

The Choctaw Nation Princess and Royalty Program: Cultural Education in Choctaw Culture and Tribal Identity

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Abstract: *The Native American princess pageant is an institution that provides a site within which Native American women exhibit and advocate for traditionally important tribal values and behavior. In doing so, princesses transmit culture, and honor is bestowed upon their families, ancestors, and elders. Through their travels and interaction with others, princesses are afforded opportunities to share their culture as they learn more about the cultures of others (Aicinena & Ziyanak, 2024; Cherokee Phoenix, 2023; Fox, 2017; Lonelodge, 2019). In the current study, we sought to determine through qualitative research methods how a specific tribal princess program, specifically the Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program, assists in the maintenance and perpetuation of traditional Choctaw culture and how the program contributes to strengthening Choctaw identity within the program's participants. To date, no researcher has published study in which this topic has been explored. Our findings led to the identification of three themes and six subthemes: 1) Formal Cultural Education: The Princess in Training Program. Subthemes include Personal Growth, and Cultural Educators. 2) Becoming a Functioning Member of the Choctaw Nation which encompasses four subthemes: Respect for Others, Cultural Identity, Servant Leadership, and Humility. 3) Choctaw Princesses Serve as Role Models. During the process of preparing for pageants, in the midst of pageant competition, and while serving their year-long term as a princess, Choctaw girls and women learn about and share their traditional culture while strengthening their identity as members of the Choctaw Nation.*

Keywords: Choctaw culture, Choctaw identity, Choctaw Nation, Choctaw Princesses, Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program, Cultural Education, The Native American princess pageant

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Introduction

A Native American princess is a woman who is chosen during a competitive process, typically a pageant, to represent a Native American tribe, geographic area, Native American Powwow, Native American organization, or Native Americans collectively (Aicinena & Ziyanak 2024). Thousands of Native American princess pageants are sponsored annually by tribal groups, powwow organizations, and Indigenous groups throughout North America at national, state, regional, and local levels (Albers and Medicine 2005; Schröder 2004; Ziyanak & Aicinena, 2024b). In the publication *Our Native Traditions* (2023) the photos of 130 of Oklahoma's Native American princesses representing 22 Indigenous Nations and 44 Native American Powwows and Organizations of were featured. The number of tribes and Native American organizations represented within the publication testifies to the importance placed upon princess pageants within Native American communities located within a small swath of the land mass encompassing the United States and Canada.

Review of Literature

Historically, most North American Native American tribes did not have an established royalty lineage as was common in Europe. Accordingly, power within tribes was not typically handed down from generation to generation (Aicinena & Ziyanak 2024; Donehoo, 1925; Dorsey, 1905; Koster, 2018; Ziyanak & Aicinena, 2024). Therefore, princesses such as those existing in England or Spain were not found in the lands now comprising the United States and Canada. Most often, tribal leaders ascended to power by demonstrating success in battles, good decision-making, and successful leadership. The concept of a Native American princess became popularized as a consequence of the legend of Pocahontas (Mansky, 2017) and popular books such as *Mahaska: The Indian Princess* (Stephens, 1863) and *The Queen* (Stephens, 1864) that featured Native American "princesses" on their cover (Johannsen, 1950).

The earliest known Native American princess pageant was the "Princess America" pageant of 1925 (Kershner, 2017). Several institutions contributed to the proliferation of princess pageants in the United States and Canada. Beginning in the 1930s, students at Native American upper-level institutions, boarding schools, and trade schools began selecting homecoming queens (Haskell Institute, 1945; Newman, 2013; Sullivan, 2013). Tribal fairs began to sponsor princess contests by 1935, and the number of tribes and organizations sponsoring princess pageants expanded rapidly throughout the 1950s in conjunction with the massive popularity of the Miss America Pageant, the Miss USA pageant, and the influence of television (Ziyanak & Aicinena, 2024).

Native American princesses typically serve a one-year term during which they officially represent their tribes or organizations within various communities, at formal meetings, events, and

various powwows. Some princesses, such as Miss Indian World and Miss Choctaw have the opportunity to travel throughout the United States and internationally as they represent their people. Native American Princess pageants and the visibility of princesses are a important contributors to the stability of tribal groups and cultural integrity (Willis, 2020). During pageants and the public appearances made by princesses, culturally significant rituals, values, and traditions are explained, performed, modeled, and celebrated.

