

French Africans in Ojibwe Country:
Negotiating Marriage, Identity and Race, 1780-1890

by

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Abstract

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This project explores changing constructions of identity for African Americans and Native Americans in the Western Great Lakes region from 1780-1890. I focus on the Bonga family, whose lineage in the region begins with the French-speaking African slaves Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga. Their descendants intermarried with Ojibwe Indians, worked in the fur trade, participated in treaty negotiations between the Ojibwe and the U.S. government, and struggled to preserve Ojibwe autonomy in the face of assimilation policies.

French Africans in Ojibwe Country analyzes how the Bongas' racial identities changed over four generations. Enmeshed in a network of Ojibwe kin ties, yet differentiated from their Ojibwe kin by their status as a family of mixed-ancestry fur traders, the Bongas gained political and social influence in both Indian and white circles. In addition to their social and legal status as Indians, at various times the labels "white," "negro," "half-breed," and "mulatto" were also applied to them. I investigate the social, cultural and political meanings of these fluctuations, situating them within the region's history of cultural contact. By comparing the Bongas' experiences to the incorporation of African Americans into Indian families in the southeast, I forefront the contrasting fluidity of the northern categories of identity. I ask, How did fur trade culture, Ojibwe culture, and intermarriage practices contribute to this regional fluidity? Which factors in the late nineteenth century led to a burgeoning tension between competing notions of race and identity, and had a direct and startling impact on the Bongas' lives? And finally, How were the Bongas' leadership roles related to their ability to manipulate the fluid nature of identity and to exercise agency as they navigated often clashing and changing notions of race, culture and gender?

For John George Harper

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Introduction

At an 1898 meeting of the Minnesota Historical Society, Judge Charles Flandrau publicly recounted a visit he made in 1856 to upper Minnesota. He had been a guest for two weeks at the house of George Bonga, a well-known and prosperous fur trader who had married into the Ojibwe tribe. Flandrau said of his experience staying with Bonga:

He was a thorough gentleman in both feeling and deportment, and was very anxious to contribute to my pleasure during my stay with him. He loved to dwell upon the grandeur of the chief factors of the old Fur Company, and, to show me how royally they traveled, he got up an excursion on the lake, in a splendid birch bark canoe, manned by twelve men who paddled to the music of a French Canadian boat song, led by himself. George was very popular with the whites, and loved to relate to the newcomers his adventures. He was about the blackest man I ever saw, so black that his skin fairly glistened, but was, excepting his brother Jack, the only black person in the country. Never having heard of any distinction between the people but that of Indians and white men, he would frequently paralyze his listeners when reminiscing by saying, ‘Gentlemen, I assure you that Jack Banfil and myself were the first two white men that ever came into this country’.¹

Flandrau probably intended to amuse and educate an audience interested in Minnesota history, but his story actually does Bonga a disservice. Although Flandrau says Bonga had never “[heard] of any distinction between the people but that of Indians and white men,” it is highly unlikely that a man like Bonga, who was educated in Montreal, worked as an interpreter for Lewis Cass, Governor of the Michigan Territory, and interacted with numerous traders and Indian agents, was not aware of the racial concept of “black.” Even though slavery was legally prohibited in Minnesota with both the passage of the Northwest Ordinance in 1789 and the 1820 Missouri Compromise, there was a small black slave community in the 1830s at Fort Snelling, which lay at the hub of the upper Mississippi River. These slaves were rented or purchased by officers and traders, many of whom George Bonga had regular contact with.

Clearly, if George Bonga referred to himself as a “white man” while playing the host and storyteller, he was showcasing his sharp wit and sense of irony. It was an ironic statement to men who knew that in many other places in the U.S. Bonga would be forced into the category of blackness by rigid social, legal and political measures. Flandrau’s anecdote is one of the most repeated stories about George Bonga, probably because it portrays unexpected conceptions of race. This story is recounted in museum exhibits, historical writings, scholarly articles, and biographical portraits on fur traders that appear in documentaries, on the Internet, and in pamphlets geared towards secondary school students.

This anecdote provides a wonderful glimpse into the fluid nature of the region’s categories of identity, and raises questions about the categories of “black,” “white,”

¹ Charles E. Flandrau, “Reminiscences of Minnesota During the Territorial Period,” *Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 9 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1901): 198-199.

“civilized,” and notions of belonging. When Flandrau said Bonga was “a thorough gentleman in both feeling and deportment” he identified Bonga as a “civilized” man, an important category of distinction among the “savage” Indians and fur traders living in the region. As the “only black person in the country...excepting his brother Jack,” George Bonga was not identified as belonging to any black community. Rather, he “was very popular with the whites.” This depiction of George Bonga totally obscures the fact that he had strong kin ties to Ojibwe Indians in the region, and must have felt a real sense of belonging among them. Instead, Flandrau suggests a binary system of identity was in place in which “civilized” or “white” was a category opposed to “savage” or “Indian.” However, upon looking at the records, it is evident that simple binaries were not determining identity in the region. While some members of this family had social and legal statuses as Indians, they were also at various times labeled “white,” “French,” “mixed-blood,” “mulatto,” and “black.” Moreover, these changes did not occur only over generations, but include fluctuations in individuals’ identities over the course of their lifetimes. For example, George Bonga was referred to as “white,” “black,” “mixed-blood,” and “Indian” at different points in his life. This study investigates these fluctuations over time, situating them within the region’s history of cultural contact.

By looking at the categories of identity that were assigned to the Bongas, the kin networks they developed, and the status and wealth they gained, a picture emerges not only of the Bonga family, but of changing constructions of identity for African Americans and Native Americans in the Western Great Lakes through the 19th century. This research looks at the Bongas from roughly 1780-1890, a family whose lineage in the region begins with the French-speaking African couple Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga. They arrived in northern Michigan in 1782 as slaves and were freed and married four years later. Their descendants intermarried with Ojibwe Indians, worked in the fur trade, participated in treaty negotiations between the Ojibwe and the U.S. government, and struggled to preserve Ojibwe autonomy in the face of assimilation policies.

French Africans in Ojibwe Country: Negotiating Marriage, Identity and Race, 1780-1890 analyzes how the Bongas’ racial identities changed over four generations. Enmeshed in a network of Ojibwe kin ties, yet differentiated from their Ojibwe kin by their status as fur traders of mixed ancestry, the Bongas gained political and social influence in both Indian and white circles. As such, this study addresses an emerging topic in Native American Studies: the relationship between African Americans and Native Americans in a racially stratified society. When considering the various labels applied to the Bongas, the question of changing and overlapping racial binaries emerges as central to my project. I build on a considerable literature in the history of Indians and racialization in a triangulated society (Daniel Usner, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, Jack Forbes, Jennifer Spear, James Brooks, and Tiya Miles), but extend this examination to a new region.

While there is a significant body of literature on relations between Native Americans and African Americans, and “Black Indians,” this is largely focused on the southeast region of the United States and the so-called five civilized tribes – the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, and Seminole Indians (Theda Perdue, Christina Snyder, Daniel Littlefield, Claudio Saunt, William Willis, Kathryn Braund). Thematically, this literature overwhelmingly focuses on the evolution of the institution of slavery within Indian communities, the antagonistic nature of black-Indian relations, and

how nineteenth century plantation slavery was comparatively implemented by Indians and whites. *French Africans in Ojibwe Country* diverges from these themes and adds a case history of cooperative relations and attends to a gap in the literature by extending an examination of these relations to the Great Lakes region.

This project also makes an intervention in the fur trade literature, which has overwhelmingly ignored the presence of blacks working in the fur trade. Recent scholarship places kinship and marriage at the center of the fur trade, examining the place of women, the style of marriage, and the nature of the family within the complex of mostly Native-white relations (Jennifer Brown, Sylvia Van Kirk, Susan Sleeper-Smith, and Richard White). I use these studies to compare the incorporation of the Bonga family, rather than French fur traders, into Ojibwe society. Since none of this work examines African Americans in the fur trade, there is an obvious gap in the literature that has been addressed by only two article-length studies (Kenneth Porter, Max Grivno). More specifically, I draw on the fur trade scholarship's framing of marriage as a tool of alliance-making and facilitating trade. The practice of intermarriage figures centrally in my project, as I describe cases of "interracial" marriage and intercultural marriage as a way to shed light on intersections of identity, race and Native kinship networks.

Mythology and legend – setting the record straight

Another field that this project intervenes in is the literature on the history of Minnesota, which overwhelmingly tells a story of Anglo-American settlement and nostalgic narratives about French fur traders. While the Bonga family does surface in various historical narratives about the region, the accounts offered are usually romanticized and legendary tales about their interactions and personal traits. These narratives may be attributed to the type of accounts that were recorded about them by people who had personal interactions with them. There are numerous nineteenth century historical sources that purport to give an accurate account of the Bonga family's migration to the region, but which are evidently far off the mark.

For example, the Rev. James Lloyd Breck traveled with George Bonga through the upper Mississippi Ojibwe country in June 1853, and recorded what he claimed to be the Bonga story in a letter to his brother. Breck wrote:

Our leader in these parts is an Africo-Ojibwa—the respectable and quite well-educated descendent of a negro that was kidnapped by the Chippeways in 1778, and brought from Chicago to the St. Croix River, who, on coming to manhood, intermarried with these people, and hence the negro blood already in a variety of families. This man, George Bungo, as his name runs, is *coal* black, and a large, fine-looking man, enjoying the confidence of all who know him. His wife is an Ojibwe woman, but his children are of a light complexion, and very finely featured. He has been living many years in these parts, being now forty-six years of age. He received his education in English and French in the Canadas.²

² James Lloyd Breck to his brother, June 13, 1853, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck; Chiefly from Letters Written by Himself* (New York: E. & J. B. Young, 1883), 256.

Another missionary traveling through the region about fifteen years later provided a different account of the Bonga migration to the region. Alfred Brunson, a Methodist missionary, hired Stephen Bonga to work for him as an interpreter and recorded what he considered the Bonga family's story:

Bungo's father was an African and a slave, who was brought from the West Indies in the latter part of the eighteenth century, by a British officer to the head of Lake Superior, Fond-du-lac, in the service of the old North-west Fur trade. He soon learned the Chippewa language, from contact with the natives, and as soon as they understood that he was a slave, they informed him that he was a free man in their country, for they allowed of no slavery among them. Upon this, the slave at once assumed his freedom and married a squaw, the Indians protecting him now as a brother. From this marriage came a large family, several of whom obtained education to some extent, and one of them, George Bungo, became first a clerk and then a trader. He was one of the strongest men I ever saw. He loaded himself, at the foot of the Porcupine Mountain, at the mouth of Montreal River, with a pack of goods, and then bags of bullets, till the whole load amounted to eight hundred and twenty pounds, and carried them one thousand paces, up the side of the mountain, and won a bet. Stephen was religious, and inclined to the missions, and the next year I employed him as interpreter among the Chippewas. He spoke both languages with fluency and correctness.³

The first account provides an exciting story of kidnap by Indians and adoption into their tribe. The second account tells a story of liberation by the hands of the local Indians, who were evidently so incensed at the notion of slavery that they forcefully deemed Bonga a free man in the country. Both of these accounts, however, get the story wrong. The Bongas were neither kidnapped nor liberated by the Indians, but they did live and work alongside them first as slaves, and then as their kin.

The actual family history of the Bongas is an interesting and illuminating story, as it traces a journey from slavery at Fort Mackinac in the 1780s, to struggles to maintain Ojibwe lifeways at the Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota in the 1880s. Along the way, there are many exciting, impressive, and tragic milestones for this family. One of the earliest and most remarkable events examined is the transition from slavery to a free status for the Bongas. Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga, after living on Mackinac Island for over a decade as slaves, were manumitted and had the resources, skills, and social capital to open and successfully run a tavern on the island. What makes this all the more remarkable is the fact that it was one of the first public accommodations on the island, and it was frequented by people of all classes.

In the spring of 1834, Henry Schoolcraft interviewed a woman named Mrs. La Framboise at Mackinac Island, whom he identified as "an aged Metif lady." According to Schoolcraft, "She also says that Capt. Robinson, while commanding at Mackinac, discharged a negro servant named Bonga, who afterwards, with his wife, purchased the

³ Alfred Brunson, *A Western Pioneer*, vol. 2 (Cincinnati: Waldon & Stowe, 1879), 83-84.

house and lot in which Mr. Wendell now lives (the old red house next Dousman's, south), where he kept a tavern, and maintained a respectable character."⁴

From this impressive entrepreneurial start as individuals living in freedom, the Bonga family only grew more prosperous. In fact, the Bonga family was so thriving, that in 1897, Joseph Gilfillan remarked in an address before the Minnesota Historical Society, "About Leech lake there are perhaps a hundred descendants of the negro Bungo; nearly all of these are very muscular, and some have been of unusually fine physique."⁵ Considering the spotlight that has been shone on this family in various historical sources and educational venues, however briefly, it is time to move from the legends and folktales to a more accurate history, which requires understanding the broader historical context of the region in which they lived.

Historical treatment of the Western Great Lakes region

The history of the Great Lakes region of North America is filled with international actors and rich with cultural encounters and struggles over empire, religion, land and trade. Historical texts show that there have long been a number of actors from various nations and groups living in and moving through the region, including peoples both indigenous to the continent and from Europe. These historical actors include agents from the European nations of France, England, and Denmark; and Iroquois, Ojibwe, Potawatomi, Ottawa, Huron, Sac and Fox, Ho-Chunk, Menominee, and Dakota Indians. From this perspective, the history of the Great Lakes region can be framed as international.

The Great Lakes region can be envisioned as a triangular area extending from Montreal westward to the Lake of the Woods in what is now Minnesota; with the Mississippi River acting as the southwest border; and the southeast border as the Ohio River. The region includes Lake Superior, Lake Michigan, Lake Huron, Lake Erie, and Lake Ontario, as well as the northern Ohio and Upper Mississippi valleys. Regarding its inhabitants, the region served as original home or way station for the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca, Huron, Wyandot, Ottawa, Ojibwe, Menominee, Dakota, Mesquakie, Sauk, Winnebago, Potawatomi, Kickapoo-Mascouten, Miami, and Shawnee peoples. The Great Lakes region was a site where peoples of comparable strength and sophistication existed together, rather than a place of the tragic and inevitable demise of the inherently weaker Native Americans at the hands of the more powerful Europeans and Euro-Americans.

With this understanding, it is useful to consider how historians' treatments of events and phenomena in the Great Lakes region contributed to changing notions about Native Americans and their interactions with Europeans. The historically-dominant presence of the French among other European nations in the region, beginning with the First French Empire of the early 1500s that included the excursions of Giovanni da Verrazzano and Jacques Cartier as the precursors to colonial expansion, and continuing with the settlement of New France in the 1600s, has resulted in a proliferation of

⁴ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years With the Indian Tribes on the American Frontiers* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1851), 321.

⁵ Joseph A. Gilfillan, "The Ojibways in Minnesota," *Minnesota Historical Collections* 9 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1901), 56.

historical writings on Indian-French relations in the Midwest. Other events in the region commonly examined by historians include the Great Peace of Montreal of 1701; the Seven Year's War (1756-1763), when the French lost American colonies to the British; Pontiac's War (1763); and the War of 1812 (1812 – 1814), that is, the war between the United States and British Canada that ended as a stalemate, establishing the Great Lakes as a permanent boundary between the two nations. After this struggle, Native Americans in the region no longer had European allies as they faced the struggle against American expansion. Many historical narratives depict this as the end of a particular period of international history in the Great Lakes region, when there are no longer various European nations struggling for control of the region and vying for Native American allies.

This project, however, shows that the Americans struggled to establish political and military domination over Ojibwe country as late as the 1850s. Many of the Native groups near the U.S.-Canada border continued to engage in friendly relations with British and Canadian agents long after the region had been deemed American territory. The Americans were aware of this, and it made them nervous, and numerous expeditions were sent to meet with the Ojibwe to try and convince them to sever their ties with the British. Moreover, gifts were given at treaty negotiations with bands of Indians the Americans were trying to win over as loyal allies. The insecurity the Americans felt as a result of the Ojibwes' refusal to swear absolute loyalty to the U.S. government shows that international politics continued in this region far longer than commonly depicted.

My project builds on this historiography, as I examine how one family's journey from slavery to prosperity tells the story of cultural contact and dynamic change and adaptation among Native peoples. Looking specifically at the Ojibwe of northern Minnesota, this project traces how Native people survived as they were first recognized as international actors by Europeans, and then forcibly marginalized as land and resources were occupied and taken by Euro-Americans. Throughout these changes, however, this project shows how the Ojibwe people maintained their sense of cultural and tribal autonomy, even as they adapted and innovated, proving their enduring political savviness and social cohesion. As part of the history of the Great Lakes region, the story of the Bonga family illustrates not only the family's survival in a region long-contested by powerful political forces, but also the survival of a people.

Anishinaabewaki and the middle ground

The scholars Richard White and Michael Witgen have introduced concepts that are foundational to understanding how history unfolded in the western Great Lakes region. Richard White's notion of "the middle ground" brought a new perspective to the process of encounter, as he described the processes of negotiation and cultural innovation that arose when Europeans and Indians could not rely solely on force. As White so usefully demonstrated, "To succeed, those who operated on the middle ground had, of necessity, to attempt to understand the world and the reasoning of others and to assimilate enough of that reasoning to put it to their own purposes."⁶

⁶ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 52.

Michael Witgen's book *An Infinity of Nations* has drawn attention to the importance of understanding Native social formations in the Western Great Lakes region. He uses the term *Anishinaabewaki* to reference the particular social formation that dominated the region in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, noting that the Dakota and the Ojibwe (Anishinaabeg) were the only powerful social formations in the region of any consequence up into the nineteenth century. Witgen explains how *Anishinaabewaki* operated:

The peoples of the interior in particular, and the Anishinaabe bands more generally, fit poorly into European national categories even though the named groups associated with summer village communities, like the Sauteurs and the Ottawas, became increasingly important to the French fur trade and diplomacy. These communities expanded to incorporate a broad range of peoples, each with different claims to hunting territories in the interior, many with trade ties to other villages. These interconnections made *Anishinaabewaki*, as a territory, into something that might be said to have resembled a web as opposed to a national territory. Real and socially constructed kinship established through trade, ritual, language, and intermarriage crisscrossed over a vast space connecting peoples to one another, but not in such a way that territory could be considered a bounded space. *Anishinaabewaki* was not a national identity with exclusive claim to occupy a particular physical space. It was instead a constellation of lived relationships.⁷

The concepts of the middle ground and the social formations of *Anishinaabewaki* are both invaluable contributions to understanding the history of this region. The work of these scholars is indispensable to understanding the fluidity of identities among the Ojibwe, and account for the ways in which the Bonga family was integrated into fur trade and Native communities. Moreover, their emphasis on understanding Native cultural practices highlights the importance of examining kin networks, village communities, and other social formations that are not dictated by the contours of the nation.

Chapter outline and methodology

French Africans in Ojibwe Country is anchored with a focus on one family as a way to underscore the real consequences of colonial encounters for individuals, families, and communities. Examining a region through time, it takes a roughly chronological progression but with comparative flashes forward and backward in time. The work is based on a review of archival records from the fur trade, the Episcopal Church, the Indian Bureau, the federal and state census bureaus, and letters by missionaries, fur traders, businessmen, and politicians. The overarching thread this project follows investigates the ways in which identity and race are reconfigured from fluid categories in the eighteenth century to increasingly hardening and fixed concepts in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In doing this, this work demonstrates that identity, race, and gender are often contested concepts that are being constantly revised.

The first chapter compares the system of slavery in New France and Indian

⁷ Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 89.

systems of captivity and examines Native identity formation in the Western Great Lakes region in the mid- to late-eighteenth century, focusing on Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga. The second chapter focuses on the second and third generations of the Bongas who worked in the fur trade. It considers the major influence the fur trade had in shaping notions of race, gender, sexuality and belonging in the region. Noting the lack of research on blacks in the fur trade, this chapter demonstrates how the Bongas constructed identities that had little to do with race, and much to do with cultivating social ties and negotiating the complex intersections of culture, kinship, and status. In the third chapter, members of the Bonga family are investigated who became involved in political struggles as the fur trade waned and the exploitative “Indian business” flourished due to treaty stipulations. It focuses on identity classification in the legal context of treaties, state-formation and race, and the creation of reservations. The fourth chapter examines the identity of Susan Bonga, George Bonga’s daughter, in the context of the federal “civilizing” program, female domesticity, and Christian missions in Ojibwe country. A moment of crises is analyzed in her life by considering how notion of race and “civilized” identities intersected, and oftentimes clashed in Ojibwe communities.

Overall, the story of this family is relevant to all Native communities because it helps shed light on many of the problems throughout Indian country that stem from colonialism. Understanding the development of federal “civilizing” policies, treaties, the annuity-based economy, and removal efforts illuminates the historical roots of contemporary problems with tribal government, loss of language and culture, tears in the social fabric that created family or parenting problems, and even why there is a disproportionately large percentage of Native Americans who served in the U.S. military. It is also important to learn about the legacies of resistance and efforts to maintain and protect Native communities that surface in the history of treaty negotiations and Indian removal. This understanding can contribute to present efforts at protecting and reclaiming Native homelands, revitalizing languages and cultural practices, and provide strength through the inspiration of ancestors’ actions.

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Chapter 1

French Africans Among Indians: Race, Identity, and Cultural Contact in the Late Eighteenth Century

Introduction

Writing from his Ojibwe community in 1872, George Bonga reflected on his family history in a letter to his old friend and former United States Senator from Minnesota, Henry Rice. Bonga wrote:

I have always been sorry that I did not ask my father while living if he knew where he immigrate[d] from. I am now inclined to think that they must have come from the new state of Missouri, as he did not speak any thing but French... My grand father & his family of 5 or 6 children, might have been taken Prisoners by the Indians & sold to the Indian traders. That is the only way I can guess at it. I understood my father to say, that all his father's family came to Mackinac, this I am certain of, for I had one uncle & two aunts, who went to Montreal with the Indian traders.⁸

Looking back on his family's history at the age of about seventy years, and surely struggling to remember the words of a father who had died nearly thirty-five years ago, George Bonga admittedly felt regret for not having more fully investigated this story when he had a chance. The passing away of his father's memory with his life meant that George Bonga had lost the opportunity to either verify or dispute the veracity of his own memories.

Interestingly, George Bonga seems to get half of the story right. In recalling what he "understood [his] father to say," his memory seems not to have faltered. However, when he attempted to make "a guess at it," his aim was off the mark. Although George Bonga's family was not "taken prisoners by the Indians & sold to the Indian traders," this "guess" at family history actually highlights an important aspect of regional history that did, in fact, greatly shape the trajectory of the Bonga clan. The practice of Indian slavery, or the taking of captives by Indians and selling them to allies, was something that greatly influenced not only the system of slavery in the region, but also the conduct of business and diplomacy among Indians and Europeans. Since George Bonga's grandparents – Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga – were indeed slaves, and also became business owners once they were manumitted, their lives were intertwined with the politics and history of Indian slavery.

Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga were a French-speaking African couple who arrived at Mackinac Island in what is now Upper Michigan in 1782. They were the slaves of Captain Daniel Robertson, the commander of the British fort on the island from 1782 to 1787. Located at the juncture of Lakes Michigan and Huron where the vast network of lake and river routes in the northwest converged, Mackinac fort was an important

⁸ George Bonga to Henry M. Rice, December 1872, Minnesota Historical Society (hereafter cited as MHS). Also published in "Letters of George Bonga," *The Journal of Negro History* 12, no. 1 (January 1927): 53-54.

location of the British empire and an important center of the fur trade. The fortified village had recently been moved to the island from the peninsula, where the fort was called Michilimackinac. The outbreak of the American Revolution had compelled the British to move the community in 1779, where it could be better defended.

Jean and Marie Jean Bonga lived during a tumultuous period of contest for empire in the Great Lakes region. Not only were they subjects of a system of slavery that was constructed during the period of the regime of New France, but they also lived as slaves and free blacks during the period of British imperial control. Evidence suggests that before arriving at Mackinac Island, the Bongas lived in Montreal. Captain Robertson had lived there for twelve years, there was a pattern of other officers at Mackinac purchasing slaves at Montreal to bring west, and a comprehensive study examining the slave population of New France shows that “most of the slaves lived in or near Montreal.”⁹

The Bongas were transferred as slaves to the hub of the fur trade network at Mackinac Island and subsequently freed when their owner exited his post in 1787. They first appeared in the written records as Robertson’s slaves at Mackinac, and they can be traced in records for eight years that show they were included in some of the community’s most significant religious rituals. Their lives were marked by the system of slavery erected in New France, the operation of the middle ground, and the expansion of Catholic kin networks. Consequently, they were part of “that broader, socially dynamic world where human interaction was shaped by both Indian and French cultures.”¹⁰

In trying to understand their lives and the milieu in which they existed, this chapter focuses on how slavery operated in Canada and at Mackinac, the places where the Bongas lived as both slaves and free people. Examining the institution of slavery and its regional particularity through the lens of the Bongas’ lives reveals a complex social world that shaped their lives and was, at the same time, indicative of the broader social processes of accommodation apparent throughout much of the Great Lakes region. Studying the Bongas’ lives highlights the dominance of Indian social processes in the region, and underlines how these processes created an arena of social fluidity and opportunity for many individuals and peoples, particularly blacks.

Robertson owned the Bongas as slaves in a region that not only included systems of slavery practiced under the administrations of New France and Britain, but also included a system of Indian captivity with vast networks. This system of Indian captivity both influenced how slavery was practiced in New France, as well as how it unfolded at Fort Mackinac under the British regime. Moreover, although the British empire gained political control over Mackinac in 1763, cultural and social practices that were developed during the French regime did not disappear. At Mackinac, the Bongas were part of a social world shaped by French–Catholic and Native practices. Their inclusion in this social world helps to tell a story about race, identity, and cultural contact that was particular to the Great Lakes region.

⁹ For the study of slaves in New France see Marcel Trudel, *L’Esclavage au Canada Français: Histoire et Conditions de l’Esclavage* (Québec: Les Presses de l’Université Laval, 1960).

¹⁰ Susan Sleeper Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 44.

New France, Montreal, and Slavery

The Indian system of captivity

As slaves in Montreal and the broader region formerly designated as New France by colonial Europeans, the Bongas were subjects of an institution of slavery with a regional particularity. In order to understand how it operated, it is important to not only understand how slavery operated under the regime of New France, but how the Indian system of captivity functioned. This is because the way slavery developed in the region was contingent on Indian captivity practices and was built upon the practices of the middle ground.¹¹

The Indian system of captivity that influenced how the Bongas were treated goes back to the pre-colonial era. As early as the Mississippian era, when the Mississippian hierarchical societies dominated the South from about A.D. 950 to 1600, “chiefs used captives, along with other prestige goods, to seal alliances with other chiefs and reward supporters.”¹² Historian Christina Snyder demonstrates that captivity practices were part of Native warfare for centuries, and notes, “From the eleventh-century conflicts that produced retainers for Cahokian elites to the Seminoles’ nineteenth-century wars against American imperialism, victors continued to claim human spoils of war.”¹³

Indian captivity practices were widespread in eastern North America and adapted over time to meet changing needs and circumstances.¹⁴ There were vast trading networks

¹¹ In the introduction of this work, I discuss Richard White’s notion of the middle ground, as explored in his book *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹² Christina Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 15, 35. Snyder examines the Mississippians of the pre-colonial era, who created broad, flat-topped earthen mounds ranging from a few feet above ground to a towering 100 feet, upon which sat the houses or temples of chiefs. These chiefdoms built towns such as Cahokia in what is now southern Illinois, Etowah in Georgia, Moundville in Alabama, and Spiro in eastern Oklahoma. Seeking to boost their authority, Mississippian chiefs used captives “to demonstrate their mastery over foreign places and external forces” because captives were “vanquished enemies.”

¹³ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 44.

¹⁴ Indian slavery occurred in other parts of North America. For works on the southwest, see Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006); and James Brooks, *Captives and Cousins: Slavery, Kinship, and Community in the Southwest Borderlands* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002). For the American south, see Alan Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade: The Rise of the English Empire in the American South, 1670-1717* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003). Also see Robert Wieggers, “A Proposal for Indian Slave Trading in the Mississippi Valley and its Impact on the Osage,” *The Plains Anthropologist* 33, no. 120 (May 1988): 198. In his work on Indian slavery’s impact on the Osage, Robert Wieggers notes that the pattern of slave raiding can also be found in Central and South America as well as in Mexico.

established across the continent so that captives sometimes traveled great distances as they were moved from one community to another. As historian Brett Rushforth notes, “The Iroquois obtained and traded enemy Indians from the Chesapeake to Lake Michigan. The Illinois took captives from the central and southern Plains and traded them into the Lake Superior region. And the Ottawas joined their Upper Mississippi Valley allies to raid deep into the Southwest, then traded the captives far to the northeast on Lake Nipissing.”¹⁵

Although captivity was strongly associated with warfare, it was a practice linked to and informed by broader social processes. These included Native spiritual beliefs, social choices, and economic strategies. In fact, slavery had a centrality in intercultural trade, alliances, and community formation, and cannot be understood merely as an economic or military process.¹⁶

When enemies were taken prisoner in war or as retribution for the loss of family members, these captives were swept into a cultural process where they faced either torture and death, or adoption and potential enslavement. Those facing death were ritually killed, while the others were either retained as personal servants or laborers, or presented as gifts to supporters or allies. The Native kinship system was the underlying factor determining which choices were made.

Notions of kinship were at the heart of the Indian captivity system, and determined whether an individual was viewed as kin, an ally, or an enemy. Only those who were not kin could be made captives. There was a relative fluidity, however, of clan or village membership and kin ties. Although Algonquian society was generally structured by patrilineal clan membership that was assigned at birth, events such as migration, extensive intermarriage, and the creation of “multiple ties of actual and symbolic kinship between neighboring peoples heavily modified actual patrilineal organization.”¹⁷ In other words, outsiders were incorporated as fictive kin through the establishment of alliances. Clans could adopt strangers, even former enemies, and they would become kin.¹⁸ As White notes,

In practice, kinship as an organizing principle moved far away from actual descent. The widespread custom of adoption forged social ties that had nothing to

¹⁵ Brett Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’: The Origins of Indian Slavery in New France,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2003): 5. See also Mildred Mott Wedel, “The Identity of La Salle’s Pana Slave,” *The Plains Anthropologist* 18, no. 61 (August 1973): 203-217. Wedel writes about one of La Salle’s Indian slaves, who revealed “the manner in which Indian captives sometimes moved from tribe to tribe” and “the role they played in spreading information, and perhaps cultural traits... over a large area,” 213.

¹⁶ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*.

¹⁷ White, *Middle Ground*, 18. Kathleen Ann Pickering, *Lakota Culture, World Economy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 2. For many Indian peoples, clans structured kin membership and determined access to land and sustenance, redress for wrongs, and protection from aggressors. However, the neighboring Lakota and Dakota peoples further to the west, who also exchanged captives, were structured by the tiyospaye, rather than the clan system.

¹⁸ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 126.

do with birth. If one person adopted an unrelated person as a relative, the adoptee acquired subsidiary kinship relations—a new mother, father, sisters, and brothers—while maintaining his or her old ones.¹⁹

However, fictive kin ties had to be maintained, otherwise the alliances were considered more tenuous or even to have degenerated. Ways of doing this included gift exchange and ceremonial renewal, including the calumet ceremony.²⁰

Symbolic meaning of captives

The symbolic power of captives meant that they were often part of gift exchanges, where they were offered to seal alliances, to replace the dead, and to broker peace negotiations. Gift-giving was central to Indian diplomacy, including in *Anishinaabewaki* where “the exchange of gifts or presents marked obligations between individuals and cemented relationships.” In a society where generosity was highly valued, gift-giving was integral to establishing status and power and highlighting the importance of an agreement between peoples. Captives were considered “prestige goods” that had the power “to mitigate the effects of warfare or murder and became an important medium of exchange” in Indian diplomatic procedures.²¹ For example, in the early eighteenth century, some French visitors to Sioux country were inducted into fictive kin relations when they were offered captives as gifts.

