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The Yamasee: A Supposedly Extinct Southeastern Tribe Rediscovered

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Brief Communication

THE YAMASEE: A SUPPOSEDLY EXTINCT SOUTHEASTERN TRIBE REDISCOVERED

One of the foremost cultural groupings in the Southeastern area in the Colonial period was the tribe or group of tribes known as the Guale and Yamasee. Their territory lay in what is now coastal and southeastern Georgia, in the area roughly bounded by the present cities of Savannah, Brunswick, Cordele, Macon, and Augusta. These people, first mentioned by De Soto's chroniclers in 1540, were Muskogean speakers and seem to have shared the general Southeastern cultural patterns.

Like other Indian nations of the Southeast, these Guale-Yamasee fared badly in their dealings with Europeans. Caught between the English and Spanish spheres of influence, they found themselves enslaved and exploited by the colonists and administrators of both nations. In 1702 they rose against the Spanish, who had attempted to missionize them, and shortly thereafter fled northward to the protection of the English of the Carolina colonies.

Conditions under the English proved to be even worse than those endured under Spanish rule. Finally, in 1715, the Yamasee led a general revolt against the English which became known as the "Yamasee War." They were aided in this uprising by the Creek, Choctaw, and Catawba. This revolt, which was promptly crushed by the English, proved disastrous to the Yamasee, who bore the brunt of the fighting. Their defeat drove them once more to their former Spanish allies, and most of the survivors settled in Florida. Here, as allies of the Spanish, harassed by the Creek Indians who were in alliance with the English, they continued to decline in numbers. William Bartram, who visited Florida in 1777-78, states that the Yamasee nation was entirely destroyed by that time (1791:137). John R. Swanton, our leading authority on the tribes of the Southeast, concluded that the majority of the surviving Yamasee were subsequently absorbed into the Mikasuki band of the Seminole, while a few others may have been incorporated into the Creek nation (1922:107-109).

Recent information collected from Indian informants, coupled with a review of the literature, has led the present writer to question Swanton's conclusions concerning the fate of the Yamasee. The tribe, it appears, is not entirely extinct—in fact a substantial number still reside in their ancestral Georgia territory.

During the years 1954-56 I collected a small body of data on the folklore and customs of a group who identified themselves as "Altamaha Cherokee." This material, which was recently published in the *Journal of American Folklore*, was secured from Stewart R. Shaffer, a man of Indian descent who lives in Albion, Michigan, and his grandson James Shaffer (Howard 1959). The Shaffers are members of a splinter group of the Altamaha which moved to Michigan from Georgia in 1906.

Included in the body of information secured from the Shaffers were the traditional locations of four villages, a migration legend, a version of the "Stonecoat" legend, and various data concerning costume, crafts, and ceremonies. At the conclusion of this paper I stated that because a great deal of this "Altamaha Cherokee" lore was obviously quite different from that of the other Cherokee groups it probably stemmed from a non-Cherokee source. It is now my belief, after a careful reconsideration of the data, that the Altamaha "Cherokee" are not Cherokee at all, but instead represent a long-submerged fragment of the Yamasee tribe.

Data supporting this conclusion are as follows:

(1) Altamaha, the name given by the Shaffers for their group, is identified by Swanton as the name of the head town of the Lower Yamasee. The name first appears in 1540 when De Soto's army is noted as coming to a province of this name (Swanton 1922:95).

(2) The names Tama and Tamali, given by Stewart Shaffer as variant names of the Altamaha, also occur frequently in historical sources concerned with the Yamasee territory. They are identified by Swanton as variants of the name of a separate tribe of Indians, considered by him one of the Lower Creek divisions (1922:181). They were probably Hitchiti speakers (1922:12).

(3) The name Tapa, given by Stewart Shaffer as a "clan" name of the Altamaha, is mentioned, in the form "Tapala," as one of the Middle Guale towns (Swanton 1922:82).

(4) The locations of Altamaha villages given by Stewart Shaffer are in the heart of the traditional Yamasee or Guale territory, not in the historic Cherokee domain. These locations are as follows: (a) Altamaha, located where the Oconee and Okmulgee join to form the Altamaha River; (b) an unnamed village, near the present Dublin, Georgia; (c) another unnamed village, near the present village of Ochwalkee, Georgia; (d) Okwaukee, near the spot where the present Georgia and Alabama railroad bridge crosses the Oconee.

(5) The ethnological data supplied by the Shaffers, with the exception of the Stonecoat legend and some nondistinctive traits such as the use of hide armor and the blowgun, seems atypical for a Cherokee group, yet is definitely Southeastern in character (Howard 1959).

For these reasons I believe that the "Altamaha Cherokee" may be identified with the supposedly extinct Yamasee tribe, and that they should not be considered Cherokee. Unfortunately, linguistic analysis, which would be very helpful, is not possible since the Altamaha have lost their native speech.

The principal settlement of this group at the present time is near Shellbluff Landing, in Burke County, Georgia, about ten miles south of Augusta and almost on the Savannah River (Gilbert 1948:422). The family names are Shaffer, Clark, Woods, and Deal. Their settlement is sometimes known as "Shaffertown" or "Shafferville" after the most common surname to be found there (Gilbert 1948:422). Stewart Shaffer took an informal census of the group in 1900 and found that there were 96 men and about 250 persons in all. The Michigan group are located in Albion, Michigan. According to James Shaffer,

other scattered groups are found in the state of Arkansas. The use of the term "Cherokee" by these people can probably be explained as the adoption of a tribal designation carrying high prestige by a remnant Indian group who, perhaps for reasons of security after the Yamasee War, did not wish to reveal their true identity.

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