Many Native American princess pageants specify a minimum blood quantum standard a contestant must meet in order to compete. Contestants are typically required to submit a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood (CDIB) or official documentation from tribal officials to demonstrate tribal affiliation. These requirements ensure that any princess chosen to represent a Native American tribal group or powwow organization has a legitimate connection to the tribal culture she is expected to proudly personify (Ziyanak & Aicinena, 2024).

The predominant cultures of Canada and the United have insidiously eroded many of the traditions and values held dear by Native American tribes through altered family structures resulting from the relocation of family members for socioeconomic reasons, the influence of pop culture, technology, the educational system, loss of traditional languages, and changes in family housing arrangements (Aicinena and Ziyanak, 2021). Young women who are chosen to serve as Native American pageant princesses have typically adapted to both the culture of their tribe and that of the modern Euro-American world. Schröder (2004) posited that such women are the only ones who could effectively represent and share the true and authentic culture of their tribe or organization.

One means of ensuring that princess contestants have familiarity with the predominant culture is through implementation of educational requirements for applicants. In previous studies, the importance of education and princess education-specific application requirements have been examined. Ziyanak and Aicinena (2024b) explored 43 pageants organized and conducted by tribal groups and pan-tribal organizations in North America to analyze participation requirements, judging criteria, and post crown duty requirements. Ziyanak & Aicinena (2024) found that formal K-12 education is one of the core requirements for participation. The majority of Native American pageants require participants to provide information about their formal education, such as submission of transcripts and minimum grade point averages (2.0–2.5 on a 4.0 scale). Educational requirements demonstrate that princess pageant organizers seek princesses who can effectively function within and outside of their traditional culture. However, in the selection of Native American princesses, traditional cultural knowledge and authentic representation of culture take precedence over formal educational achievement.

The Importance of Traditional Culture in Native American Princess Pageants

The stated goals for princess pageants most often include those of cultural maintenance and revitalization (Williams, 2019). Illustratively, the Director of the prestigious Miss Indian World Pageant, Melonie Mathews, described the annual event as an, “opportunity for Native women to

display their culture and knowledge... The need filled is one of education, entertainment and cultural preservation” (Williams, 2013b, 135). The Miss Indian World Pageant is a pan-tribal event that welcomes participation from women who are members of any Indigenous tribal group.

Ziyanak and Aicinena (2024a) employed observational assessment during the Miss Indian World pageant’s talent competition, question and answer competition and information published in newspapers and magazines specific to the 24 contestants to determine in what ways princess pageant programs assisted in the maintenance of traditional indigenous cultures. Ziyanak & Aicinena (2024) found that the princess pageant assisted in the maintenance of tribal cultures in several important ways:

1. Pageant participation assisted contestants in developing fidelity to tribal traditions.
2. Princesses publicly represented their tribes and tribal cultures by serving as;
 - a. A sign of their people. They were visible, living representations of their culture.
 - b. An ambassador for their people. They served as tribal and organizational cultural ambassadors within Native American communities and outside of them.
 - c. A role model for their people. The members of a princess’ tribal group can see traditionally valued behaviors and skills, be inspired to learn more about them, and to replicate them.
3. Pageant competitions assisted contestants in developing and honing leadership skills as they utilized platforms for support of Native American issues.
4. Pageant princesses conveyed to onlookers how to successfully walk in the dominant culture while maintaining their tribal values, beliefs, and identities.
5. Pageant participation strengthened contestants’ tribal and pan-tribal identities.
6. The title of princess provided a platform that was used by contestants to represent and benefit members of their tribes and Native Americans in general.

Contestants must demonstrate their command of traditional culture in order to be selected as a pageant’s princess (Aicinena & Ziyanak, 2024; Roberts, 2005; Williams, 2013b; Ziyanak & Aicinena, 2024). Aspiring princesses can spend from months to years enhancing their knowledge and competence in traditional culture as they prepare to compete in a pageant. Contestants work to improve language fluency, traditional talent, knowledge of tribal history, and specifics regarding tribal values and traditions (Fox, 2017; Williams, 2013a). For example, Miss Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Shemah Ladania Crosby explained that after deciding to enter the Choctaw Princess Pageant, she spent about two months to prepare for it (Swogetinsky, 2021).