In 1700, a Sioux chief held a feast to honor French trader Pierre Charles Le Sueur, offering him as gifts two powerful symbols of alliance: food and captives. Invoking the ceremonial language of kinship associated with captive exchanges, the Sioux chief pointed to his people and said to the French visitors, ‘No longer regard us as Sioux, but as Frenchmen.’ Le Sueur gratefully received the gift and invited the Sioux to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and settle near the French.²²

Captives had the power to forge alliances, as well as to halt bloodshed. Brett Rushforth emphasizes this in noting, “A gift of captives, even more powerfully than wampum or the calumet, signified the opposite of warfare, the giving rather than the taking of life.”²³ One particular way this occurred was in the practice known as “raising the dead,” or of offering a captive as a gift for an ally’s deceased kin. This was only an appropriate response when an ally perpetrated a murder. Otherwise, if the killer belonged

¹⁹ White, *Middle Ground*, 18.

²⁰ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 55; White, *Middle Ground*, 15, 18.

²¹ Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 4; Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 48; E. A. S. Demers, “John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac,” in *Indian Slavery in Colonial America*, edited by Alan Galloway, 391-416 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Richard White, *Middle Ground*, 36.

²² Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 7.

²³ *Ibid.*, 5.

to an enemy group, the dead were not raised or covered, but instead “blood revenge” was sought.²⁴

Symbolic meaning aside, Indians sometimes secured captives simply as a way to replenish demographically suffering groups. For example, between 1649 and the mid-1660s, the Iroquois engaged in “mourning wars” in which they raided nearby tribes for captives throughout the region bordering the Great Lakes and descending down in the Ohio Valley. After their own numbers were diminished by a series of wars of expansion against nearby tribes to satisfy Dutch demand for furs, the Iroquois sought to secure captives to replace fallen kinsmen or to “atone at the torture stake for their loss.” In these and other cases, the labor and practical value of captives was appreciated.²⁵

The captivity process: capture, humiliation, and adoption

In contrast to Euro-American ideas about slavery, which asserted the labor value and inhumanity of slaves, “the defining characteristic of Indian captivity...[was] the violence and dishonor associated with capture itself.”²⁶ Indian prisoners were ritually humiliated by warriors, and then tortured and further humiliated by villagers upon arrival in the new community. The process then culminated in either a ceremonial killing or adoption.²⁷ Adoptees were integrated into a kinship network, and were overwhelmingly women and children.²⁸ Oftentimes, these women were the captives offered to French traders as a way to create trade alliances.²⁹

²⁴ White, *Middle Ground*, 76, 77, 80. For examples of negotiations to “cover the dead” and “raise the dead” between Algonquians and the French in the early seventeenth century, see White, *Middle Ground*, 82-86, and 89.

²⁵ Daniel Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse: The Peoples of the Iroquois League in the Era of European Colonization* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); White, *Middle Ground*, 1; Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 48; Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 5.

²⁶ Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁸ Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 4. Rushforth explains the abundance of women and children captives: “Seventeenth-century observers consistently noted that all Indian villages spared and adopted women and children more often than men. In addition to targeting the male warriors for revenge killings, this strategy maximized the demographic benefits of captive adoption, whereas increasing the number of adult males in a village would do little to change its reproductive capacity. During times of high mortality resulting from disease or warfare, female captives often represented the best hope for rapidly restoring lost population. Especially in polygynous societies like the Illinois, female captives integrated smoothly into present social structures as second or third wives of prominent men. Children were prized because of the relative ease with which they assimilated into the capturing society, learning new languages and customs much more quickly than older captives.”

²⁹ Demers, “John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac,” 392. Demers notes that “groups found themselves with excess women whom they could barter to French traders as wives.”

There are important differences between how Indians and Europeans deployed slavery and captivity. Although at times these systems accommodated one another on the middle ground, there were also tensions between these systems. Both Richter and Snyder point out how Indian slavery differed from European or Euro-American forms of slavery. Although these scholars examine different geographic areas and historical periods, they both emphasize that Indian slavery was less rigid and racially deterministic than European slavery. In his study of the Iroquois, Richter notes that captives who were viewed as slaves by Europeans were actually adoptees who had been incorporated into kin networks but had been less assimilated.³⁰ Snyder, in her examination of southern Indians, argues that as the South turned towards black slavery, Indians “continued to enslave enemies of all colors and sorted them according to sex and age rather than race.”³¹ Snyder also highlights a difference in conceptualizing the duration of a slave’s status. While Euro-Americans generally targeted blacks as slaves and viewed their slave status as permanent and intergenerational, Indians conceptualized slaves status as mutable and transitory. However, this can not be generalized to include all Indian peoples. As Rushforth points out, “Indians of the Pacific Northwest...condemn[ed] their captives to a state of perpetual inherited slavery.” In contrast, “northeastern Indians’ captives often achieved a measure of social respectability and did not pass their status to their offspring.”³²

Slavery in New France

French fur traders, missionaries, explorers, and other newcomers were introduced to Indian slavery by the Indians they met and forged alliances with. In fact, the system of captivity often shaped their first interactions and influenced the burgeoning economies of new villages and settlements. In the late seventeenth century, French visitors acquired their first “official” slaves as gifts from Indian peoples, when Indian captives were made as offerings of friendship.³³ For example, in 1670 “Jacques Marquette received an Indian captive as a token of friendship after caring for an ailing Kiskakon Ottawa man.”³⁴

The colonists of New France acquired Indian captives from the colony’s Indian allies, particularly the Ottawas and the Illinois. These allies offered slaves they had captured from western enemies “as symbolic gifts to French merchants associated with the fur trade.” Channeled along trade networks by the French to Montreal and Quebec, the captives often contributed to “a modest but growing slave trade into Montreal and Quebec from about 1690 to 1709.”³⁵

At the first two permanent Illinois Country villages, Cahokia and Kaskaskia, the founders had Indian slaves at the turn of the eighteenth century. The population of French

³⁰ Richter, *The Ordeal of the Longhouse*, 69.

³¹ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 150-51.

³² Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 2.

³³ Carl Ekberg, *Stealing Indian Women: Native Slavery in the Illinois Country* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 9; Trudel, *L’Esclavage au Canada Français*; Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 2003. Ekberg also describes how this was the case in Louisiana.

³⁴ Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 5-6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

missionaries, coureur de bois, and Illinois Indians inhabiting the villages were not the first to own Indian slaves in the region, as Carl Ekberg argues, since “Illinois tribes had been acquiring slaves from trans-Mississippian tribes well before Frenchmen arrived in the region.” During the 1770s in St. Louis, members of the ruling class all owned Indian slaves. In fact, Ekberg argues, St. Louis had “a larger proportion of Indian slaves than any ‘white’ community in North America ever had – not excluding Montreal, Detroit, or Charles Town.” Indian slaves constituted nearly seventeen percent of the population in St. Louis, out of roughly five hundred people in 1770. Because it was not a plantation society, these slaves were used principally as domestic servants within the wealthy and powerful households.³⁶

And at Michilimackinac, where the Bongas arrived at the end of the seventeenth century, local Indians provided Indian slaves to the French residents often in exchange for corn, furs, and canoes. Moreover, offering slaves was viewed as a strategy for building closer ties between culturally different peoples because these slaves were placed in a position to become future cultural brokers.³⁷

Particularity of slavery in Canada, the colony of New France

As French-speaking African slaves, the Bongas represented a minority demographic in the slave population in the region. Although the inhabitants of New France had both Indian and black slaves, there were far more Indian slaves, than black. Although no exact census of the slave population is possible, historian Marcel Trudel’s study of local records reveals 3,604 slaves in Canada during the period from 1686 to 1806.³⁸ In all, historian Robin Winks estimates there were some four thousand slaves in New France.³⁹ Most of the slaves lived in or near Montreal, where fifty-one percent of the known total was found.⁴⁰ Of these slaves accounted for, only about 1,132 were black, or just over a third.⁴¹ The total slave population decreased slightly when the British regime displaced the French regime, from 2,087 to 1,517. After this political transition, however, the proportion of black slaves to Indian slaves grew significantly. Black slaves had composed less than one-fifth of the slave population under the French regime; under the British regime, black slaves represented just under half of the slave population.⁴²

In contrast, elsewhere in the world the French empire relied much more heavily on slave labor. By the end of the seventeenth century, the French settled on black labor

³⁶ Ekberg, *Stealing Indian Women*, 16-17, 63, 60. Ekberg notes, “For example, in 1782 at Detroit, slaves constituted only 8% of the total population, and perhaps one-quarter of the slaves were black. And the disproportionate number of female slaves in St. Louis, especially young girls, had increased significantly since 1766. This tendency had been apparent at an early date in the Illinois Country, for women and children Indians were both easier to capture and retain in captivity.”

³⁷ Demers, “John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac,” 403.

³⁸ Trudel, *L’Esclavage au Canada Français*, 57-98.

³⁹ Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1971), 9.

⁴⁰ Trudel, *L’Esclavage au Canada Français*, 130.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 87-94.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 86-87.

“as the principal means of cultivating their West Indian empire.”⁴³ The French experiment of using Caribs as slaves in the West Indies had failed because they fled captivity and suffered a high mortality rate due to first-time exposure to European diseases. In recognition of this problem, an official decree of 1640 forbade the further enslavement of Caribs. Yet this decree was not implemented, and the extermination of the Caribs continued.⁴⁴

Although the Indians in the Great Lakes region adopted many of their captives, they occasionally sold them to work as a field hand or domestic servant for the French. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, officials and colonists generally referred to these Indian slaves as “panis,” and slave owners evidenced little concern with their tribal origins. Trudel notes that the word “panis” entered the Canadian lexicon in the last years of the seventeenth century, and was used widely in French records throughout the eighteenth century.⁴⁵ Much evidence refutes the claim that “panis” slaves were taken primarily from the tribe known today as the Pawnee. For example, Brett Rushforth writes,

In the seventeenth century, names similar to ‘panis’ actually referred to a great number of Plains nations, only some of which have clear modern equivalents. On a single map made in 1688, for example, French cartographer Jean-Baptiste-Louis Franquelin listed as separate nations the ‘Panimaha,’ ‘Panetoca,’ ‘Pana,’ ‘Paneake,’ and ‘Paneassa,’ any or all of whom could have suffered at the hands of Illinois raiders. Of these groups, none can be said with any certainty to be ancestors to the modern Pawnees. More important, when seventeenth-century French observers noted the source of Illinois slaves, they universally suggested multiple victims.⁴⁶

Because these *panis* slaves outnumbered black slaves, the system of slavery in Canada was not associated with “blackness” or based on race, as generally occurred in

⁴³ William B. Cohen, *The French Encounter with Africans: White Response to Blacks, 1530-1880* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 35. Cohen notes that the exact date when the French began to use black slave labor is unknown.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁵ Trudel, *L'Esclavage au Canada Français*, 64.

⁴⁶ Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 6. For more on the term “panis” see Rushforth, who builds his argument with further evidence. See also Ekberg, *Stealing Indian Women*, 13; Wedel, “The Identity of La Salle’s Pana Slave. Ekberg notes: “‘Pana slaves’ may have come from any number of tribes living west of the Missouri River in what is now eastern Nebraska and northern Kansas. These included the Panis (Pawnee), Panis-Piqués (Wichita), Panis Noirs (Wichita), Panimaha (Skidi or Wolf Pawnee), and a variety of other Caddoan-speaking tribes with a bewildering array of names. Some of these tribes may have included the ancestors of today’s Pawnees, but even that is not certain.” Wedel writes, “But the general usage of ‘Pani’ for any Indian slave rather than a Pawnee seems to have developed after 1682-83 among the French, nearer 1700 or soon thereafter,” 209.

some other regions. Accordingly, living as slaves under the jurisdiction of New France was a different experience than in the English colonies, especially for blacks.⁴⁷

Moreover, the way the French used Indian slaves is consistent with the meanings with which Native peoples imbued their captives. Inhabitants of New France both recognized the symbolic power of Indian captives and utilized this meaning, in addition to appreciating their labor power. As Rushforth points out, the colonists of New France pursued two seemingly contradictory policies with the Indians in the region: they focused on building Indian alliances as they also developed an extensive system of Indian slavery.⁴⁸ Rushforth suggests that at first glance these policies may seem incompatible, but upon examination of the Indian system of captivity and how it was integral to building alliances among Native peoples, it is hardly surprising that colonists picked up on this practice. Clearly, the way that slavery was practiced in Canada, first under French and then British control, was heavily influenced by indigenous practices of captivity.

Slavery remained marginal to New France's economy, which revolved around the fur trade and fishing. There was no economic base upon which slavery could be profitably built and little demand for either slave or *engagé* (indentured) labor. However, in the 1690s, "Indian slaves began to appear in the public records of Montreal and Quebec, indicating a small but growing acceptance of Indian slavery among New France's elite."⁴⁹ A clear legal status for slaves, both Indian and black, was implemented with the 1709 *Ordonnance*. Jacques Raudot, royal intendant in Quebec, sought to dispel confusion in the colony about who was slave and who was free with his lengthy *ordonnance* that declared, "all the *panis* and Negroes who have been purchased and who will be purchased, shall be the property of those who have purchased them and will be their slaves."⁵⁰ By 1736, slavery had grown sufficiently to require records as well as regulation in New France, and the intendant, Gilles Hocquart, issued an *ordonnance* that provided for a uniform means of manumission.⁵¹

Additionally, the *Code Noir* regulated slaves' status in New France. Although the *Code* was never officially proclaimed in New France, Trudel argues it was used as customary law to regulate the status of slaves in the colony. There were two versions of the *Code Noir*; the first was drafted in 1685 for application to the West Indies, while a

⁴⁷ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 12. On this point, Winks writes, "Neither the church nor the state in French territories faced the reality of slavery so readily as in some Spanish and Portuguese lands, but neither did slavery emerge in so hardened and harsh a form as in the English colonies...In the English colonies...the presumption of the law was in favor of slavery as the Negro's natural condition."

⁴⁸ Rushforth, "'A Little Flesh We offer you,'" 2.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁰ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 6.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 3, 6. Regarding the need for a uniform means of manumission, Winks notes, "Between 1706 and 1736 the number of slaves who had been given their freedom – or claimed they had – increased rapidly, leading to confusion (especially among the unchristianized who shared the same or similar names) about who was slave and who was free."

revision was issued in 1724 to include the new colony of Louisiana.⁵² Winks notes, “The original *Code* was drafted to protect the white man from forms of slave violence: theft, revolt, and escape. Since slaves were not numerous in New France, little attention was given to specific regulations covering such eventualities until a specific case arose, which then was dealt with on its merits and within the spirit of the code.”⁵³

Because slavery was not based on race in New France, as in other regions, the status of slaves was more fluid. Slave status was not considered a role just for blacks, nor was it assumed that all slaves would remain slaves for their lifetime. Since the designation of slave was more tenuous, it naturally afforded more opportunities to blacks in the region. Furthermore, no legislative steps were taken to prevent intermarriage in New France, and if a white man married a black slave woman, she was subsequently freed by the act of marriage.⁵⁴ In fact, the tenuousness of slave statuses was legislated by royal decree. King Louis XIV rejected a proposal Hocquart made to include measures in his 1736 *ordonnance* that would rigidify the status of slaves. Instead, the king ordered that the looser, more fluid customary law should continue. “Any move to advance the assumption that all Negroes were slaves – as was occurring for Negroes in the English colonies at this time – and thus to formalize their condition along purely racial lines, was thereby blocked.”⁵⁵

The diplomacy of Indian slavery

Despite the lack of labor-based motivations for adapting slavery in Canada, the French quickly realized there were other reasons for doing so that were equally, perhaps even more, pressing. Rushforth argues that the colonists of New France adapted Indian slavery between 1660 and 1710 because western traders and French officials recognized the symbolic power of captives while French families learned to rely upon their labor power. Although traders accepted Indian slaves from Native allies as a way to strengthen trade relations, following the Great Peace of 1701, French officials realized that captive exchanges offered one of the most effective means of stabilizing the precarious alliance created by the new treaty.⁵⁶

⁵² Ekberg, *Stealing Indian Women*, 10. There was also a third set of regulations in France. Ekberg writes, “Seventeenth-century French jurists did not generally accept slavery as a normal institution of human society within Europe...French legal traditions leaned heavily against the existence of slavery on the soil of metropolitan France. On the other hand, overseas colonies gradually came to be viewed as altogether different legal entities on the issue of slavery...In a triumph of practicality and convenience over consistency in legal theory, an institution that was deemed unacceptable in metropolitan France was deemed perfectly acceptable in the overseas colonies.”

⁵³ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 7.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁶ Rushforth, “A Little Flesh We Offer You,” 9. “In the summer of 1701, the French successfully negotiated the Great Peace of Montreal, a treaty by which the Iroquois promised to cease warfare against the French and their allies and to remain neutral in all conflicts between the French and the English.”

In fact, exchanging captives became quite central to the diplomacy of New France, so that by 1708 French officials were relying on it as the sole means of maintaining peace between the Ottawas and the Iroquois. Moreover, when the Governor-General of New France, Marquis de Vaudreuil, was “asked by Versailles in 1707 to buttress the French alliance with the Abenakis...[he] promptly sent orders to Jean-Paul Legardeur de Saint-Pierre to buy ‘a young panis slave to be given to the Abenaki’ as a token of friendship.”⁵⁷

The Fox Wars demonstrated both the centrality of captivity to the system of Indian diplomacy, as well as how adroitly Indians wielded the Indian slave trade as a tool to limit French expansion. When the French wished to expand their trade alliances and influence into the west by befriending the Fox, those Indians already allied with the French blocked this move. New France’s allies, including the Illinois, Ottawas, Ojibwes, Miamis, and Hurons, were enemies of the Fox, and although they needed Fox cooperation during the Iroquois War of the mid-seventeenth century, they sought to exclude them from French protection and trade.⁵⁸ Their strategy involved deploying the Indian slave trade in a way that would manipulate the French into antagonizing the Fox. Rushforth explains how this was carried out:

By raiding Fox villages for captives, and then giving or selling these captives to the French as slaves, these peoples drove a deep and eventually fatal wedge between the French and their erstwhile Fox allies. Despite official French policy of befriending the Fox, French colonists’ demand for Fox slaves supported this strategy, ultimately ensuring its success by alienating the Fox from French interest and finally compelling them to war.”⁵⁹

French-allied Indians in the region clearly understood how to politically alienate their enemies by way of the slave trade. By doing this, and maintaining their position as suppliers of slaves to the French, certain Indians were able to leverage their position and demand French accommodation to their customs.

Black slaves in New France

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century, official French policy was in favor of using black slaves, rather than Indian slaves, in New France. Despite this official position, efforts to obtain and import black slaves in significant numbers were repeatedly defeated and blacks remained a slim minority within the slave population.⁶⁰ With the notable exception of Olivier Le Jeune, who was the first black slave on record in New France, there were no black slaves on record until the last decades of the century.⁶¹ Frustrated by the political complexities of Indian slavery and facing frequent shortages of

⁵⁷ Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You,’” 11.

⁵⁸ Brett Rushforth, “Slavery, the Fox Wars, and the Limits of Alliance.” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63, no. 1 (January 2006): 57.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ As noted earlier, during the French regime, black slaves constituted less than one-fifth of the slave population.

⁶¹ Trudel, *L'Esclavage au Canada Français*, 2. Olivier Le Jeune came to Quebec from Africa in 1632.

labor, French officials looked to black slavery for a solution.⁶² For example, in 1688 Governor Marquis de Denonville argued to officials in France that importing black slaves to the colony was necessary to address a shortage of labor. He complained that paid workers and servants were too rare and expensive to allow the colonists to flourish.⁶³ In both 1689 and 1701, Louis XIV formally authorized the use of black slavery in Canada, but war and political instability prevented its growth. Thus, the number of black slaves did not grow proportionately because it was nearly impossible to import slaves in large numbers from the West Indies.⁶⁴ Neighboring colonies beckoned as the most convenient sources for slaves, which proved to be an option the French regime did not shy away from. A royal decree was issued in July 1745 that authorized the selling of “slaves from enemy colonies who fled into French territory,” with the proceeds going to royal coffers.⁶⁵ Indeed, war with the English colonies, illegal sales between colonists, and Indian incursions into English colonies provided a substantial proportion of the black slaves in Canada.⁶⁶ Additionally, English settlers chose and brought in substantial numbers of black slaves after 1759.⁶⁷

Although slavery became more common in Canada following Raudot’s *ordonnance* of 1709, black slavery never took hold in Canada to the same extent that it did in Louisiana and in the Illinois Country. French settlers owned more slaves than the British under both regimes, and they preferred Indian slaves, who were not even half as expensive as black slaves.⁶⁸

Regarding conditions under slavery, Winks argues that there was less social distance between black slaves and slave owners in Canada under New France than in other regions with black slaves. Because more than three-quarters of slaves in Canada lived in towns, with over half of the total population living in or near Montreal, their urban existence afforded them advantages that slaves living in plantation societies did not have.⁶⁹ These black slaves were overwhelmingly working as domestic servants, they

⁶² Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 8.

⁶³ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 4. Also, intendant Michel Bégon hoped to solve the colony’s labor shortages by importing African slaves, as noted in Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You,’” 13.

⁶⁴ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 5. “The outbreak of King William’s War, and Denonville’s recall, virtually nullified the Royal assent [of 1689].” And then Queen Anne’s War, or the War of the Spanish Succession, broke out in 1702.

⁶⁵ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 16.

⁶⁶ Trudel, *L’Esclavage au Canada Français*, 90-93.

⁶⁷ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 9.

⁶⁸ Trudel, *L’Esclavage au Canada Français*, 57; Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 15. On the comparative prices of slaves, Winks writes, “Under the French, the average *pani* cost four hundred *livres* while the Negro brought 900 *livres*; again, the latter’s greater expense helped to protect him against abuse.”

⁶⁹ Trudel, *L’Esclavage au Canada Français*, 130. According to Trudel’s numbers, 52.3% of the known total of the slave population was documented as living in Montreal; 77.2% of all slaves lived in towns.

experienced physical proximity to their owners, and were exposed to free blacks.⁷⁰ Moreover, the opportunities for education in the towns and the “stability of service engendered by marriage customs and inheritance” both narrowed the social gap between white and black that was a yawning chasm in other regions. Further, many of the government officials and military officers who owned slaves planned to return to Europe someday, and not expecting to hold their slaves indefinitely as property, viewed them less as true chattels.⁷¹

Slavery under the British regime

The political transfer of power to the British regime with the Treaty of Paris in 1763 incidentally resulted in the legal strengthening of slavery in Canada. English criminal and civil law were introduced to Quebec in the terms of peace, which effectively nullified the protections afforded to slaves by the customary law of the *Code Noir*. Between 1763 and 1790, the British government added legal clarity to the system of slavery and on several occasions provided explicit guarantees to slave owners that their property would be respected. The Imperial Act of 1790 offered particularly strong protections to slave owners in legislation that allowed free importation into North America of all “Negroes, household furniture, utensils of husbandry or cloathing.”⁷²

The change in political regimes, however, failed to overturn long-held practices. The first civil governor of Quebec under the new regime, General James Murray, was sympathetic to the French Canadians and allowed French customs and codes to continue to govern slave relations. The Quebec Act of 1774 reinforced this position by restoring earlier French civil law to the province.⁷³ Essentially, the French carried on with slavery in the same way as they had under the British regime, even continuing to own more slaves than the English.⁷⁴

From Montreal to Fort Mackinac

Captain Robertson and the Bongas

Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga were owned by Captain Daniel Robertson, a Scotsman who married into a wealthy and prominent Canadian family of New France. In 1760 in Montreal, Robertson married Marie-Louise Reaume. The Reaume family was one of sixty-seven families in New France that had a dozen or more slaves, and out of this group, only six families had more slaves than the Reaumes, who had twenty-nine slaves.⁷⁵ In 1763, Robertson settled in Montreal after the reduction of the British army following the Treaty of Paris. At the outbreak of the American Revolution, Robertson was a major in the Montreal militia and by June 1775, he was appointed captain-

⁷⁰ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 10. In fact, Winks also notes, only “22.8% of the slaves were field laborers, but only 192 of these were black, since black men most often were servants.”

⁷¹ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 21.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 26.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 24-26.

⁷⁴ Trudel, *L'Esclavage au Canada Français*, 57.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 58.

lieutenant of the 1st battalion of the Royal Highland Emigrants. Robertson was captured by the American rebels at Fort St. Johns in November 1775, and exchanged and released in early 1777, whereupon he returned to Montreal.⁷⁶

Considering that Robertson lived in Montreal from 1763 to 1775, and had married into one of the wealthy slave-owning families living there, it is likely that Montreal is where he first connected with the Bongas. Further, Trudel's data showing that more than half of the slaves in Canada lived in Montreal support the argument that the Bongas were slaves in this region. It is possible that one or both of the Bongas were serving in Robertson's household during the twelve year period he was settled in Montreal, during which he and his wife had six children (two of whom died in infancy) and his wife died.⁷⁷

In September 1779, Robertson was appointed commandant at Fort Oswegatchie, a small post on the St. Lawrence. He was there for three years, where he supervised raids on American rebels along the Mohawk frontier and impressed his superiors by personally leading a successful attack on a settlement on the Mohawk River.⁷⁸ As a captain at this post, Robertson most likely would have had slaves or servants in his employ. As historian Max Grivno notes, "Among the aristocratic officers and prominent traders, black slaves were more than laborers; they became important symbols of status."⁷⁹ It is possible that Robertson had both the Bongas there with him, because during this period they already had two children – the first born in 1777 and the second in 1778. On the other hand, he also could have obtained the Bonga family once he was transferred to Mackinac, anticipating that it would be appropriate for him to arrive with slaves.

There are reasons to assume that the Bonga family was kept together once they had children and were not at high risk of being separated to be sold. Trudel points out that the *Code Noir* provided some basic guarantees to slaves that helped maintain their humanity. Namely, slaves were guaranteed a Catholic education, it was forbidden for slave owners to abandon them at old age, and a family could not be separated to be sold.⁸⁰ And although the British regime was in place at this point, it appears that French

⁷⁶ David A. Armour, "Robertson, Daniel," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, 1801-1820* 5, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=2631 (published as a volume in 1983, accessed online June 2012). Reproduced from the print version of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, a joint project of the University of Toronto and the Université Laval; "The British Regime in Wisconsin," In *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 18 (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1908), 436-437 n50; David A. Armour and Keith Widder, *At the Crossroads: Michilimackinac During the American Revolution* (Mackinac Island, Michigan: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1978), 182.

⁷⁷ Armour, "Robertson, Daniel." Robertson's wife, Marie-Louise Réaume, died on October 17, 1773.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Max Grivno, "'Black Frenchmen' and 'White Settlers': Race, Slavery, and the Creation of African-American Identities along the Northwest Frontier, 1790-1840." *Slavery and Abolition* 21, no. 3 (December 2000): 79.

⁸⁰ Trudel, *L'Esclavage au Canada Français*, 162. Trudel writes, "Il y a dans ce Code Noir une part admirable d'humanité: l'esclave est assuré d'un minimum d'entretien,

customs towards slavery continued as before. In fact, writing about slavery in Canada under the British regime at the end of the eighteenth century, Winks notes, “There are only two records of husband and wife being separated for sale, and but one instance of a young child being sold apart from his parent.”⁸¹

Considering this, it makes sense to base a determination of the Bongas’ trajectory on their children’s births, knowing that they most likely remained together throughout these events. Since their son Pierre was likely born in 1777, the Bongas were therefore most likely living together at that period and had the same owner. Robertson may have been their owner as early as this date; he had just returned to Montreal this year after having been released as a prisoner. Significantly, he returned with a new rank – that of captain-lieutenant – and he had four children to look after who had no mother. Furthermore, Robertson had a respectable status in his community at this time, having been honored in 1768 with a “public notice of thanks” after serving as a member of the grand jury at Montreal.⁸² Therefore, he was in a position where it was entirely appropriate to have slaves looking after his domestic affairs, and perhaps it was at this point that he took over ownership of the Bongas.

Irrespective of the exact point at which Robertson established ownership of the Bonga family, there is much evidence to build the case that they lived in Montreal prior to living at Mackinac. First of all, their given names – Jean and Marie-Jeanne – and the fact that they were French-speaking suggests they lived in New France long enough to learn the language and to receive these names. Additionally, both their names and the circumstances of their daughters’ baptisms at Mackinac strongly suggest that Jean, Marie-Jeanne, and their son Pierre were baptized as Catholics in Montreal. When the younger children were baptized at Fort Mackinac, neither Pierre nor the parents were baptized. The most likely reason is that these three were already baptized at Montreal. The parents would not have baptized their younger children and have been allowed to be married by a priest if they had not been baptized themselves. Moreover, the fact that they had an owner who was not involved in the Catholic rites at Mackinac – Robertson never appears in the registers – further attests to their commitment to the Catholic religion and their integration into the Catholic community. Under the British regime, slaves overwhelmingly followed in the religion of their owners. Yet the fact that the Bongas were Catholic suggests that they had Catholic owners at some point, probably in Montreal. Since Robertson’s in-laws were French-Catholic, it is possible that the Bongas came from his household in Montreal, or the Reaume household, which had a proportionately large number of slaves. As part of a Catholic household in Montreal the Bongas would have likely been baptized, since the slave population was accordingly Catholic in a proportion of 92.5%⁸³

As further evidence, general data about the slave population in New France points to the Montreal region as the most likely place for French-speaking black slaves in New

il doit recevoir une éducation catholique, on n'a pas le droit de l'abandonner quand il se fait vieux, on ne peut vendre séparément le père, la mère et les jeunes enfants.”

⁸¹ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 52.

⁸² Armour, “Robertson, Daniel,” 1.

⁸³ Trudel, *L'Esclavage au Canada Français*, 198. Trudel notes this was because it was overwhelmingly French Canadians who owned slaves.

France to be living. Assuming this was the case, Jean and Marie Jeanne probably spoke not only French, but also English and some Native languages. In addition to any personal ties or history Robertson had cultivated with them, this would be another reason they were valuable and that Robertson would want to have them as his servants at Mackinac.

At Fort Mackinac

When the Bongas moved to Mackinac Island in 1782, they entered a major thruway of what Richard White has called “the middle ground,” where Indian-European relations in the Great Lakes region created “new systems of meaning and exchange.”⁸⁴ Innovative cultural practices were negotiated on the middle ground between Indians and the French, the British and finally the Americans. On trading and gift-giving, White describes the processes as a cultural compromise in which Europeans accommodated the customs of Native people and had to adjust to the local kinship politics of Native society. White shows that the British struggled to emulate the relations the French had with the Indians, but ultimately failed. When the Bongas came to Mackinac Island, the British were struggling to grasp the workings and diplomacy of the middle ground. They were at a comparative disadvantage “in not having kin status with the fur-trading families, and not having a knowledge of local trade protocols.”⁸⁵

As a crossroads of the fur trade industry, Mackinac had trading networks reaching far north of Lake Superior, west across the Mississippi River, south into the Illinois Country and along the shores of Lake Michigan. The region’s social organization was profoundly shaped by this trade, with Indian and French families over the past century having built their lives and networks around its organization and maintenance. The fort had passed from French to British control in 1760, and soon after British traders surged into the region. As Demers notes:

The British conquest of New France and the *pays d’en haut* in the Seven Years’ War (1757-1763) had significant impact on the lives of the interior French and Native Americans. Suddenly the tide of English traders that the French had struggled so mightily to contain for over a century poured into the upper country’s villages, posts, and towns.⁸⁶

Although the French and their Native allies had been locked in a violent struggle with the British and had animosity towards them, those in the interior near Mackinac were relieved to see the end of the war. It had led to an interruption in trade and caused hardship.⁸⁷

Travelers to Mackinac included British officers, Indians from many nations, French Canadians, a scattering of free and enslaved Blacks, and aggressive English, Scottish, and French businessmen who were lured by furs. Each summer thousands of Indians, including Ojibwe, Ottawa, Sac and Fox, Menominee, Ho-Chunk, and even

⁸⁴ White, *Middle Ground*, x.

