Constitution of the Choctaw Turtle Tribe

Draft for review by the Tribal Council and Elders. Items in [brackets] are to be filled in by the Tribe.

Preamble

We, the descendants of the Choctaw Turtle Tribe, carry the lineage, language, and teachings given to us by our ancestors. We are one people, joined by blood, by story, and by the ways we have kept. Like the turtle, we carry our home with us, move with patience, and endure. We establish this Constitution to protect our heritage, honor our Elders, guide our families, and pass our way of life to our children and grandchildren. This Constitution states who we are and how we have always decided things, so that our ways are known and respected.

Article I: Name and Tribe

Section 1. We are the Choctaw Turtle Tribe, referred to in this Constitution as the Tribe.

Section 2. The Tribe is a people, not only a place. Its authority comes from its ancestors and its living descendants.

Section 3. The Turtle is the Tribe's emblem and teacher. It stands for patience, protection, longevity, and the carrying of one's home and heritage.

Section 4. The Choctaw Turtle Tribe has not been colonized. It is not governed by any outside system, and it governs itself by its own hereditary ways and culture. This Constitution records those ways and does not take its authority from any colonial government.

Section 5. The Tribe affirms the right of Indigenous peoples to self-determination and to keep their own institutions, languages, and cultures, as recognized in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and the American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (ADRIP).

Article II: Foundation of Hereditary Standing

Section 1. Standing in the Tribe is established by descent. A person belongs because of the lineage they were born into, not because of a vote, a payment, or a petition.

Section 2. All rights, duties, and positions in the Tribe arise from hereditary standing and from faithful keeping of the Tribe's culture. No other basis for standing is recognized.

Section 3. Standing cannot be bought, sold, or granted by any single person or office.

Article III: Membership

Section 1. Who is a member. A member is any person who can be shown to descend from an ancestor recorded on the Lineage Roll of the Tribe.

Section 2. Lineage Roll. The Elders shall keep the Lineage Roll, a record of families and their descendants. It shall be kept safe, preserved in more than one place, and updated at births, adoptions by lineage, and deaths.

Section 3. Proof of descent. A person seeking recognition shall present family records, oral history confirmed by Elders of the family line, or other evidence of descent. The Clan Mother decides whether descent is established, with the advice of the Council of Elders.

Section 4. Family lines. Each member belongs to the family line through both the mother and the father; because the Tribe is matriarchal, the member belongs to the clan of their mother. Family and clan are inherited and do not change.

Section 5. Children. A child born to a member is a member by descent once the birth is recorded on the Lineage Roll.

Section 6. Loss of standing. Hereditary standing is not lost. A member who acts against the Tribe may lose the right to take part in its affairs for a time, as set out in Article IX, but never loses the lineage.

Section 7. Non-descendants. A person without descent may be welcomed as a friend or guest of the Tribe. A friend or guest has no standing, no vote, and no claim to office.

Article IV: Clans and Families

Section 1. The Tribe is made up of family lines and clans.

Section 2. Clans are the basic unit of the Tribe. Clan Elders speak for their clans, settle family matters, and keep their clan's histories.

Section 3. The Tribe shall list its clans, their names, and their teachings.

Section 4. Each clan is equal in standing before the Tribe, though each may hold different duties and gifts.

Article V: Culture, Language, and Teachings

Section 1. The culture of the Tribe is its living law. Ceremonies, stories, songs, dances, crafts, foods, language, and customs are inherited responsibilities.

Section 2. The Tribe shall protect and teach the Choctaw language and shall encourage its use in homes, ceremonies, and meetings.

Section 3. The Tribe shall appoint **Culture Keepers**, chosen by the Clan Mother from those who carry knowledge of ceremony, language, and history. Culture Keepers teach the young and guard sacred knowledge.

Section 4. Some teachings, songs, and ceremonies belong to particular families or clans. They shall not be shared, recorded, or performed outside those lines without the permission of the Elders who hold them.

Section 5. Every member has a duty to respect the land, the water, the animals, and one another.

Section 6. The Tribe shall hold seasonal gatherings and ceremonies on dates set by the Clan Mother with the advice of the Culture Keepers and the Council of Elders.