A Miss Indian World contestant explained why it was important for her to learn more about her tribal culture as she prepared to compete for her tribe’s princess title for the second time (Smith, 2022):

The first time I ran for Ponca Tribal Princess, all we did then, we just danced. It was basically dancing and public speaking. Then, of course, your traditional regalia and everything. The second time I ran for the title, you needed to know more. They, of course, still had the dance and traditional dress and also the public speaking. But they added in an

interview, like how much Ponca do you know or like, how are you going to treat people out there representing and everything. Para 14

Knowledge of traditional culture, traditional talent and skills, traditional dance, regalia, and use of tribal language are the most commonly used measures of culture assessed in the selection of a princess (Ziyanak & Aicinena, 2024b). Aspiring princesses who consider themselves lacking in cultural knowledge or the skills used to judge contestants must address their perceived limitations through education and training or choose not to begin the application process. When they choose to enhance their cultural knowledge and skills, contestants strengthen the culture's significance in their lives and within the community they seek to represent. Enhancement of a contestant's knowledge of her traditional culture also strengthens her tribal identity.

The Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program

The Choctaw Nation is located within the State of Oklahoma, USA. It is the third largest of the 574 indigenous tribes recognized by the United States government. With 69,454 tribal members, the Choctaw tribe is exceeded in numbers by only the Navajo Nation and Cherokee Nation (Sánchez-Rivera, Jacobs, & Spence, 2023). The Choctaw Nation sponsors and funds a princess pageant program known as the Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program because leaders of the Choctaw Nation believe the event benefits contestants, princesses, and the tribe as a whole:

The Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma Princess and Royalty Program has been molding strong Chahta ohoyo for decades. The program is designed to grow confidence, teach lifelong skills such as interviewing, public speaking, and poise. The pageant process also instills knowledge of the history and culture of our great nation.

Choctaw Nation, ND, p. 2.

Competitions are conducted annually in each of the nation's 12 Districts to select a princess in each of three age groups: 8-12 (Little Miss Choctaw District X), 13-17 (Junior Miss Choctaw District X), and 18-22 (Miss Choctaw District X). During the annual Choctaw Labor Day Festival, princesses from each District compete in Tuskahoma (Tvshka Homma), Oklahoma for the honor of Little Miss Choctaw Nation, Junior Miss Choctaw Nation, and Miss Choctaw Nation. The winners of the Labor Day Royalty Pageant are considered "Royalty Princesses". Choctaw Royalty Princesses travel throughout the 12 Districts, the state of Oklahoma, the United States and internationally as representatives of their people. District princesses who do not win Royalty Pageant crowns complete their reign primarily in service to their Districts. Young women seeking the title of Miss, Junior Miss, and Little Miss Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma are subject to the following eligibility requirements:

1. Be a tribal member

2. Be between 18 and 22 years of age on Labor Day (when final event is held)
3. Present a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood
4. Possess a minimum Blood Quantum of 1/16 Choctaw Blood
5. Must reside within and compete within one of the 12 Districts of the Choctaw Nation
6. Submit a letter from school, employer, church, or other official stating contestant's achievements
7. Submit a 5'7 color full-length photo in traditional Choctaw Nation Regalia
8. Submit of a description of her regalia in 100 words or less.
9. Submit of a 200-word essay explaining what goals she hopes to achieve as Miss Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma
10. Submit a W-9
11. Submit of a Code of Conduct Form signed by the applicant and parent. Violation of the code results in forfeiture of the title.
12. Winners cannot hold other pageant titles

The judging categories for the Miss and Junior Miss Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma include:

1. Goals as Princess (Miss and Junior Miss Only)
2. Beauty and Personality
3. Traditional Talent relating to traditional heritage, arts, crafts, etc. (Miss and Junior Miss Only)
4. Traditional Choctaw Regalia
5. Interview (Royalty Pageant Only)
6. Impromptu Question (Royalty Pageant Only)

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In the current study, we seek to determine if and how participation in the Princess and Royalty Program assists in creating culturally knowledgeable citizens within the Choctaw tribe, and how participation in the program impacts the strength of individual tribal identities. Does the Princess and Royalty Program assist in the retention of Choctaw culture?

When discussing their Cultural Tethering Theory, Aicinena and Ziyanak (2021) stressed that Native American culture has historically included various cultural components which collectively function as tethers. When cultural tethers are multifaceted and thick, it becomes more difficult for Native American to lose their traditional identity as a consequence of acculturation or complete assimilation into mainstream culture. However, when the connection to cultural tethers

such as language, religion, contest powwows, regalia, and traditions are severed, individuals are more likely to become fully assimilated into the dominant American culture. The Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program functions as a cultural tether within the Choctaw Nation.

Methodology

In this study, we employed qualitative methodology, specifically content analysis, to determine how and to what extent education is connected to the experience of being a Choctaw princess and how participation contributes to her development as a culturally astute member of the Choctaw Tribe. Transcribed interviews were used to collect data. We interviewed 9 participants. The first set of interviews was completed between June 1-7, 2024, in Oklahoma. We conducted follow-up interviews with Choctaw tribal members in December 2024 and the spring of 2025. Interviews lasted a minimum of 45 minutes and up to 1 hour and 10 minutes. The youngest participant was 16 years old, and the oldest was 74 years old.