⁸⁵ Demers, “John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac,” 393.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

occasionally a few Dakota, came to exchange presents with the military officers in a ritual gift-giving that took place on the middle ground.⁸⁸

When Captain Robertson assumed the responsibilities of commanding officer at Fort Mackinac, he was entering a situation that had been politically unstable. The previous commandant, Patrick Sinclair, had struggled to contain the American rebels and their Native allies in the Illinois Country while also contending with the Spanish settlements far down the Mississippi River. Furthermore, during the early 1780s Sinclair and Sir Frederick Haldimand, Governor of Quebec, constantly questioned the loyalty of northwest traders and some Indian groups. They feared that goods were being smuggled to American rebels from Lake Superior's southern shore.⁸⁹

Moreover, Sinclair left his post because the British had trouble grasping the importance of negotiating on the middle ground. The administration refused to grant the funds necessary to buy enough gifts to maintain important Indian alliances; therefore problems arose. When Robertson took up the post, he was given clear instructions to depart from Sinclair's practices in order to reduce expenses.⁹⁰

Under Robertson's command, the work to complete building Fort Mackinac continued and war with the American rebels settled into a stalemate. Although gift expenses were reduced, the traders' business flourished because of the relative peace along the Mississippi. In May 1783, the Mackinac community finally learned of the terms of the Peace of Paris and was shocked by the news that Mackinac Island was determined to be U.S. territory. As construction at Fort Mackinac lapsed, the village on the island continued to grow. The British evacuated the fort for their new fort on St. Joseph Island in the St. Mary's River in 1796, and the Americans occupied Fort Mackinac.⁹¹

Slavery at Mackinac

When Robertson and the Bongas arrived at Mackinac Island in 1782, there were not only slaves in the region, but also traders in the region who made money by selling slaves. John Askin, a British merchant living at Mackinac who owned twenty-three slaves over his career, also bought and sold both black and Indian slaves.⁹² In 1778 Askin conducted transactions over several peoples' lives, including arranging for a "mulatto" woman belonging to one man to work in another man's house, selling an Indian slave, and seeking to purchase "two pretty panis girls of from 9 to 16 years of age."⁹³ The "mulatoe woman" was a domestic in Askin's house, but by selling her he could afford to replace her labor with two younger, cheaper Indian slaves.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 19.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁹⁰ Henry Hope to Captain Daniel Robertson, 20 Sept. 1782, "The Haldimand Papers," in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* 10 (Lansing: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Company, State Printers, 1908), 638-640.

⁹¹ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 179, 193, 196.

⁹² Trudel, *L'Esclavage au Canada Français*, 158. Trudel lists the number of slaves owned by the Askin family.

⁹³ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 80; Demers, "John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac," 404.

⁹⁴ Demers, "John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac," 404-405.

The way Askin conducted business, however, differed greatly from the way slave traders were dealing with slaves in plantation societies. Even under the British regime, slavery at Mackinac persisted as “basically a family affair with roots in the region’s network of French and native villages.”⁹⁵ In other words, slavery was still dictated by kinship relations, rather than dominated by economic terms. For example, Askin himself had three children with an Ottawa slave woman named Manette, whom he eventually manumitted in 1766 (after she bore their three children).⁹⁶ In contrast to a relationship based on sexual exploitation and slave-breeding, as oftentimes occurred in plantation societies, Askin’s relationship with Manette was a matter of establishing kin relationships. He used his connections with Manette’s Ottawa relatives and clan as a way to strengthen his position and influence as a trader. Demers states, “Manette’s status as a slave would have had no impediment to the development of these [kin] ties. As part of a complex system of gift and trade exchange, female slaves represented the community’s desire to establish links with the new masters of Michilimackinac.”⁹⁷

Askin apparently did not view slaves in strictly economic terms, but rather considered their kin ties as central to their importance and value. Perhaps because of his own mixed-race children and the close resemblance to the affairs of his own life, Askin took pity on a “boy...who was sold to the Ottawas” and reputed to be the mixed-race son of another prominent trader. In 1778, Askin admonished Charles Patterson, who was then at Montreal, for selling his own son from a relationship with an Indian woman. Askin wrote in a letter to Patterson, “I have at length been able to get him from them on promise of giving an Indian Woman Slave in his Stead – he’s at your service if you want him, if not I shall take good care of him until he is able to earn his Bread without Assistance.”⁹⁸

Demers argues that Askin’s conduct reveals the persistence of customs of the middle ground during the period of the British regime, in that Indian attitudes towards slavery were still in practice. Demers notes, “In this case, the exchange of a male child for a female adult suggests that labor needs were not at the core of Indian slavery, but rather the bonds that could be established between both sides through the nature of exchange.”⁹⁹ In other words, besides being outraged that Patterson had the moral turpitude to sell his own son, Askin also attempted to cultivate ties through this exchange with both Patterson and the Ottawas who had bought the boy.

The fluidity of slavery

In the region, besides Indian and black slaves, there was also a form of servitude by white *engagés* that helped to further divorce labor from race. According to Grivno:

⁹⁵ Demers, “John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac,” 391.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 397-398. Demers notes, “The documentary record is unclear on Askin’s purchase of – and relationship with – Manette (or Monette), although there is evidence he probably bought her from René Bourassa, an influential Michilimackinac trader...[after she was manumitted] she disappears from the historical record.”

⁹⁷ Demers, “John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac,” 399.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 400. Cited from John Askin to Charles Patterson at Montreal, June 17, 1778, in Milo M. Quaife, ed., *The John Askin Papers*, 2 vols. (Detroit: Detroit Library Commission, 1928), 1: 134.

⁹⁹ Demers, “John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac,” 400.

The *engages* [were] employed by fur companies to staff outposts and transport goods. Clearly, comparisons between slaves and *engages* must not be overstated; unlike bondsmen and women, *engages* chose to enter into contracts, received some wages, and did not pass their status to their children... Still, *engages* surrendered a large measure of their personal freedom and mobility by entering lifetime contracts with their employers.¹⁰⁰

In 1803, Alexander Henry described an *engagés*' contract as "an agreement of perpetual bondage," highlighting the servile status of the laborers. In fact, according to Henry, an *engagés*' autonomy was compromised to the point that the employer was bound to "clothe him" and to give permission to marry.¹⁰¹

Employers often used free blacks and slaves interchangeably with whites and Indians, making it difficult to create ethnic and racial distinctions based on occupation.¹⁰² Although most slaves performed domestic chores or manual labor, they were not necessarily associated with specific occupations or servile positions. For example, Askin put considerable trust in his black slave Pompey and an Indian employee, who may have been a *panis*, since the terms servant and slave were often used interchangeably.¹⁰³ In May 1778, Askin sent a shipment of goods from Michilimackinac to Sault Ste. Marie aboard the *Mackinac*. For the job, Askin put "the Indian" in command of the ship, and ordered Pompey and a Scottish wage laborer named McDonald to work alongside each other. Askin did not provide for them equally, as "the Indian" and McDonald received a daily ration of one quarter pint of rum, but Pompey got only one-eighth pint." Moreover, although "the Indian" was in command of the ship, McDonald was paid more, and he received a salary of 1,170 *livres* per year compared to the 900 *livres* "the Indian" received. After the ship reached its destination, Askin had arranged for "the Indian" and McDonald to work elsewhere, and Pompey "and a man yet to be hired were to sail the *De Peyster* across Lake Superior; upon return, Pompey was to come back to Michilimackinac." This shows that Askin placed a great amount of trust and responsibility in Pompey's hands, who had a fair amount of independence in his work and movement. Pompey and another one of Askin's black slaves, a skilled cooper named Jupiter, were competent sailors and regularly manned the *Mackinac* and the *De Peyster*.¹⁰⁴

The presence of free blacks alongside slaves also helped to destabilize the assumption that all blacks were slaves, or that slaves would remain fixed in their position. Jean Baptiste Point Du Sable is an example of a prominent and educated free black, and

¹⁰⁰ Grivno, "Black Frenchmen and White Settlers," 81.

¹⁰¹ Alexander Henry, *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799-1814*, volume 1, edited by Barry M. Gough (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1988), 137.

¹⁰² Grivno, "Black Frenchmen and White Settlers," 80.

¹⁰³ Trudel, *L'Esclavage au Canada Français*, 60-61. Trudel notes that beginning with the period of the French regime, authorities and officials were reluctant to use the word "*esclave*," and oftentimes employed the word "*domestique*" when referring to slaves. However, not all individuals designated as "*domestiques*" were necessarily slaves, so it was not a consistent process.

¹⁰⁴ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 76.

there were certainly more. Du Sable was held as a prisoner at Michilimackinac for about six months after he was arrested in August 1779 for conspiring with the American rebels. The commandant at Michilimackinac at the time of Du Sable's capture, Arent Schuyler DePeyster, described Du Sable as "A handsome negro, well educated (and settled at Eschecagou); but much in the French interest."¹⁰⁵ In the fall of 1779, a free black man named "Black Piter" was involved in an encounter with a ship heading to

Michilimackinac that got caught in a storm. When the ship dropped anchor near shore, Black Piter, accompanied by three Indians, including a chief... greeted the visitors... They presented [the captain] with some venison and received in return two bottles of rum, a piece of tobacco, bread, and some pork. Standing on deck [the captain] gave Black Piter several strings of wampum, two gallons of rum, and a carrot of tobacco which he promised to deliver to Grand Sable, one of the Chippewa chiefs from Mackinac Island."¹⁰⁶

In this example, not only was a black man free, but he was also acting as a middleman for an important Ojibwe Indian. As these examples show, in this region "color or ethnic background did not necessarily bear a direct relation to one's status; black slaves found themselves in a position similar to [Indian slaves] or white *engages*, while free blacks found themselves enjoying more independence than the *engages*."¹⁰⁷ With these dynamics in the region, it helped to prevent the association of blackness with slavery that was cropping up in other parts of the country.

Although the record does not clearly state whether the Bongas were employed domestically, as slaves of the commandant at Mackinac, the Bongas probably remained at the fort doing work for Robertson. Some of their daily activities may have included "repairing equipment, hauling, cleaning furs and hides, and other sundry tasks."¹⁰⁸ Certainly, slaves often contracted with traders as canoeists on trading voyages, and were involved in numerous roles as hunters, assisting on ships, and food preparation. The young Pierre Bonga most likely was hired to work on trading voyages and gained valuable experience. However, the fact that the Bongas later opened a tavern and ran one of the only hotels on the island indicates that they had spent their time at the fort with Robertson.

The persistence of the middle ground

Although Mackinac and the surrounding region was claimed as part of the British empire, the Bongas actually lived in a society that was in an Indian world, rather than a British colonial world. Social and political customs, including diplomatic protocol and religious rites, were determined by Indian rules and practices. Therefore, the Bongas were not caught in a rigid system of slavery and sphere of identity formation that was based on Anglo-American notions.

Richard White argues that the British allowed certain aspects of the middle ground to erode, particularly the diplomatic aspects, but were still forced to accede to the

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 110. *Eschecagou* refers to what is now Chicago.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 124.

¹⁰⁷ Grivno, "Black Frenchmen and White Settlers," 82.

¹⁰⁸ Demers, "John Askin and Indian Slavery at Michilimackinac," 402.

construct of the middle ground. He notes that by 1768, after hostilities arose and murders were occurring back and forth between Indians and backcountry white settlers, “the British had abandoned any meaningful attempt to apply the jurisdiction of British laws. Instead they resorted to the middle ground”¹⁰⁹ Signs of this were evident around Mackinac, where the treatment of prisoners and slaves was clearly still influenced by the Indian system of captivity. In numerous cases, the British circumvented British law in order to meet the terms of negotiating captivity on the middle ground.

For example, when DePeyster was exiting his post as commandant at Michilimackinac in 1779, the Ottawa leader Quieouigoushkam said in a speech, “Farewell, father! We lose you; but the vile Kitchikomokamans shall pay for it. They shall carry water at this fort of Mitchilimackinac.”¹¹⁰

In this speech, the Ottawa leader indicated that the American rebels, or the “vile Kitchikomokamans,” would become slaves to the British by saying that the Americans “shall carry water.” This statement points to an acceptance of making war captives into slaves. Further, in this case “white Americans” could become slaves through war, showing that the status of slaves was not based on race.

The British officers at Mackinac also put these ideas into practice. In 1780, a band of Menominee Indians brought Spanish prisoners they had captured on the Mississippi to their British allies at Michilimackinac. “Delighted by his captives, [Lieutenant Governor] Sinclair informed the [General] Haldimand on May 29 that he had sent six prisoners to Quebec, employed four on Mackinac Island, and allowed traders to engage six more.”¹¹¹ By putting some prisoners to work on the Island and turning some over to traders as *engagés*, the British commandant was treating the prisoners as captives in Indian fashion, rather than turning them all over to the British legal system.

During Robertson’s tenure as commandant, British officials felt obligated to “cover the dead” for Indian allies, indicating that the Indians still made the rules of diplomacy. In January 1797, for example, four slaves were “purchased by order of the Superintendent General & Inspector General of Indian Affairs in order to fulfill a promise made by Governor St. Clair to the Indians, and confirmed by Capt Robertson, to replace some of their People killed in action during the late war.”¹¹² In verifying the expenses, Robertson revealed the extent to which Indians were still in control of the region and had the power to force the British to accede to their diplomatic procedures. Robertson officially stated for the record that the expenses for the slaves were “Just and

¹⁰⁹ White, *Middle Ground*, 350.

¹¹⁰ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 114. Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*, 133. This reference to “carry water” indicated becoming slaves because, as Christina Snyder notes in regard to late eighteenth century practices, “In a practice harkening back to the Mississippian era, captors forced male and female slaves to fetch wood and water, a task traditionally belonging to women and children.”

¹¹¹ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 140.

¹¹² Mr. Aulsebrook to the General Partnership, 20 August, 1787, “Papers from the Canadian Archives, 1767-1814.” In *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 12 (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, State Printers, 1892), 95.

indispensably necessary for His Majesty's Indian Interest at Michilimackinac.”¹¹³ Clearly, the British were in no position to ignore the demands of the Indians and therefore dutifully observed the persisting protocol of the middle ground.

The Bonga Family's Manumission

Robertson eventually manumitted Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga, presumably when he exited his post in 1787 – five years after their arrival at Mackinac Island. Afterwards, the Bongas bought a house in town where they ran a tavern, managing one of the first public accommodations on the island of Mackinac.¹¹⁴ Their entrepreneurial success, as well as the kin ties they developed with prominent families, attests not only to their personal skills and characteristics, but also to the opportunities that a racially and ethnically fluid society created. “With status somewhat divorced from ethnicity and race,” Grivno argues, “assertive free blacks and slaves carved larger, more prominent niches for themselves and their children.”¹¹⁵

The couple's decision to stay and settle in the region could have been based on several factors, including the prospects the region afforded their children. Since the Indians were accustomed to integrating strangers into their communities through marriage and fictive kinship ties, they may have seen opportunities there. They also must have known that there were other places where “blackness” was viewed as a rigid marker of identity, and would define a person's existence. Although Mackinac Island was by no means a haven for slaves and servants, as it still had a class hierarchy dominated by the British officers and wealthy merchants, it was nevertheless a place where the two former slaves could eventually marry formally, baptize their children, and manage a successful business. Furthermore, it appears the Bonga family forged significant ties in the community with the network of prominent traders and French Catholics in the region, which probably created another incentive to settle there.

The evidence proving the Bongas stayed at Mackinac also points to their social integration into the community. The Mackinac register shows that Jean and Marie-Jeanne were married by a priest on June 25, 1794:

I, the undersigned priest and apostolic Missionary, Received the mutual consent of Jean Bonga and of Jeanne, the former a negro and the latter a negress, both free, and I gave them the nuptial Benediction in the presence of the following witnesses, towit: Messr. Jean Nicolas Marchesseaux, Hamelin, the elder,

¹¹³ Robertson to the Indian Department Office, 27 November, 1787, “Papers from the Canadian Archives, 1767-1814.” In *WHC* 12, 96.

¹¹⁴ *History of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Containing a Full Account of its Early Settlement; Its Growth, Development, and Resources; an Extended Description of its Iron and Copper Mines. Also, Accurate Sketches of its Counties, Cities, Towns and Villages, their Improvements, Industries, Manufactories; Biographical Sketches, Portraits of Prominent Men and Early Settlers; Views of County Seats, Etc.*, http://content.wisconsinhistory.org/u?wch_52908, (Chicago: Western Historical Company, published as a volume in 1883, accessed online July 2012).

¹¹⁵ Grivno, “Black Frenchmen and White Settlers,” 82.

francois Souligny, charles chandonnet, some of whom signed; the others, being unable to write, made their usual marks.

LE DRU, apostolic Missionary¹¹⁶

In addition, Jean Bonga's death was recorded in the same register:

January 22, 1795, was interred in the cemetery of this post Jean Bongas, a free negro – who died the day before yesterday evening about nine o'clock – with public prayers in the absence of a missionary.

ADHEMAR ST MARTIN J. P¹¹⁷

These records show that the Bongas were a family that was part of the Catholic kin networks at Mackinac. They were married by a priest, and presumably other prominent Catholics in the community conducted “public prayers” on behalf of Jean after his death. Moreover, the number of witnesses who signed at their marriage indicated the importance of their marriage ceremony, especially because the witnesses were influential members of the community. By the time they were married, the Bongas probably had deep roots in the community, having lived there for twelve years and surely becoming acquainted with many people through their work and religious ties.

Baptism and names

The records of baptism, marriage, and interments at Mackinac suggest that a system of French-Catholic social networks with origins in practices under the regime of New France was still in operation during the Bongas' stay. The integration of black slaves, Indian slaves, and converted Indians into Catholic social networks was a practice that developed due to its compatibility with Native concepts of kin networks. This practice developed on the middle ground, where French people oftentimes became the godparents of baptized Indians and baptized slaves, thereby extending alliances to various classes of people.¹¹⁸

Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga were most likely “given” names by godparents at their own baptisms in Montreal. There was a long-standing French custom of French godparents reserving the right to name the newly baptized.¹¹⁹ Upon examining the registers at Mackinac during the period when the Bongas were there, this trend appears to have persisted.

¹¹⁶ “The Mackinac Register, 1725-1821: Register of Marriages in the Parish of Michilimackinac,” *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin* 18 (hereafter cited as *WHC*) (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1908), 497.

¹¹⁷ “The Mackinac Register, 1695-1821: Register of Baptisms of the Mission of St. Ignace de Michilimakinak,” *WHC* 19 (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1910), 157.

¹¹⁸ Kenneth M. Morrison, “Baptism and Alliance: The Symbolic Mediations of Religious Syncretism,” *Ethnohistory* 37, no. 4 (Autumn 1990): 421.

¹¹⁹ Trudel, *L'Esclavage au Canada Français*, 193-206; Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 14; Morrison, “Baptism and Alliance,” 421.

Trudel comparatively examines the practice of Indian and black slaves taking the names of their owners, which overwhelmingly occurred when slaves were baptized. Trudel shows that a mere three percent of the Indian slave population followed this practice. In contrast, he finds that black slaves were proportionately much more invested in this process, since twenty-eight percent of the population took Christian names. Black slaves seemed to attach more importance to taking Christian given names and surnames than Indians, Trudel argues, because they were less integrated into colonial society and were more likely to view a Christian name as a status symbol within colonial society.¹²⁰

Trudel includes a list of one hundred and ten surnames that were present among the black slave population in New France, noting that only fourteen of them are French and that the majority are English. However, among this list are several names that appear to be neither French nor English, including the name *Bonga*.¹²¹ This suggests that the Bongas were unusual in retaining what many assume to be an African name. It is difficult to determine, however, whether their name is actually African in origin, or has other meaning.

The Bongas' Catholic kin networks

The records show that at least two of the Bongas' children – both girls – were baptized by a priest at Fort Mackinac. The first baptism occurred in 1786, when the family was “living with monsieur Robertson, Captain, Commandant of Michilimakinac and dependencies.”¹²² At this point, the entire family was still enslaved, and Rosalie Bonga was the only member of the family receiving baptism. The practice of baptizing slaves, in itself, was not unusual, as there was a history in the region of baptizing slaves going back to the French regime.¹²³ Rather, the fact that no other family member was baptized at this time suggests her parents and older brother had already been baptized, presumably in or near Montreal.

The second baptism occurred eight years later for Charlotte, who was “a free negress, eight years old, legitimate daughter of Jean Bonga and Janne, her father and mother.” Having been “privately baptized” at birth by “the Midwife,” Charlotte was formally baptized when the opportunity arose with the arrival of a priest, as often occurred at remote outposts.¹²⁴ Charlotte was probably born shortly after the Bongas' arrival at Mackinac, according to her recorded age. Although there is a five-year spectrum for her age – she was either eight or twelve years old in 1794, according to the baptism record and the Bongas' marriage record – in either case she was born when the Bongas were still slaves.

At both baptisms, the godparents were from prominent trader families. Within the class hierarchy at Mackinac Island that was dominated by British officers and wealthy

¹²⁰ Trudel, *L'Esclavage au Canada Français*, 246-47.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹²² “The Mackinac Register, 1695-1821” *WHC* 19, 83.

¹²³ Winks, *Blacks in Canada*, 14. Winks writes of slavery in New France from 1628-1760, “No law required that slaves be baptized, but the influence of Christian thought was pervasive and, while owners often waited many years, ultimately four-fifths of all slaves were baptized.”

¹²⁴ “The Mackinac Register, 1695-1821” *WHC* 19, 97.

merchants, the godparents of the Bonga girls had high standing. When Rosalie Bonga was baptized in 1786 as a “dependent” of “monsieur Robertson,” her godfather was “Monsieur Antoine Barthe” and her godmother was “Madame Jean baptiste Barthe.”¹²⁵ Antoine Barthe served as godfather at several other baptisms, including for both “legitimate” and “natural” daughters of various couples.¹²⁶ Madame Jean Baptiste Barthe served as a godmother at ten other baptisms between July 1786 and August 1787. These included children of Frenchmen and Indian women who were unmarried (they had “natural” children, rather than “legitimate” children); children of married Frenchmen and Indian women; a twenty year old female “panis” slave, and a “legitimate” daughter of two “savages” of the “Outaouais nation.” During this period, the same priest who baptized Rosalie Bonga, Father Payet, baptized many “natural” children of couples composed of Frenchmen and Indian women. From July 1786 to August 1787 there were about thirty-three children baptized from these unions.¹²⁷

Moreover, Rosalie’s godmother was the wife of Jean Baptiste Barthe, a prominent trader at Michilimackinac who “owned a couple of dwellings occupied by a Negro and a panis slave” in 1779 near Mackinac.¹²⁸ In all, the Barthe family owned ten slaves.¹²⁹ In the summer of 1781, Jean Baptiste Barthe was part of a group of prominent traders that petitioned Governor Frederick Haldimand to allow a Catholic missionary to come to Mackinac after seven years without a visit from a missionary.¹³⁰

Years later, in May 1794, Charlotte Bonga was baptized and sponsored by the godparents Alexis Laframboise and Genevieve Blondeau.¹³¹ Laframboise was the son-in-law of Genevieve Blondeau, who came from a prominent trader family with a long connection to the fur trade, and a total twenty-four slaves over the years.¹³² Furthermore, Genevieve Blondeau was married to Toussaint Antoine Adhemar, the brother of Jean Baptiste Adhemar, a main trader at Michilimackinac.¹³³ In addition to serving as Charlotte Bonga’s godfather, Alexis Laframboise was the godfather at five other baptisms in August 1787, and several others in 1799. He also had at least one slave, who was baptized in February 1794.¹³⁴

The baptisms of the Bongas were by no means unique; there were five occasions from 1738 to 1786 when other blacks were baptized at Mackinac. The fact that all the

¹²⁵ “The Mackinac Register, 1695-1821” *WHC* 19, 83.

¹²⁶ “Legitimate” children were those born to couples that were married in the church. “Natural” children infers that the parents are not married in the church.

¹²⁷ “The Mackinac Register, 1695-1821,” *WHC* 19.

¹²⁸ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 134.

¹²⁹ Trudel, *L’Esclavage au Canada Français*, 158.

¹³⁰ Armour and Widder, *At the Crossroads*, 179.

¹³¹ “The Mackinac Register, 1695-1821,” *WHC* 19, 97.

¹³² Trudel, *L’Esclavage au Canada Français*, 158; Rushforth, “‘A Little Flesh We Offer You’,” 14.

¹³³ Timothy Kent, *Rendezvous at the Straits: Fur Trade and Military Activities at Fort de Buade and Fort Michilimackinac, 1669-1781*, vol. 2 (Ossineke, Michigan: Silver Fox Enterprises, 2004), 540. Jean Baptiste Adhémar was one of only eight traders granted permits for the far Northwest in 1777, attesting to his influence and importance.

¹³⁴ “The Mackinac Register, 1695-1821,” *WHC* 19, 96.

other blacks were slaves, however, differentiates the Bongas. Although there were many Indians, both slave and free, who were baptized at the fort, the Bongas were the only free blacks in the register.

The significance of Catholic kin networks

The baptism records from Mackinac reveal that the Catholic kin network was deeply intertwined with the fur trade alliances linking numerous fur trade communities. Moreover, as Catholic kin networks linked the Indians and the French, they also “paralleled, but did not displace, the kin networks of indigenous society.”¹³⁵ It appears that the Bongas were integrated into these networks in the same way that Indians were integrated.

The baptism record offers the only clues to Charlotte and Rosalie Bonga, with no mention of their brother Pierre, but it suggests some intriguing possibilities.¹³⁶ In 1794, when the Bongas “acknowledged as their legitimate daughter a girl called Charlotte, about twelve years old,” no mention was made of Rosalie, nor of Pierre.¹³⁷ Rosalie would have been around fourteen years old at this time, presuming that her documented age at her baptism eight years earlier was correct. She likely was married already or was employed with another family, and would have been considered an adult not in need of recognition as “legitimate” offspring at this age.¹³⁸

We know even less about Pierre Bonga’s years at Michilimackinac, including where he was in 1786 or 1794, or how long he lived with his parents. Records show by 1795 he was working for the North West Company at the Fond du Lac post and by 1800 he was working as an interpreter directly under Alexander Henry, a trader who frequently passed through Michilimackinac.¹³⁹ Prior to this, while his parents lived at Mackinac and while he was still a boy, Pierre may have contracted with traders on canoeing voyages. His work as an adult employee for the North West Company indicates that he probably worked with traders and Indians on trading voyages. His language skills, in particular, indicate that he had frequent contact with Indians and Frenchmen. He was likely not “legitimated” as the son of the Bongas at the time of their marriage in 1794 because he was considered an adult and had probably left home, and was around sixteen or seventeen years old at the time.

On the other hand, since the Bongas ran a tavern on the Island, their older children may have been needed for labor. The domestic needs would have been high for

¹³⁵ Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 5.

¹³⁶ Pierre Bonga is the focus of the next chapter.

¹³⁷ Since Charlotte was not baptized with Rosalie in 1786 (she was baptized in May 1794), she was probably not yet born. It is likely that she was actually eight years old in 1794, rather than twelve years old.

¹³⁸ “The Mackinac Register, 1695-1821,” *WHC* 19, 7, 39-40, 60. In the Mackinac register, Indian slaves aged “12 or 13”, 14, 15 and “9 or 10” years are referred to as “adults” in 1742, 1755, and 1760.

¹³⁹ Bruce White, *The Fur Trade in Minnesota: An Introductory Guide to Manuscript Sources* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977).

the establishment, and having a young woman like Rosalie in the house to help gather wood, cook, clean, wash, and tend the garden would have alleviated some of the labor that presumably the Bongas had performed. Possibly Pierre was helpful to the work of the establishment as well, and he would have had contact there with people throughout the vast trading networks that crossed through Mackinac. In this context, he would have had the opportunity to develop the language skills that he later applied as an interpreter and to meet fur trade employers. Regardless, living at the straits of Mackinac Pierre gained the cultural familiarity with fur trade life that promoted his later success in the fur trade.

Sadly, Marie Jeanne Bonga remains but a faint shadow in the record. She was only mentioned in the marriage register and at her daughters' baptisms. When her husband's death was recorded in January 1795, merely seven months after they married in the Church, no mention was made of her.

Conclusion

The lives of Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga are by no means clearly illuminated, but more light has been shone on their experience, helping to clarify the murky story George Bonga told of them in 1872. When he speculated they had been "taken Prisoners by the Indians & sold to the Indian traders" from the "new state of Missouri," George Bonga probably meant to indicate they were from the Illinois Country.¹⁴⁰ He was not far off the mark by considering his grandparents' enslavement among Indians, but he missed an important chapter of their lives by failing to uncover their experience at Mackinac. Although they arrived at the community as slaves, the Bongas' lives show that black slaves could build a successful and prosperous life as free people. Tracing the stories of their descendents also shows that Jean and Marie Jeanne provided a sturdy foundation for a family that flourished and prospered over the generations.

The Bonga family story begins with slavery in Indian country because Indian approaches to slavery lay at the core of how slavery developed and was practiced in Canada and at Mackinac. By understanding how the Indian system of captivity and Native kinship networks influenced slavery, we can understand that slavery was not race-based in a simple race-to-status correspondence. The absence of a black/white binary in the region helped open up opportunities for blacks to prosper as free people, and for them to build important kin networks with both French and Indian families in the region. Looking at the integration into Catholic and Indian communities experienced by the Bongas, Du Sable, and "Black Piter" shows that the middle ground was a comparatively promising place for blacks to live. In contrast to the antagonistic relations that developed in the southeast among Indians and blacks who were contending with ideas about race and slavery that grew out of a plantation economy, Indians in *Anishinaabewaki* generally lived on peaceful and cooperative terms with the blacks in their territory.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ George Bonga to Henry M. Rice, December 1872, MHS. Also published in "Letters of George Bonga," *The Journal of Negro History* 12, no. 1 (January 1927): 53-54.

¹⁴¹ Snyder, *Slavery in Indian Country*. Scholarship focusing on relations between Indians and blacks in the south includes: William S. Willis, "Divide and rule: Red, black,

The Bongas' lives highlight the regional particularity of racial formation, showing several other ways in which the fluidity of status and identity were rooted in the region's particular history. Their roles as business owners and their experience living in a community where they probably interacted with white *engagés* and Indian slaves, as well as British officers, wealthy French merchants and Native "chiefs," highlights a society in which labor was divorced from race. This was a place where European men held other white men "in perpetual bondage" and married Indian women, and where Indians and blacks became Catholic and exchanged tobacco and wampum with British officers as a way to indicate peaceful relations. The diplomatic customs and practices of the society in which the Bongas lived, in fact, reveals that the processes and negotiations of the middle ground continued. Captain Robertson, the owner of the Bongas, and other British officers were forced to yield to Indian law and customs. By continuing to "cover the dead" and at times flouting British law for Indian rules and customs, the British administration met Indian allies on the middle ground and showed their deference to Native political formations. Therefore, the Bongas were not caught in a rigid system of identity formation strictly based on Anglo-American notions.

Indeed, the Bongas seemed to have been well integrated into a French-Catholic and fur trade system of identity formation, as evidenced by their Catholic baptisms and marriage at Mackinac. Their linkage to this Catholic kin network was established in the same way that Indians were extending their own kin networks to include the French. In light of this, the Bongas provide an example of how a black family, both slave and later free, was not treated differently from white, mixed-blood, and Native community members. Regardless of their color, these various community members stood in similar relation to the prominent trader families, who showed no obvious discrimination based on race in extending Catholic kin ties. There was certainly a hierarchy at Mackinac that was topped by the prominent trader families, but these privileged families appeared to treat similarly those they sponsored for baptism, whether they were Indian, black, or white. The persistence of this Catholic kin network points to the persistence of French practices in the region, despite the fact that political control had been passed from the French to the British. These French practices were inextricably tied to Indian customs, and continued to operate in a largely Indian-controlled region in such a way that the Bongas raised

and white in the Southeast," *Journal of Negro History* 48 (1963), 157-76; Daniel Littlefield, *Africans and Seminoles: From Removal to Emancipation* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977); Theda Perdue, *Slavery and the Evolution of Cherokee Society, 1540 – 1866* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1979); Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Kathryn H. Braund, "The Creek Indians, Blacks, and Slavery," *The Journal of Southern History* 57 (1991), 601-636; Alan Gallay, *The Indian Slave Trade*, 2002; Claudio Saunt, *Black, White, and Indian: Race and the Unmaking of an American Family* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

children who were integrated into Indian kin networks, and flourished in their own way on the middle ground.

Chapter 2

A Family of Fur Traders: Intermarriage and Trade in Ojibwe Country

Introduction

In May 1820, an expedition headed by Lewis Cass, Governor of Michigan Territory, set off to explore the Upper Mississippi region. The stated objectives of the expedition were to gather more knowledge on the Native peoples living there, to delegate a spot for a garrison at the foot of Lake Superior, to make geological investigations, and to make treaties with the Indians purchasing more land. The party, which departed from Michilimackinac, included a topographical engineer, a physician, “a person acquainted with mineralogy,” and “ten Canadian voyageurs, seven U.S. soldiers, ten Indians of the Ottawa and Shawanee tribes, an interpreter and guide.” At the beginning of July, the expedition reached Fond du Lac, the former location of a North West Company trading post in the heart of Ojibwe country. The American Fur Company had taken over the trade with the Ojibwe at this time and had established headquarters at a location about eighteen miles distant.¹⁴²

The expedition encountered an Ojibwe village here, populated by families that were involved in the fur trade. Henry Schoolcraft, the noted “mineralogist” in the party, noticed Pierre Bonga’s family and made a note of them in his journal:

Three miles above the mouth of the St. Louis River, there is a village of Chippeway Indians, of fourteen lodges, and containing a population of about sixty souls. Among these we noticed a negro who has long been in the service of the fur company, and who married a squaw, by whom he has four children. It is worthy of remark, that the children are as black as the father, and have the curled hair and glossy skin of the native African. It does not appear that climate has had more influence here, than it has along the borders of the Atlantic, in ameliorating the colour of this race.¹⁴³

Schoolcraft’s observations give the impression that the Bonga family was different from the other families living in the village. From the Ojibwe perspective, however, and from the view of many other fur traders, the Bongas were not members of a distinct “race.” Although they were indeed descended from African slaves, this ancestry did not prevent them from being fully integrated into fur trade society and Ojibwe kin networks.

