sacred ceremonies, and cosmological frameworks long before they began the westward migration that would eventually bring them to Texas.

The Long Walk West From Alabama to Texas

The Alabama-Coushatta's path from their Southeastern homelands to East Texas was not a single forced march but a generational process spanning approximately 1700 to 1850 — a series of progressive westward movements driven by colonial pressure, encroachment on their lands, and the specific violence of American expansion. At each stage, the communities carried their sacred traditions with them — the ceremonial fire, the Green Corn Ceremony, the ball game, the clan system, the language.

THE WESTWARD MIGRATION — KEY STAGES

LATE 1700s — LOUISIANA: As American colonial pressure increased in Alabama and Mississippi, some Alabama and Coushatta bands moved westward into Louisiana, establishing communities along the Red River and other waterways. Spanish colonial authorities (who governed Louisiana until 1800) were generally more tolerant than American authorities, and the communities maintained relative stability. **EARLY 1800s — EAST TEXAS:** As American authority expanded into Louisiana after 1800, further movement westward brought both the Alabama and Coushatta into East Texas — then under Spanish and then Mexican authority. The Big Thicket region offered the specific ecological conditions the communities recognized: dense forest providing both protection and the specific plants needed for their medicine and material culture traditions. **SAM HOUSTON AND REPUBLIC OF TEXAS RECOGNITION:** When Texas became a republic (1836) and then a state (1845), the Alabama and Coushatta's situation became legally precarious. Sam Houston — who had lived among the Cherokee and had specific respect for Indigenous nations — provided some protection and advocated for their land rights. The current reservation land was set aside for the tribe in 1854 by the State of Texas, making the Alabama-Coushatta the only Native American group with a land reservation established by the State of Texas before federal recognition. **FEDERAL RECOGNITION (1928):** The Alabama-Coushatta received federal recognition in 1928 — later than many other tribes. This recognition came alongside the transfer of their reservation from state to federal authority and provided some measure of legal protection. **THE BIA TERMINATION ERA (1950s):** Like many tribes, the Alabama-Coushatta faced the threat of federal termination in the 1950s — the US policy of ending tribal recognition and dispersing tribal lands. The tribe successfully resisted full termination, though they experienced a period of reduced federal services. Full federal status was restored in 1987.

The Clan System

The Foundation of Social and Sacred Life

Like all Muskogean-speaking peoples, the Alabama and Coushatta organized their social life through a matrilineal clan system — identity, obligation, marriage rules, and specific ceremonial responsibilities all determined by the mother's clan. The clan system provided the specific social structure through which the community maintained cohesion across generations of displacement; it was one of the primary mechanisms through which Alabama-Coushatta identity survived the pressures of colonial contact.

THE MAJOR CLANS AND THEIR ROLES

The Alabama-Coushatta maintained several clans, each associated with specific animals and specific community functions. While the specific number and names of clans have varied across historical accounts and some clan knowledge is held privately, the publicly documented clans include: THE WIND CLAN (THLOCCO): Associated with leadership — chiefs and major political figures traditionally came from the Wind Clan. The Wind Clan's connection to the sky and to the directional forces gave it specific sacred authority. THE BEAR CLAN: Associated with medicine and healing — the practitioners of traditional medicine were often from the Bear Clan. The bear's sacred character as the animal that knows the healing plants (in Southeastern Native American tradition, the bear is understood to have specific knowledge of medicinal plants because it eats them during illness) gave this clan its specific healing role. THE DEER CLAN: Associated with the forest, with hunting protocols, and with the specific relationship between humans and the deer nation. The Deer Clan maintained the sacred knowledge of proper hunting conduct and the specific ceremonies that honored the deer for the gift of its body. CLAN MARRIAGE RULES: Marriage within one's own clan was strictly prohibited — clans were understood as extended family, and intra-clan marriage was incest regardless of actual biological relationship. This rule maintained genetic diversity and extended the web of kinship obligations across the community.

The Sacred Fire

The Central Ceremonial Presence

The sacred fire (the central fire of the ceremonial ground — the talwa or town square ground) is the most important physical sacred presence in Alabama-Coushatta ceremonial life — the living representative of the Creator's presence in the community, the center around which all ceremony moves, and the specific continuity that connects the contemporary community to their ancestral homeland. When the Alabama and Coushatta moved westward, they carried fire from their original ceremonial grounds — the continuity of the sacred fire was the continuity of the community's sacred identity.

THE SACRED FIRE — CHARACTER AND PROTOCOL

THE FIRE'S SACRED IDENTITY: The ceremonial fire is not merely a fire — it is a sacred being, a direct manifestation of the Creator's presence. Speaking to the fire, making offerings to the fire, and maintaining the fire in its proper state are acts of ongoing relationship with the sacred, not with a physical object. **THE NEW FIRE CEREMONY:** Closely connected to the Green Corn Ceremony (see Part Eleven), the renewal of the sacred fire at the beginning of the new year is one of the most important ceremonial acts in the annual cycle. Old fire is extinguished — extinguishing the fire extinguishes the accumulated sin and contamination of the previous year — and new fire is kindled through friction, using specific wood and specific technique. The new fire is then distributed to every household from the sacred center. **FIRE PROTOCOL DURING CEREMONY:** During ceremonial events on the ceremonial ground, specific protocols govern who may tend the fire, how it may be tended, and what may or may not happen near it. The fire must not be contaminated — certain foods may not be brought near it during certain periods, certain people may not approach it during certain ceremonial phases. **THE FIRE AS COMMUNICATION:** Prayer offered at the sacred fire is prayer spoken directly to the Creator — the fire is the medium through which the community's intentions, gratitude, and needs reach the divine.

