



The Yamacraw embassy to England John Percival (1734)

When British colonist James Oglethorpe founded the settlement of Savannah, Georgia, in 1733, he did so with the permission of a local indigenous community called the Yamacraws. The following year, Oglethorpe escorted a Yamacraw delegation across the Atlantic to England. There the Yamacraws had an audience with King George II and conducted trade negotiations with Georgia's London-based colonial trustees. One of those trustees, John Percival, earl of Egmont, recorded the delegation's activities in his diary, selections from which appear below.

The delegation was led by Yamacraw chief Tomochichi (whom Percival calls "king" and whose name he spelled several different ways). Among those who accompanied Tomochichi to England were his wife Senauki (whom Percival never names but calls "the queen") and his teenaged heir Toonahowi (who is usually identified as Tomochichi's nephew). One of the requests Tomochichi made of the colonial trustees was that they send someone to Georgia to teach Christianity to Toonahowi and other Yamacraw children. In these selections from Percival's diary, we see British and Yamacraws responding to one another's religions.

The seven Indians, with their interpreter, Mr. Oglethorpe, Mr. Vernon, and Mr. Verelst, came and dined with me. I diverted them in the best manner, walked them into the wood, had music and dancing. I made also some presents. They behaved with great decency and were well pleased. At parting, the king Toma-chiki made me a speech to tell me he came down to see me in goodwill and returned in friendship; that God above would continue it, and he hoped we would take care to breed their children Christians. I made him a suitable return.

They were yesterday to see the archbishop of Canterbury and were extremely pleased with their visit. They had apprehensions that he was a conjuror, but the kind reception he gave them altered that imagination. The archbishop would have put some questions to them concerning their notions of religion, but they have a superstition that it is unfortunate to disclose their thoughts of those matters and refused to answer. They attributed the death of their companion to having too freely spoken thereof since they came over.^a Nevertheless, the king was so taken with the archbishop that he said he must come again alone to talk with him. At coming away, he said he now really believed they should have some good man sent to them to instruct them and their children.

He showed his politeness in that visit. The archbishop refused (out of respect to them) to sit down, though so weak as to be supported on the arms of two servants all the time they were with him; whereupon the king, who saw him in pain, forbore to make him a speech he had prepared and said he would speak it to his servants, meaning Dr. Lynch, dean of Canterbury, the archbishop's son-in-law, and other clergymen there present. At table, I asked as usual what dish he would be served with. His answer was to eat whatever was set before him, meaning thereby a civility not to refuse what I should proffer him, as Mr. Oglethorpe explained it to me. When I presented him a large gilt carved tobacco box, he told me that he would get a ribbon and hang it

^a One member of the Yamacraw delegation had contracted smallpox in England and died.

at his breast next to his heart. His nephew, as he calls him, but who is grandson to his wife, reads already very well, and with a good accent, and comprehends a great deal of English. His father was taken by the Spaniards and burned because he would not be a Christian.

Of all these Indians, there is but one who can be tempted to drink too freely, and they complained to us that their interpreter is too much given to it. When they went upon the water, they heard some of the rude multitude swear, which they told Mr. Verelst was very naughty. Their modesty is very great. They cannot ease nature when another is in sight, and it offended them when, being to see the Tower, the flap of Harry the Eighth's codpiece was taken up. There were many women that crowded in and liked the sight, but the queen turned her head away. The king's reflection on it was that, to be sure, that man had more wives than one. The custom of their country allows polygamy, which may prove an impediment to making them Christians, but the king has all his life contented himself with one. [...]