The key to the family’s integration was the marriage alliances they cultivated. As Schoolcraft noted, Pierre Bonga, who was of full African descent, married an Ojibwe

¹⁴² Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Narrative Journal of Travels Through the Northwestern Regions of the United States: Extending from Detroit Through the Great Chain of American Lakes to the Sources of the Mississippi River* (Albany: E. & E. Hosford, 1821), xii, 78, 203.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 202-203.

woman and built a family with her. Although his children were “as black as the father” they also married Ojibwe Indians and fur traders, further cementing the family’s kin ties and social networks. This chapter looks at how Ojibwe women were central to the functioning of the fur trade, as men like Pierre Bonga and his sons married them and relied heavily on them and their kin networks. The prosperity of this family, and many others who flourished during the era of the fur trade, was contingent on the influence and skills of the Native women who brought communities together through marriage.

Schoolcraft’s comment about the conditions “along the borders of the Atlantic” is a reminder of the regional particularity of racial formation and other categories of identity. In the Western Great Lakes region where the Bongas were living, identity formation was based on different cultural and historical processes than in the Southeast, and thereby operated differently. Indigenous concepts of identity and practices of the French fur trade contributed to a more fluid set of categories in the region.

However, it is important to remember that members of the Bonga family lived as “free blacks” at a time when slavery was flourishing in the South and even in the northern so-called “free” states. Although slavery was legally prohibited in the region due to the Northwest Ordinance of 1789 and the Missouri Compromise of 1820, there was a small slave community in the 1830s at Fort Snelling, which lay at the hub of the Mississippi River. These slaves were rented or purchased by officers and traders. Even Wisconsin’s first Territorial governor, Henry Dodge, who was in office in the late 1830s and 1840s owned slaves. Lawrence Taliaferro, the Indian agent at Fort Snelling from 1820-1839 was one of many who contravened federal law by owning slaves. Historian William Green notes,

On the frontier federal proscriptions against slavery meant little without the support of state and territorial leaders, the outrage of a critical mass of antislavery residents, or the willingness of the U.S. government to exert its otherwise limited power to enforce federal law.¹⁴⁴

Although black slaves were present in the region, they were few and far between and rarely traveled into the interior Ojibwe country. As such, the Bongas were an exception as a family of African ancestry that intermarried with and worked among the Ojibwes. However, their lives illustrate that their African ancestry did not give rise to a process of racializing them as black. Instead, they demonstrate that fur trade society and Ojibwe communities constructed identities that had little to do with race, and much to do with cultivating social ties and negotiating the complex intersections of culture, kinship, and status.

The Fur Trade: Opportunities in Ojibwe Country

The Western Great Lakes region has a history of a fur trade economy that had major influence in shaping notions of race, gender, sexuality and belonging. A trading structure between indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes region and the French was in place by the early eighteenth century that supported an interdependent social system in

¹⁴⁴ William Green, *A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Early Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 7.

which Indian people and traders lived together, often intermarrying. This system, which benefitted both Indian people and the European trade, persisted through the British and American regimes, until the fur trade economy bottomed out in the nineteenth century with the advance of lumbering and agricultural settlement.

While the fur trade literature often focuses on notions of race and ethnicity, it is usually limited to examinations of Indians and Europeans, such as French, Scottish, and British traders.¹⁴⁵ However, in the early 1930s Kenneth Porter wrote specifically on “Negroes and the Fur Trade.” Porter described three groups of labor on the fur trade hierarchy – entrepreneurs and clerks; voyageurs; and hunters – and asserted that “any picture of the racial aspects of the fur trade of [the early nineteenth century] which omits the Negro is so incomplete as to give a false impression, for representatives of that race were to be found in all three groups connected with the trade.”¹⁴⁶ Porter demonstrated that African Americans who participated in the fur trade were not restricted by a racial hierarchy, even though they most commonly entered the field as personal servants. Because once in the field, African Americans had opportunities to advance from jobs as servants or voyageurs to higher positions as interpreters, guides, hunters and salaried traders. Porter surmised that racial discrimination was not a barrier to African Americans in the fur trade “probably because on the frontier the racial division lay between Indian and white rather than between white and Negro.”¹⁴⁷

Porter argues that few blacks who entered the trade in menial capacities ever became independent entrepreneurs, with the exception of a few individuals described by Porter, including the Bongas.¹⁴⁸ But the average French-Canadian voyageur also had difficulty making his way out of the menial classification, so it was not strictly a matter of race making advancement difficult. According to Porter, African Americans possessed more versatility in occupying and moving among fur trading positions than either the Highland Scots, the French-Canadians, or the Kentuckians, all of whom usually dominated particular roles.

Max Grivno’s work in 2000 examined how black men could “enjoy great success and claim a ‘white’ identity” among traders and Indians in the “old northwest” through

¹⁴⁵ Examples include Jennifer Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1980); Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur-Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Colin Calloway, *White People, Indians, and Highlanders: Tribal Peoples and Colonial Encounters in Scotland and America* (Oxford: University Press, 2008); Susan Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men: Rethinking Cultural Encounter in the Western Great Lakes* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

¹⁴⁶ Kenneth Porter, “Negroes and the Fur Trade,” *Minnesota History* 15, no. 4 (December 1934): 423.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 428.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 423, 424. Individuals include Jean Baptiste Point du Sable of Chicago and “a runaway slave from Kentucky.”

the nineteenth century.¹⁴⁹ In addition to citing the well-known story by Flandrau about George Bonga, Grivno noted that James Thompson, an African American who was brought to Fort Snelling as a slave, often “boasted that he was ‘one of the first white settlers in Minnesota.’”¹⁵⁰ Grivno attributes that phenomenon to a history of fluid categories of identity in the region, bred by the region’s sheer diversity where “many people’s identities encompassed a multifaceted array of ethnic, national, and racial ties [and in turn], the very notions of ethnicity and race began unraveling.”¹⁵¹

Echoing Porter’s work, Grivno asserted that “Many people de-emphasized ethnic and racial division, placing greater importance on the boundaries between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized,’ between people considered ‘white’ and those deemed ‘savages.’”¹⁵² Thus, “the northwest frontier promised greater social fluidity and mobility for African-Americans, especially compared with the entrenched systems of racial control and oppression in the eastern and southern United States.”¹⁵³

This social fluidity had its roots in Native identity formation, which took place within a complex system of Native social organization “that defied easy categorization” and where “power and identity constantly changed form and function.”¹⁵⁴ As Michael Witgen explains, Ojibwe country was a world “dominated by an expansive, multiethnic, and distinctively Native social formation, rather than a world dominated by nations and empires.” Witgen continues,

Individuals and extended families lived in social formations as small as hunting bands associated with a senior male relative, but also identified as members of a doodem or clan, and as part of named bands or villages—associations that might change during a person’s life time. Collective identities such as Ottawa or Sauter increasingly functioned as situational identities linked to the places where the French alliance system worked, on the ground, transforming Natives and newcomers into *inawemaagen* [relatives]... These collective identities, however, were more ambiguous in the western interior... People who identified with the Sauters in the pays d’en haut might assume a more appropriate designation to signal their identity when they passed the winter hunting in the muskeg, or swamplands to the northwest of Gichigamiing. In this space they might identify themselves as Awasse, Monsoni, or Ni-ka, as members of dodemaag with a right to hunt in this region. These designations would make them more legible to other Anishinaabeg, and would signal their place among the constellation of Native peoples who made up Anishinaabewaki as a territory and as a social formation that predated the French alliance.¹⁵⁵

¹⁴⁹ Max L. Grivno, “‘Black Frenchmen’ and ‘White Settlers’: Race, Slavery, and the Creation of African-American Identities along the Northwest Frontier, 1790-1840,” *Slavery and Abolition* 21, no. 3 (December 2000): 76.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 77.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early North America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 115.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 75-76.

This fluidity was cultivated on what Richard White has called “the middle ground,” where the French were forced to acknowledge that their success in the region depended on conforming to certain cultural expectations that were held by the Indians, rather than compelling obedience from a position of strength.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, a long history of adoption, intermarriage, and the fur trade’s labor economy did not encourage the construction of rigid categories based on race or ethnicity. As the fur trade historians Jennifer Brown, Sylvia Van Kirk, Susan Sleeper-Smith, and Jacqueline Peterson have aptly illustrated, the fur trade gave rise to a society that bred a particular culture in which Indians and Europeans constructed intimate relations and built new kinds of families that embraced both European and Algonquian practices.¹⁵⁷

In Ojibwe country, the operations of the fur trade were built on Native concepts of reciprocity and kinship. Many Ojibwe people believed cooperative arrangements “existed between different kinds of beings in the world” and had to be sustained through gift-giving. Bruce White explains how the system of reciprocity that governed fur trade relations, was also applied to non-human beings.

Ojibwa people who hunted, fished, or gathered plants had to be aware of their reciprocal obligations with the natural world and give back something to the animals, fish, or plants from which they harvested. In taking small plants in the woods, or bark from the trees, people often left a gift of tobacco. After a bear was killed, they held an elaborate ceremony of thanks and gave presents to the bear... Reciprocity was necessary to keep the system operating. Without gifts and respect, animals would not be so helpful to humans... Without gifts and respect, the system would cease to function.¹⁵⁸

This belief in the principle of reciprocity gave rise to a culture of generosity among the Ojibwe and large-scale gift-giving within the fur trade. Ojibwe families did not accumulate food for their own future use, but would give it to others when they had some. “In giving food,” White notes, “Ojibway people made an investment in long-term goodwill and helped to assure their own future well-being.”¹⁵⁹ The practice of gift-giving

¹⁵⁶ Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Chapter 1 of this dissertation goes into a lengthy discussion of the fluidity of identity in the region and how it was based on Native identity formation and practices that sprung up on the “middle ground.”

¹⁵⁷ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*; Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*; Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*; Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown, eds, *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001).

¹⁵⁸ Bruce M. White, “The Woman Who Married a Beaver: Trade Patterns and Gender Roles in the Ojibwa Fur Trade,” *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 1 (Winter, 1999): 111.

¹⁵⁹ Bruce M. White, “A Skilled Game of Exchange: Ojibway Fur Trade Protocol,” *Minnesota History* 50, no. 6 (Summer, 1987): 229-230.

was also tied to notions of kinship, because gifts helped establish a tie and could potentially turn strangers or enemies into kin or allies.

The fur trade season included a lot of ritual gift-giving between the Ojibwe and the traders as a way to foster good relations and maintain business ties. The traders understood the symbolic meaning of gifts, and were careful to observe gifting practices. In the fall, the trader usually exchanged gifts with the Indians and then gave trade goods on credit to Ojibwe clients. Trade worked on a credit system until 1834, whereby a trader would charge nothing and provide an Ojibwe with “a flint, a needle, and awl, a gun worm, a little vermilion, rings, beads, and three or four inches of tobacco, besides various other articles.” Hunting then took place in late fall and early spring, and when the furs and skins were collected in late spring a general settlement of the debts occurred. However, these were rarely settled in an exact fashion. As James Doty noted, “In a credit of six hundred skins, if the trader gets three hundred in return for his goods, he considers himself recompensed. He frequently does not obtain even this proportion.”¹⁶⁰

Near Leech Lake, the Ojibwe would pay the traders back with maple sugar, wild rice, and skins, namely those of beavers, otters, martens, minks, muskrats, bears, red and gray foxes, deer, raccoons, and fishers.¹⁶¹ The Ojibwe took reciprocal material relationships seriously, and liked to demonstrate their trustworthiness after being extended credit.¹⁶²

Pierre Bonga's beginnings in the fur trade

From the late 18th- to the mid-19th century, the Bonga family worked in the fur trade mainly in the employ of two companies - the North West Company and the American Fur Company. Pierre Bonga was the first family member to appear in the fur trade records when he worked for John Sayer in the Fond du Lac department in the 1795-96 season, located in what is now Wisconsin and Minnesota.¹⁶³ The Bonga kin ties to the Upper Mississippi Ojibwes originated in this period, since Sayer's trade had regular contact with the Ojibwes at Leech Lake, Sandy Lake, and Fond du Lac.¹⁶⁴

Pierre Bonga was probably born in Montreal around 1777 and shortly afterward baptized.¹⁶⁵ Pierre and his parents, Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga, and his sister Rosalie arrived in northern Michigan in 1782 as the slaves of Daniel Robertson, who was appointed commandant of the British Fort Mackinac. Freed in 1787, the Bongas bought a

¹⁶⁰ James Duane Doty, “Northern Wisconsin in 1820,” in *Wisconsin Historical Collections* 7 (Madison: E. B. Bolens, State Printer, 1876), 205; White, “A Skilled Game of Exchange,” 231-233; Rhoda Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” *Minnesota History* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1970): 124.

¹⁶¹ Doty, “Northern Wisconsin in 1820,” 195.

¹⁶² White, “A Skilled Game of Exchange,” 233

¹⁶³ Bruce M. White, *The Fur Trade in Minnesota: An Introductory Guide to Manuscript Sources* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977).

¹⁶⁴ Douglas A. Birk, “John Sayer and the Fond du Lac Trade: The North West Company in Minnesota and Wisconsin,” in *Rendezvous: Selected Papers of the Fourth North American Fur Trade Conference, 1981*, ed. Thomas Buckley (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 51-61.

¹⁶⁵ See Chapter 1 of this dissertation, 23-25

house in town where they ran a tavern, managing one of the first public accommodations on the island of Mackinac.¹⁶⁶ As a result of the combination of their Catholic kin ties, their skills and training, and the racially and ethnically fluid character of the social hierarchy at Mackinac, the Bongas successfully forged a social niche for their family.

Arriving at Mackinac Island as a child, Pierre Bonga grew up in a culturally diverse and racially fluid environment.¹⁶⁷ Moreover, as a hub of the vast fur trade network which saw traffic from thousands of Indians from many nations, British officers and soldiers, French Canadians, English, Scottish, and French businessmen, and free and enslaved Blacks, Mackinac Island was the perfect training ground for fur trade employment. Each summer thousands of Indians came to exchange presents with the military officers in a ritual gift-giving that took place on the middle ground, including Ojibwe, Ottawa, Potawatomie, Sac and Fox, Menominee, Ho-Chunk, and even occasionally a few Dakota Indians.¹⁶⁸ As someone who was raised and socialized in this diverse milieu, Pierre Bonga not only spoke the French of his parents, but also likely spoke English and various dialects of Algonquian and possibly Siouan languages.

The Catholic kin network that the Bongas were enmeshed in meant that Pierre had ties to prominent trader families who were connected to Mackinac.¹⁶⁹ From this location, trade networks reached far north of Lake Superior, west across the Mississippi River, south into the Illinois Country and along the shores of Lake Michigan, and east to Montreal. Prominent traders not only lived at Mackinac, but frequently passed through the Fort's community. This provided ample opportunity for Pierre. He probably contracted with traders on canoeing voyages from a fairly young age, and since his parents ran a tavern on the Island, he had the opportunity to meet many people passing through Mackinac.

Two of his earliest employers were traders who frequently passed through Mackinac – John Sayer and Alexander Henry the younger. Sayer and Henry both worked for the North West Company in interior departments and regularly interacted and traded with Ojibwe Indians. Sayer was working as the Michilimackinac agent for a Montreal merchant in 1780 and was one of the earliest traders working out of this post to winter at Leech Lake.¹⁷⁰ Sayer apparently visited the Pillager community in the winter of 1780, finding that “most of the Ojibwas with whom he had formerly traded had died of

¹⁶⁶ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs of a Residence of Thirty Years With the Indians Tribes on the American Frontiers* (1851; repr., Memphis: General Books, 2010), 478-79.

¹⁶⁷ See Chapter 1 of this dissertation, 22-37. Grivno, “‘Black Frenchmen’ and ‘White Settlers.’”

¹⁶⁸ David A. Armour, and Keith Widder, *At the Crossroads: Michilimackinac During the American Revolution* (Mackinac Island, Michigan: Mackinac Island State Park Commission, 1978), 19.

¹⁶⁹ See Chapter 1 of this dissertation, 37-45.

¹⁷⁰ Douglas A. Birk, “Sayer, John,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, 1801-1820* 5, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=2458 (published as a volume in 1983, accessed online June 2012). Reproduced from the print version of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, a joint project of the University of Toronto and the Université Laval.

smallpox.”¹⁷¹ By 1791, after an unsuccessful attempt at organizing a partnership with a number of other Michilimackinac merchants, Sayer formed John Sayer and Company and became an agent of the North West Company at Sault Ste. Marie.¹⁷²

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the North West Company was a powerful firm with over one hundred and fifteen trading houses spanning from eastern Canada to the Rocky Mountains. The North West Company emerged in 1783 as the result of trade agreements among wealthy Montreal traders seeking to create a united economic front against the Hudson’s Bay Company.¹⁷³ There was a hierarchy structuring the North West Company’s operations in which partners, or *bourgeois*, as they were called, sat at the top. The shares they owned could not be bought by outsiders because they were “reserved as a reward for experienced and capable clerks.” After partners retired, their shares were claimed by the Company, which negotiated their sale to clerks who were deemed deserving. The possibility of being able to eventually purchase into becoming a partner evidently served as a major incentive for clerks’ performance and loyalty. At the bottom of this hierarchy were the voyageurs, who were generally French-Canadians and “mixed-bloods.”¹⁷⁴

With headquarters in Montreal, activities in the field were organized into departments that were managed by one or more wintering partners or clerks. Clerks were in charge of the actual trading, and it was their responsibility to see that the wintering posts were successful. Clerks generally served an apprenticeship of five to seven years and the company provided them with provision, clothing, and traveling equipment. Clerks kept the books and supervised the hired men and delegated jobs.¹⁷⁵

Each summer a rendezvous was held at Grand Portage on the north coast of Lake Superior. The partners, clerks, and voyageurs who had wintered with the Indians brought the furs they had collected, and the partners from Montreal brought new supplies of merchandise. William Warren, writing in 1852, noted of these rendezvous meetings,

These yearly meetings were enlivened with feasting, dancing, and revelry, held in the great hall of the company. In the style of the feudal barons of old, did these prosperous traders each year hold their grand festival surrounded by their faithful and happy “coureurs de bois” and servitors. The eyes of an “old northwester,” while relating these happy scenes of by-gone times, will sparkle with excitement—his form will become momentarily erect as he imagines himself moving off in the merry dance, and his lips will water, as he enumerates the varied luxuries under which groaned long tables in the days of these periodic feasting.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Birk, “Sayer, John.”

¹⁷² Birk, “John Sayer and the Fond du Lac Trade,” 56, 57.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 56, 51.

¹⁷⁴ Arthur S. Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71* (Toronto: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1939), 328.

¹⁷⁵ Birk, “John Sayer and the Fond du Lac Trade”; “People of the Fur Trade: On the Backs of Men, in the Hands of Women,” MHS, <http://www.mnhs.org/places/sites/nwcfp/reading.htm> (accessed July 1, 2012).

¹⁷⁶ William Warren, *History of the Ojibway People* (1855; reprint, St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 379-380.

Over the years, Pierre Bonga and two of his sons, George and Stephen, all worked as interpreters in the fur trade. Interpreters and guides were extremely experienced and skilled workers and were paid between two and four times as much as voyageurs. However, despite their importance to the safety of the canoe brigade, they were still inferior to the partners and clerks. During the voyage or at the wintering post, they were still considered “servants” of the company.¹⁷⁷

It is possible that Pierre’s ties to his former slave owner, Daniel Robertson, played a role in his introduction to Sayer. Robertson was married to Marie-Louise Reaume, and thereby connected to one of the wealthy and prominent trading families in Canada. One of Marie-Louise Reaume’s kin, Joseph Reaume, had a tie to Sayer as a former associate of the earlier failed trading association. Reaume was a veteran of the Fond du Lac trade and possibly hired Pierre Bonga out of Michilimackinac when he was as young as thirteen years old. Pierre could have joined one of the many trading outfits to the Upper Mississippi region: In 1790, Reaume and Jean Baptiste Cadotte were trading at Leech Lake; in 1791, Reaume and Cadotte headed one of Alexander Henry the elder’s outfits working with the Leech Lake and Sandy Lake Ojibwe; and in 1792 Reaume led one of Sayer’s outfits to the Pembina area.¹⁷⁸ If Reaume hired Pierre, he probably recommended him as an employee to Sayer.

Working for John Sayer in 1795, Pierre Bonga most likely honed the Ojibwe language skills that he later put to use as an interpreter. As an agent of the North West Company, Sayer gained more control over the Fond du Lac trade in 1793 and moved his headquarters to the newly built Fort St. Louis at the head of Lake Superior. From here, Sayer brought more North West employees into the interior Ojibwe region, as he opened large posts at Sandy Lake in 1794 and Leech Lake in 1798, and smaller ones between Red Lake and Ontonagon.¹⁷⁹ When Pierre Bonga was working for Sayer in 1795, Sayer had been trading with the Ojibwe near Leech Lake for at least fifteen years and understood he needed employees who not only spoke the language, but also had the social capability and knowledge to work among the Indians. However, Pierre may have been working in the Upper Mississippi area earlier than is indicated in the historical record, because of the likelihood that he was engaged by independent traders passing through Mackinac.

The Leech Lake Ojibwe, or “Pillagers”

It was important to the trade’s success to have individuals at Leech Lake who knew how to socialize with the local Ojibwes. This band was considered particularly difficult to deal with, and establishing kin ties among them was undoubtedly central to traders’ longevity in the region. Not only would this help ensure access to trading relationships, but also guaranteed protection in a community where risks were rampant stemming from the dangerous natural and man-made elements.

The Leech Lake Pillagers were a remotely northern Ojibwe community that had resided in the region since driving the Dakotas out in the 1770s. Being the furthestmost

¹⁷⁷ *People of the Fur Trade*, MHS.

¹⁷⁸ Birk, “John Sayer and the Fond du Lac Trade,” 57.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 58.

western band on the edge of Ojibwe country, the Leech Lakers were engaged in sustained fighting with the Dakotas for control over hunting territory and were seasoned warriors. Moreover, the Pillager band was dominated by the Bear and Catfish clans, which were traditionally composed of warriors. They were the largest band of Ojibwe people in the western Great Lakes region, with estimates of their numbers in the nineteenth century ranging from 800 to 1,650 individuals, with most reports around 1,100 individuals.¹⁸⁰

The distinctive name “Pillagers” was applied to the Leech Lakers in 1767 or 1768, when a trader and his crew came to Leech Lake for the first time, just as the Ojibwes were preparing for a *midewiwin* (Grand Medicine) ceremony. According to William Warren, a nineteenth century historian, the Leech Lakers grew impatient when the trader delayed the bartering because of illness.

Some of his goods having got wet by rain, were untied by his men, and exposed to the sun to dry. The temptation to the almost naked Indians, who had not seen a trader for a long time, was too great to be easily overcome, and being on the eve of their grand festival rite, when they are accustomed to display all the finery of which they are possessed, caused them doubly to covet the merchandise of the sick trader. They possessed plenty of furs, which they offered repeatedly to exchange, but the trader’s men refused to enter into a trade till their master was sufficiently recovered to oversee it. There was no preconcerted plan, or even intention of pillage, when the rifling of the trader’s effects actually commenced.

A number of young men, women, and children, were standing around, admiring the goods which had been exposed to dry, and longing for possession, as much as an avaricious white man for a pile of yellow gold, when a forward young warrior approached a roll of cloth, and after feeling, and remarking on its texture, his itching fingers at last tore off a piece sufficient to make him a breech clout, at the same time he remarked, that he had beaver skins in his lodge, and when the trader got well, he would pay his demands. The trader’s men stood dumb, and making no effort to prevent the young pillager from carrying off the cloth, others becoming bold followed his example, and tearing off pieces of calico for shirts,

¹⁸⁰ Henry Rowe Schoolcraft. *Narrative Journal of Travels Through the Northwestern Regions of the United States*, 244; Doty, “Northern Wisconsin in 1820,” 195; James Lloyd Breck, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck; Chiefly from Letters Written by Himself* (New York: E. & J. B. Young, 1883) MHS, 245; Harold Hickerson, “William T. Boutwell of the American Board and the Pillager Chippewas: The History of a Failure,” *Ethnohistory* 12, no.1 (Winter 1965): 3; Theresa Schenck, *William W. Warren: The Life, Letters, and Times of an Ojibwe Leader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 59. Schoolcraft noted in 1820 that the Leech Lake band consisted of “one thousand one hundred and twenty souls, one hundred and fifty whom are warriors.” Doty noted in a report from the 1820 Cass expedition that “At Leech Lake there are more than two hundred men, at least three hundred and fifty women married to them, and about eleven hundred boys and girls.” Breck noted in 1853 that the Pillagers are “a band of eleven hundred Indians.” Hickerson noted there were 800 Pillagers at Leech Lake in the 1830s. Schenck notes Indian Agent Jonathan Fletcher reported “about nine hundred” Pillagers in the Annual Report of 1849. Further, the annuity census taken in 1849 recorded their number at 1,050 individuals.

cloth for blankets, the goods spread out to dry soon disappeared at a very uncertain credit.

The young pillagers taking their trophies to the lodges, the excitement in the village became general, as each person became determined to possess a share of the trader's remaining bales. The crediting of the goods was now changed to an actual pillage, and the only anxiety evinced by the Indians, men, women, and children, was, who would secure the greatest quantity. A keg of fire water being discovered in the course of the ransacking of the sick trader's outfit, added greatly to the excitement and lawlessness of the scene, and the men soon becoming unmanageable and dangerous, the rifled trader was obliged quickly to embark in his empty canoe, and leave the inhospitable camp of the Ojibways to save his life.¹⁸¹

Warren notes that as a result of this incident, the Leech Lakers were referred to as "the Pillagers," even among other Ojibwe bands who "generally very much deprecated this foolish act." The Leech Lakers' behavior was partly explained by the fact that at this time, they "had no regular trader to winter among them, and they were obliged to make visits each summer to La Pointe, Sault Ste. Marie, and Mackinaw."¹⁸²

Although the Leech Lakers attempted to rectify the situation the next spring by sending a generous gift of beaver skins to Fort Mackinac, the name and reputation persisted.¹⁸³ The Pillager band had gained the notoriety of being composed of "uncivilized" and unruly individuals and their warrior-like nature was constantly emphasized. For example, Reverend William T. Boutwell described the Pillagers as possessing "countenances [that] were full of wildness" and looking as "fierce as the tiger, and bold as the lion" upon first meeting them in 1832. He also disdainfully commented that, "They are impudent and care not for their trader, but regard him as their servant."¹⁸⁴ Indian agent Jonathan Fletcher described the Pillagers as "a warlike people... and occupying an extensive hunting ground" around 1848.¹⁸⁵ In 1868, the matron of the Indian Boarding School at Leech Lake agency described the Pillagers of Leech Lake as "a very bad tribe in those days."¹⁸⁶ As late as 1874, they apparently still had not shaken the reputation and were aware of it, because *Maygemahwishkun*, a chief at Cass Lake, wrote in a letter to Bishop Henry Whipple, "The whites always expect these Pillagers are going to do some mischief, so we always try to do well."¹⁸⁷ Historian Harold Hickerson ascribed this band's particular character to both geography and the strength of its warrior society:

The Pillagers were a frontier people, often at war with the Dakota, and when not actually at war were still hard pressed to occupy their hunting and trapping grounds on the margins of the war zones to the southwest of their village.

¹⁸¹ Warren, *History of the Ojibway People*, 257-259.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁸⁴ Boutwell papers, Journal, July 17, 1832, MHS.

¹⁸⁵ Schenck, *William W. Warren*, 59.

¹⁸⁶ Julia A. Spears and family papers, 1839-1923; folder 3, page 2, MHS.

¹⁸⁷ *Maygemahwishkun* to Henry Whipple, June 23, 1874, Whipple Papers, MHS.

They hunted in bands of as many as 15 or 20 household heads, 30 to 40 men in all. Their ‘young men’ formed a society of warriors. At times turbulent, at times ‘foolish,’ they were always insistent upon their corporate rights with respect to their own leaders—the civil Chiefs and the chiefs of the Mide [*midewiwin*] lodge—as well as the traders and, as Boutwell found out to his sorrow, the missionaries.¹⁸⁸

Shortly after the incident that deemed the Leech Lakers “Pillagers,” a wave of smallpox ravaged the region. The Ojibwe band at Sandy Lake was hit hardest among the Mississippi Ojibwe, and “not less than fifteen hundred, or two thousand” died. Further north, the Assiniboins suffered greater losses in the several thousands, and consequently the region they lived in at the forks of the Red and the Assiniboine rivers opened up for Ojibwe movement.¹⁸⁹ When Alexander Henry was assigned to oversee the building of fur trade posts in the Red River Valley in 1800, he and his crew worked extensively with Leech Lakers and other Ojibwe bands. Henry referred to the Ojibwe as “Saulteurs,” however, or “Saulteux” in the plural form, using a term the French used because of their interactions with an Ojibwe band that lived near Sault Ste. Marie.

Pierre Bonga and Alexander Henry’s Red River post

In 1800, the North West Company assigned Alexander Henry to take control of trade with the Ojibwe on the Red River. Pierre Bonga was hired as part of the outfit as an interpreter, having likely had experience among the Ojibwe in the Fond du Lac department under Sayer. Henry’s outfit was charged with filling the Pembina post, which was in an area where violent skirmishes between the Ojibwe and the Dakota was common and where the climate was harsh in both the winter and summer.¹⁹⁰ It was considered a dangerous assignment, and skilled interpreters and hunters who knew how to make alliances with the Ojibwe were particularly valued.

Henry headed to the Pembina post in the fall of 1800 from Grand Portage, where he had attended the annual rendezvous in the spring.¹⁹¹ He was outfitted with a large brigade of four canoes, each carrying four men and 2,520 pounds of goods packed in twenty-eight bales of ninety pounds each. Along their journey, they were joined by a forty-five canoe “Indian Brigade” composed of “two bands of Ojibway or Saulteaux, inhabitants of the Head Waters of the Mississippi, Leech Lake, etc.” Although Henry

¹⁸⁸ Hickerson, “William T. Boutwell of the American Board and the Pillager Chippewas,” 5.

¹⁸⁹ Warren, *History of the Ojibway People*, 261-262; Morton, *A History of the Canadian West to 1870-71*, 21.

¹⁹⁰ Barry M. Gough, *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799-1814*, vol. 1 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1988), xxxiii-xxxiv.

¹⁹¹ Barry Gough, “Alexander Henry,” *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online, 1801-1820* 5, http://www.biographi.ca/009004-119.01-e.php?&id_nbr=2458 (published as a volume in 1983, accessed online June 2012). Reproduced from the print version of the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, a joint project of the University of Toronto and the Université Laval.

noted only the names of the Indian men in his journal, recording only thirty-four Ojibwe names, the “Indian brigade” included women and children.¹⁹²

The voyage lasted over seven weeks, and was arduous and terrifying, primarily because of the constant fear of the Dakota. There were frequent alarms of Dakota sightings, many of them false, and in the first year no actual warring occurred with the Dakota and successful hunts were made.¹⁹³ After building a post on the Park River in the fall, Henry and a team moved north along the Red River in the spring of 1801 to build at the Pembina River. At this site, “Henry tilled the soil with great profit and enjoyment... [He] planted his first garden in the rich soil at Pembina River Post.”¹⁹⁴

In Henry’s journals, which cover a five-year period in the Red River region, there is a sense of Pierre’s conspicuousness as a black man. Although Henry made frequent references to Pierre’s “blackness,” he was not preoccupied with race to the point of equating it with ability. Rather than exhibiting racist tendencies towards Pierre, Henry entrusted him with important tasks and roles that denoted a confidence in the man.¹⁹⁵

Henry first made reference to Pierre’s skin color when he drew up the roster of his brigade. In August 1800, Henry listed the six men that were to ride in his own canoe, including Pierre Bonga, and noted “Negro” after Pierre’s name. Pierre was certainly the only black man in the brigade, and no one else had racial, ethnic, or national labels attached to their names. Then, on September 3rd, when the brigade split into two groups, Henry recorded another roster that identified Pierre as “Negron.” As he described the departure of the first group and the parting words that were exchanged, Henry noted that “Owshed and Ponis bid farewell to all hands white and Black.”¹⁹⁶ This consciousness of Pierre’s “blackness” seems to have been noted in an amused manner, rather than in an attempt to define Pierre’s character.

