



## Seminole accounts of the creation of races (Recorded 1810s-1820s)

*During the 1700s, members of various indigenous nations in what is now the southeastern United States migrated into Florida and banded together to form the Seminole nation. Black people escaping slavery in South Carolina and Georgia also settled in Florida, where they established communities that paid tribute to the Seminoles. During the 1810s, the Seminoles assimilated an influx of Muscogees who retreated south after their defeat by the United States in the Creek War; among those Muscogee refugees was the military leader Neamathla, a speech of whose is represented below. In that same decade, the Seminoles fought against invading US forces who aimed to wrest control of Florida from Spain. Spain ceded Florida to the United States in 1819, after which the US government required the Seminoles to relocate to a reservation in the center of the peninsula. The following selections present versions of a creation myth that was told by Seminoles during the period when they were being brought under US rule.*

### **1. Report of a white British traveler (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 overbaked, black and crusty; these were the aborigines of the negro race. Again the Creator essayed, but endeavoring to avoid the error of the former attempt, he plunged into another: that of applying too little fuel. They were, in consequence, but half baked, of a pale ash color; these were our first parents. But in the third and last effort, the Great Master created perfect models, both in shape and color, producing to the world the founders of the Indian tribes.

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### **2. Neamathla, Seminole spokesman, to the territorial governor of Florida (c. 1823)**

My father, we have listened to the message of our Great Father at Washington, who has taken pity on his red children and would teach us to speak on paper like the children of the white men. [...] But we want no schools such as you offer us. We wish our children to remain as the Great Spirit made them and as their fathers are: Indians. The Great Spirit has made different kinds of men and given them separate countries to live in, and he has given to each the arts that are suited to his condition. It is not for us to change the designs of the Great Master of Life. If you establish a school and teach our children the knowledge of the white people, they will cease to be Indians. The Great Spirit wishes no change in his red children. They are very good as he made them; if the white man attempts to improve, he will spoil them.

Father, we thank you for your offer, but we do not wish our children to be taught the ways of your people.

Listen, father, and I will tell you how the Great Spirit made man, and how he gave to men of different colors 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 endeavor 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.

My father, listen—I have not told you all. In this way, the Great Spirit made the white, the black, and the red man when he put them upon the earth. Here they were—but they were very poor. They had no lodges nor horses, no tools to work with, no traps nor anything with which to kill game. All at once, these three men, looking up, saw three large boxes coming down from the sky. They descended very slowly but at last reached the ground, while these three poor men stood and looked at them, not knowing what to do. Then the Great Spirit spoke and said, "White man, you are pale and weak, but I made you first and will give you the first choice; go to the boxes, open them and look in, and choose which you will take for your portion." The white man opened the boxes, looked in, and said, "I will take this." It was filled with pens, and ink, and paper, and compasses, and such things as your people now use. The Great Spirit spoke again and said, "Black man, I made you next, but I do not like you. You may stand aside. The red man is my favorite; he shall come forward and take the next choice. Red man, choose your portion of the things of this world." The red man stepped boldly up and chose a box filled with tomahawks, knives, war clubs, traps, and such things as are useful in war and hunting. The Great Spirit laughed when he saw how well his red son knew how to choose. Then he said to the negro, "You may have what is left; the third box is for you." That was filled with axes and hoes, with buckets to carry water in and long whips for driving oxen, which meant that the negro must work for both the red and white man; and it has been so ever since.

Father, we want no change; we desire no school and none of the teachings of white people. The Master of Life knew what was best for his children. We are satisfied. Let us alone.

**Sources:**

1. *Narrative of a Voyage to the Spanish Main, in the Ship “Two Friends”* [...] (London: John Miller, 1819), 174, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.aa0008802159>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

2. Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, *History of the Indian Tribes of North America* [...] (Philadelphia: J. T. Bowen, 1848), 1:82-84, <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/nyp.33433088721877>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Quotation marks enclosing Neamathla’s speech in the source publication omitted. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation regularized, Americanized, or otherwise emended in line with modern conventions. The use of lowercase for *aborigine*, *negro*, and the racial labels *white* and *black* reproduces the consistent usage of the source publications; the racial label *red*, occasionally capitalized in McKenney and Hall, is consistently presented here in lowercase. The divine epithet *Great Master*, lowercase in *Narrative of a Voyage*, is capitalized here for consistency with that same source’s capitalizing of *Great Spirit* and with the capitalizing of *Great Master of Life* in McKenney and Hall. The capitalizing of *Great Father*, referring to the US president, but the lowercasing of *father* when addressing the governor of Florida, replicates the source.

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