The Green Corn Ceremony (Poskita) The Most Sacred Ceremony — Step-by-Step

The Green Corn Ceremony (Poskita — from the Muskogean word for 'fasting') is the central sacred ceremony of the Alabama-Coushatta and of all Muskogean peoples — the annual ceremony of renewal, purification, forgiveness, and thanksgiving held when the corn reaches the stage of ripeness called 'green corn' (in late summer, typically July or August). It is simultaneously the new year ceremony, the forgiveness ceremony, the first-fruits ceremony, and the most complete expression of the Alabama-Coushatta's relationship with the sacred.

GREEN CORN CEREMONY — STEP-BY-STEP

PREPARATION (WEEKS BEFORE): The ceremonial ground is cleaned and prepared. Buildings are repaired. The specific positions for each clan's participation are established. Participants fast for specific periods before the ceremony — the fasting is the literal meaning of Poskita and is the physical enactment of the internal purification the ceremony accomplishes. Sacred medicines are prepared — the specific plant medicines used during the ceremony are gathered and prepared by the medicine keepers. DAY ONE — THE PURIFICATION: STEP 1 — THE CEREMONIAL GROUND OPENING: The ceremonial leaders formally open the sacred ground, acknowledging the Creator and the sacred fire. STEP 2 — THE BLACK DRINK (ASI): The ceremony opens with the ritual consumption of the 'black drink' — a highly caffeinated tea brewed from the leaves of yaupon holly (*Ilex vomitoria*), which in sufficient quantity induces vomiting. This purging is the physical enactment of the ceremony's purification purpose — expelling what has accumulated in the body over the past year. The black drink is consumed communally, with specific protocol governing who drinks and in what order. STEP 3 — SCRATCHING: Specific clan members receive ritual scratching — small scratches made with a specific comb-like implement on the arms and legs. The scratching releases accumulated negative energies from the body and marks the individual as having undergone the ceremony's purification. STEP 4 — THE EXTINGUISHING OF THE OLD FIRE: The sacred fire is formally extinguished — the accumulated contamination of the previous year goes out with it. STEP 5 — THE NEW FIRE: New fire is kindled through friction — the specific wood, the specific technique, the specific prayers. The new fire is the new year's beginning, the community's renewal at the deepest sacred level. DAY TWO — THE RENEWAL: STEP 6 — THE FIRST CORN: The new corn — which was tapu (forbidden to eat) until the ceremony — is formally presented to the sacred fire. The first consumption of new corn happens in ceremony, with specific prayers and specific protocols. STEP 7 — THE STOMP DANCE: The community dances around the sacred fire — the stomp dance's specific counterclockwise movement, the shell-shaker women's rhythm, and the call-and-response between leader and group are the primary ceremonial expression of collective joy and renewal. STEP 8 — THE FORGIVENESS: The Green Corn Ceremony includes a specific moment of communal forgiveness — grievances and wrongs of the past year that have not been formally resolved are released. The understanding: no one enters the new year still holding last year's wounds. With specific exceptions (murder requires specific resolution beyond the ceremony), all interpersonal conflicts are ceremonially resolved. STEP 9 — THE FEAST: The ceremonial feast — featuring the new corn along with other community foods — celebrates the renewal and expresses gratitude to the Creator for the year's sustenance. STEP 10 — THE DISTRIBUTION OF NEW FIRE: Every household receives new fire from the sacred center — the community's individual domestic fires are renewed from the one sacred source, expressing the unity of the community under the Creator's care.

The Sacred Ball Game (Toli) Ceremony as Athletic Contest

The traditional ball game (called toli or kapocca in Alabama-Coushatta — related to the game known as stickball, lacrosse's predecessor) is one of the most important ceremonial practices of the Southeastern peoples and one of the most distinctive expressions of the Alabama-Coushatta's ceremonial life. It is emphatically not simply a sport — it is a ceremony in which physical competition serves sacred purposes, and in which the preparation and protocol surrounding the game are as important as the game itself.