Henry’s habit of noting Pierre’s skin tone speaks more to the rarity of black people in the region, rather than to racist thinking that viewed skin color as a determinant factor in a person’s nature and abilities. In several instances, Henry noted important jobs he gave Pierre. For example, in May 1801, as Henry prepared to move camp to the Pembina river post he wrote, “I made up the Packs of this place. Indians drinking and troublesome. Engaged M. Langlois, Desmarais, Pierre and some others, to settle the mens accounts.”¹⁹⁷ In November 1803, Pierre was one of two men left in charge

¹⁹² Gough, *Journal of Alexander Henry*, 5-6, 25. Throughout the *Journal*, many activities of the women and children are described.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*, 25, 26, 27, 32, 34, 37, 39, 41, 45.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, xxxv.

¹⁹⁵ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: the Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 305n1. I borrow Reginald Horsman’s use of the terms *racialism* and *racialist*, which he uses to differentiate from the terms *racism* and *racist* in order to “draw some distinction between *racist* thought in the context of present knowledge of racial matters and *racialist* thought in the context of nineteenth-century knowledge.” He further notes that “The terms *racism* and *racist* are charged with meanings that can cause confusion when applied to the thought of the... nineteenth century.”

¹⁹⁶ Gough, *Journal of Alexander Henry*, 23, 42.

¹⁹⁷ Gough, *Journal of Alexander Henry*, 118.

of the Pembina fort while Henry was away. Upon his return Henry noted, “Duford had threatened to kill my servant man in my absence P[ierre] B[onga] but did not escape before he got a sound beating.”¹⁹⁸ Pierre was clearly delegated responsibility in somewhat volatile circumstances and Henry did not record any failings on Pierre’s part. In the matter of Duford, it is not clear whether Pierre or someone else delivered the “sound beating,” but in any case Bonga was ably protected.

In addition to the altercation between Bonga and Duford, there were many violent incidents during this period, many of which involved alcohol and fights over women.¹⁹⁹ Considering this, Pierre was probably skilled at defending himself and his family, having survived at least one attack from Duford. Henry recorded many of the violent encounters, and interestingly provided more detail when recounting the Indians’ violent behavior than the traders’ violent actions. For example, Henry noted, “Monday [September 1800] 29th. This morning the Indians still continued drinking. About 10 Oclock I was informed that Old Crooked Legs had killed his young wife. I instantly sent Desmarais to enquire into the business. He soon returned and told me she was not yet dead, but had received three dreadful stabs.”²⁰⁰ Henry also described dramatic cases where one attack led to a chain of retaliations, often seemingly fueled by alcohol:

14th [March 1802] In a drinking match at the Hills yesterday, the Gros Bras in a fit of jealousy stabbed Aupusoi to death with a hand dagger. The first stroke opened his left side, the second his belly and the third into his breast up to the hand. He never stirred, although he had a knife in his belt, but died instantly. Soon after this Aupusois’ brother, a boy about 10 years of age, took his deceased brothers Gun and loaded it with two balls and approached the Gros Bras Tent, when putting the muzzle of the Gun through the door he fired the two balls in his breast and killed him dead.²⁰¹

Despite this violence, women and children accompanied the traders and Indians at the posts. The large “Indian brigade” had families aboard, and Henry’s outfit that was assembled at Grand Portage included women and children. He noted at the beginning of the expedition that his four canoes were holding “18 Men, 1 Clerk, 1 Interpreter, 4 Women, 4 Children, and two Horses.”²⁰² Only two women and three children were named on this list: “Michel Coleret wife and daughter” and “J. Bte Desmarais, Guide and his wife and two children.”²⁰³ It is possible that the two women who were not named were married to some of the men *a la façon du pays*, and the unnamed child was considered an “illegitimate” child. Henry may have wished to omit the details about them because the British officers were less approving of these kinds of relationships.

It is difficult to ascertain at which date Pierre’s Ojibwe wife joined him, but it is certain she was with him at the Pembina fort by March 1802.²⁰⁴ In light of this, she may

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 150.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 312.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 59.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 126.

²⁰² Ibid., 24.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Gough, *Journal of Alexander Henry*, 126

have been one of the unnamed women who was with the brigade from the beginning. Pierre probably met her when he was working in the Fond du Lac department under Sayer. Their son, Stephen, was born about 1799, just before Pierre was hired for the Henry expedition. She was probably from the Fond du Lac or Leech Lake band of Ojibwes, because of the extensive interactions Pierre had with these groups in the trade. It was in his – and the Company’s – best interest for him to form kin ties through marriage to the bands with whom he conducted business. Moreover, Henry was probably more interested in hiring Pierre for his expedition if he had an Indian wife, because of Indian women’s significant contributions to the trade.

If Pierre’s wife accompanied him on the Henry expedition, her presence was very useful. Indian wives of traders often traveled with them, rather than staying home in their Native communities. This was one of the benefits of marriages *a la façon du pays* – the Indian wives performed important tasks that made traders’ lives easier. For example, while voyaging through the country, Indian women assisted in the laborious work of portaging. While traveling through the Upper Mississippi region in 1832, Lieutenant Allen remarked on the indispensability and strength of some of the Native women assisting his group. He wrote, “Some Indian women who were assisting in the portage, carried at once a bag of flour, a trunk, and soldiers knapsack, surmounted by a nursing infant in an Indian cradle.”²⁰⁵ Allen marveled at the perception that the women were more capable than the men at carrying goods, and attributed it to the fact that they were “less indolent and more accustomed to it.”²⁰⁶

At the North West Company trading posts, some of the work the Indian wives engaged in included stringing snowshoes, making moccasins, preparing the men’s leather garments, and dressing leather and drying provisions out of the fresh meat brought to the fort.²⁰⁷ John Sutherland, a North West Company trader at the end of the eighteenth century, had a Native wife who was appreciated for the work she did curing skins and making pemmican, as well as for speaking both the Cree and the Ojibwe languages.²⁰⁸ In the Red River valley, Pierre’s wife possibly assisted with agricultural work. In May 1804, Henry noted, “Indian women preparing ground, sowing potatoes, corn, and squash, burning brush, etc.”²⁰⁹

Aside from the valuable work she performed, Pierre’s wife also built a family with him. While at the Pembina post on March 12, 1802, as noted by Henry, “Pierre’s wife was delivered of a daughter, the first new fruit in this Fort, and a very black [*sic*].”²¹⁰ Pierre and his wife also probably had a young son, Stephen, and this newborn with them in the dangerous Red River country. Or perhaps they left their son with maternal grandparents in the Fond du Lac region. Either way, they were unusual in parenting such a dark-skinned child, as indicated by Henry’s emphasis on her “blackness.”

²⁰⁵ Edward Neill, *The History of Minnesota: From the Earliest French Explorations to the Present Time* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1858), 404.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ Morton, *A History of the Canadian West*, 349.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 437-38.

²⁰⁹ Gough, *Journal of Alexander Henry*, 158-159.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Pierre Bonga apparently had a total of five children with his Ojibwe wife, whose name is recorded as *Ojibwayquay* in one source, which translates simply as “Ojibwe woman.” Among their three sons, Jack, Stephen, and George, only Jack had a recorded Ojibwe name: “*Ay no dah gun*.” Their two daughters both had Ojibwe names only recorded in this particular source.²¹¹ However, Pierre had a daughter named Margaret, or Marguerite, who was likely born around this date. Since census records show that Stephen was born in 1799 or 1800 near Fort St. Louis, he was born there while Pierre was still there working under Sayer, or while Pierre started his new job with Henry and his mother stayed at Fond du Lac.²¹² In the second case, *Ojibwayquay* probably traveled to the Pembina post after her son was born to join her husband, and could have left Stephen behind with her family.

It is possible that Pierre’s wife was a Pillager woman. Considering that Henry carefully cultivated a relationship with the Leech Lakers over the years and that Stephen was born at Fond du Lac, it makes sense. Henry and his men traded with Ojibwes from several bands on the lower Red River, including “Saulteurs” who were Leech Lakers, Red Suckers, and Red Lakers. In 1800 there was a group of forty-five Ojibwe hunters supplying the Pembina post with beaver and buffalo, and in the next season ten new hunters from Red, Leech, and Rainy Lakes joined the group. The number of hunters grew steadily each year so that by 1804 and 1805 there were about one hundred Ojibwe hunters.²¹³ Although these hunters and oftentimes their families were near the Pembina post during the hunting season, which lasted from fall to the spring, they usually returned to other locales in the summer. Pierre’s wife therefore had groups to travel with if she chose to go back and forth between Fond du Lac, Leech Lake, and Pembina. If she spent time at Leech Lake, there was much to do and valuable resources to gather. A North West Company clerk at the Leech Lake post noted in 1807, “A hundred warriors are stationary here, who hunt beaver in the Spring, while their women make sugar, on which they and their children subsist.”²¹⁴

Pierre was not unusual in building a family with an Ojibwe woman, as many other men at the fort did the same thing. In fact, in 1801 Henry established marital relations with the daughter of one of the Ojibwe hunters, Liard, whom he referred to as his *beau-père*, which is French for father-in-law. Henry took these kin relations seriously, as evidenced by his behavior after Liard and his family were killed in 1805 by Sioux warriors. Henry noted that a retaliatory war party was being organized of “Saulteaux,” Assineboines, and Crees, numbering about three hundred men. He wrote, “I gave them a 9 Gallon Keg of Gun Powder and 100 lbs of Balls to encourage them to revenge the death

²¹¹ Ransom Judd Powell Papers, Roll: 9, MHS.

²¹² 1870 U.S. Census, Superior, Douglas county, Wisconsin (1 August 1870) Roll: M593_1712; Page: 82B; Image: 168; Family History Library Film: 553211.

²¹³ Harold Hickerson, “The Genesis of a Trading Post Band: The Pembina Chippewa,” *Ethnohistory* 3, no. 4 (Autumn 1956): 315-316.

²¹⁴ Grace Lee Nute, “A Description of Northern Minnesota by a Fur-Trader in 1807,” *Minnesota History Bulletin* 15, no. 1 (February 1923): 38. George Monk was the clerk.

of my *Beau-Pere* and family.” Henry also personally buried Liard’s body and collected the remains of his *belle-mere* (mother-in-law) for burial.”²¹⁵

These men of the North West Company understood that if they took a Native wife, they would establish kin relations with her family and thereby be ensured of trade relations with them. They understood how the middle ground operated, and the Company budgeted for these necessary expenses. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, however, the Company attempted to cut costs by passing a regulation forbidding employees to support their Indian families with Company funds. In the end, it was impossible to enforce.²¹⁶

By 1805, Pierre’s success is evident in the ledgers of the North West Company. They show his wages nearing those of two clerks, and actually surpassing one clerk. Pierre was one of four interpreters being paid at the post, and the sole interpreter without another official title listed. The three other interpreters were also listed as clerks, so they had additional responsibilities. The ledger shows that Joseph St. Germain was paid 800 *livres*, Augustin Cadotte was paid 900 *livres*, and Pierre Bonga was paid 750 *livres*. There were no wages listed for Antoine Desjarlais. Bruce White noted that it is not clear whether the currency is noted in *livres*, a denomination of money based on old French currency and used in Canada and the American Northwest during the fur trade period, or North West *livres*, which were worth twice as much as those used in Montreal.²¹⁷ Either way, the three paid interpreters were all listed as being one year in service, so seniority was not the determining factor in the pay gap. However, Pierre was the only employee given a racial or ethnic designation in the ledger, which noted “Negro” in the “remarks” column. Only a few other employee entries included notes in this column, and these were roles such as “Cooper,” “Hunter,” “& Interpreter.”²¹⁸

By the end of the 1807-1808 hunting season, Henry abandoned the trading post at Pembina.²¹⁹ Pierre probably left at this point too, and was assigned to work elsewhere for the North West Company. He probably stayed in the Fond du Lac department where he was most useful to the company because of his kin ties and knowledge of the Ojibwes. Moreover, it was probably just as important that the Leech Lakers knew Pierre. He went east towards Leech Lake and eventually settled near the main Fond du Lac headquarters at Fort St. Louis, where he and his family were encountered by the Cass expedition in 1820.

Pierre worked for the North West Company until 1817, when he made a switch to working for the South West Company.²²⁰ This was a subsidiary of the American Fur

²¹⁵ Gough, *Journal of Alexander Henry*, 175.

²¹⁶ Morton, *A History of the Canadian West*, 350.

²¹⁷ White, *The Fur Trade in Minnesota*, 6.

²¹⁸ Company Records, 1791-1811, North West Company, MHS

²¹⁹ Hickerson, “The Genesis of a Trading Post Band,” 326. Hickerson notes, “The character of the Red River country changed radically after 1812. An agricultural colony was established by the Hudson’s Bay Company under Lord Selkirk...the colony persisted and became the dominating force in the region. European immigrants, mainly from Scotland and Switzerland, formed the population base for the settlement.” Their main occupation was to hunt buffalo for the Hudson’s Bay Company.

²²⁰ White, *The Fur Trade in Minnesota*.

Company, which was founded by John Jacob Astor in 1808, and handled the Midwestern fur trade. Pierre's change in employment was most likely due to radical changes in the fur trade after 1816, when American legislation banned British traders from U.S. political territory.²²¹ The new trade restrictions aimed to give American businesses the advantage in an area where British traders were frequently crossing the U.S.-Canada border to trade with Indians. Of course, many Ojibwe, and people tied specifically to the Leech Lakers, frequently traded with British agents, and American officials and traders increasingly tried to stop this exchange. In many cases, as historian Janet Chute notes, kin ties aided this cross-border flow:

Certain traders, such as Charles Ermatinger at the British Sault, continued to trade south of the border for a while through their Ojibwa kin. Married to a daughter of Chief Katawabedai at Fond du Lac, Ermatinger received furs from southwest of Superior until retiring to Montreal in 1828. Shingwaukose also regularly traveled into interior Minnesota and Wisconsin during the 1820s and 1830s to acquire peltry destined for British posts.²²²

Although he worked for a different company, Pierre Bonga continued to work in the Fond du Lac department among many of the same people. When the American Fur Company became the dominant trading company in the region they followed the example of the North West Company and just hired the men who were already there and who had established ties and reputations among the Ojibwe.²²³ However, there were some significant changes. The structure of the Astor Company was very different from the North West Company as it “reflected a consistent policy of maximizing profit and minimizing risk for the parent concern at the expense of its agents in the field.”²²⁴

Pierre shows up in the records working for the American Fur Company in the 1818-1819 season, and was still in the employ of the company in 1820.”²²⁵ James Doty, who accompanied the Cass expedition through Ojibwe country that year, noted of the Fond du Lac Ojibwe band:

The tribe consists of forty-five men, sixty women, and two hundred and forty children. There are about thirty half-breeds, and three freemen, who have families. The freemen are Canadians married to squaws, living entirely with the Indians, and are not engaged to the Southwestern Company, by whom, as well as the Indians, they are considered a great nuisance, being forever exciting broils and disturbances. **There is an old negro in the employ of the company who has a squaw for a wife, and a family of four children residing in Fond du Lac.**²²⁶

²²¹ Janet Chute, “Ojibwa Leadership during the Fur Trade Era at Sault Ste. Marie,” in *New Faces of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the Seventh North American Fur Trade Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1995*, eds. Jo-Anne Fiske, Susan Sleeper-Smith, William Wicken, 153-174. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998).

²²² *Ibid.*, 63.

²²³ Warren, *History of the Ojibway People*, 383.

²²⁴ Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” 124.

²²⁵ “American Fur Company Employees, 1818-1819,” in *Wisconsin Historical Collections* 12 (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, 1892): 156.

²²⁶ Doty, “Northern Wisconsin in 1820,” 201.

Doty emphasized how the Fond du Lac band differed from the Leech Lakers further north, also revealing why it was a more peaceful community for an old man like Pierre to retire in. “They consider the Sioux their enemies,” Doty wrote, “but make few war excursions. They sometimes join those of the other tribes, but have never taken that deep interest in the struggle that the others have.”²²⁷ The great number of “half-breeds” living at Fond du Lac also suggests that Pierre and his wife settled among men whom they had worked with in the trade. In this fur trade community, Pierre fit in perfectly and race was not a matter alienating him. He was viewed more as a man of the fur trade who happened to have dark skin, rather than a “black” man who worked in the fur trade. With his Ojibwe wife and numerous children surrounding him, Pierre and his family closely resembled every other family in the region built by marriages between Ojibwe women and fur traders.

By the time Pierre was about forty-five years old, he seems to have stopped working regularly and instead took on the occasional job. Perhaps he accepted these “engagements” less out of necessity than doing a favor when needed. Pierre was hired as a boatman in 1822 for the American Fur Company in the Fond du Lac department, which seems to have been a brief assignment because he was paid only \$200 and it was listed as an “engagement.”²²⁸ At this point, his sons were probably working for traders or were hired for voyages in a manner that was not recorded. George was around fifteen or sixteen years old and Stephen was around twenty years old, and maybe it was Pierre’s chance to retire.

The passing of an era in the fur trade

Pierre disappears from the record after 1822, just as his sons begin to appear. Historian William Warren, writing in 1852, remembered Pierre Bonga as one of a dozen other “principal traders” who were part of a golden age of the fur trade before the 1821 merger. After praising the “honorable and charitable” conduct of the North West Company traders, Warren offered as solace a reminder that “These early pioneer traders all intermarried in the tribe, and have left sons and daughters to perpetuate their names.”²²⁹ Warren mourned the passing of an era in the fur trade that he characterized as embodying positive relations between traders and Indians. He wrote of the North West Company, “With deep regret do the old voyageurs and Indians speak of the dissolution of this once powerful company, for they always received honorable and charitable treatment at their hands.”²³⁰

The North West Company embraced the voyageur culture that was so intertwined with French traditions. Once the North West Company ceased to exist, these traditions waned. In particular, the voyageur culture was saturated with “pomp and circumstance,” and given free reign within the North West Company. Historian Arthur Morton romanticized these traditions:

²²⁷ Doty, “Northern Wisconsin in 1820,” 201.

²²⁸ White, *The Fur Trade in Minnesota*, 34.

²²⁹ Warren, *History of the Ojibway People*, 381.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 381.

The crews sang as they paddled; they camped before coming in to the important posts to shave and to dress in their most colorful garments: then came the spectacular arrival at the fort, paddles keeping time with the voyageur song. Their endurance of hard labor was taxed to the limit, but it was tempered by *régales*, libations of rum, at stated points on the route or after an especially hard days work. A *régale* and a dance were *de rigueur* at the arrival at the wintering post.²³¹

Once the American Fur Company gained domination in the region, a new breed of traders arrived to do business. These new traders were “men with education and close family ties in the East...both looked upon the Northwest as a developing frontier rather than as a preserve of hunters and fur buyers.”²³² Some of the aggressive new businessmen had no friendship or kin ties to the Indians, and did not pursue any. Henry Sibley, who was overseeing a new department doing trade with the Sioux, hoped this lack of ties would shore up profits by introducing a stricter code of business.²³³

Pierre’s legacy in the fur trade

As historian Kenneth Porter described them in 1934, “The Bongas are an example of a fur-trading family of Negro blood the members of which advanced from positions as personal servants or voyageurs to stations as interpreters, and who finally became independent entrepreneurs.”²³⁴ In his work, Porter highlights the Bongas as an exception, and notes that “few Negroes who entered the fur trade in menial capacities ever became independent entrepreneurs.” This raises the question of whether they really were an exception, and if so, why?

Looking at the results of Pierre’s work and his kin ties, he clearly prospered. He sent two of his sons out east for their educations, in accordance with the habit of many fur traders of means. However, Pierre only sent his two oldest sons, George and Stephen, to school, and no mention was made of Jack’s education. Jack was noted as “unable to read or write” in census records and never worked as an interpreter like his older brothers, indicating a lack of the same literacy and language skills.²³⁵ Notably, there was a gap in their births – Stephen and George were born respectively around 1800 and 1807, while Jack was born much later, around 1817. There is also evidence that Pierre died when Jack was of school age.²³⁶ The timing of Pierre’s death, as well as the declining business of the

²³¹ Morton, *A History of the Canadian West*, 349.

²³² Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” 125.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 130-131.

²³⁴ Porter, “Negroes and the Fur Trade,” 426.

²³⁵ 1860 U.S. Census, Leech Lake, Cass county, Minnesota, enumerated by Peter Roy (22 June, 1860) Roll: M653_567; Page: 459; Image: 450; Family History Library Film: 803567.

²³⁶ Grace Lee Nute, *Calendar of the American Fur Company’s Papers* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1945). James Keith, Hudson’s Bay Office, Lachine, April 2, 1838, “requests information about the heirs of Pierre Bungo [Bonga] to whom funds may be paid.”

fur trade, might explain why Jack did not attend school in the east. There is no way of knowing definitely.

The educations Pierre chose for his sons indicate more than prosperity, but also a deliberate strategizing. Pierre sent George to Montreal, probably a Catholic school, and Stephen to Albany, New York to study to become a Presbyterian minister.²³⁷ These different regional and religious affiliations positioned the family to make alliances with more religious and ethnic communities in the coming years. With missionaries from different denominations arriving in the region, Pierre probably sought to build as many alliances as possible by branching out into different churches and regions.

George Bonga and the American Fur Company

George Bonga was one of those sons who perpetuated the Bonga name and continued their legacy of prosperity in the region. George was fluent in French, English and Ojibwe, and worked for the American Fur Company from 1820-1839. Records show he was employed as a “boatman” in the Lac du Flambeau department in 1822, in what is now northeastern Wisconsin.²³⁸ At about sixteen years old, he was old enough to be considered an adult, but was beginning in a modest position as not much more than a voyageur. George Bonga soon progressed up the fur trade hierarchy, however, and was hired as a clerk working under the head trader William Aitkin for the Fond du Lac department. By the 1833-1834 trading season, George was licensed to trade as a clerk at the Lac Platte post, which was in central Minnesota, southwest of Fond du Lac.²³⁹ He was also granted a license as the clerk for the Lac Platte post for the 1836-1837 season.²⁴⁰ As the clerk, he managed the trading conducted from this post and it was his responsibility to see that the wintering season was successful. Interpreters, hunters, and voyageurs were all under his supervision.²⁴¹

Bonga apparently ran the Lac Platte post efficiently, because in the summer of 1836 he was sent to set up a permanent post for Aitkin at Otter Tail Lake. This assignment was in a region that some Ojibwe were anxious about traveling to, because of its proximity to the Dakota country. The fact that George Bonga was sent to build at Otter Tail Lake, which was deemed dangerous country by the Pillagers, shows that he was not faint of heart.

William Boutwell, a missionary at Leech Lake, wrote a letter to Schoolcraft on June 1, 1836, describing the activities George Bonga was involved in and the divided opinions of the Leech Lakers on the matter. Boutwell wrote:

Mr. Aitkin is establishing a permanent post at Otter Tail Lake. G. Bonga had gone with a small assortment of goods to build and pass the summer there. The Indians are divided in opinion and feeling with regard to the measure. Those

²³⁷ Wisconsin Historical Society, “Stephen Bonga,” Photo Gallery, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=55160> (accessed June 25, 2012).

²³⁸ White, *The Fur Trade in Minnesota*, 34.

²³⁹ Return Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries: 1655-1908*, vol. 2 (The Publishing Society of Minnesota, 1908): 55

²⁴⁰ Grace Lee Nute, “The Diary of Martin McLeod,” *Minnesota History Bulletin* 4 (October 1925): 380.

²⁴¹ *People of the Fur Trade*, MHS.

who belong to this lake, or who make gardens in this vicinity, are opposed to the measure. Those who pass the summer in the deer country and make rice towards the height of the land, are in its favor. It is on the line dividing us and our enemies—some say, where we do not wish to go.”²⁴²

Clearly, some of the Leech Lakers felt Otter Tail Lake was too close to the border with the Dakotas. They were reluctant to travel there to trade because of the risk, and perhaps felt other Ojibwes would not go there as well. This may be what happened, because by October George Bonga was “recalled from Otter Tail Lake.”²⁴³ The failure of this post very likely hinged on the Ojibwe Indians’ view that the location was dangerous and on their unwillingness to cooperate with the traders. The fact that many Leech Lakers were “opposed to the measure” and did not “wish to go there” certainly mattered to the post’s success. Traders not only needed Indians to come to their posts to trade for furs, but they relied on them for food, and could not survive without their help.

For example, cutting off access to wild rice was a sure way to make a trader fail. George Johnston was an independent American trader who maintained two thriving posts in the vicinity of Rainy Lake in 1822. In the winter of 1823, his business failed because agents of the Hudson’s Bay Company bought up most of the available wild rice from nearby suppliers. It was physically impossible for Johnston’s men to survive, and they had to abandon the posts.²⁴⁴ At places like this on the U.S.–Canada border, access to wild rice was a crucial resource needed for survival. Fortunately for the Hudson’s Bay Company employees, the border was relatively porous. Most of the wild rice grew in lakes south of Rainy River in American territory, and despite the legislation passed in 1816 that banned British traders from U.S. soil, the Hudson’s Bay Company employees went south to trade for wild rice. The law was finally enforced beginning in the fall of 1822, when customs officers began to police the border, threatening to imprison and fine British traders who were violating trade laws. From this point, their supplies were secured from Indians who were willing to cooperate and who had the freedom to move back and forth across the border.²⁴⁵

It is not unreasonable to think that the Leech Lakers or other Ojibwe bands chose to cut off the Otter Tail Lake post because they were not satisfied with how the American Fur Company conducted business. Their dissatisfaction in 1836 largely stemmed from a non-interference agreement made between the American Fur Company and the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1833. After decades of serious competition between the companies that was especially hostile at the U.S.-Canada border, the American Fur Company agreed to

²⁴² Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs*, 361.

²⁴³ Nute, “The Diary of Martin McLeod,” 380; Nute, *Calendar of the American Fur Company’s Papers*. Nute notes, “Aitken, in a letter to Crooks, dated October 12, 1836, in the American Fur Company Papers, mentions the discontinuance of the Otter Tail Lake post.” 1836, Oct. 15 – Fort Ramsay – From Lyman M. Warren notes “George Bonga has been recalled from Otter Tail Lake.”

²⁴⁴ John S. Galbraith, “British-American Competition in the Border Fur Trade of the 1820s,” *Minnesota History* 36, no.7 (September 1959): 242-244.

²⁴⁵ Galbraith, “British-American Competition in the Border Fur Trade of the 1820s,” 242, 245.

abandon its border posts from Pembina to Lake Superior “in return for a payment of three hundred pounds sterling per year” from the Hudson’s Bay Company.²⁴⁶ Although the traders were happy, this non-interference agreement limited competition in a way that left the Ojibwes at a disadvantage. Flat Mouth voiced his people’s resentment at their exploitation by the American Fur Company in an address to Joseph Nicollet in the summer of 1836:

See how the Americans treat us: . . . They abandon us to the mercy of merchants who trade at a price three times above that ever asked by the French and the English, and in return supply us only with bad merchandise, thus making the price six times higher. And these traders, well do they know the American government is not capable of either helping or protecting us. They do with us what they please, and if in these times when they force us to go naked and starve, we beg for justice, not charity, they threaten to leave.²⁴⁷

Flat Mouth was responding to changes in the trade that came in the wake of major restructuring within the American Fur Company. A new era began in 1834 with the retirement of John Jacob Astor and the reorganization of the American Fur Company under the presidency of Ramsey Crooks. The trade west of Lake Superior was divided into a Northern Outfit that traded with the Ojibwe and had headquarters at La Pointe, and a Western Outfit that dealt with the Sioux, the Ho-Chunk, and the Menominee. The business of the Northern Outfit, which ranged from around the headwaters of the Mississippi as far west as the Red River Valley, was managed by William Aitkin, who remained the head of the Fond du Lac department. Aitkin’s department was supplied from La Pointe, where Lyman Warren, a partner in the Northern Outfit, acted as chief agent.²⁴⁸

As a result of the 1833 non-interference agreement, the American Fur Company had a virtual monopoly on the trade in the Fond du Lac department. The reorganization of the company under Crooks the next year sought to take full advantage of this position. To the dismay and outrage of the Ojibwes, the company increased prices and curtailed credit. Historian Rhoda Gilman notes, “Gifts of tobacco and ammunition which had been handed out freely for fifteen years were abruptly cut off. The result was anger and unrest among the Chippewa.”²⁴⁹ In an effort to reduce expenses, Aitkin was forced to cut the number of posts in his department in half in 1834-35. This was to balance out the increase in costs for security which was needed in the wake of “Indian unrest” among the traders. As Aitkin reported to Crooks in 1834, the change in policy “required for the

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 248, 249. Galbraith notes, “The agreement of 1833 made possible a decade of tranquility and monopoly profits for the Hudson’s Bay Company. The failure of the American company in 1842 was a severe blow to the security of the chartered monopoly, for it opened the way to renewed competition on the frontier.”

²⁴⁷ Martha Coleman Bray, ed., *The Journals of Joseph N. Nicollet*, translated by André Fertey (St. Paul, 1970), 113, quoted in Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” 138.

²⁴⁸ Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” 125-126.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 128-129.

present year that each post should be manned with a sufficient number of men to show the means of defending our property.”²⁵⁰

The Ojibwe seemed to have one sure means of putting pressure on the Americans, however, and they gave them a sense of insecurity by maintaining ties with British allies. In the summer of 1832, when Henry Schoolcraft, the Indian agent, visited the Upper Mississippi with an escort of soldiers and Reverend Boutwell, the delegation visited with Flat Mouth at Leech Lake. As they sat in his “headquarters” surrounded by about “40 or more of his warriors” it was observed that “one side of his room was hung with an English and American flag, medals, war-clubs, lances, tomahawks, arrows, and other implements of death.”²⁵¹ Evidently, the Leech Lakers still considered themselves allies of the British, or at least they wished to present themselves that way to the Americans. During the visit Flat Mouth made a speech to the delegation threatening to turn to the British for assistance that the Americans had denied the Leech Lakers. He said, “I hoped that you would bring us relief. But if you did not furnish some relief, I thought I should go farther, to the people who wear big hats, which the Long Knives [Americans] have so often promised.”²⁵²

Only a few years later, in 1835, George Featherstonhaugh, a geologist, visited Fort Snelling and interviewed Henry Sibley, then the chief factor of the Western Outfit of the American Fur Company. When asked about bands of Indians who had British ties, Sibley replied, “The Chippewas, the Pottawattamies, the Ottawas, and some of the Menominies, with a portion of the Sacs and Foxes have, until within a very few years, received annual presents to a large amount from the British government, and the two former continue to receive them... Chippewas from the very head of Lake Superior may be encountered every year who are on their way to see their English father and participate in his bounty.”²⁵³

And as late as 1843, the Methodist missionary Alfred Brunson described American efforts to woo an Ojibwe band that came to La Pointe for the first payment under the treaty of 1842. Without naming the specific band, Brunson noted that “a young chief” swore “fidelity to the [US] government.” Brunson continued:

What made this circumstance of more importance than it otherwise would have been, and made the government more anxious to encourage and reward such devotion, was the fact that among the Indians bordering on this lake there was a lingering attachment to the British, and presents had for many years been bestowed upon them to retain their friendship in case of war as well as to secure

²⁵⁰ Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” 128-29; Aitkin to Crooks, December 25, 1834, Crooks to Aitkin, March 6, 1835, American Fur Company Papers.

²⁵¹ Edward Neill, “History of the Ojibways, and Their Connection With Fur Traders, Based Upon Official and Other Records,” in *Minnesota Historical Collections 5* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1885), 478-79.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 480.

²⁵³ Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 57.

their trade on their side of the lake, which had the effect to draw hundreds of our Indians annually to Drummond's Island to receive the presents.²⁵⁴

Clearly then, the Ojibwes were not ready to swear loyalty to the U.S. government and to completely sever ties to their former British allies. The Americans were not doing enough to benefit the Ojibwes, so there was no reason for the Ojibwes to cut off kin ties with the Americans' foes.

