

WASHINGTON IRVING'S VERSION OF THE
SEMINOLE ORIGIN OF RACES

Alan Dundes

University of Kansas

Washington Irving was very much interested in the American Indian. In a number of his writings he described various aspects of specific Indian cultures.¹ This interest is apparent in an article of his on the Seminoles which was first published in *The Knickerbocker* in 1840. In this article, Irving relates a speech which a Seminole chief delivered to a Florida governor, William P. Duval. Included in the text of the speech is a narrative from Seminole oral tradition which attempts to explain the origin of the white, black, and red races. However, there is some question of the accuracy of the narrative as reported by Irving. Specifically, it is doubtful whether certain details of Irving's version were ever actually in oral circulation among the Seminoles.

Irving's version is as follows:

We have a tradition handed down from our forefathers, and we believe it, that the Great Spirit, when he undertook to make men, made the black man; it was his first attempt, and pretty well for a beginning; but he soon saw he had bungled; so he determined to try his hand again. He did so, and made the red man. He liked him much better than the black man, but still he was not exactly what he wanted. So he tried once more, and made the white man; and then he was satisfied. You see, therefore, that you were made last, and that is the reason I call you my youngest brother.²

Immediately following this account, there is a tale explaining the different social and occupational characteristics of the three races (Motif A 1614.4.3).³ The Great Spirit presents three boxes: the first is filled with books, maps, and papers; the second with bows, arrows, knives, and tomahawks; and the third with spades, axes, hoes, and hammers. According to Irving, the white man "being the favorite" had first choice and he selected the box of books and papers. The red man chose the bow and arrow box, while the black man was forced to take the remaining box of tools. The moral drawn from the tale by the Seminole narrator was that the red man was not intended by the Great Spirit to use paper and books. It was also stated that the black man was supposed to work for the white and red races, which, in fact, was the case.

One element of Irving's version which does not appear entirely trustworthy is the order of creation. Why should the white be created last and best? Seminoles, even more than most American Indians, historically have been extremely proud of their own traditions and they have been slow to appreciate and accept White ways. It is thus hard to believe that a traditional Seminole origin myth would have the Great Spirit displeased with the red man and pleased with the white man. A Seminole chief as a spokesman for his people would not be likely to speak of his people as in any way inferior to the Whites.

Fortunately, another version of the same speech was published in 1842, just two years after Irving's appeared. According to this account, the occasion of the speech was the protest of the Seminoles against an attempt by the United States government to provide a school for the education of the Seminoles. The treaty of Moultrie Creek, concluded in September of 1823, stipulated that the United States should establish a school for the children of the Seminoles. The Seminole chief

Neamathla, speaking for his people, told Governor Duval that the Seminoles did not want their children to be taught the ways of the White men. The 1842 version of Neamathla's speech is as follows:

Listen, father, and I will tell you how the Great Spirit made man, and how he gave to men of different colours the different employments that we find them engaged in. After the world was made it was solitary. It was very beautiful; the forests abounded in game and fruit: the great plains were covered with deer and elk, and buffalo, and the rivers were full of fish; there were many bears and beaver, and other fat animals, but there was no being to enjoy these good things. Then the Master of Life said, we will make man. Man was made, but when he stood up before his maker, he was white! The Great Spirit was sorry: he saw that the being he had made was pale and weak; he took pity on him, and therefore did not unmake him, but let him live. He tried again, for he was determined to make a perfect man, but in his endeavour to avoid making another white man, he went into the opposite extreme, and when the second being rose up, and stood before him, he was black! The Great Spirit liked the black man less than the white, and he shoved him aside to make room for another trial. Then it was that he made the red man; and the red man pleased him.⁴

In this account, the Great Spirit also offers the three men their choice of boxes. He tells the white man that although he is pale and weak, he was the first created and therefore he will be the first to choose. The white man chooses a box filled with pens, ink, and paper. The Great Spirit does not follow the order of creation, however, inasmuch as he then tells the black man to stand aside and let the red man have the second choice. The red man chooses the box filled with tomahawks, knives, and war clubs, leaving the box with axes and hoes to the Negro.

Comparison of the two versions indicates some sharp differences. Whereas in Irving's version, the white man is the "favorite" of the creator, in the second version, the white

man is acknowledged to be a mistake of the creator and only the creator's feelings of pity prevent him from 'unmaking' the white man. Perhaps the clearest indicator of the differences in emphasis is the order of creation. In Irving's version, the order is black, red, and white. In the other version, the order is white, black, and red. Since both versions were published within 20 years of the historical event in question, that is, Neamathla's speech to the Florida governor, it is remarkable that there should be so great a divergence. The question naturally arises as to which of these versions, if either, comes closer to the Seminole tale of the origin of races as it existed in oral tradition. While the 1842 version appears to be more in accord with the Seminole tradition of scorning the whites, Irving's version comes directly from Governor Duval to whom the speech was directed.⁵

There is additional evidence available which may help to ascertain which of the two versions of the origin of races is closer to Seminole oral tradition. First of all, a version of the narrative appeared in 1818.