We employed a three-stage coding process consisting of axial coding, open coding, and thematic development. Each interview was first transcribed and then compiled into a single document along with other interviews. These documents were carefully read, with necessary sections reviewed a minimum of three times.

The interview questions followed a semi-structured format. For participants under the age of 18, interviews were conducted with a parent present, and consent was obtained from the parent. Before commencing with any interviews, approvals and written permissions were obtained from the University of Texas Permian Basin (UTPB) Institutional Review Board (IRB) committee, parents, and the Choctaw Nation IRB board. Additionally, tribal employees interviewed also obtained permission from their own tribal committees to participate in the interviews. Once all requisite approvals were received, interviews were conducted.

After transcription, the analysis phase continued through the Fall of 2024, and the analysis specific to the current study was completed in Spring 2025. In the open coding stage, necessary codes were identified and analyzed, and the most emphasized themes were determined from the documents. After identifying approximately 25 codes during the axial coding stage, overlapping codes were grouped under common categories, reducing the number of codes to eight. In the thematic stage, essential themes were derived from the eight codes, ensuring each theme encompassed relevant codes.

Findings and Discussion

Below, we present and discuss the themes and subthemes gleaned from interviews we conducted with district princesses, Choctaw Royalty Princesses, and officials affiliated with the Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program to illustrate that information and training offered through the Princess in Training Program is highly valued by Choctaw princesses. Moreover, we will demonstrate how formal education efforts made through the training program and informal cultural educational experiences gained when serving as a princess are directly linked to personal growth, and the journey young princess and aspirants take toward becoming a fully-functioning member of the Choctaw Nation.

Theme 1: Formal Cultural Education: The Princess in Training Program

A princess contestant who lacks cultural knowledge cannot win a Choctaw Princess contest. One of our participants noted, “When the judges interview [contestants], they go into details about how much they know about their culture and about their traditions, about their ceremonies and their dances and the language.”

Authentic representation of Choctaw culture is sought through the judging process. A participant explained how a judges’ cultural knowledge and experience contributed to the realization of this important goal,

Most of the time the judges are elders or they are members of the tribe who have a great knowledge of the tribal culture and tribal history, and they can easily spot out if someone is just has rehearsed answers or they really don't know what they're talking about.

Because some young Choctaw are unfamiliar with the pageant process and because they may be unfamiliar with various aspects of traditional Choctaw culture, the Choctaw Nation sponsors an educational program known as the Princess in Training Program. This formal educational program enhances the cultural knowledge, traditional skills and abilities of girls and young women who attend. The program also provides training in public speaking to participants, and more. According to the Director of the Princess and Royalty Program,

The Princess in Training Program is designed to provide helpful tools needed to be prepared to run for District Princess. It offers information on applying for the District Princess Pageant, provides the requirements to be eligible to run for District Princess, a list of required documents and information on how to obtain that information, guidelines of the pageant, dress code of a District Princess, a Language Specialist to teach their introduction in the Choctaw Language, details on how to get a traditional Choctaw dress and regalia, and a discussion about traditional talents that may be performed. Potential contestants are invited to sit on stage, be called to the microphone, and introduce themselves using the microphone. Potential contestants are shown the stage pattern and places to stand while modeling their traditional dress. We explain the importance of good posture and eye contact with the judges while on stage.

We provide a mock interview session with the potential contestants. [We] explain the importance of highlighting what they want the judges to know about them and how they want the judges to remember them in the short time they are given.

One of the requirements of each District Princess is to learn how to sign the Lord's Prayer while someone sings or a song recording is played in the Choctaw Language. Each District Princess will begin opening ceremonies at events with the Lord's Prayer immediately following their crowning.

Princess in Training provides a QR code that will take the applicants to a video link showing a former Miss Choctaw Nation signing the Lord's Prayer so they can practice at home. We also have the current Choctaw Nation Royalty in attendance to teach them the Lord's Prayer and answer any questions³.

The Princess in Training Program is offered at each of the tribe's 12 District Community Centers, thus making it available to girls and women throughout the Choctaw Nation. The dates the Princess in Training program is offered at each district is publicized within each District Community Center, through various social media sites, and in the tribal newspaper, Bishinik, which is published monthly and made available online.