George Bonga's actions and words

George Bonga was one of the fortunate employees to survive the reduction in the workforce in the Fond du Lac department. It was at this point that he was promoted to a clerk position at Lac Platte, and was soon afterwards given the additional responsibility of attempting to expand the Company's network of posts to Otter Tail Lake. Although that was a failed venture, George Bonga continued to prove his worth and mettle.

In a particularly sensational account that was "long a matter of comment," George Bonga represented the ideal Company employee because of both his skills and loyalty to his boss. This story portrayed Bonga as knowledgeable about the land, possessing keen tracking skills, displaying fearlessness towards Indians, and determinedly pursuing justice, or revenge, on behalf of his boss. This is especially significant in light of fur trade folklore that circulated from the mid-eighteenth through the mid-nineteenth century that depicted the abandonment of a head trader by his men in desperate and fearful situations. Oftentimes, the head trader was left to confront hostile Indians alone, and took desperate measures to protect his goods and himself.²⁵⁵ This would not be the case if George Bonga were around, as the story illustrated.

In January 1837, George Bonga tracked down an Ojibwe man named *Che-ga-wa-skung*, who had murdered Alfred Aitkin, William Aitkin's son. A dispute had arisen over a woman, and *Che-ga-wa-skung*, a Leech Laker, had attacked Alfred Aitkin at the Cass Lake trading post and killed him. No action was taken to apprehend the man until William Aitkin traveled from Sandy Lake to Leech Lake a month later, having been gone from the country on business. He arrived on the scene on January 13, 1837, ready for action, as he later related to Henry Schoolcraft:

When arrived, I found the feelings of every one prepared for vengeance... In a moment there were twenty half-breeds gathered round... full-armed, ready to execute any commands that I should give them... We arrived on the wretches unawares, disarmed the band, and dragged the monster from his lodge. I would have put the villain to death in the midst of his relations, but Mr. Boutwell advised it would be better to take him where he might be made an example of. The monster escaped from us two days after we had taken him, but

²⁵⁴ Alfred Brunson, *A Western Pioneer*, vol. 2 (Cincinnati: Waldon & Stowe, 1830), 192.

²⁵⁵ See Bruce M. White, "The Fear of Pillaging: Economic Folktales of the Great Lakes Fur Trade," in *The Fur Trade Revisited: Selected Papers of the Sixth North American Fur Trade Conference, Mackinac Island, Michigan, 1991*, eds. Jennifer Brown, W. J. Eccles and Donald Heldman, 199-216 (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1994).

my half-breeds pursued him for six days and brought him back, and he is now on his way to St. Peter's in irons, under a strong guard."²⁵⁶

An early twentieth century historical source notes, "The chief agent in running down the murderer was George Bonga, the mixed blood Indian and negro, sub-trader under Aitkin. He followed him night and day for the entire six days, and William L. Quinn says that Bonga's unrelenting pursuit was long a matter of comment in early days."²⁵⁷

This remarkable story illustrates several points about George Bonga's experience in the fur trade. In addition to the legendary skills and fortitude it depicts, the story also shows that Bonga was considered a "half-breed" just like the other traders who had Indian mothers and European or "mixed-blood" fathers. When William Aitkin related the story, he did not emphasize Bonga's African ancestry or "blackness." He only spoke of "[his] half-breeds." Instead, it is the historian writing in 1908 who described Bonga as "the mixed blood Indian and negro." Men who were part of the fur trade viewed Bonga first and foremost as a "half-breed" trader because of the cultural context. Within the fur trade culture, those who were born of trader fathers and Indian mothers had "half-breed" or "mixed-blood" identities.

Furthermore, this story indicates that George Bonga made a reputation for himself by accomplishing feats that excited discussion and gossip about him. As one of the few men of African ancestry working in the fur trade in this region, and doing sensational things while conducting business among the notoriously difficult Pillager band, George Bonga was probably someone most people in the region had heard of.

George Bonga displayed a distinctly compassionate view of the Leech Lakers two years later, which is striking for how his account contradicted Company reports on the community. Charles Borup, the head agent of the American Fur Company's Northern Outfit at La Pointe, sent a report to Company president Ramsay Crooks at the end of January, 1839, reporting on conditions at Leech Lake:

The Indians are far from being dissatisfied...I entertain no fears what ever for the safety of our people or property [at Leech Lake]...We have been disappointed in our expectations here. But the weather was so extraordinarily bad, that even with the greatest exertions, we could do nothing. Every thing is arranged for a fair trial next Spring."²⁵⁸

In contrast to Borup's optimistic report, George Bonga offered an account of conditions at Leech Lake that described deplorable conditions and a slight critique of company policy. In February 1839 George Bonga wrote to Company headquarters at Sandy Lake:

Dear Sir,
Mr. Davenport has requested me to give you some account of the Leech Lake Indians, which I am sorry to say that they have not made any hunts

²⁵⁶ Schoolcraft, *Personal Memoirs*, 368.

²⁵⁷ Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries*, 125-130.

²⁵⁸ Charles Borup to Ramsay Crooks, 28 January 1839, American Fur Company Papers, MHS.

whatever, nor is there any probability of their making any spring hunts for there is 20 reasons for it, even if the spring was favourable for it, for they are in want of every thing, and another thing there is not an Indian that has a canoe elsewhere than at Leech Lake, and the most of them will have to remain, to prevent their families from starving to death, and they are quite naked, it is not the little ammunition + tobacco that we are going to let them have, that will be of any service to them, one thing that surprises me is that I have not heard a saucy word from an Indian this year.²⁵⁹

Bonga does not provide a sunny account of the situation at Leech Lake. His report evoked pity for the Leech Lakers, as he noted they are “in want of everything” and “they are quite naked.” In contrast to common depictions of Indians, he avoided portraying them as indolent, noting “most of them will have to remain, to prevent their families from starving to death.” Moreover, he was not blaming the Ojibwes for their hardship, since there were “20 reasons” for why their hunts were not successful. Bonga also suggested that the traders were not providing much in the area of provisions for the Leech Lakers, noting “it is not the little ammunition plus tobacco that we are going to let them have, that will be of any service to them.” This comment reveals Bonga was not hesitant to be critical of Company policy, and within the context of the whole letter it appears to criticize a heartlessness towards the “starving” and “naked” Pillagers. For while Borup blamed the weather for the dire conditions at Leech Lake, Bonga seems to place some blame on the failure of the Company to bring useful provisions into the country. Finally, Bonga also avoided reinforcing the perception that the Pillagers were an unruly people, writing “I have not heard a saucy word from an Indian this year.”

Intermarriage & the Fur Trade

Marriage alliances and kin networks

When the Cass expedition passed through Ojibwe country in 1820 and encountered Pierre Bonga’s family at Fond du Lac, there were many observations recorded about the traders living among the Indians. An officer in the group noted that “the fish and the wild rice are the chief sustenance of the traders, and without them the trade could scarcely be carried on.”²⁶⁰ This statement hints at the importance of Ojibwe women to the trade, because without their assistance traders were deprived of access to resources necessary for their own survival and the survival of the trade.

In Ojibwe communities there was a gendered division of labor. Activities were generally separated into male and female domains, yet to a large extent the domains overlapped so that women and men often worked together. Men hunted, trapped, and went to war, and women managed the specialized harvests of maple sugar and wild rice and the gathering of other wild plant foods. Women also oversaw the planting and

²⁵⁹ George Bonga to Charles Borup, 13 February 1839, American Fur Company Papers, MHS.

²⁶⁰ Doty, “Northern Wisconsin in 1820,” 196.

harvesting of small fields of corn, pumpkins, and squash and built bark houses and wove mats.²⁶¹

When Ojibwe women participated in the fur trade, they contributed the work they commonly performed in Ojibwe communities and adapted new roles. Traders had relied on Native women since the seventeenth century, when the fur trade first reached into the Ojibwe country near Lake Superior. The most successful traders among the Ojibwe married Native women and learned to speak the Ojibwe language. These marriage alliances were pursued equally by traders and Native communities, because they established ties between groups that were mutually beneficial.

The region's Native population had long integrated "outsiders" into communities through the practices of adoption and intermarriage, which were very much a function of the fur trade.²⁶² Fur trade marriages, known as *a la façon du pays*, or "in the custom of the country," brought Native women and fur trade men together. This was a practice that started under the regime of New France through royal sanction, and spread westward through the vast networks of the trade.²⁶³ Sylvia Van Kirk notes that marriages *a la façon du pays* were adapted by employees of the North West Company more easily and with less complications than the Hudson's Bay Company employees. This was because the "Nor'Westers"

did not suffer any split between official policy and actual practice. Deeply influenced by the previous experience of the French traders, the North West Company appreciated the advantages which could accrue from allowing its men to form unions with the Indian women. One of the results of the spread of the fur trade to the Great Lakes region had been extensive intermarriage between the French and the Ojibwa. Although denounced by the Jesuit priests as being immoral, the traders had taken their Indian wives according to traditional native marriage rites and distinct family units had developed. This pattern was to continue after the British take-over of the Québec fur trade. In the North West Company, all ranks (bourgeois, clerk and engagé) were allowed to marry Indian women.²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Priscilla Buffalohead, "Farmers, Warriors, Traders: A Fresh Look at Ojibway Women." *Minnesota History* 48, no. 6 (Summer 1983): 236-244; White, "The Woman Who Married A Beaver," 119. The Ojibwe subsistence economy was in harmony with the cycle of the seasons. Summer village life depended on fishing, hunting game, gathering wild plant foods, and planting small fields of corn. In late fall and winter, village residents dispersed into smaller family or band units to pursue large game and to trap or snare fur-bearing animals.

²⁶² See White, *The Middle Ground*; and the Introduction and Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

²⁶³ Robin W. Winks, *The Blacks in Canada: A History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1971), 3. "Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the [Minister of Finances of France from 1665 to 1683 under the rule of King Louis XIV], encouraged intermarriage between French and Indians so that a new people of one blood might emerge, with their loyalties and their future pinned to the revitalized colony."

²⁶⁴ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 28.

Fur trade marriages were a meeting on the middle ground of cultural kin networks from different traditions. Native notions of kin structured by clans combined with French Catholic kin ties established by godparents in the eighteenth century to build vast kin networks that governed trade relations.²⁶⁵ While at Mackinac as a child, Pierre was integrated into this kin network when his parents became a part of the Catholic community by marrying and baptizing their children in the church. When Pierre later married *Ojibwayquay*, they were united as husband and wife *a la facon du pays*, rather than in a church. By this point, Catholic kin ties were less important than the Ojibwe ties he established. In the interior country where he was living, near the Upper Mississippi, ties to the Indians and other prominent traders were established primarily through marriage *a la facon du pays*, rather than through church-sanctioned rites such as baptism or marriage.

Recent scholarship places kinship and intermarriage at the center of the fur trade, examining the place of women, the style of marriage, and the nature of the family within the complex of mostly Native-white relations.²⁶⁶ These studies illustrate how the fur trade “was not simply an economic activity, but a social and cultural complex that was to survive for nearly two centuries.”²⁶⁷ In 1991, Richard White’s text *The Middle Ground* represented a turn in the fur trade literature because although he wrote mostly of men’s roles and diplomacy, he referred to the role of women in trade at many points. Jennifer Brown’s 1980 study, *Strangers in Blood*, presented a comparative study of North West and Hudson’s Bay Company fur trade societies and was a watershed in fur trade literature for focusing on marriages and families between traders and Native women. Sylvia Van Kirk demonstrated that women played an essential role in the development of fur-trade society and that interracial marriage was fundamental to its growth. She argued that this phenomenon was exceptional because in most other places, sexual encounters between European men and Native women were illicit and peripheral to trading societies. Susan Sleeper-Smith emphasized that kinship determined identity and established familial bonds “often as secure as those of written contracts.”²⁶⁸ Although recent works look at race, class and gender by analyzing Indian and Métis women and interracial marriage, there is no inclusion of African Americans in these partnerships. However, the Bonga family seems to have been similarly incorporated into Ojibwe families as the French fur traders. This evidences that Ojibwe people did not accept notions of race as barriers to kin incorporation, and viewed the Bongas as culturally French rather than in racial terms.

The Bongas prospered because they succeeded in becoming integrated into influential kin networks. Without these, Pierre could not have maintained trade for so

²⁶⁵ For a study examining these overlapping kin networks in the Illinois Country see Susan Sleeper-Smith, “Furs and Female Kin Networks: The World of Marie Madeleine Reaume L’archeveque Chevalier,” in *New Faces of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the Seventh North American Fur Trade Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1995*, eds. Jo-Anne Fiske, Susan Sleeper-Smith, William Wicken, 53-72 (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998).

²⁶⁶ Brown, *Strangers in Blood*; Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*; White, *The Middle Ground*; Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*.

²⁶⁷ Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties*, 2.

²⁶⁸ Sleeper-Smith, *Indian Women and French Men*.

long among the Ojibwes. Without his Ojibwe wife, he would not have had access to food or furs. By making these partnerships, the Bongas developed kin ties that brought benefits to both Ojibwe communities and the fur trade employees. As Bruce White explains:

From the point of view of the native community, marriages between traders and native women could help achieve the important aim of ensuring a steady supply of merchandise. Ties of affection could increase the likelihood that a trader would return to the community in future years and that he might be more generous with gifts and in the rates exacted for direct exchange.²⁶⁹

Native women occupied important roles that brought benefits to both the Native communities they were from and the fur trade societies they joined when they made marriage alliances with traders. Native women helped provide fur traders with a more reliable food supply, they were a resource of valuable information, they exercised control over food resources, and they negotiated with traders.²⁷⁰ These important jobs thrust Native women into central roles in the fur trade, and ensured that traders sought them out as wives.

The Upper Mississippi region was a place where the harsh climate often brought periods of hardship and starvation, especially during the long, freezing winters. The Ojibwe had developed a seasonal round of food acquisition, and traders learned to depend on them for survival. They traded with the Ojibwe for food and hired them as hunters, and in desperate times even appealed to their Ojibwe kin for handouts.²⁷¹

Gaining access to wild rice, in particular, was one of the many advantages afforded to traders who married Ojibwe women. As historian Brenda Child notes, “The wild rice harvest was the most visible expression of women’s autonomy in Ojibwe society.”²⁷² Women controlled all stages of rice harvesting and processing up until the twentieth century, when men became increasingly involved and started taking over the activity.²⁷³ Frances Densmore describes the ways in which women controlled the harvest prior to this:

Each group of relatives had its share of the rice field as it had its share of the sugar bush, and this right was never disputed. The women established it each year by going to the rice field in the middle of the summer and tying a small portion of the rice in little sheaves. The border of each tract was defined by stakes, but this action showed that the field was to be harvested that year. When

²⁶⁹ White, “The Woman Who Married a Beaver,” 128.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*; Brown, *Strangers in Blood*.

²⁷¹ White, “A Skilled Game of Exchange,” 235. For example, Bruce White notes, “In mid-March, 1804, Nelson wrote that one of his employees had gone to stay with the man’s father-in-law ‘as we have nothing here to eat.’” George Nelson was an XY Company trader in the 1803-1804 season.

²⁷² Brenda Child, *Holding Our World Together: Ojibwe Women and the Survival of Community* (New York: Viking, 2012), 25.

²⁷³ Thomas Vennum, Jr., *Wild Rice and the Ojibway People* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1988), 108-109.

the rice was ripe the people made their camp on the lake shore and prepared for work. The rice was harvested by the women.²⁷⁴

This type of management was observed among the Upper Mississippi Ojibwe in 1820. Officer James Doty noted in his report of the Cass expedition that women harvested the wild rice in teams, while the men stayed ashore. “[The wild rice] is now gathered by two [women] passing around in a canoe, one sitting in the stern and pushing it along, while the other with her back to the bow and with two small pointed sticks about three feet long, one in each hand, collects it in by running one of the sticks into the rice and bending it over on to the edge of the canoe, while with the other she strikes the heads suddenly and rattles the grain into it. This she does on both sides of the canoe alternately, and while the canoe is moving.”²⁷⁵

Outside observers of Ojibwe activities manifested such an interest in the harvesting and processing of wild rice because it was a vital food resource for them. Although traders attempted to produce their own food supplies, they always bought wild rice from the Ojibwes.²⁷⁶ For example, in 1807, a clerk of the North West Company’s post on Leech Lake wrote: “The North West Company have an Establishment at the west end of Leech lake, where five acres of ground produce 1000 bushels potatoes, 30 bushels oats or rice, cabbages, carrots, beets, Beans, Pumpkins, and Indian Corn. The Company have introduced, horses, cats, and hens into this quarter. Hunter’s meat is scarce in this country, every possible effort is made in the fall to lay in the necessary stock of provisions for the winter; consequently a quantity of wild rice is purchased from the natives.”²⁷⁷

As noted earlier, accessibility to wild rice was manipulated by traders and Indians around the U.S.-Canada border in the 1820’s. As competition between the Hudson’s Bay Company and the North West Company heated up, control of the crop became important. As a result, Indians in the region “exploited their strategic position as its principal suppliers.”²⁷⁸ Having an Indian wife was one way a trader could avoid being cut off.

Ojibwe women also controlled the production of maple sugar, another important food resource in the region. After the Chouteau Company took control of the Western Outfit in 1842, they opened a post in the Pillager region at Cass Lake to trade specifically for maple sugar. Norman Kittson, a trader at the post explained to his boss why the new location was important, and noted that maple sugar was “an article which we cannot have too much of.”²⁷⁹

Women clearly made important decisions about the distribution and trade of the products they managed, both within their own families and communities and with

²⁷⁴ Frances Densmore, *Chippewa Customs* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1929), 128.

²⁷⁵ Doty, “Northern Wisconsin in 1820,” 200.

²⁷⁶ White, “A Skilled Game of Exchange,” 235, provides examples.

²⁷⁷ Nute, “A Description of Northern Minnesota by a Fur-Trader in 1807,” 38.

²⁷⁸ Galbraith, “British-American Competition in the Border Fur Trade of the 1820s,” 242.

²⁷⁹ Norman Kittson to Henry Sibley, 19 October, 1852, Sibley Papers, MHS, quoted in Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” 131.

outsiders.²⁸⁰ Women's negotiations with traders for both products they had processed and for male-acquired resources were viewed as a remarkable and sometimes humiliating experience by the traders. For example, the German ethnographer Johann Kohl reported that among the Lake Superior Ojibwe, men always gave the game they killed to their wife for distribution.²⁸¹ When Alexander Henry had to negotiate with women for furs in 1804 in the Red River Valley, he wrote, "I fought several battles with the Women to get their furs from them, It was the most disagreeable *Derouine* I ever made. However I got all they had, about a pack of good Furs, but I was vexed very much at having been under the necessity of fighting with the women."²⁸²

Native women who married fur traders were usually influential and effective communicators who had to be assertive to most successfully fill their roles.²⁸³ They gathered information from their kinship networks and spoke to other wives in the trader community, sometimes passing along valuable information about resources and opportunities.²⁸⁴ They related information to traders and Native people about Indian communities and other traders, serving as informal sources of information. Bruce White notes, "The value of such marriages to a Native community could only be achieved if women exercised influence on the trader and served to increase the flow of information and merchandise in both directions."²⁸⁵

The Bonga kin ties

Clearly, the Bonga men made valuable matches with influential Ojibwe women, as measured by their success in the fur trade. George and Jack established kin ties with the Pillager band that were especially strong by marrying sisters, and both lived with their wives and worked in the region where the Pillagers lived.²⁸⁶ George and his wife *Ashwewin* had four sons and two daughters.²⁸⁷ Jack and *Dedagamaabikwe* had somewhere between three and seven children.²⁸⁸ Their brother Stephen also married an

²⁸⁰ Buffalohead, "Farmers, Warriors, Traders," 240.

²⁸¹ Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway* (1860; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985), 111.

²⁸² Gough, *Journal of Alexander Henry*, 156.

²⁸³ White, "The Woman Who Married a Beaver," 134.

²⁸⁴ White, "A Skilled Game of Exchange," 238. White writes, "XY trader Curot learned that one Ojibway family did not want to give their furs to the North West trader as the man was out of rum. Curot said he had heard it from the wife of his man Savoyard who had in turn heard it from the wife of the North West trader's clerk."

²⁸⁵ White, "The Woman Who Married a Beaver," 131, 138.

²⁸⁶ Minnesota, Wah De Nah and Other and Tallaly, Cass county, Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, enumerated by Peter Roy (5 December 1857) MHS, St. Paul, MN; Minnesota, Cass Lake, Cass county, Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, enumerated by Peter Roy (15 December 1857) MHS, St. Paul, MN; 1860 U.S. Census, Leech Lake, Cass county, Minnesota, enumerated by Peter Roy (22 June, 1860) Roll: M653_567; Page: 459; Image: 450; Family History Library Film: 803567.

²⁸⁷ R. J. Powell Papers, Roll: 9, MHS.

²⁸⁸ Although the Powell records listed three children from the union, the 1860 federal census lists seven children.

Ojibwe woman who was listed as Mary Bonga in federal censuses, and they had a daughter and a son.²⁸⁹ Notably, Jack and “Dayda” extended their kin networks to an influential family when their oldest daughter, *Quaynib*, married William V. Warren. He was the son of William Whipple Warren – the trader, interpreter, farmer, and historian – and Mathilda (Aitkin) Warren, whose father was William Aitkin, the trader whom George Bonga had long worked with. These marriages cemented George and Jack’s ties in the Pillager region as well as among trader families in the Fond du Lac department.

Ashwewin and *Dayda* were probably part of a family that had a desire to garner a large share of the Fond du Lac trade. Since the two sisters were married to traders, and George being an especially influential one, their Ojibwe kin had virtually assured access to credit, gifts, and the choicest pick of provisions the company brought in to trade. Their male kin were likely hired as hunters and trappers over other Ojibwes in the region, and in times of hardship they had somewhere to turn for credit or food at fair prices. George and Jack, in turn, had kin members to work for them and negotiate trades in a region where traders and missionaries had often encountered difficulties and “unruly” attitudes from the Pillagers. For example, in 1833 the trader William Johnston was at Leech Lake and noted,

This band is noted for the disrespect and contempt, with which they have always treated the traders; and especially the men in their employ, frequently taking from them, the dishes of food, while they were in the act of eating. Such insults and treatment they had to put up with, as no signs of resistance could be shown among such a numerous band of wild fellows, who delighted to show; and converse only of warlike and manly deeds; all else below these they consider, indicates a woman’s heart.²⁹⁰

George and Jack were less likely to encounter this problem, and if they did, their wives or other Ojibwe kin probably intervened on their behalf. Notwithstanding the reputation of the Pillagers, these brothers aligned themselves with an Ojibwe band that was valuable to the fur trade. Writing of the American Fur Company’s profits in the region in 1820, Doty wrote, “They sent from Leech Lake, last year, thirty-eight packs; from Sandy Lake, twenty-five; and Fond du Lac, nine. This year, from the first place, fifty-three; the second, thirty-five; and the third, fifteen. Last year the whole return was not as much as usual, and this year rather more.”²⁹¹

After the American Fur Company failed and big trading companies were less dominant in the region, George and his family worked as independent traders. Jack and George were both listed as “Indian traders” in the 1857 territorial census of Minnesota and were located as living in the Upper Mississippi region.²⁹² By 1860, however, their

²⁸⁹ R. J. Powell Papers.

²⁹⁰ William Johnston, “Letters on the Fur Trade,” *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections* 37 (Lansing: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck, Crawford Company, 1909), 185.

²⁹¹ Doty, “Northern Wisconsin in 1820,” 205.

²⁹² Minnesota, Cass, Cass, county, Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, MHS, St. Paul, MN; Minnesota, Wah De Nah and Other and Tallaly, Cass, county, Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, MHS, St. Paul, MN.

fortunes had diverged. While George had amassed a value of \$2,500 in his personal estate and was working as the “Superintendent of the Indian farm,” Jack was listed as a “Voyageur” and had no personal estate or real estate values listed.²⁹³ They were both listed as living in the Leech Lake community with large families, and George’s nineteen year old son James was working with him as a “Farm laborer” at this point. Eventually, George’s sons started trading at Leech and Red Lakes, and George had to exercise his considerable influence to secure trading licenses for them in 1866.²⁹⁴ By 1870, George was the second wealthiest member of his community and his occupation was listed as “Dry Goods merchant, retired.”²⁹⁵

Further evidence of the Bonga family’s success in the fur trade lies in the fact that a trader married Margaret Bonga, George’s sister. Jacob Fahlstrom was a Swiss immigrant who worked first for the Hudson’s Bay Company and then the American Fur Company. In 1823, he married Margaret Bonga and later became a Methodist preacher.²⁹⁶ Fahlstrom’s desire to marry Margaret suggests several things about the Bonga family. First of all, it suggests there was an advantage to making an alliance with the Bonga family, which speaks to both Pierre’s influence and his Ojibwe kin networks. It also suggests that Margaret had learned the important skills that made her valuable as a fur trader’s wife. She probably grew up near Fond du Lac with her Ojibwe family and spoke Ojibwe, French, and English. Margaret’s marriage also indicates that she was not alienated or marginalized from fur trade society because of her skin color. Since she married a trader and not an Indian man, she probably had a uniquely fur trade identity that framed her as culturally French.

These marriages show that the Bonga family built a reputation, name, and fortune for themselves by successfully navigating the social rules of fur trade society. They found a world in which they could prosper because the rules were based on notions of kinship and reciprocity, rather than fixed notions of identity. Because they were good at building alliances and secured Ojibwe wives who were effective partners, they were integrated into communities in Ojibwe country and led the lives of typical traders.

Conclusion: The Legacy of the Bonga fur trading family

²⁹³ 1860 U.S. Census, Leech Lake, Cass county, Minnesota, enumerated by Peter Roy (22 June, 1860) Roll: M653_567; Page: 459; Image: 450; Family History Library Film: 803567.

²⁹⁴ George Bonga to Joel B. Bassett, September 1866, Bassett Papers, MHS. Bonga to Bassett, November 4, 1866, Bassett Papers, MHS. In September George Bonga asked Bassett to secure licenses for his sons James Bonga at Leech Lake and for Peter Bonga at Red Lake. In November he asked Bassett to add his son William’s name to his application for a license to trade.

²⁹⁵ 1870 U.S. Census, Cass county, Minnesota, enumerated by Charles Ruffee (26 July 1870) Roll: T132_2; Page: 466; Image: 235; Family History Library Film: 830422.

²⁹⁶ Esther Chapman Robb, “The ‘Swede-Indian,’” in *American Swedish Historical Museum: Yearbook 1960*, ed. Adolph Benson (Bridgeport, PA: Chancellor Press, 1960), 51-52; Alfred Brunson, *A Western Pioneer*, vol. 2 (Cincinnati: Waldon & Stowe, 1879), 119-120.

Upon considering the trajectory of Pierre, George, and Jack Bonga's lives, it is evident that they were not restricted by a racial hierarchy in the region. Kenneth Porter accurately argued that African-Americans found greater opportunity working in the fur trade of the Old Northwest than in other regions of the United States. Especially in comparison with the rigid racial structures in the eastern and southern United States, the Western Great Lakes region was a particularly socially fluid world. The Bonga family story of advancement from slavery to prosperity aptly illustrates Max Grivno's argument that there was greater mobility for African-Americans in the fur trade world of flexible identities.

The Bongas were also noted as an exception by Porter, because not every African American was as prosperous as they were, but he does not explain why this was the case. What differentiated the Bongas from other blacks in the region was their Ojibwe kin ties, their integration into a Catholic kin network, and their overall socialization into fur trade society. The combination of these elements resulted in a strong fur trade identity for the family that was not based on notions of race, but rather based on cultivating social ties and negotiating the complex intersections of culture, kinship, and status.

Although there were frequent remarks about the "blackness" of Bonga family members, this awareness of their African ancestry and distinctive phenotype does not equate to racist tendencies among the commentators. These written comments were limited to the perspectives of traders and missionaries who interacted with the Bongas, and judging from their successful careers, the family was not discriminated against on the basis of their oft-noted heritage. While men like Alexander Henry, Henry Schoolcraft, and James Doty found the Bonga skin color worthy of note, they also hired the Bonga family members to work for them and trusted them with great tasks. The continued references to the ancestry and phenotype of the Bongas speaks more to the rarity of black people in the region, rather than to racist thinking that viewed skin color as a determinant factor in a person's nature and abilities.

The experience of the Bonga family in Ojibwe country also shows that the region's Native people determined identity on the basis of kinship and culture. With this as the basis, identity was fluid and outsiders were easily incorporated into kin networks. Pierre lived with his family in an Ojibwe village at Fond du Lac and George and Jack probably lived near their wives' family. The Bonga men were integrated into Ojibwe families and communities because their marriages transformed them from strangers to kin. For the Ojibwe, this process equally applied to any individuals regardless of ancestry, culture, or skin color.

The Bonga family members clearly achieved good standing in the Native and trader communities that overlapped and sometimes clashed. The fact that Pierre, George, Stephen, and Jack all married Ojibwe women illustrates that they were viewed as valuable allies by the women's families. They were clearly viewed as influential traders by the Ojibwes, because otherwise they would not have been considered as valuable additions to their indigenous kin networks. Moreover, Margaret Bonga's marriage to Jacob Fahlstrom, and the marriage of Jack Bonga's daughter to a man who was both the son of William Warren and the grandson of William Aitkin, indicates that the Bonga family was similarly viewed as respectable and influential by European and Euro-American traders.

Overall, the Bonga family utilized several strategies for cultivating their social ties and building prosperity. Pierre established kin relationships with an Ojibwe woman, using his connections with her family and clan as well as with his own mixed-race children to strengthen his influence and position. No doubt he used his connections to powerful traders like Henry to have his sons admitted to schools in the east, where other influential traders sent their children. By sending one son to Montreal, and the other to Albany, Pierre prepared to develop links to various communities in the region. The next generation built on these networks, as they branched out as independent traders and took advantage of their firmly entrenched positions within Ojibwe communities.

Chapter 3

French-African Indians:
Interpreters of 19th Century Minnesota Ojibwe Politics

Introduction

George Bonga, a man of mixed African and Ojibwe ancestry, is well known in Minnesota history as being one of the earliest black men in the region. Described as a man of “coal-black skin,” George Bonga was labeled “white,” “black,” and “mulatto” in territorial, state and federal censuses over a period of just thirteen years. Considering that these labels came from census classifications, one might reasonably question how much they reflected the daily and lived reality of this man’s identity. But upon examination of self-designated terms, and labels used by friends and acquaintances in relation to George Bonga, an equally divergent array of terms surfaces.

George Bonga referred to himself as “white,” as a “half breed,” and as a “trader,” as in a French fur “trader,” which had specific French and European cultural connotations. One of his dear friends and with whom he frequently corresponded, Henry Whipple, Bishop of Minnesota, described Bonga in 1868 as “a negro of mixed blood and a member of the Indian tribe.”²⁹⁷ So who was George Bonga? Was he an Indian, that is, an Ojibwe Indian? Was he a “negro” or a “half breed,” and in what ways might he have actually fit into the racial construction of “whiteness”?

George Bonga and Stephen Bonga were brothers who worked in the fur trade in the old Northwest Territory. Their father was Pierre Bonga, a man born of freed African slaves who worked as an interpreter with Alexander Henry the Younger at the beginning of the nineteenth century in the Red River Valley. Pierre Bonga had children with an Ojibwe woman, following in the practice of the fur trade culture of which he was a part, in which intermarriage frequently occurred between European traders and Indian women as a function of the fur trade. Pierre Bonga retired with his Ojibwe family in an Ojibwe village located near Fond du Lac, where he raised his family and settled among the community of other fur trade families.

As the sons of a prominent fur trader, George and Stephen Bonga were part of a culturally distinct group of people that, as Bruce White notes, “exhibited a range of cultural possibilities, often related to economic class. Some children were fully incorporated into Indian communities. Others – particularly those of prominent traders – were sent east to be educated and continue in a trading role. Culturally, they were European.”²⁹⁸ George and Stephen probably fell on the more prominent part of the spectrum of the fur trade families. Their father Pierre had attained the economic success required to send George to school in Montreal and Stephen to Albany, New York. Both men returned to the region, married Ojibwe women, had prosperous fur trade careers, and worked as interpreters for government officials, missionaries, and at treaty negotiations.

²⁹⁷ Henry Whipple, August 4, 1868, Whipple Papers, MHS.

²⁹⁸ Bruce White, “The Power of Whiteness: Or, the Life and Times of Joseph Rolette Jr.,” *Minnesota History* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1998): 181.