THE BALL GAME — SACRED CHARACTER

WHAT IT IS: The traditional ball game is played with one or two sticks (each approximately 2 feet long, with a small net at one end) and a small ball. The goal is to throw or carry the ball to the opposing team's goal post. The game is fast, physical, and demanding — and historically was played between entire communities, with the playing field sometimes stretching for miles. **WHY IT IS SACRED:** The ball game has been called 'the little brother of war' — it served as a substitute for armed conflict between communities, resolved disputes that might otherwise require violence, and tested the collective spiritual and physical power of the community. The preparation for a ball game involved fasting, sacred medicine application, prayers, and the specific blessing of the players and their equipment by the medicine practitioners. **THE NIGHT BEFORE:** The night before a major ball game was spent in ceremony — dancing, prayer, and the application of specific sacred medicines. Players observed specific restrictions: specific foods were avoided, specific behaviors were prohibited. The medicine practitioners sang specific songs over the players and over the ball sticks. **THE WOMEN'S ROLE:** In traditional practice, women did not play in the game but participated in specific ceremonial roles — particularly in the dancing and singing that accompanied the game and in specific acts during the game itself that were understood to affect the outcome. **CONTEMPORARY SURVIVAL:** The Alabama-Coushatta have maintained the stickball tradition and continue to play ceremonial games at specific community events. This survival is remarkable — the game was suppressed by American authorities as part of the broader suppression of Native American cultural practices.

The Stomp Dance

Sacred Movement and Community — Step-by-Step

The Stomp Dance is one of the most widespread sacred ceremonial forms in the Southeastern Indigenous world — practiced by the Alabama-Coushatta, the Creek, the Cherokee, the Seminole, the Yuchi, and related nations — and one of the most immediately accessible expressions of the tradition's understanding of sacred movement as community-building and Creator-honoring practice.

THE STOMP DANCE — COMPLETE STEP-BY-STEP

THE SETTING: Stomp dances are held at the ceremonial ground, typically at night, centered on the sacred fire. The fire is the physical and spiritual center around which the dance moves. STEP 1 — THE CALL: The lead singer (the 'caller') begins with specific calls that open the dance — distinctive rising vocal patterns that signal the beginning of a new song set. The call is answered by the male dancers who respond with specific phrases. STEP 2 — THE FORMATION: Dancers form a line or circle, with the lead singer at the front. The pattern moves counterclockwise around the sacred fire — counterclockwise is the sacred direction in Southeastern ceremonial movement, following the movement of the sun from the sacred perspective of facing south. STEP 3 — THE SHELL SHAKERS: Women wearing leg rattles — traditionally turtle shells filled with pebbles or small stones, now often condensed milk cans filled with small stones, worn on the lower legs — provide the primary rhythmic foundation. The shell shakers walk between the male dancers, their shaking legs creating the continuous rhythmic underpinning of the dance. The shell shaker's role is sacred and skilled — maintaining precise rhythm throughout the night requires both physical endurance and ceremonial preparation. STEP 4 — THE CALL AND RESPONSE: The lead singer calls specific phrases; the male dancers respond. The specific words of the call and response are sacred — specific songs for specific occasions, specific songs to invite specific sacred qualities. The call and response structure means the entire community's voices are engaged together. STEP 5 — THE PROGRESSION THROUGH THE NIGHT: The Stomp Dance typically continues through much or all of the night — beginning at dark and continuing until the rise of the day. Different song sets have different characters; the dance progresses through a specific sequence of increasing and decreasing intensity. STEP 6 — THE BREAKS: At specific intervals, the dance breaks — water may be passed, tobacco may be smoked, conversations occur. The breaks are not interruptions but part of the ceremony's rhythm. STEP 7 — THE CLOSING: The dance formally closes when the lead singer performs specific closing sequences — signaling to the community and to the spirit world that this particular ceremony is complete.

The Haligricity Lens

The Sacred Fire and Right Relationship

The Alabama-Coushatta tradition offers Haligricity the most complete available Southeastern Indigenous model of the sacred fire as the living center of community life — not as symbol or metaphor but as the specific physical presence of the Creator's sustaining attention. Every ceremony orbits the fire. Every household receives fire from the sacred center. The new year begins when the old fire goes out and the new fire is kindled from the friction of specific wood.

The Green Corn and the Haligric Year

The Green Corn Ceremony's built-in forgiveness practice — the specific ceremonial moment when last year's accumulated grievances are released before the new year begins — is the most institutionally complete available expression of what the Haligric tradition holds about clearing: you cannot carry last year's unresolved weight into the new year's work without dragging that weight into everything you build. The Alabama-Coushatta found the ceremonial technology to prevent this accumulation — and they maintained it through two hundred years of displacement, pressure, and cultural suppression. The fire is still burning in the Big Thicket.

They walked from Alabama through Mississippi through Louisiana into East Texas and they did not put down the fire. Not once in two hundred years of walking did they let it go out — not the ceremonial fire's continuity, not the Green Corn's forgiveness, not the clan system's kinship web, not the language that held the sacred names. The Big Thicket held them when nowhere else would. They are still there. The Stomp Dance moves counterclockwise around the sacred fire in Polk County, Texas, every year. Grand Rising.

*"Istissi hachi — We are still here.
The fire has not gone out."*

— Alabama-Coushatta Tribe of Texas

Federal recognition in 1928. State reservation established 1854. Two nations who became one people in the Big Thicket of East Texas. The Green Corn Ceremony still purges the old year. The new fire is still kindled by friction. The shell shakers still move counterclockwise around the sacred fire until the rise of the day. The stickball game is still played. The clan system still holds. Grand Rising.

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