



Indigenous Americans interpreted as Israelites Francis Le Jau (1708-1716)

Francis Le Jau was a Huguenot, a French Protestant. To escape religious persecution in Catholic France, he fled to Britain, where he became an Anglican priest. He later ministered in the colony of South Carolina under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), an Anglican missionary organization. Although Le Jau ministered primarily to white colonists, his mandate from the SPG also included trying to convert enslaved Africans and indigenous Americans. In the following selections from reports he sent to SPG leadership in England, Le Jau claims to have encountered indigenous practices and myths that have parallels in the Bible. Evidently, Le Jau was partial to a theory that explained the existence of America's indigenous peoples by postulating that they were a branch of the ancient Israelites.

[September 18, 1708]

I most humbly beg of you to let me know what things I must be more particular in to give full satisfaction to the Society; I will take pains about the instruction of our slaves and inform myself of the state of our Indian friends. I hear of several nations that are circumcised; I take notice of several old legal ceremonies still kept among our neighbors, chiefly their feast and a kind of offering of first fruits when their corn is ripe.

[February 1, 1710]

I see our free Indians, and several come to see me, when they fix their abode near me, for they are perpetually changing places to get food, having no provisions laid up. Could we make them capable to understand what is meant by words commonly used by us when we speak of religion, or could we understand their meaning, we would find them other than we imagine; as they grow acquainted and familiar and can trust to one, they disclose surprising things.

What I had the honor to tell you of something practiced among some Indian nations like to circumcision, I had from a friend—an ancient gentlewoman, Mrs. Bird by name—that came, these many years past, to this country from Barbados and had that observation from travelers. I will tell more particulars about that when I have seen her again.

Three weeks ago, my Indian neighbors that live upon and near our glebe land had a dance, which they keep yearly, from time immemorial, for three days together. In the daytime, the men dance by themselves; the women, for that time, are absent and never come near till the three days are over, but those women keep their dance among themselves by night. As I asked one of the men the reason of that separation, he told me 'twas to remember a time wherein man was made alone and there was no woman; but after, God took somewhat out of man and made the woman. [Upon our] asking what it was God took, the man put his hand upon his breast and somewhat there, and then called it a bone. My wife presently named a rib; the Indian smiled and said yes.

I heard also of some other Indians, not far from us, who, at a certain time yearly, take the largest deer they can get among many, for all go a-hunting that day on purpose, and hang it upon a long

post to the Lord, and leave it to consume there. Our Indian neighbors call their nation Ittiwan. When any of them dies, they anoint him all over with oil, either of bear or of hickory nuts, for they have no other; that's a constant practice and the women's employment.

[January 4, 1712]

In October last, I went to see how our Ittiwan Indians kept one of their solemn festivals. I saw about forty of them—trimmed, painted, and dressed in their fineries—coming from the woods near a little hut supported upon pillars, all painted and adorned. There, after a pause and a speech, three young men, holding one another under the arms, began a dance, followed by the rest in a long train and serpentine about several times with pretty motion, steps, and figures. They had rattles for their music and sang, after a pause, only four notes, saying the same again. They wanted an old Indian who used to make long speeches upon the occasion, but he happened to be sick.

The most sensible I spoke to—one Capt. George, an elderly Indian—told me the three young men that held one another in front and were followed by the rest, one by one in a long tail, were three sons of one man, from whom all the rest came, and the little square hut, painted, where they stopped was a ship. This made me suspect they had some tradition about Noah's ark and his three sons. I asked another Indian, at my house, about the ceremony, who told me of a ship that had white men which were brought to his country; and as he wanted words to express his meaning, I told him the best I could of the ark of Noah and his sons. He answered [that] they said so in his country. As I discover any new thing, I take notice of it and will not miss any opportunity of informing myself better.

[March 19, 1716]

About nine years ago, I had the honor to mention to the honorable Society a curious account I had from a very ingenuous and pious good woman, Mrs. Bird, now deceased, that some traders or travelers had assured her they had seen some circumcised Indians not far from us. What she said was somewhat obscure and not to be wholly depended upon; but after much inquiry, here is a small relation which I hope will please:

A week ago, a good, honest man called Kirk—a Nottingham man and an ingenious artist in his trade, which is shipwright and joiner and carver—came to my house to see my son, with whom he grew acquainted in their Cherokee expedition, and told me he had seen three years ago, in Roanoke, two circumcised Indians actually sold [as] slaves to be transported abroad. They belonged to the nation called Marimiskeets, living formerly in the north of Roanoke, towards Virginia. That nation consisted of fifty families, two of which families, only, circumcised all their males. But the nation, being concerned in the Tuscarora war, were dispersed, many killed or sold; yet there is a remnant of it settled somewhere not far from Roanoke. He promised to use all diligence in getting further information of that matter. I will neglect no opportunity on my part and will let you know what I can discover further about it.

Source: Frank J. Klingberg, ed., *The Carolina Chronicle of Dr. Francis Le Jau, 1706-1717* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956), 45, 67-68, 105-106, 175-176, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.31822015513922>. Public domain in the United States, Google-digitized.

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These edited excerpts from Le Jau's correspondence are intended for *teaching* purposes only. For *research* purposes, you should consult, quote, and cite the source publication listed above.



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