In short, George and Stephen Bonga were members of a well established and respected fur trade family whose identity arose within a social world particular to the region.

The world that George and Stephen grew up in was a social context where people often made a choice about their identity. At a time when the fur trade economy dominated the region, people made choices about their identities based on cultural practices, dress, and choosing from the array of terms that surfaced in response to generations of intermarriage between fur traders and Indians.

Many of the “pure-blooded French voyageurs” who had lived their entire lives among the Indians and intermarried with them sometimes identified themselves as *chicot* or *bois brulé*.²⁹⁹ They clearly based their identity on their lifestyle and kin relations, rather than notions of race. To these men, their ancestry was of less importance in determining their identities than the choices they made on a daily basis about how they lived their lives.

In many ways, notions of identity hinged on a spectrum of civilized/uncivilized, in which an individual fell somewhere along a continuum based on their education, status, wealth, dress, residence, language skills, and occupation. Lines were not strictly drawn based on whether someone was an Indian, or white, but were based more on cultural traits and behavior. For example, the Rev. Alfred Brunson wrote, while traveling through the Upper Mississippi country in 1843, “Among the voyagers were Frenchmen, half-breeds (which means any degree of mixed Indian and white blood), and full-blooded Indians who had donned the hat or cap with coat and pants, the insignia of civilization, who had the same pay and performed the same work as white men.”³⁰⁰ Brunson was traveling with Indians who were viewed as “civilized” and therefore worked alongside and received equal pay as the whites. They also made firm distinctions between themselves and other Indians who were not considered “civilized.” Brunson wrote,

On our return voyage a wild Indian was taken on board to work his passage, he to have rations with the others. . . . At night his rations were drawn and cooked with the others of his boat’s crew; but the mess would not allow him to cook for them. They did this themselves, but gave him his full proportion in a separate dish, which he ate by himself, and when the others lay down in their blankets on the sand by the campfire he had to lie by himself. I have said that some of the voyageurs were full-blooded Indians who fared as white men and took their turns in cooking; but they would no more eat and sleep with their brother of the wigwam than would the whites. The mere change of clothing changed the rank and fare of the same Indian. If in a blanket and leggings, he was treated as a wild one; but if he put on the habiliments of civilization he was treated as a white man.³⁰¹

At this period, French fur traders, voyageurs, and Indians oftentimes inhabited the same position based on a spectrum of “civilized” and “uncivilized,” rather than fixed

²⁹⁹ Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi Gami: Life Among the Lake Superior Ojibway* (1860; repr., St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1985), 260-261.

³⁰⁰ Alfred Brunson, *A Western Pioneer*, vol. 2 (Cincinnati: Waldon & Stowe, 1879), 175.

³⁰¹ Brunson, *A Western Pioneer*, 176.

racial determinants. A new element was introduced, however, with the appearance of Anglo-Americans in the region at midcentury. As an increasing flow of individuals from New England and the mid-Atlantic states came in the wake of the territorialization of Minnesota in 1849, the French fur trade identity shifted.

Illustrating how contingent the construction of identity is on context, some French fur traders began identifying themselves against the Anglo-Americans. When German ethnographer Johann Kohl visited the Lake Superior Ojibwe in 1855, he encountered a French voyageur who spoke nostalgically about life before the British, Scottish, Irish, and Yankees had appeared.³⁰² Historian Bruce White notes of this man, “For this French Canadian, being nonwhite represented a specific society of European and Indian background, one that depended on an interactive social and economic relationship, one that was becoming less and less possible with the changes taking place in the region. Perhaps most significantly, the fur trade itself, which had given birth to this society, was ceasing to exist in its traditional form.”³⁰³

These dual changes—the decline of the fur trade and the influx of easterners—had serious implications for the Indian peoples living in the region. Pressure was put on the Ojibwe and Dakota in Minnesota to cede land so it could be opened up for white settlement and resource extraction. Furthermore, the rise of treaty negotiations also ushered in the need to more firmly establish identities in the legal context of treaties. As Ojibwe Indians signed treaties, U.S. and Indian leaders had to come to agreements about which individuals belonged to the parties to the treaties. Questions about families of mixed ancestry and their relations to the Indians were especially probed.

The mid-nineteenth century was also the period of the rise of culturally distinct Métis communities. Bruce White notes:

Impetus for this creation came from the amalgamations of the XY and North West Companies in 1805 and the North West and Hudson’s Bay Companies in 1821. These consolidations put many people out of work, forcing them and their families to survive through hunting, gathering, and trading, following both European and Indian patterns. In places such as Prairie du Chien, St. Paul, Mendota, Pembina, and the Red River settlement of Manitoba, as well as in areas surrounding trading-post villages throughout the region, people of mixed ancestry and culture created autonomous, diverse communities.³⁰⁴

Studying the lives of the Bonga family members in this context highlights how some individuals navigated the shifting politics of identity during a volatile time when much was at stake for many different peoples.

George Bonga’s life, and the lives of his family members, including his brother Stephen Bonga, raise interesting questions about the fluid nature of the region’s categories of identity. By looking over the changes in their identities and positionality, and how they were classified and labeled over their lifespans, I trace an increasingly rigid state administration of race and their struggles to navigate these new power structures. By examining the trajectories of their lives, this chapter highlights how a changing political

³⁰² Kohl, *Kitchi Gami*, 260-261.

³⁰³ White, “The Power of Whiteness,” 184.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 181.

economy shaped notions of race and status in the region, and forced some mixed-blood men to choose sides in deadly political games.

Mixed Ancestry Identities in Treaties

Half breeds and mixed bloods

Reviewing how families of mixed ancestry were acknowledged in treaties with the Ojibwe sheds light on the strength of their Native kin ties and the persistence of certain trader social networks. Moreover, changing terms for these families underscore the ambiguous nature of conceptions of their identity, as they shift within the legal context of treaties among the classifications as “half breeds,” Indians, and “mixed bloods.” As I examine how the Bonga family fit into these dynamics, I show that George and Stephen Bonga succeeded in casting off any racial limitations that were imposed on their father in this legal context, as they took prominent places in the unfolding events and secured annuities and new types of jobs.

In a treaty negotiated in 1826 at Fond du Lac with several bands of the Ojibwe Indians, the status and identity of the fur trade families that had lived among them were addressed in remunerative terms. In this treaty, the families of mixed ancestry were referred to as “half-breeds and Chippewas by descent” who were “scattered through this extensive country.” The treaty stated that the half-breeds were being included because the Ojibwes had “affection” for them and an “interest...in their welfare.” Moreover, all the signatories to the treaty agreed that the half-breeds “should be stimulated to exertion and improvement by the possession of permanent property and fixed residences.” Therefore, a list was drawn up that was annexed to the treaty which purported to include “all of [the half-breeds] who are attached to the government of the United States.” The people included on the list were to receive a portion of the 640 acres of land granted to the “half-breeds.”³⁰⁵

Upon review of the list, it is evident that most of the influential fur trade families in the region were included. In a list providing forty-five separate grants of land, many of the men that Pierre Bonga worked with were listed, but the Bonga family was not. Although Pierre was not a “half-breed,” since both his parents were African, many of the grants were given to the wives and children of traders who were not of mixed ancestry. For example, the list includes:

To Teegaushau, wife of Charles H. Oakes, and to each of her children, one section.

To Henry and John Sayer, sons of Obemau unoqua, each one section.

To each of the children of John Tanner, being of Chippewa descent, one section.

To Wassidjeewunoqua, and to each of her children, by George Johnston, one section.

To Pazhikwutoqua, wife of William Aitken, and to each of her children, one section.

³⁰⁵ “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1826,” August 5, 1826, in *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, vol. 2, ed. Charles J. Kappler (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), 268.

To Susan Davenport, grand daughter of Misquabunoqua, and wife of Ambrose Davenport, into each of her children, one section.

To each of the children of Ugwudaushee, by the late Truman A. Warren, one section.

To William Warren, son of Lyman M. Warren, and Mary Cadotte, one section.³⁰⁶

The Bonga family lived and worked alongside these families for years. Pierre Bonga worked for John Sayer at the turn of the nineteenth century and possibly first lived in the Upper Mississippi Ojibwe country in his employment. George Johnston was an independent American trader with posts near Rainy Lake in the 1820s and traded with and relied on the Indians near the U.S.-Canada border. William Aitkin and Ambrose Davenport both worked in the Fond du Lac and Upper Mississippi region for the American Fur Company. William Aitkin and Lyman Warren were close friends, and Lyman's sons, Truman and William, both traded and lived among the Mississippi Ojibwe bands.³⁰⁷

The Bongas were clearly part of this community, so why were they not included? Pierre was not excluded on the basis of belonging to an Ojibwe community that was further away. Since “the children of George Ermatinger, being of Shawnee extraction” were included, being on the list had less to do with belonging to a specific Ojibwe band than with membership in an elite fur trade community. This also was probably related to who the commissioners were that negotiated the treaty on behalf of the United States government. The commissioners evidently exercised decision-making power regarding stipulations in the treaties. For example, an 1833 treaty that the U.S. government signed with Ojibwe, Ottawa, and Pottawatomie bands in Illinois includes a list of individuals designated to receive payments in lieu of reservations. These individuals, who were clearly mixed-bloods, asked for reservations but “the commissioners refused to grant [them].”³⁰⁸ Perhaps Lewis Cass and Thomas McKenney, the U.S. commissioners at the 1826 treaty, refused to include the Bonga family.

Lewis Cass was the governor of Michigan territory from 1813 until 1831. He was from New Hampshire, and married a white woman from Ohio. He led an expedition in 1820 to the northern part of the territory, which was when he first became exposed to fur trade society in this part of Ojibwe country. He was clearly an outsider, and had different ideas about identity than those who were part of the society. In Cass' estimation, Pierre Bonga was seen as a “Negro,” and this status either excluded him from half-breed status or at least relegated him to its lowest echelons.

In effect, the Bongas were excluded from being legally classified as half-breeds in the 1826 treaty, and were therefore marginalized as outsiders of the communities in which they lived. On a daily basis, they were clearly members of this community, but this was not reflected in the legal construct of the treaties. The Commissioners probably

³⁰⁶ “A List of the Mixed-Blood Chippewa of Lake Superior, 1839,” State Historical Society of Wisconsin. (unpublished).

³⁰⁷ Anton Treuer, *The Assassination of Hole in the Day*, (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2011), 239 n4.

³⁰⁸ “Treaty with the Chippewa, etc., 1833,” September 26, 1833, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 402.

judged their identities by their skin color, and did not make an effort to see how their culture, daily practices, and kin relations played into their identity and made them a family like all the others.

It is also interesting to note that the other network which the Bonga family had been a member of, the Catholic kin networks at Mackinac, also benefited from a legal recognition in treaties. In a treaty signed in 1833 at Chicago between bands of Chippewa, Ottawa and Pottawatomie Indians and the U.S. government, there was a list attached naming individuals who were being compensated with money in lieu of being granted reservations. In contrast to the list of “half-breeds” in the 1826 treaty at Fond du Lac, this list did not apply any racial or ethnic term to the group. Clearly though, these were the prominent fur trade families of mixed French and Indian ancestry who also created kin ties through Catholic godparent networks. Some of the family names included were Laframboise, Chevalier, and Bourassa, the same families the Bongas were attached to at Mackinac and who regularly served as godparents at numerous baptisms.³⁰⁹ This community of families of mixed ancestry were viewed as separate to some degree from the Indians, because the Commissioners “refused to grant” them reservations. However, they were also viewed as inextricably connected to the Indians who were parties to the treaty, and therefore viewed as deserving some type of compensation related to what the Indians received.

Another member of the Catholic kin network that the Bonga family was connected to at Mackinac received compensation in an 1836 Treaty with bands of the Ottawa and Ojibwe tribes from around Michilimackinac. Augustin Hamelin, Jr., was granted a payment in lieu of a land grant due to his “being of Indian descent.” It should be noted that one “Hamelin the elder” served as a witness at the church marriage of Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga in 1794 at Mackinac. This treaty stated that the Indians were “desirous of making provisions for their half-breed relatives,” but that the President had determined they should receive payments instead of land grants.

Perceptions of half-breeds as a diverse group were clearly codified in this treaty. It appears that the “half-breeds” were ranked on a scale judging “civilized” attributes because this treaty denoted three classes of half-breeds. Compensation was based on how far they had advanced along a continuum of “civilization” and how helpful they were to aiding the Indians’ advancement. The treaty stated,

As the Indians hold in higher consideration, some of their half-breeds than others, and as there is much difference in their capacity to use and take care of property, and, consequently, in their power to aid their Indian connections, which furnishes a strong ground for this claim, it is, therefore, agreed, that...the Indian chiefs [will] designate... three classes of these claimants, the first of which, shall receive one-half more than the second, and the second, double the third.”³¹⁰

As a result of his legal classification, Augustin Hamelin, Jr. benefited from a fund of \$150,000 designated for half-breeds, and an additional sum of \$48,148 to buy private

³⁰⁹ “Treaty with the Chippewa, etc., 1833,” September 26, 1833, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 402-418.

³¹⁰ “Treaty with the Ottawa, etc., 1836,” March 28, 1836, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 452 (entire treaty 450-455).

landholdings from about a dozen half-breed individuals whose land lay inside the reservation. Further noting that some of the half-breeds “may be judged incapable of making a proper use of the money” that was being paid to them, the treaty described some half-breeds as being hardly different than Indians.³¹¹

When the Mississippi Ojibwe signed another treaty in 1837, George, Stephen and Jack Bonga had garnered sufficient reputations to win a spot on the list of half-breeds. By this time, George have been working as a clerk for the American Fur Company and he had created a sensation when he tracked down the murderer of William Aitkin’s son the previous winter. Moreover, Stephen Bonga actually worked as an interpreter at this treaty, which was signed by individuals from about a dozen different Ojibwe bands. This treaty included a payment of \$100,000 “to the half-breeds of the Chippewa nation.” The payment was to be distributed by two sub-agents, but first a list of the “half-breed relations” of the Ojibwe had to be compiled.³¹² This took some time, and a list was not formally approved until September 1839.

Individuals had to travel to La Pointe on Madeline Island and Lake Superior in the fall of 1839 to give testimony. Out of 880 claimants to the “half-breed” money, only 392 were recognized as belonging to the nations in the area ceded in the treaty and the money was divided among them. The roll of half-breeds was submitted to a council of Indian leaders from the bands and they made the final decisions on who was to receive the payment.

Overall, this list provided a type of census on the substantial portion of the population of people of mixed ancestry in the western Great Lakes area. It listed next to the name of the claimant information on the fraction of “Indian blood,” age, residency, and birthplace. Pierre Bonga’s three sons were listed as “Stephen Bounga,” “George Bounga,” and “Jacob Bounga.”³¹³ Although the list was not finalized until the fall of 1839, George Bonga apparently had reason to be confident of his inclusion. He noted in a letter written on February 16, 1839, “When Mr. Oakes spoke to me about passing the summer at Leech Lake, I told him I would if the Co. would allow me to attend the payment of the Half Breeds, wherever they might be paid.”³¹⁴

There are several probable reasons why the Bongas were included on this list of “half-breeds” and not on the list made in 1826. In the twelve year gap between the two treaties, the Bonga brothers had proven themselves to be a part of the upper echelons of fur trade society. Indicating that compensation in treaties and designation as “half-breeds” in this legal context was somewhat contingent on class, the Bongas had won this legal status because they had joined the upper-class ranks. The status of their generation, as opposed to their father’s, was more firmly established as elite because of their educations, their jobs as clerks and interpreters, and their social ties to prominent and influential traders, officials, and Indians. Although Pierre Bonga also had Ojibwe kin ties

³¹¹ Ibid., 453.

³¹² “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1837,” July 29, 1837, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 491-493.

³¹³ “A List of the Mixed-Blood Chippewa of Lake Superior, 1839,” State Historical Society of Wisconsin (unpublished).

³¹⁴ George Bonga to Charles Borup, February 16, 1839, American Fur Company papers.

and fur trade social networks, he was the first generation to work in the trade and therefore accumulated less social capital.

Over the next few decades, treaties with the Ojibwe continued to include provisions for payments for “half-breeds.” After an 1842 treaty negotiated at La Pointe provided \$15,000 for the Indians’ “half breed relatives,” a decision was reached to close the gap between benefits received by Indians and half-breeds.³¹⁵ A treaty negotiated in 1847 at Fond du Lac with the Ojibwe bands of the Mississippi and Lake Superior included a provision that seemed to put an end to the legal separation of the fur trade community from their Ojibwe relations. It stated,

It is stipulated that the half or mixed bloods of the Chippewas residing with them shall be considered Chippewa Indians, and shall, as such, be allowed to participate in all annuities which shall hereafter be paid to the Chippewas of the Mississippi and Lake Superior, due them by this treaty, and by the treaties heretofore made and ratified.³¹⁶

For the first time, the term “mixed blood” was used in the legal context of the treaties with the Ojibwe. More importantly, this provision asserted that the “half-breeds” were entitled to the same annuities as the Indians, thereby suggesting that they had just as much claim to the land and resources. Whereas in the past, half-breeds had been positioned as a group separate from the Indians, and with less entitlement to goods and provisions, now they were to receive equal treatment from the government.

Just weeks later a treaty was signed with the Pillagers that made no mention of “half-breeds” or “mixed-bloods.”³¹⁷ Although there were half-breeds who lived among them, including George Bonga, they did not share in the Pillagers’ annuities. The “half-breeds” who were listed on the 1839 roll, including the Bongas, received annuity payments that were designated in treaties with the Mississippi and Lake Superior bands.

By 1854, the form of annuity payments changed from cash payments to provisions that would largely support “civilizing” projects among the Ojibwe. In a treaty that year with the Lake Superior and Mississippi bands of Ojibwe made at La Pointe, the “mixed bloods of said nation” were to receive six thousand dollars’ worth of “agricultural implements, household furniture, and cooking utensils.”³¹⁸ In 1855, a treaty with the Mississippi, Pillager, and Lake Winnibigoshish bands of Ojibwe made in Washington, D.C., further emphasized the “civilizing” reform goals by including payments to encourage agricultural work, to support schools on the reservations, and measures to survey and allot land. A grant of eighty acres of land to “mixed bloods” that were “heads

³¹⁵ “Treaty with the Chippewa of the Mississippi and Lake Superior, 1842,” August 2, 1847, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 567-569.

³¹⁶ “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1847,” October 4, 1842, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 542-545.

³¹⁷ “Treaty with the Pillager Band of Chippewa Indians, 1847,” August 21, 1847, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 569-570.

³¹⁸ “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1854,” September 30, 1854, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 648-652.

of families” and had “actual residences and improvements in the ceded country” was also included.³¹⁹

These changes in annuity payments reflect broader changes that were occurring. There were significant changes in the demographics of the region at this time, because after Minnesota attained statehood in 1858 there was an influx of people from the east. Further, there was increasing pressure on Indians to open up land to white settlement and to adapt a settled and “civilized” lifestyle. The mixed-bloods did not want to be left behind, and found ways to include measures in treaties that would benefit them.

A treaty signed in Washington D.C. with the Mississippi and the Pillager and Lake Winnibigoshish bands in 1863 gave a hiring preference to “full or mixed bloods, if they shall be found competent to perform them.” The terms of this treaty designated provisions for many types of labor to be needed on the reservations, such as building houses, clearing lots, and plowing fields. By getting this provision in the treaty for hiring preference, the mixed blood population was ensured that they would not be squeezed out of a job by incoming populations.

Overall, looking at how the Bongas and other fur trade families were legally classified and compensated in treaties shows changing ideas about identity, and specific developments in the use of terminology. From 1826 to 1842 the fur trade families were referred to solely as “half-breeds” in the legal context of treaties. Indicating the difficulty of settling on one collective term for such a diverse group, both the terms “half-breeds” and “mixed-bloods” were used interchangeably in the 1847 treaty. The term mixed-blood apparently gained some traction afterwards, and was solely used in the 1854, 1855 and 1863 treaties with the Ojibwe. In a curious reversal, however, the 1867 treaty with the Mississippi band referred to payments for “any half-breed or mixed-blood.”

These fluctuations reflect an unstable and shifting perspective on the families’ identities. Major changes were occurring in the region and people struggled to understand the identities of people of mixed ancestry. Just as much, the half-breeds were struggling to find a place in the new order. As the fur trade waned there was less money to be made collecting skins and furs from Indians. The traders soon found a new way to capitalize on their relations with the Indians and seized the opportunity to benefit from the treaty negotiations that were underway.

Rise of the Indian trade

Early in 1842, Ramsey Crooks sold the American Fur Company’s interest in the Western Outfit to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., and Company of St. Louis. Seven months later, American Fur went into bankruptcy. In the gap left by the company’s downfall, a new economy arose that was linked to the region’s Indians. This economy, however, was based less on the Indians’ seasonal cycle and more on their cessions of land. As Gilman notes, the traders’ “volume of purchases no longer rose and fell with the coming and going of Indians on the fall and spring hunt; the date of the annuity payment was now the crucial time for the trader to be on hand. When he was, the rewards were high.”³²⁰

³¹⁹ “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1855,” February 22, 1855, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 685-90.

³²⁰ Rhoda Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” *Minnesota History* 42, no. 4 (Winter 1970): 130.

As traders transitioned from counting on the influx of furs to relying on annuity payments, the period of the “Indian trade” commenced. Among the treaties the Ojibwe signed, certain provisions for traders reveal the extent of fur traders’ profits from the negotiations. As they made efforts to classify their “mixed-blood” status as the legal equivalent to the Indians’ identity, the fur traders also worked to get payments for Indians’ debts settled in treaties. Beginning with the Treaty of 1837, traders made large claims against annuities based on the credit system of trade they had long conducted with the Indians. The Ojibwe were plagued at every successive treaty signing and annuity payment by traders who inflated the Ojibwes’ debt owed to them. The traders then demanded payments were taken from the Ojibwe annuities and paid directly to them.³²¹

Historian Anton Treuer attributes this unscrupulous practice to the traders’ ability to manipulate perceptions of their identities. As the fluctuations in terminology and changes in provisions towards “half-breeds” and “mixed-bloods” in treaties demonstrate, U.S. Commissioners did not maintain a stable and fixed conception of this group’s identities. The traders used this to their advantage, as Treuer writes,

Many traders had mixed Ojibwe and European heritage. Typically, however, they did not identify as Indians, did not participate in traditional native religious ceremonies, and did not live in Indian villages. But when Indians were being paid for sale of tribal lands, the traders made sure that they and their families received payment as if they were regular village Indians and partial owners of the land being sold. These payments were garnered in addition to payments from their employers for their inflated claims of Indian credit purchases and payments from the government for services rendered as witnesses, interpreters, and scribes.³²²

Treuer highlights the Warren and Aitkin families as particularly benefiting from this practice, but in fact, many individual traders and companies reaped large payments. The 1837 Treaty provided \$70,000 to be paid to traders for claims against the Ojibwe. Of this amount, William Aitkin was to receive twenty-eight thousand dollars, Lyman Warren was to receive twenty-five thousand dollars, and Hercules Dousman was to receive five thousand dollars.³²³ The 1842 Treaty at La Pointe included seventy-five thousand dollars to be paid against debts to traders. Of this sum, over \$13,000 went to the American Fur Company, almost \$38,000 went to John Jacob Astor, and a whole list of other claimants was included.³²⁴

Historian Rhoda Gilman points out that traders openly discussed their reliance on annuity payments. In particular, when American Fur Company traders collected a total sum of \$325,000 in 1837 from a combination of treaties signed by the Ojibwe, Dakota, and Ho-Chunk tribes, traders admitted the payments were crucial to absorbing heavy losses suffered the previous year. Hercules Dousman wrote to his boss Henry Sibley

³²¹ Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 64-65.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1837,” July 29, 1837, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 491-493.

³²⁴ “Treaty with the Chippewa of the Mississippi and Lake Superior, 1842,” August 2, 1847, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 567-569.

about the treaty payments, noting “This is good news...otherwise we were gone
Coons.”³²⁵

In the 1847 Treaty, George Bonga was listed as a claimant who was to receive \$366.84.³²⁶ This treaty was negotiated the same year that the American Fur Company failed, and many traders were probably trying to settle their accounts before considering other options. In the broad scope of things, George Bonga’s claim was insignificant. The amount he was paid hardly seems to represent a gouging of annuity payments.

By the time of the 1855 Treaty with the Ojibwe, signed with the Mississippi, Pillager, and Winnibigoshish bands, U.S. officials were aware of the need for reform. Article 3 of the treaty noted that payments given to the Ojibwe totaling \$90,000 “to adjust and settle their present engagements” had restrictions on them. Specifically, they were not allowed to give more than \$10,000 to “full and mixed bloods” out of this fund. Moreover, article 5 noted that no part of the annuities that the treaty designated could “ever be taken or applied, in any manner, to or for the payment of the debts or obligations of Indians contracted in their private dealings, as individuals, whether to traders or other persons.”³²⁷ Interestingly, the reform measures indicated that “full and mixed bloods” and “traders” needed to be checked, but they did not acknowledge that these groups overlapped.

Additional reform measures were implemented in the 1863 Treaty with the Mississippi, Pillager, and Lake Winnibigoshish bands. This treaty introduced inspections by the Board of Visitors, which was composed of two or three missionaries or clergymen. This Board was charged to attend annuity payments and to submit a report on the “moral deportment” of everyone on the reservations and the progress of the agricultural projects. The moral conduct of the “full and mixed bloods” was especially highlighted as a concern, because article 9 stipulated that these individuals would be excluded from annuities if they were deemed by the Board to display conduct that was “not conducive to the welfare of said Indians.”³²⁸

From the 1830s to the 1860s, as the Ojibwe signed successive treaties ceding land, they became locked in a vicious cycle. Treuer explains,

As Ojibwe lands were ceded and settled by non-Indians the economy of the fur trade collapsed because of lost land on which to trap, over-trapping, and a

³²⁵ Dousman to Sibley, July 12 (quote), 1838, Sibley Papers, MHS, quoted in Gilman “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” 129, 130. Gilman further notes that after a payment at La Pointe in 1838, the President of the American Fur Company, Ramsey Crooks wrote: “‘between their debts, and goods they bought here we got about \$3,500 out of \$4,700 they received from the government.’ When the Winnebago were paid their annuity in September, 1843, Dousman told Sibley that despite fierce competition ‘I got \$18,000 out of the \$36,000 that was paid, but the Inds have at least \$8,000 in their hands yet.’”

³²⁶ “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1847,” October 4, 1842, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 545.

³²⁷ “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1855,” February 22, 1855, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 685-90.

³²⁸ “Treaty with the Chippewa of the Mississippi and the Pillager and Lake Winnibigoshish Bands, 1863,” March, 11, 1863, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 841.

declining market for furs. Annuities from land sales initially helped compensate for losses and maintain the Ojibwe standard of living, but then the Ojibwe were boxed in. They became increasingly dependent on annuities, which then created incentives for more and more land cessions.³²⁹

In the midst of these profound changes, as traders and people of mixed ancestry struggle to get a piece of the annuity-based pie, the Ojibwe were also grappling with their Dakota neighbors. Members of the Bonga family also played roles in these encounters, at both peace negotiations and trapped in the middle of bloody conflicts.

Interpreters among the Dakota and the Ojibwe

Stephen Bonga was working as one of four formal interpreters at the first major land cession treaty that was signed with the Minnesota Ojibwe, in 1837. It was negotiated at St. Peter's, near Fort Snelling, and about twelve hundred individuals assembled under the hot July sun. There were delegations of Ojibwe Indians from central and eastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin, U.S. Army officers, the U.S. Commissioners, interpreters, and black slaves, who were owned by the officers stationed at Fort Snelling.³³⁰

To try and understand Stephen Bonga's role in the scene, it is useful to get a picture of what occurred. Anton Treuer notes, "The negotiations were dramatic. The Ojibwe delegations from Lac Courte Oreilles and Lac du Flambeau arrived late, only to find that the Mississippi Ojibwe had begun negotiations for the sale of Wisconsin Ojibwe lands without the presence of any delegates from Wisconsin other than St. Croix. This upset them, the traders who arrived late with them, and some American officials." On top of this, trader Lyman Warren made exceedingly large claims on the annuity payments, while also serving as interpreter for many of the Wisconsin bands. "His claims were so outrageous," Treuer writes, "and forcefully stated that Indian agent Lawrence Taliaferro pulled his revolver and threatened to kill Warren if he did not sit down... [The Ojibwe chief Hole in the Day] was indignant at the outrageous trader claims and undoubtedly concerned that the arrival of so many Indians from regions beyond his influence would detract from his central role in the negotiations. 'Shoot him, my father,' he yelled to Taliaferro. Henry Dodge, the governor of Wisconsin Territory, intervened before events turned bloody."³³¹

Following the negotiations, a ceremonial feast was served by the black slaves for the officers, Indian leaders, interpreters, and traders. Historian William Green imagines that Stephen Bonga was served at the feast by "Harriet Robinson, a slave woman from Virginia who later married a fellow slave at Fort Snelling named Dred Scott." Green asks, "Did the whites in attendance view Bonga and Scott in the same way? Did the

³²⁹ Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 150.

³³⁰ Edward D. Neill, "History of the Ojibways, and Their Connection with Fur Taders, Based Upon Official and Other Records," *Minnesota Historical Collections* 5 (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1885), 485.

³³¹ Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 64.

Ojibwe? Did Bonga and Scott?”³³² It is interesting to consider Stephen Bonga, as a man of mixed Ojibwe and African ancestry, sitting at a table with prominent white and Indian men, being served by black slaves. He was clearly in a position of privilege and separated from the other black people by a vast social chasm. His role in the negotiations did not go unnoticed, and the following summer Stephen Bonga was hired by the Methodist missionary Alfred Brunson.

Brunson was living at a Dakota mission at Prairie du Chien in southern Minnesota. He hired Bonga to join a party traveling to Lac Courte Oreille in Wisconsin to visit a mission. Brunson apparently took a liking to Stephen and hired him because of his “pious” conduct as well as his familiarity with the country. Brunson kept a journal chronicling his travels, and noted in it that “Stephen was religious, and inclined to the missions, and the next year I employed him as interpreter among the Chippewas. He spoke both languages with fluency and correctness.”³³³ Throughout his journal, Brunson interchangeably uses the terms “mixed-blood” and “half-breed,” which he defines as “any degree of mixed Indian blood.”³³⁴ This does not reflect the terms used in the treaties, however, which used only “half-breed” until 1847.

In Brunson’s journal, he depicted Stephen Bonga as inhabiting an Ojibwe identity, and did not fail to also highlight his African ancestry. In introducing him, Brunson referred to Stephen Bonga as “a Red River half-breed” and as “my half-African interpreter.”³³⁵ On the journey to Wisconsin, Brunson’s party encountered a camp of twenty-five or thirty lumbermen “in a log shanty” one night, and were joined by “a converted Indian and his wife.” Brunson held a prayer meeting at the campfire for the group, noting that the “converted Indian” and Stephen Bonga prayed “in Chippewa,” while Brunson and the others prayed in English. “We sang some hymns that had been translated into Chippewa,” Brunson wrote, “they in Chippewa and we in English in the same tune.”³³⁶

Although Stephen’s Ojibwe identity helped guarantee him work, it also put him at risk of death because of the intense warfare between the Ojibwe and the Dakota. Brunson had hired Bonga for a journey through Ojibwe country, but Brunson lived primarily among the Dakota at a mission at Prairie du Chien. When the party returned to Brunson’s mission after traveling to Wisconsin, they encountered a group of Dakota Indians who were welcoming back a war party from a skirmish with the Ojibwe.

I had with me my interpreter and my half-breed voyager, both of whom were Chippewas, who were so excited with fear as to be whiter than usual, and the whole band of Sioux were preparing for a war-dance over the Chippewa scalps they had taken but a short time previous at the head of St. Croix Lake. This added to the anxiety of my men, and they would have left and gone to the fort for protection if they could have got there. But I told the Sioux and their chief that those were *my* men; that they had not been in the war nor had taken any part in it,

³³² William Green, *A Peculiar Imbalance: The Fall and Rise of Racial Equality in Early Minnesota* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), ix.

³³³ Brunson, *A Western Pioneer*, 84.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 190.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 110, 97.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 110.

and they must not be hurt or they would hurt me; and they agreed not to hurt them.