Subtheme 1.1: Pageant Training and Experiences Assist in Personal Development

Participants described how formal education provided through the Princess in Training Program, the informal education they received while working with others to learn more about their culture, and experiences gained while serving her term as a princess or Choctaw Royalty have been keys to their personal growth and development. One participant attributed her formal and informal pageant training and educational experiences for transforming her from being a shy individual into a young woman full confidence,

Well, for me personally, I was very shy. I was the quiet one in school, so public speaking was very daunting for me. But it helped me a lot running in these pageants. Public

³ Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, Tribal Council, A Resolution to Honor Chihowa (God) for His Great Blessings Over the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and Proclaim the Choctaw Nation a Nation of the Christian Faith, CR-01- 19, Introduced in Tribal Council October 13, 2018. ...whereas, we are a Christian Nation; and whereas, the Tribe's core values of Faith, Family, and Culture, come from the Choctaw people's strong faith in Chihowa (God). Therefore be it resolved by the Council that this Resolution be cited as approval for to hereby honors (Chihowa) God in protecting the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and commits to making all reasonable efforts to honor (Chihowa) God in the development and improvement of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma. Therefore, be it resolved by the Council that the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma is recognized as a Nation of the Christian faith. (<https://www.choctawnation.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/cr-05-24.pdf>)

speaking... I can I can do it pretty easily now. It still gets kind of scary, but it's not too bad. Nobody's gonna throw anything at you. Hey, so it probably works out most of the time.

A second participant attributed the Princess in Training Program and the Princess and Royalty program with helping to make her a better person,

So [the Princess in Training Program and pageant participation] helps to give you good core values, and it keeps you out of trouble, for sure. And it builds your self-confidence with public speaking and socializing in general, which are very important things, especially in the world that we live in today. Even if I were to never win, I know I came out a better person with all those skills that I gathered. "

Subtheme 1.2: Choctaw Princesses as Cultural Educators

We found that princesses come to understand that they are to function as cultural educators. During their reign as a princess, they are expected to pass cultural knowledge on to tribal members and non-tribal members within and outside of the geographic boundaries of the Choctaw Nation. Cultural transmission occurs as princesses provide cultural presentations during workshops, as they teach others traditional skills such as traditional cooking and crafting, when they teach Choctaw language classes to assist with language revitalization efforts, or as they provide information during public speaking appearances in which they share information focused upon the Choctaw Nation, and its culture.

Because Choctaw princesses are cultural educators, unlike canonical beauty pageants, cultural knowledge is the focus when judges select a District princess or Royalty Princess. Teaching Choctaw culture and encouraging potential contestants, and contestants is a primary function of the Princess in Training Program. During the Choctaw Labor Day Royalty Pageant, the goal of the pageant's director and administration is to select the very best cultural representative in each of the three age groups. The Princess and Royalty Program Director attested to the importance of selecting culturally astute princesses,

The beauty of our young Choctaw ladies carrying their traditions on through the pageant system is a courageous way to keep our history, language, and traditions alive. Judges assess each of those categories and give a score based on the requirements, and [the contestant's] knowledge of the categories.

Many pageant contestants possess a vast knowledge of Choctaw culture because they have been raised within families that seek to carry on their culture and live it daily. According to the Princess and Royalty Program Director,

Most Choctaw families have a rich cultural history that is passed down within their own families from generation to generation. Many families [for example] attend Choctaw speaking churches that sing traditional Choctaw hymns.

However, other contestants initially lack the level of cultural knowledge necessary to achieve pageant success. For example, one of our participants understood that she was lacking in

her cultural knowledge well before she competed in her first pageant. She understood that she needed to enhance it,

My culture is very important because I never, like, like when I was younger, I didn't really experience it that much. So it was really important to me as I grew up that I would learn more about it.

Potential pageant applicants and contestants often seek cultural experiences, education and training above and beyond that which is offered within the Princess in Training Program, "Many participants attend Choctaw Language classes and participate in cultural activities where history and tradition is shared." Participants also turn to individuals to teach them. One participant was taught how to craft traditional beadwork by a relative. Another participant learned how to craft and play traditional flutes from a Choctaw craftsman held in high esteem. Still others turned to elders and to learn how to properly pronounce Choctaw words, to translate English into Choctaw, or to find out if the components of their regalia were properly worn.

Judged pageant categories include performance of a traditional Choctaw skill and the ability to describe the cultural significance and meaning of the regalia that they compete in. In advance of pageants, contestants often seek assistance from family, elders, and acquaintances in gaining the ability to perform culturally valuable skills in pageants and to knowledgeably describe symbolism and significance associated with their traditional regalia. The ability to perform traditional skills and the ability to converse about the meaning and significance of the traditional regalia, which princesses wear during all public appearances, convey a princess' cultural acumen and authenticity as a cultural educator.