The Seminole savages have a vague idea of the creation of man: they believe that he was originally formed from the clay, that the Great Spirit submitted his creation to the influence of fire, but that his ignorance of the degree of heat, necessary to give consistence, caused the first batch to be over baked, black and crusty: these were the aborigines of the negro race. Again the Creator essayed, but endeavouring to avoid the error of the former attempt, he plunged into another, that of applying too little fuel, they were in consequence half baked, of a pale ash colour, these were our first parents; but in the third and last effort, the great master created perfect models, both in shape and colour, producing to the world the founders of the Indian tribes.⁶

In this earlier version, the order of creation is black, white, and red. This order is different from the order in both of the previously cited versions. Nevertheless, the fact that the

narrative ends with the creation of the red man and that it has the clear ethnocentric notion that the red man is the ideal creation while the white is "half-baked" make it more akin to the 1842 version. Another reason for believing that the red man is the last created in the more traditional versions is afforded by a recent sampling of contemporary Seminole folklore. In April, 1962, the following text was recorded:

When God created the human, the first thing he did was to put them in something in order to bake them. Then he took them out, but they weren't quite done. That was the White man. Then he put another one in and he thought he'd let it sit there for a little bit. Then it was too black. That was the Negro. The third one he set in there just right and it came out just right. And that was the Indian.⁷

A comparison of all of the above texts reveals the following differences in the order of creation:

1818	1840	1842	1962
Black	Black	White	White
White	Red	Black	Black
Red	White	Red	Red

It may be seen that the only version in which the red man is not the last created is that of 1840, the one reported by Irving. The alternation of black and white in the first and second positions is much less significant. Structurally, the tale consists of two failures followed by a success. Whether the sequence of the failures is "too little" baking followed by "too much" or vice versa, does not matter nearly so much as the position of the red man in the third and final structural slot. The red man is neither too pale nor too dark. He is "just right."

There is still, of course, the possibility that Neamathla departed from his native tradition in order to please his White audience, but such an act of diplomacy is not in keeping with

Seminole personality and the history of Seminole-White relations.⁸ If one assumes, then, that the narrative reported by Irving in 1840 is not in accord with tradition, the problem remains as to whom to attach the blame for the inaccuracy. The account might have been altered by Duval when he recited the anecdote to Irving. On the other hand, Irving, a masterful writer of fiction, might have been unable to resist the temptation to alter the tale. Certainly, the tale might be considered to be more palatable to an all-white audience of Knickerbocker readers in the form wherein White supremacy is acknowledged even by a proud chief of a proud people. In any case, the ruinous effect of a White's rethinking and retelling an American Indian tale may be illustrated by comparing Irving's version with versions in Seminole oral tradition.

It is also interesting to note the persistence of the narrative in tradition. How wrong Thomas L. M'Kenney and James Hall, the publishers of the 1842 version, were when they stated that the tale was one fabricated by Neamathla himself, and that such legends, devoid of historical and poetic merit, were inevitably soon forgotten. For over one hundred years, the tradition has persisted and so long as the Seminoles remain in contact with Whites and Negroes, it is likely to continue to live in Seminole oral tradition.

Notes

1. For a summary of Irving's contributions of this nature, see Russell, *Irving: Recorder of Indian Life*, pp. 185-195.
2. Irving, *The Seminoles*, pp. 341-342.
3. The motif number refers to Thompson's *Motif-Index*, vol. 1, p. 244.

4. M'Kenney and Hall, History of the Indian Tribes, vol. 2, pp. 145-147.

5. In a note in Wolfert's Roost, p. 304, where the Seminole article was reprinted, it is stated that the anecdotes concerning the Seminoles were gathered in conversation with Governor Duval.

6. The account is contained in a work entitled Narrative of a Voyage to the Spanish Main. . . (London, 1819), but the relevant portions have been recently republished by Griffin in Some Comments on the Seminole in 1818, pp. 45-46. Griffin points out that the tale is necessarily a post-contact one.

7. I collected this version from Max Osceola, aged 31, supervisor of the Seminole Okalee Indian Village Enterprise located at Dania, Florida. Another version which is almost identical to the one told by my informant was related by Sam Tommie in 1955; see Darby, Florida's Seminole Indians, p. 10.

8. In a recent historical study, Neamathla's tone is described as being "surprisingly defiant." See Mahon, The Treaty of Moultrie Creek, 1823, p. 366.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Darby, Ferne, Florida's Seminole Indians (Dania, Fla., 1955)

Griffin, John, Some Comments on the Seminole in 1818
(Florida Anthropologist, vol. 10, 1957)

Irving, Washington, The Seminoles (The Knickerbocker, vol. 16, 1840)

—————, Wolfert's Roost (New York, 1855)

M'Kenney, Thomas L., and James Hall, History of the Indian Tribes of North America (2 vols. Philadelphia, 1842)

Mahon, John K., *The Treaty of Moultrie Creek, 1823* (Florida Historical Quarterly, vol. 40, 1962)

Russell, Jason Almus, *Irving: Recorder of Indian Life* (Journal of American History, vol. 25, 1932)

Thompson, Stith, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (6 vols. Bloomington, Ind., 1955-1958)