Article VI: Leadership by Lineage

Section 1. Clan Mother. The Clan Mother is the head of the Tribe. The office passes by hereditary right through the mother's line within the Turtle Clan. The Clan Mother passes it down to a woman of her own line, chosen as most fit in character and knowledge of the culture.

Section 2. Succession. The Clan Mother names her successor, who must be an adult woman of good standing from her own line and must know the Tribe's ways.

Section 3. Appointments. The Clan Mother appoints all other officers of the Tribe, including the Clan Elders and the Culture Keepers. No office stands beneath hers.

Section 4. Clan Elders. Each clan's Elder is appointed by the Clan Mother.

Section 5. Duties of leaders. Leaders serve the people. They shall act with patience, honesty, and humility, consult before deciding major matters, and put the Tribe ahead of themselves.

Section 6. Removal. The Clan Mother may set aside any officer who abandons the culture, acts dishonorably, or harms the Tribe, after hearing that officer. The Council of Elders advises her in the matter, and the decision is hers. The Clan Mother herself cannot be removed from office by the Council or by anyone else.

Article VII: The Council of Elders

Section 1. The Council of Elders assists the Clan Mother in governing the Tribe. It is made up of the Clan Elders and the Clan Mother, who leads it and holds the final decision on every matter.

Section 2. The Clan Mother alone calls the Council to meet. It meets whenever she calls it and at every seasonal gathering. No set number of meetings is required.

Section 3. The Council advises by consensus whenever possible. The Clan Mother hears the Council's counsel and then makes the final decision.

Section 4. The Council assists the Clan Mother in her work to:

- Keep and confirm the Lineage Roll
- Guide the Culture Keepers
- Settle disputes between families or clans
- Protect the Tribe's lands, resources, records, and sacred items
- Speak for the Tribe to other governments and peoples
- Manage the Tribe's property for the benefit of all descendants

Section 5. Meetings are open to members in good standing, except where the Council must meet privately to protect sacred or family matters.

Article VIII: Rights and Duties of Members

Section 1. Rights. Every member has the right to:

- Be recognized as a descendant of the Tribe
- Take part in ceremonies and gatherings of their clan
- Learn the language and teachings of the Tribe
- Be heard by their Clan Elder and the Council
- Be treated fairly and with respect
- Share in the benefits of the Tribe's property and programs

Section 2. Duties. Every member has the duty to:

- Honor the culture, ancestors, and Elders
- Treat other members with respect
- Care for their family and clan
- Help protect the Tribe's lands, records, and traditions
- Carry knowledge forward by teaching the young

Section 3. Elders hold the Tribe's highest respect. Care for Elders is the duty of their families and of the Tribe as a whole.

Article IX: Disputes and Accountability

Section 1. Disputes shall first be settled within the family, then by the Clan Elder, and only then by the Clan Mother with the advice of the Council of Elders.

Section 2. Resolution shall aim at restoring balance and relationships, not at punishment alone. Remedies may include apology, restitution, community service, teaching, or a period of stepping back from ceremonial and governing roles.

Section 3. Every person accused of wrongdoing has the right to be told of the complaint, to be heard, and to be assisted by a family member or Elder.

Section 4. Decisions of the Clan Mother on matters of descent and culture are final within the Tribe.

Article X: Property, Lands, and Sacred Items

Section 1. Any sale, lease, or transfer of the Tribe's property requires the consent of the Clan Mother, who shall seek the advice of the Council of Elders and make the matter known to the members.

Section 2. Sacred items and burial places shall be protected and cared for under the guidance of the Culture Keepers.

Article XI: Amendments

Section 1. This Constitution may be amended to strengthen the Tribe, but never in a way that ends hereditary standing or abandons the culture.

Section 2. An amendment may be proposed by the Clan Mother or by [three] Clan Elders. It must be discussed in a full gathering of the Tribe and decided by the Clan Mother with the advice of the Council of Elders.

Section 3. Amendments take effect when recorded in the Constitution and announced at the next seasonal gathering.

Article XII: Adoption

This Constitution takes effect when approved by the Clan Mother, with the advice of the Council of Elders, and signed below.

Adopted on: February 14, 2024

Clan Mother: *Miko Hehewuti*

Appendix A: Further Information on Indigenous Rights and Culture

- United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP): adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2007
- American Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (ADRIP): adopted by the Organization of American States in 2016