During the Labor Day Choctaw Nation Royalty Pageant, judges also score contestants' personal interviews which last 3-5 minutes and the focus upon Choctaw culture. A list of questions is provided to the contestants by pageant officials in July, affording each contestant the opportunity to seek information needed to provide an appropriate response to each.

Judges and the emcee, receive the list of questions the night before the interview takes place. Judges choose from the list of questions to ask contestants and score each contestant's response based upon the exhibited knowledge of her culture as well as her communication skills, social skills, ability to make eye contact, etc.

The emcee also selects questions from the list to ask each contestant an "Impromptu Question". The response to the Impromptu Question is also scored by judges. By providing the questions to contestants, pageant officials encourage them to study and learn more about their culture in advance of the pageant.

Participants who served as District Princesses and Royalty Princesses expressed that they have been "happy", "pleased", "excited" and "blessed" to be able to share their culture with others. A former Miss Junior Choctaw, though she is young, relishes sharing her culture with other teens and, in turn, she encourages them to share Choctaw culture with others as well,

I hope that I'm encouraging others to share their culture and be proud of it because I feel like people my age, especially, they don't talk about their culture as much... I sit at a lunch

table, and we can start talking, and we'll throw in Choctaw words every once in a while, and we'll be like, "Oh, did you see her humma shirt? It was so pretty!" And I hope that I'm encouraging others my age, but I'm also encouraging people that are older than I am [and] way younger than I am to share their culture. So this is really important to me.

Formal educational functions performed by our study's participants included, putting on a traditional pottery clinic at a major American university, volunteering at the Choctaw cultural center to teach visitors more about her culture and its history, making presentations to groups focused upon Choctaw history and culture, teaching traditional cooking classes, serving as instructors and mentors in Princess in Training sessions, and more. Further, our participants have given public presentations during District and tribal meetings, during presentations at schools, and during Princess in Training sessions. These educational efforts appear to be important contributors to the awareness, maintenance, and transmission of Choctaw culture.

Theme 2: Becoming a Functioning Member of the Choctaw Nation

Participants in the Choctaw Princess in Training Program and the young women chosen to serve as a District Princess or Choctaw Royalty Princesses are expected to adhere to the cultural traditions and behavioral expectations important in Choctaw culture as they relate to their duties. Adherence to cultural traditions and behavioral expectations would presumably be expected of any fully functioning member of the Choctaw Nation. Pageant applicants, in fact must sign a behavioral contract and violation of its terms leads to pageant disqualification, or relinquishment of the position and title of District Princess or Royalty Princess.

We identified three subthemes, each of which illustrates cultural expectations held in high regard by the Choctaw and our study's participants. The subthemes include Respect for Others, Servant Leadership, Humility, and Valuing Choctaw Identity. Each subtheme helped us understand how serving as a princess assisted the participants in becoming better functioning members of the Choctaw tribe.

Subtheme 2.1: *Respect for Others*

Our participants often expressed that respecting others was extremely important and that to be disrespectful towards others in any situation was an egregious act. According to several participants, when you are disrespectful, others notice, "you have to show respect at all times because there's other girls looking at you and there's other people looking at you."

One participant emphasized that respecting others is expected within Choctaw culture and demonstrating respect for all people is one of the expectations a princess must fulfill. To her, demonstrating respect towards others is a manifestation of one's true beauty, "If you're ugly on the inside, it doesn't really matter if you're beautiful on the outside if you can't show people respect."

Another participant expressed the belief that judges evaluate how contestants treat others informally and during pageants, "I think something that the judges are probably looking for is

how you treat people as well, because when we do win, we are going to be out in the public a lot, talking to our tribal members, our elders, the youth, all of that. You have to be someone who can be respectful and kind or it's going to reflect badly on you and possibly the nation.”

Elders are highly esteemed within Choctaw culture. Participation in the Princess Royalty program resulted in participants meeting with, talking with, and learning about specifics of Choctaw culture and traditions from elders as they prepared for competitions. The program connected youth with elders and the participants benefitted greatly. One participant observed that, “this program is about connecting, bridging the youth to our elders.” A second participant attributed elders with motivating her to learn more about Choctaw culture. Meeting with elders, “really ignited that flame to learn more about my people and to give back to the community that's given so much to me.” The respect participants expressed for their elders did not seem contrived, rather, it was genuine.