I have in another place mentioned their notions of religion: their belief in one God who resides above; their wishes that he will prosper them, which implies a providence; and a happy place for souls departed. They have desired we would banish rum out of our settlements, as what kills them and only produces quarrels. In a word, if we can root out that spirit of revenge which possesses them and convince them of the impropriety of having a multiplicity of wives, there is great hopes of making the nation Christian; but all will depend on the discretion and virtue of a minister to be sent among them. It is pretty extraordinary that they have an ancient tradition that there will come a time when they shall receive knowledge from a white man. This time, they think, is near at hand. They have a sort of type of this great event, an annual ceremony handed down by their ancestors, that has the resemblance of sacrifice, but they slay no animal nor offer any fruits of the earth. They are so far from blood that they think it a fault to kill anything that has life, except when engaged in war or to take satisfaction for injuries. The custom I have mentioned is as follows. They once a year build a sort of altar with stones and lay fagots thereon. Then the person among them who is known to have lived the most innocent and virtuous life is chosen out to set fire to it, for this reason: he is generally a young lad that has not drawn blood. Him they paint, all over, white; and when everything is prepared, he takes two sticks, which, being rubbed together, take fire, with which he kindles the fagots. When they are burned, he gives the lighted brands to the assembly, who carry them home and look upon them as holy.

They say God will, when he pleases, reveal knowledge to them, but they expect it will be to their youth, for the grown men, having killed an enemy, are polluted and must not expect it. They have a dependence on God, that he will do what is best for them and that he knows better what is fit than they; wherefore they look on it as foolish to tell God their wants or pray to him. When the Lord's Prayer was explained to them, they said the first part was very well, and *Thy kingdom come* they explained by the revelation of his knowledge which they expected. *Give us this day our daily bread* they said was not necessary, for God was too good to need being asked. But *forgive us our trespasses as we forgive them that trespass against us* they liked, for they said the way to please God was to do to others as they would be done by. These are at present the notions they entertain, whereby it seems as if providence had prepared them to become Christians [...]. Moreover, they believe it a great fault to pray to images, as they see the French and Spaniards do, and imagine the Cross to be some bad spirit to whom they pray.

The king made a sensible reflection since he came over. He said he saw we knew a great many more things than they, but he thought we were not the better men for it and that they were more happy and innocent in their ignorance. [...]

I understand by Mr. Oglethorpe that our Indians of the Upper and Lower Creeks^b have a tradition that there once was a great flood occasioned by the waters in the earth breaking forth, which occasioned the mountains, before which the earth was plain. That after that, great rains fell from heaven. That an old wise man was informed of this by Sunataughy, God, who thereupon built a great canoe, which rested on a hill and in which he saved all who followed him. That this was occasioned by God's anger, but a white eagle brought the sprig of a tree, which declared peace; and ever since, their nations have used eagles' feathers in passing from one country to another, which declared they were in peace. That in old time, God had talked with men, and they would write and read, and their writing was on skins; but God was angry with them, and they have lost the art, but still they can whiten the skins. That their ancestors came a great way from the west, and rested so many cuttings of corn (by which they marked time) in one station, and so many in another, till they arrived where they are. These stations they at this day name. Mr. Oglethorpe added that he believed they learned this from some Jews, who may easily have come there westward from Japan, where there have been many.

^b *That is, the Muscogeese, a larger nation to whom the Yamacraws were related.*

Source: R. A. Roberts, ed., *Manuscripts of the Earl of Egmont*, vol. 2 (London: H. M. Stationary Office, 1923), 121-125, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nc01.ark:/13960/t2p55xx9s>. Public domain.

Excerpts edited and annotated by John-Charles Duffy. Some paragraph breaks omitted for a more compact presentation of the text. A long sentence broken up. The formatting of Percival's summary of Muscogee myths as a series of sentence fragments, each beginning with *That...*, is retained from the source publication. Some grammatical infelicities or archaisms emended for readability. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation Americanized, modernized, or otherwise emended. The spelling of English names modernized to facilitate identification, but Percival's spelling of Tomochichi's name retained from the source. The spelling of Percival's name is that used in the source publication. For the sake of modernization, several words capitalized in the source have been converted here to lowercase, including the titles *king*, *queen*, and *archbishop*; the religious terms *providence* and *heaven*; and divine pronouns.

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



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