Subtheme 2.2: *Servant Leadership*

Princess and Royalty candidates are also asked to publicly share the goals they have as a princess. Responses, according to the program director provide, “insight into what the contestant views [about] serving the Choctaw Tribal Members are and how they plan to serve as ambassadors of Choctaw Nation.” As such, Choctaw princesses serve their people as cultural leaders.

In fact, according to one participant, the Choctaw people expect their leaders to serve others, not just in word, but in deed,

A basic pillar for the Choctaw community is servant leadership—this idea that as leaders, we should be the ones serving our community and [that the community] sees our actions more than [it hears our] words. That is something I have been raised up on between doing these pageants, but also through my mom and dad.

Princesses understand the duty they have to serve others, “As a royalty or princess, it's important to not just serve yourself but others, the nation and the tribe.” Servant leadership, has been a key to the Choctaw Tribe’s ability to maintain its traditional culture through the myriad of challenges and hardships its people have endured throughout their history,

that's how we've stayed as strong as we have throughout all the different trials we faced: removal, our land being taken away, and warfare. As long as we would stick together and not separate from each other. That's how that's why we're still here today.

Another participant highlighted that being a princess was not just about the achievement of her goals but more importantly, the title placed her into a position from which she could be of great help to her people. The Choctaw value the tribe and family above self.

Here in the US is it's all about me. How can I get ahead, me by myself? What do I have to do to get to the top? Whereas with the Choctaw culture, it's how can we get ahead? How can we progress as a people? Not just for myself, but as everyone else?

One important way that Choctaw princesses serve others is by participating in the education of others, and to encourage them to accomplish great things,

So I have gotten to talk at some of our princess trainings because we'll have Princess trainings before the district pageants start to help them with their skills and what they're going to have to do. I just tell them my backstory and just how much I've changed throughout the program and how you shouldn't stop there. You should keep finding goals to go after even after the pageant, whether it's school, other pageants, just different things. They should see it as a way to keep stepping up in the community. And just to show them that it doesn't matter, like how shy or introverted you are. You can be that person. You can be Miss Choctaw Nation.

Subtheme 2.3: Humility

As a group, the participants consistently exhibited humility and respect during our interviews. They conveyed to us that winning is not everything and that receiving the title of princess is an honor that places them into a position to assist their tribe and its people. None of the participants put on airs or acted as if they were entitled or special.

Competition can be humbling, and important lessons can be learned after a loss. One participant competed for titles on multiple occasions before winning. The losses and continual striving assisted her to develop a humbler spirit,

Some people would consider [losing to be] negative feedback, but I developed humility. I learned to be humble because I definitely didn't win my first couple of pageants!

Participants also understood that many aspects of the competitive process coalesce in the selection of a princess and that on another day, they may not have been named the pageant's princess,

While it's awesome to win, it's also important to stay humble because anybody can win, honestly. So stay humble and just don't get a big head.

One participant made sure she stayed humble during her pageants and, contrary to the dominant culture's calls to get ahead and serve the self, she tried to help her competitors,

I think of myself as humble while I'm on stage, and I try to help others, especially during other pageants and just, like, calm them down and help them be as confident as they can be. Because on stage, it can be very nerve wracking, especially when you're running for the district pageants before you go to the nation pageant. So it just kind of helps your nerves.

A second participant believed pageant judges assessed whether contestants exhibited cockiness or humility, "For me, I felt like they looked for how I held myself. And if I was like, I don't want to say the cocky, I don't want to say cocky, but, like, how, like, you were humble in yourself and confident." We had no means of determining if judges do specifically look for demonstrated humility in their princesses.

Subtheme 2.4: Strengthening Choctaw Identity

Most of the participants shared a message of unity and harmony, emphasizing that these desirable states are achieved through their collective identity. Pageant training, competition and

the experiences gained while serving as a Choctaw princess heightened and strengthened our participants' Choctaw identity. Pageant training, pageant competition and serving as a princess, "helps grow your identity as an indigenous person, especially whenever you grow up in such a little bubble. You expand your perspective by going to places like gathering of Nations and meeting so many different people."

Pageants also encourage contestants to learn more about their culture which, in turn, strengthens their identity as a Choctaw, "I can sort of strengthen my own identity by learning more about it." Participants also learned to value their Choctaw identity,

And so I will say, though, that whenever it comes to native girls finding the confidence within their identity, that is something that, like, you can't put a price to. And so I growing up within my community and not always feeling like I have the strongest connection to my identity and always teetering the line of, like, what is native enough, what is too white? And how do I see myself on that spectrum? How do other people see me and are struggling with that? But then finding an outlet where I can sort of strengthen my own identity by learning more about it. And also getting to find a community where girls can voice those same concerns, and we sort of find affirmation within each other.

Perhaps the most poignant lesson learned by the participants was the following, "You know, if we lose our identity, then we lose, you know, our nation in general." We conclude that the young women we interviewed enhanced and strengthened their Choctaw identity as participants in the Princess Royalty Program.

Theme 3: The Choctaw Princess is a Role Model

Choctaw princesses and Royalty serve as role models for members of their tribe. Princesses are role models whether they are teaching a class, giving a public presentation, or appearing at a tribal and community event. Because they are role models, Choctaw princesses inspire young girls to seek titles. One participant shared with us what motivated her to become a Choctaw Royalty Princess,

So originally, I'm from Virginia, and I would visit my Choctaw grandmother in the summers in Oklahoma. And I would come down to the Labor Day festival and I would see all the princesses. I just thought they were really cool and great role models. My grandmother wanted me and my sisters to be princesses. So after she passed away when I was 12, I made it my mission to eventually run someday.

Some princesses do not appreciate that they are role models until they begin their year-long reign. One participant recalled, "I don't think I realized how big of an impact it was until I won Junior Miss. And then to go around and always know that there's a little one, like, watching and everything."

Choctaw princesses grow to understand that the image they project must be one that reflects the values and expectations upheld by their people, "Even if you're out in the regalia or even if you're not even when you're with your friends, you still have to be on your best behavior." Because they are role models, and because the regalia, sash and crown they wear in public draws others to

them, princesses are often able to educate others about Choctaw culture within informal settings. One participant loves serving in the role of teacher when informal educational opportunities present themselves,

But then my favorite interactions are the people that will come up and ask the questions and be like, “Oh, what is the proper name for this?” “Like, what is the history behind that?” “Why do you have this design?” “Like, who made this?” And you get to share and have that interaction with people and make even, like, the tiniest of impact when it comes to your culture, I think is really important.

We also found that some of the princesses' mothers were also princesses. Mothers who served as princesses serve as exceptional role models for both their daughters and their daughters' peers. In the photo below, Melissa Reich, Director of the Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program (Left) can be seen next to, and her daughter, Mia (Right).



Conclusion

In the current study, we sought to determine through qualitative research methods how a tribal princess program, specifically the Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program, assists in the maintenance and perpetuation of traditional Choctaw culture and how the program contributes to strengthening Choctaw identity within the program's participants. Our findings led to the identification of three themes and six subthemes: 1) Formal Cultural Education: The Princess in Training Program. Subthemes include Personal Growth, and Cultural Educators. 2) Becoming a Functioning Member of the Choctaw Nation which encompasses four subthemes: Respect for Others, Cultural Identity, Servant Leadership, and Humility. 3) Choctaw Princesses Serve as Role Models. During the process of preparing for pageants, in the midst of pageant competition, and while serving their year-long term as a princess, Choctaw girls and women learn about and share their traditional culture while strengthening their identity as members of the Choctaw Nation.

We conclude that the Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program is a valuable tool used by the Choctaw Nation to teach Choctaw cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities to the girls and young women who participate in it. Further, participation in the Princess and Royalty Program offers a litany of informal educational opportunities.

Formal education in Choctaw culture is offered through the Princess in Training Program conducted by the Princess and Royalty Program's administration and staff. Princesses and former princesses assist in the conduction of training sessions that seek to prepare training program participants to honorably compete for princess titles. We also note that a significant amount of informal education is offered by princesses as they interact with others during public appearances. Princesses are also involved in formal educational activities during their reign as they make formal presentations within tribal and non-tribal settings.

We believe that the impact of the Choctaw Princess and Royalty Program can only be deemed effective if it assists participants in learning more about their culture and results in the strengthening of their identity as a member of the Choctaw Nation. The words of a Miss Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma attest to the fact that it is, indeed, effective,

I would want them to know that being a princess doesn't have to mean what you might think it is, like, some dainty girl that's just like very, I don't know, frail or whatever. You don't just have to sit still and be pretty. You can get things done, get things started for the community, whether it be different classes to outreach and learn to the youth, different services to help. You can be a warrior. You can be a cultural liaison, help and teach people as well. But you don't just have to, you know, powder your nose.

In parallel with the concept of cultural tethering, the Choctaw Princess Program can be added to the list of cultural tethers. The findings of this study indicate that participation in the

program strengthens both the identity and cultural connection of young individuals in the Choctaw Nation.

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