I then retired with my voyaging company to the school-house, where we spread our blankets on the puncheon-floor, much harder than the ground in which we had been accustomed to sleep for weeks. We had no weapon of defense, nor did we even pull in the latch string, though the whole band were engaged in their war dance within 10 rods of us. After seeing the others lying down I went out to see the dance and reconnoiter as to the signs; but, seeing no indications of war on us, I retired and slept soundly and safely notwithstanding the noise from the shouts and drumming over the scalps they had taken. In the morning I went up to the fort with my half-breeds, who stayed near it for safety.³³⁷

This situation must have been terrifying for Stephen and the other Ojibwes, and it illustrates the degree of danger that the interpreters were sometimes exposed to because of their work. Interpreting at meetings and negotiations among various Native groups during this period oftentimes meant having to enter tense and life-threatening situations. The dramatic negotiations at the treaty meeting of 1837, for example, where Agent Taliaferro threatened to shoot Lyman Warren, aptly illustrate the amount of tension at negotiations where stakes were high for all.

Following immediately in the wake of the Treaty of 1837, there were a couple more violent encounters between the Ojibwe and the Dakota that gained widespread attention. In the spring of 1838, a group of Dakota families, accompanied by Rev. G. H. Pond, a Presbyterian missionary, were attacked by Ojibwe warriors as they camped out on a hunting trip in the upper part of the valley of Chippewa River. Hole in the Day had showed up at the Dakota party's camp with his young son and nine Ojibwe warriors, announcing peaceful intentions. Although they were welcomed on friendly terms, that night the Ojibwes killed the Dakotas in a surprise attack. They took one woman prisoner, who was returned the next April after American officers intervened by holding a council with Hole in the Day.³³⁸ In August, 1838, while Hole in the Day and other Ojibwes were on their way to visit Fort Snelling, they were attacked by Dakota warriors from Mud Lake. One person from each party was killed, and the next day American officials held a council with the Indians at Fort Snelling, resulting in the delivery of two Dakota warriors to the Americans.³³⁹

Following these bloody incidents, in the summer of 1839, the Indian agent sent Stephen Bonga to deliver a letter to Hole in the Day. Several days later, Hole in the Day arrived with five hundred Ojibwes and asked permission to remain three days. The next day, Stephen Bonga was the interpreter at a "council the Ojibwe held with the [Dakota] under a canopy near the walls of Fort Snelling."³⁴⁰ It was a large and festive gathering with a delegation of more than nine hundred Mississippi Ojibwe, who fraternized with the more than twelve hundred Dakota "in the Indian custom." As Anton Treuer writes,

³³⁷ Ibid., 116-118.

³³⁸ Neill, "History of the Ojibways, and Their Connection with Fur Traders," 486-487.

³³⁹ Ibid., 487-488.

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

they enjoyed “Horse races, foot races, and lacrosse...together with councils of peace, pipe ceremonies, and feasts.”³⁴¹

The peaceful relations did not last long. Neill notes,

The next day a man by the name of Libbey came up in the steamboat Ariel, and sold thirty-six gallons of whiskey to Scott Campbell the Sioux interpreter, and the next night the Sioux and Ojibways presented the scene of a pandemonium. Upon Sunday the 30th of June Hole-in-the-Day announced his intention to return to his own country, and on the 1st day of July the Sioux and Ojibways even smoked the pipe of peace, and Hole-in-the-Day began his ascent of the Mississippi. Two Pillager Ojibways (relations of the man shot the summer before) however remained near the fort... About sunrise on the morning of the second, killed Badger, a Sioux, on his way to hunt.³⁴²

In retaliation, the Sioux rounded up a war party to pursue the Ojibwe. They caught up with the Mille Lacs band of Ojibwe on the fourth of July and killed and wounded about ninety of them. Another war party pursued the St. Croix Ojibwe and attacked them on the third of July. William Aitkin was with them and survived, but twenty-one Ojibwes were killed and twenty-nine wounded.³⁴³

These bloody events testify to the level of danger and violence that interpreters were caught in because their identities were unclear, as they mediated peace negotiations that were never upheld for very long. Stephen Bonga probably possessed a cool demeanor and reassuring presence if he was continually hired to fill this stressful role. Eleven years after the negotiations with Hole in the Day and the Dakotas at Fort Snelling, Stephen Bonga’s work threatened his life due to the conditions Ojibwe Indians were forced to endure at the command and mercy of the U.S. government. In 1850, Stephen Bonga accompanied Wisconsin Indians on a journey to Sandy Lake after a federal order for their removal was implemented.

The government had summoned the Indians [to Sandy Lake] to receive their annuities, but somehow it failed to have either the cash annuities or adequate food rations for the Ojibwe who arrived there. While waiting for their promised payments, three thousand Ojibwe were fed moldy flour and spoiled meat. Major outbreaks of food poisoning and measles ensued... While the Americans claimed the catastrophe was accidental, the Ojibwe believed otherwise. Some one hundred and fifty people died immediately, and four hundred more perished on the way home, mainly of food poisoning.³⁴⁴

Stephen Bonga survived the ordeal, and went on to have a large family with an Ojibwe woman, settling in Wisconsin. His life trajectory from feasting with white army officers to eating moldy flour and spoiled meat with starving Indians speaks to the turbulent changes of the time.

³⁴¹ Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 71; Neill, “History of the Ojibways, and Their Connection with Fur Traders,” 489.

³⁴² Neill, *ibid.*, 489.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁴ Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 101-102.

George Bonga also worked as an interpreter at monumental events and turning points in Ojibwe history. In 1820, George worked as an interpreter of Governor Lewis Cass at Fond du Lac, when he was only about fourteen years old.³⁴⁵ He also worked as an interpreter at the 1847 Treaty with the Pillagers, in which the band agreed to extinguish their land title without any financial compensation. They were paid instead in the form of blankets, cloth, needles, mirrors, kettles, tobacco, salt, beaver traps, and guns. The main reason they agreed to this exchange was because the treaty relocated the Wisconsin Ho-Chunk and Menominee to reservations in central Minnesota that lay in the zone between the Ojibwe and the Dakota. In effect, they would serve as a buffer.³⁴⁶

In 1867, George Bonga traveled to Washington, D.C. to serve as a witness at the signing of a major treaty. This treaty reduced the size of the Leech Lake Reservation, which had been established in an 1855 Treaty, and created a large new reservation at White Earth. By this time, the Ojibwe had become increasingly dependent on annuities, and faced with dire prospects, they finally started listening to proposals for removal. Officials hoped removal to the White Earth Reservation would help assimilate the Indians, and the Ojibwe agreed to move there only after the government constructed roads, a sawmill, a grist mill, and a house for each Ojibwe family.³⁴⁷

In February 1867, ten Ojibwe leaders from the Mississippi and Pillager bands traveled to Washington, D.C. and were accompanied by the Indian agent, Joel Bassett, Truman Warren, and George Bonga, among others.³⁴⁸ John Johnson Enmegahbowh traveled with George Bonga to D.C., and wrote to Bishop Henry Whipple about the trip. Enmegahbowh was an Ottawa Indian who was the first Native American ordained as a priest by the Episcopal Church. On February 7, 1867 Enmegahbowh wrote about the party that had accompanied Bassett,

Dear Bishop, In haste I drop you a line or two to inform you that our party arrived here this morning all in good health... I am truly sorry that I came with this party. I do not like to be anyway connected with their affairs. I disliked very much but as I am here I shall stand by Mr Bassett if I can do any good. I will keep you inform all our proceedings here & during our stay. My mind is much troubled since I left home. I left hardly any thing for my family. Mr Bassett provided provision for all the traders that came down with him, but I ask him nothing... I shall not ask Bassett for money the half Breeds got plenty of it.

In this letter, Enmegahbowh was referring to the traders' plans to include provisions for mixed-blood traders in the treaty as the "affairs" which he disapproved of. George Bonga was apparently in conflict with the cohort of traders that had attended the meeting, as evidenced by his letters discussed below. However, Enmegahbowh was apparently disgusted with the relationship between the agent and the traders, as he characterized it as handsomely benefiting the traders while he and his family struggled with nothing. From his perspective, Enmegahbowh was making a sacrifice to go to Washington in order to monitor the treaty negotiations for unfair practices. The traders or "half Breeds," on the other hand, were not making any personal sacrifices to attend the

³⁴⁵ Neill, "History of the Ojibways, and Their Connection With Fur Traders," 488.

³⁴⁶ Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 80.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 150, 159, 161.

³⁴⁸ Bassett to Whipple, January 23, 1867, Whipple Papers, MHS.

negotiations and were actually financially benefiting. In short, the traders' motives did not appear to be in the best interest of the Indians, but rather generated out of self interest.

George Bonga not only attended the treaty meeting in Washington, D.C. in 1867, but he also worked as an interpreter for the Indian agent Joel Bassett from 1865 to 1867. During this period, George Bonga became embroiled in a controversy over Bassett's work, as Bassett faced accusations of corruption from a cohort of Crow Wing traders. These charges were led by Charles Ruffee, a trader with ambitions to occupy the role of Indian agent so he could exercise more control over the trade. Ruffee sought to push Bassett out of the position so he could claim it, and he wrote to Bishop Whipple describing a list of infractions that Bassett had allegedly committed. In November 1867, Whipple wrote to Bassett asking him about these charges:

My Dear Maj. Bassett;

I write you with a sad heart, First, that your interpreters and employees have often been drunkards, that no effort has been made to secure the provisions of the treaty which require married men as employees.

Second, that your clerk and other employees have, contrary to the express orders of the Department, engaged in the Indian trade, and are so engaged.³⁴⁹

The charges Whipple brought up explicitly addressed the conduct of Bassett's employees, including George Bonga. Ruffee's charges asserted that Bassett was not only violating provisions in recent treaties, but also that employees like George Bonga were behaving in "immoral" ways that could compromise the efforts to "civilize" the Indians. The accusations that employees were "drunkards" and "unmarried" underscores the dimension of moral reform that was part of the Indian agent's role. George Bonga and possibly other employees were probably married to Native women *a la façon du pays*, and Ruffee was trying to incriminate them on the basis of principles about family and marriage upheld by the Episcopal Church.

Ruffee also raised the issue of federal employees engaging "in the Indian trade," charging that Bonga and other employees at Leech Lake were violating orders from the Indian Department. If this were the case, there would be a conflict of interest since the Indian agent had express control over how the trade was conducted and who was issued trading licenses. Bassett immediately responded to Whipple, defending his role and the conduct of George Bonga and other employees at Leech Lake. He wrote in a letter to Whipple:

I see that trouble is likely to grow out of it and have taken the necessary steps to have the trade discontinued. George Bonga is said to have an interest in the house of Fairbanks & Co., though he says his interest is only in furnishing money. At the time of payment at Leech Lake I posted up notices that no employee would be allowed to carry on any trade with an Indian. I am doing all I can to put a stop to trading by employees.³⁵⁰

³⁴⁹ Bishop to Bassett, November 14, 1867, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁵⁰ Bassett to Whipple, November 15, 1867, Whipple Papers, MHS.

About a month later, in his official report on the Chippewa Agency, Bassett noted that George Bonga has “not tasted a drop of intoxicating drink for 5 years.”³⁵¹

In this job, George Bonga faced attacks on his moral conduct and character as political factions jockeyed for power and spared no one. The stakes were high for everyone, as Indians, traders, mixed-bloods, and missionaries all sought to gain a foothold in a rapidly changing world. Political alliances were formed and lines were drawn, and many mixed-blood men like the Bongas were forced to choose sides in deadly political games.

Examining the State Constitution and Censuses

Territorial censuses

The period of racial fluidity that the fur trade society bred started to come to an end in the mid-nineteenth century. During the period from when Minnesota was organized into a U.S. territory in 1849, to ten years after making the transition to statehood in 1858, racial categories that appeared in important political legislation effectively changed the stakes of categories of identity. As categories such as “white,” “mixed white and Indian blood,” “Indian blood,” and “African blood” were discussed, debated, and codified in legislation by civilians and politicians, a new system of racial identity was being constructed that had the teeth of legality. Furthermore, the term “civilized” surfaced in legislation as well, reflecting a fixed understanding of the term “civilized” by 1868 that specifically applied to Indians and worked to prop up the relevancy and importance of the “civilizing” programs on Indian reservations. The question of removal was oftentimes at stake for Indians. If Indians could prove they were civilized, they showed they were capable of remaining on the land and prospering there.

In the 1850s, the Minnesota Territory was a place of tremendous diversity that included Dakota and Ojibwe people, French Canadians, African Americans, Euro-Americans, and people of mixed ancestry. The first censuses recorded after Minnesota was officially organized as a territory – in 1849 and 1850 – identified forty free persons of African descent, most of whom lived in St. Paul.³⁵² In 1849 “free colored” persons were barred from voting in congressional, territorial, country and precinct elections.³⁵³

George Bonga was not barred from voting on this basis of race. He was counted in the 1849 Minnesota Territory census, but he was not noted as a “free black.” He was simply listed as one of nine men that were heads of households living at Crow Wing.³⁵⁴ Interestingly, Bonga’s household was composed of twenty-two males and seventeen females, for a total of thirty-nine individuals. His was the second largest household after Henry Rice’s, who had forty-two individuals in his household. For George Bonga, this number of people could be attributed to his large family, and possibly his brothers and sisters and their children were listed as part of his household. On the other hand,

³⁵¹ Joel B. Bassett’s 1867 annual report, Chippewa Agency, Minnesota, December 13, 1867, Bassett Papers, MHS.

³⁵² White, “Power of Whiteness,” 183; Green, *Peculiar Imbalance*, 44.

³⁵³ Green, *Peculiar Imbalance*, 41.

³⁵⁴ Minnesota, Crow Wing, St. Croix county, Minnesota 1849 Territorial Census, Minnesota Territorial Census Schedules, MHS, St. Paul, MN.

considering that Rice also had such a large household, and he was not integrated into a large kin network, individuals working as servants or laborers may have been listed under the heads of households.

In March 1849, the Organic Act creating Minnesota Territory was put into effect, but officials immediately faced a challenge with population numbers. This act replaced the Northwest Ordinance as the basic charter of government for Minnesota Territory, and it mandated that only “free white male inhabitants” above the age of twenty-one years could vote at the first election and hold elective office. A requirement for territorial organization under the Northwest Ordinance, however, was that that five thousand “free inhabitants” must be present in the region.³⁵⁵ An earlier bill for territorial organization had failed on this basis, so officials realized it would be enforced.³⁵⁶ When Alexander Ramsey, the new governor of Minnesota Territory, arrived in St. Paul in May 1849, he found that the non-Indian population of the entire territory was still less than five thousand. In order to deal with this problem, officials decided to include the population of mixed-blood traders residing at Pembina in their population count of “free white males.”³⁵⁷ Bruce White describes how the process of census enumeration became entangled in desperate efforts to attain statehood in Minnesota:

The ways that different enumerators categorized the population of Minnesota Territory shows the contextual nature of the terms ‘white’ and ‘half breed’ and the way in which they evolved. Beginning in 1849, population figures were used to argue for recognition as a territory and, later, as a state. Categorizing people of mixed ancestry as white helped make the case for the territory.”³⁵⁸

These circumstances help explain why George Bonga was classified as “white” in the 1857 Minnesota Territorial Census. Leaders of the territory were desperate to inflate the number of inhabitants, thereby “mixed-blood” men like George Bonga were coded as “white.” Oddly, though, George Bonga was actually counted twice in this census. He was first counted as an inhabitant of Pembina, in the census taken on November 18 by a man named James McFetridge. Soon afterwards, on December 5, George Bonga was counted in the census at “Wah De Nah and Other and Tallaly” taken by Peter Roy.

In the Pembina census, Bonga’s “color” was designated as “white,” just like every other person in the sixty-two households that were listed in this count. There are four men listed as a part of the household led by George Bonga, which evidently was a wintering post from which he conducted trade. As indicated by the “occupation” category, Bonga was a trader and had probably hired the four men to work for him because three of them were working as hunters and one was a laborer. Two were actually relatives, as George’s

³⁵⁵ Green, *Peculiar Imbalance*, 39-41.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 38. In 1846 a congressional delegate from Wisconsin introduced a bill to organize Minnesota Territory, but it died in the Senate because the population was insufficient.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

³⁵⁸ White, “Power of Whiteness,” 183.

son William Bonga was hired as the laborer and Henrie Bonga, possibly a cousin of George's, was one of the hunters.³⁵⁹

George Bonga was also counted in the 1857 census in Cass county for the locality "Wah De Nah and Other and Tallaly." In this census, his color was classified as "black" and he was counted singularly – as no part of a household. Since this census was recorded almost a month after the first one, and by Peter Roy, a different enumerator, George Bonga had probably traveled to another community to trade.³⁶⁰

The fact that George Bonga was counted twice in the 1857 census points to two possible trends that were occurring. The first is that traders moved around quite often between communities, much as their Ojibwe kin were accustomed to doing. George probably had several residences which were scattered in the various communities in which he traded. Further, this double counting also may have been a deliberate strategy for inflating the population. Although these censuses were enumerated by two different individuals, there may not have been much concern with the risk of counting some individuals twice. Peter Roy, who was a mixed-blood member of the trader community, knew about the residency patterns of traders like George Bonga, but evidently did not take precautions against counting traders twice.

The differences in George Bonga's "color" classification in the two censuses also suggests something about how race was conceived differently by individual enumerators. Assuming that McFetridge was instructed to count everyone at Pembina as "white," it is hardly surprising then that George Bonga was counted as white as well. There were seven different "localities" listed within Pembina county, most of which were taken by McFetridge. In all of these localities, everyone was listed as "white." However, why would Roy count Bonga as "black" if officials in the territory were concerned with inflating the numbers?

Peter Roy was the enumerator for all four of the censuses taken in Cass county, which was in the Pillager region. Out of one hundred and ninety-six inhabitants, and thirty-two "dwelling houses," listed in the county, George Bonga and Jack Bonga were the only individuals listed as "Black." For everyone else, the "color" column was left blank, which probably indicated "white" by default. There were many "mixed-blood" families listed in Cass county who were of mixed French and Ojibwe ancestry, but they were listed as white by default. Peter Roy evidently thought counting two of the Bongas as "black" would not harm efforts to inflate the white population, and maybe thought their "race" would be a point of interest to others.³⁶¹

³⁵⁹ Minnesota, Pembina, Pembina county, Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, enumerated by James McFetridge (8 November 1857), MHS, St. Paul, MN.

³⁶⁰ Minnesota, Wah De Nah and Other and Tallaly, Cass county, Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, enumerated by Peter Roy (5 December 1857), MHS, St. Paul, MN.

³⁶¹ Minnesota, Cass Lake, Cass county, Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, enumerated by Peter Roy (15 December 1857), MHS, St. Paul, MN; Minnesota, Wah De Nah and Other and Tallaly, Cass county, Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, enumerated by Peter Roy (5 December 1857) MHS, St. Paul, MN; Minnesota, Leech Lake, Cass county, Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, enumerated by Peter Roy (10 December 1857), MHS, St. Paul, MN; Minnesota, Chippewa Agency and Gull Lake; Cass county,

Other members of the Bonga family were counted in the census of St. Louis county, in which Fond du Lac was located. Of a total of eight hundred and sixteen families and eight hundred and ten “dwelling houses” that were counted, there were seven Bonga family members who were all classified as “black.” Stephen Bonga was listed here as a “Trapper,” and his household was the only non-white household in the county except for one “C. Baker,” who was a thirty-year-old barber from Maryland who was listed as “black.”

The censuses reveal that the Bongas were not only unique as a family in the territory because of their African ancestry, but also that they were virtually the only family of African ancestry living outside of St. Paul. While there were many “mixed-blood” families living in the territory, they were the only “mixed-blood” family that included African ancestry. In this case, the “mixed-blood” families were being counted as white, and whether the Bonga family fell into this category depended on the enumerator.

While Roy found reason to classify George Bonga as “black,” McFetridge was evidently explicitly instructed to classify everyone in his county as “white.” However, because of George Bonga’s class position, McFetridge was probably less inclined to find a problem with classifying him as “white.” George Bonga had accumulated significant wealth and status at this point. Just the prior year, Bonga was visited by Charles Flandrau, a future state Supreme court judge, who noted that Bonga was a “thorough gentleman in both feeling and deportment.” Moreover, Flandrau noted that Bonga entertained his guests by reminiscing that he was one of the “first two white men that ever came into this country.”³⁶² With residences in Minnesota’s Lac Platte, Otter Tail, and Leech Lake, Bonga was quite prosperous and a lavish host, and thereby viewed as falling on the more “civilized,” and thereby “white,” end of the spectrum of fur trade families.

The “white-only” provision of the Organic Act was a poor representation of Minnesota’s population, a point noted by inhabitants at the time. Writer J. Fletcher Williams observed of the population of St. Paul in 1845, “At this time, by far the largest proportion of the inhabitants were Canadian French, and Red River refugees, and their descendents. There were only three or four purely American (white) families in the settlement... English was probably not spoken in more than three or four families.”³⁶³

The situation soon changed. Shortly after the Organic Act was passed, a rush of immigration flowed into the territory. Between 1855 and 1857 the population in Minnesota grew from 40,000 to 150,000. According to Bruce White, “These new settlers came primarily from the Middle Atlantic states, New England, and the Midwest... These individuals settled in large numbers in southeastern Minnesota and became the base for the new Republican Party, begun in the state in 1855.”³⁶⁴ These new immigrants had to learn how to live with a largely French-speaking and Native population in their new

Minnesota 1857 Territorial Census, enumerated by Peter Roy (1 and 2 December 1857), MHS, St. Paul, MN..

³⁶² Charles Flandrau, “Reminiscences of Minnesota During the Territorial Period,” in *Minnesota Historical Society Collections* 9 (Saint Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1901), 199.

³⁶³ J. Fletcher Williams, *History of the City of Saint Paul to 1875*, (St. Paul: MHS Press, 1983), 229, quoted in Green, *Peculiar Imbalance*, 41.

³⁶⁴ White, “Power of Whiteness,” 188.

surroundings. For example, when the newly formed Court of the Third district convened at the end of August 1849, the judge's words had to be translated into French because only three out of the two dozen members of the jury understood English.³⁶⁵

Constitutional debates & census classifications

As debates about the shape and direction of the state of Minnesota arose in the 1850s, criteria for assessing the “whiteness” of individual Indians and “mixed-bloods” arose as a central topic of discussion. As the Republican and Democratic parties became polarized on the issue of suffrage for blacks and Indians, a long discussion was drawn out, stretching over the next decade, that sought to articulate how factors of culture, status, education and race defined “whiteness.”

In the Minnesota state constitution that was ratified in 1858, race clearly determined whether a person had the right to suffrage. Note how race and categories of identity are included in Article 7, section 1, of Minnesota's 1860 constitution:

Every male person of the age of twenty-one years or upwards, belonging to either of the following classes, who shall have resided in the United States one year, and in this State for four months next preceding any election, shall be entitled to vote at such election...First. *White citizens* of the United States. Second. *White persons* of foreign birth...Third. *Persons of mixed white and Indian blood*, who have adopted the customs and habits of civilization. Fourth. *Persons of Indian blood* residing in this State, who have adopted the language, customs, and habits of civilization, after an examination before any District Court of the State, in such manner as may be provided by law, and shall have been pronounced by said Court capable of enjoying the rights of citizenship within the State. [my italics].³⁶⁶

The fact that suffrage is extended to some Indians and is prohibited to blacks based on the specific inclusion of “white persons” points to a change in the control of political power in the region. The region that had been dominated by fur traders and Indians in the early century underwent a shift in political economy as the fur trade declined and more Anglo Americans were arriving from the east. Many of Minnesota's early government leaders and politicians had worked in the fur trade before the region became a territory and they generally belonged to the Democratic Party. They were often called “Moccasin Democrats” because of their business alliances with Ojibwe and Dakota Indians. For example, Henry Sibley was the first territorial delegate to the U.S. Congress and also led the Western Outfit of the American Fur Company, which conducted trade primarily with the Dakota. He and his partner, Hercules Dousman, were two of the traders that had benefited enormously from annuity payments and had an interest in seeing that the system continued.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁵ Green, *Peculiar Imbalance*, 44.

³⁶⁶ A copy of the constitution can be accessed online from the Minnesota Historical Society at: <http://www.mnhs.org/library/constitution/index.html>.

³⁶⁷ See Gilman, “Last Days of the Upper Mississippi Fur Trade,” White, “Power of Whiteness.”

The newcomers from the east were usually members of the Whig Party, which was struggling with its central leadership and its position on slavery. By 1855, the Whig Party was replaced in Minnesota by the new Republican Party. As debates over the Minnesota constitution gained momentum, a clear division over alliances with Indians and African Americans emerged, as the “Moccasin Democrats” and the Republicans took their respective stands.

The Republican and Democratic parties were so hotly divided that elected delegates from the parties held separate conventions to draft a constitution for the new state in the summer of 1857. The Republicans were split on whether there should be racial qualifications for voting, and a number of them argued that blacks and Indians should both be enfranchised. However, the majority of the Republicans were reluctant to grant black enfranchisement and proposed submitting the question as a referendum to the voters of Minnesota.³⁶⁸

The “Moccasin Democrats,” on the other hand, did not focus on the question of whether blacks and Indians should have the same rights. Instead, they were more concerned with whether Indians should be treated the same as “white foreigners.” The Democrats had long been interested in conducting commerce with Indians and most of their power lay in their ties to mixed-blood communities of former fur traders. The qualified voting rights to Indians would reward the Democrats’ long-time business partners who had helped to enrich them. Moreover, the Democrats made efforts to ensure that mixed-bloods’ and Indians’ right to annuities was not compromised as a condition for suffrage rights, because the traders and businessmen of the region had a lot to gain from the maintenance of the system. The Constitution that was finally ratified in 1858 more closely reflected the Democrats’ draft.³⁶⁹

Scholar Deborah Rosen notes that delegates from both parties focused on the problem of assessing the whiteness of individual Indians, and agreed that it “required a cultural judgment as well as a racial one.”³⁷⁰ Henry Sibley even urged the delegates to clarify the meaning of the word “white” and proposed including a provision in the constitution that stated “the word white where it occurs in this section, shall be construed to include those persons of pure and mixed Indian and white blood who have adopted the customs and manners of the whites.”³⁷¹ This proposal was withdrawn, however, because other delegates refused to define “whiteness” as entirely divorced from color.

In the constitutional conventions, the struggle to define “whiteness” really came down to a matter of drawing the line between “civilized” and “uncivilized.” The delegates’ discussions revealed that they viewed culture as a marker of race, and they strived to develop guidelines for measuring race on this basis. Rosen writes, “Although Republican and Democrats agreed on the general indicators of civilized life, they were not entirely confident that they could articulate a clear, enforceable line between civilized

³⁶⁸ Deborah Rosen, *American Indians and State Law: Sovereignty, Race, and Citizenship, 1790–1880* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 136-137.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁷¹ *Minnesota Democratic Convention*, 435 (Sibley), quoted in Rosen, *American Indians and State Law*, 138.

Indians who should be classified as white and uncivilized Indians who should be treated as nonwhite.”³⁷²

The delegates sought to resolve this issue by legislating stricter guidelines for “full-blood” Indians than for the “mixed-blood” Indians, whom they deemed to be more inclined to adapting “civilized” lifestyles. The final constitution granted suffrage to mixed-bloods who “adopted the customs and habits of civilization”; but it required that “full-blood” Indians needed to have “adopted the language, customs, and habits of civilization...and shall have been pronounced by said Court capable of enjoying the rights of citizenship within the State.” This further requirement for language and court approval for Indians proved to be a major obstacle, but the delegates were satisfied. The Democrats, more specifically, who had years of experience among the Ojibwe, knew exactly how unattainable suffrage would be for them.³⁷³ The English language provision rendered many Indians disenfranchised because the majority of missionaries’ work among the Dakota and the Ojibwe was conducted in their indigenous languages. Church services, prayers and Christian songs were usually conducted in Ojibwe and Dakota languages, and teaching English was a slow, and infrequent focus of missionary labor.

Bruce White argues that the Indian business was key in supporting the fledgling economy of the early Minnesota Territory, in large part due to the power of the Moccasin Democrats. During its first session in 1849, the new territorial assembly passed a resolution asking the federal government to remove all Ojibwe living in areas that had been ceded under the treaties of 1837 and 1842. As White notes, “The ostensible reason for this request was to ‘ensure the security and tranquility of the white settlements in an extensive and valuable district of this Territory,’ but the vast majority of these Ojibwe were actually living across the border in the new state of Wisconsin. Their removal would put them entirely within Minnesota Territory, up the Mississippi River from the commercial center of St. Paul.”³⁷⁴ By relocating them, the annuities for this band of Ojibwe would be distributed in the Mississippi region, rather than at their previous post at Detroit. With this change, many of the fur traders who were linked to the Moccasin Democrats would reap financial benefits.

By 1868, ten years after the ratification of Minnesota’s state constitution, attitudes and political loyalties shifted significantly in the wake of the civil war. The legislature amended the state constitution by granting the franchise to males of African descent, “civilized” Indians, and mixed-bloods over the age of 21. Minnesota became one of the few states to enfranchise its black citizens voluntarily, occurring two years before the adoption of the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. However, Minnesota was no haven of social and racial equality. The political battles and discourse that were generated in the space of time between the original state constitution and the 1868 amendment had introduced new notions of identity that were not only in conflict with Ojibwe conceptualizations of identity, but had the cutting power of legal and political thrust behind them.

In the wake of the new statehood and Minnesota constitution, George Bonga’s racial classification shifted again. Whereas George Bonga had been recorded as “white”

³⁷² Rosen, *American Indians and State Law*, 138.

³⁷³ Green, *Peculiar Imbalance*, 110.

³⁷⁴ White, “Power of Whiteness,” 185.

in 1857, in the 1860 census he is recorded as “black,” in the 1865 Minnesota census he is recorded as “colored,” and in the 1870 census he is classified as “mulatto.”³⁷⁵ Moreover, there were also interesting inconsistencies of racial classifications within his family. In the 1870 federal census, his seventeen-year-old daughter Susan Bonga is listed as “1/2 black.” This is unusual because her status is different from the statuses listed for her father, her two brothers, and her sister, all of whom are grouped together on the sheet. All of the Bongas but Susan are listed as “M,” or “Mulatto.” Interestingly, upon close examination of the 1870 census it can be clearly discerned that the census-taker initially wrote down “M” as Susan’s race, but then scratched it out and wrote “1/2 B” in the space. Apparently, census-takers encountered the slippery nature of race categorization and were either corrected by others or were confounded by their own uncertainty. The discrepancy between Susan’s race and that of her family underscores the ambiguity and manipulation of racial classification.³⁷⁶

George Bonga’s letters & his identity

George Bonga lived in a region that had virtually no black presence, so naturally, he was not part of any African-American community and would not have identified as “black.” His friends and acquaintances looked at him and saw much more than race, as well. Bishop Whipple penned a letter in 1868 with the description: “George Bonga – mixed Indian & negro blood. A truthful man, intelligent, a good interpreter, & worthy of confidence.”³⁷⁷ Whipple also wrote in 1868, “I have known [George Bonga] for years. He is a man of great intelligence very devoted to the Indians, & having lived with them from childhood his opinion[s] are entitled to great weight.”³⁷⁸ From studying Bonga’s own words, however, it is clear that while he had lived among the Pillager Ojibwe for most of his life, he viewed himself as vastly different from the “ignorant Indians” he so frequently advocated for. Although he was deeply concerned for their well being and had kin ties with them, Bonga’s writings reveal a sometimes paternalistic attitude towards the Indians based on his status as a “civilized” man. He did not have a firmly entrenched identity as an Ojibwe Indian, having not grown up among them, as he noted in 1872, “I left [the Ojibwe country] when I was a little boy, as I have no recollection of the place & went to school in Montreal, as there was no one to take any particular interest about me.”³⁷⁹

³⁷⁵ Minnesota. Cass County. Minnesota 1865 Census, MHS, St. Paul, MN; 1870 U.S. Census, Cass county, Minnesota, enumerated by Charles Ruffee (26 July 1870) Roll: T132_2; Page: 466; Image: 235; Family History Library Film: 830422. The 1860 census specified the race categories “white, black, or mulatto,” and the 1870 census specified the categories “White, Black, Mulatto, Chinese, and Indian” as choices for the enumerators.

³⁷⁶ For more on inconsistencies in the census in the Territory of Minnesota see Annette Atkins, *Creating Minnesota: A History from the Inside Out* (St. Paul, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2007), 38-39.

³⁷⁷ August 5, 1868, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁷⁸ Whipple, August 4, 1868, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁷⁹ Bonga to H. M. Rice, December 1872, Bassett Papers, MHS.

In his letters, Bonga always refers to “the Indians” as a group that is separate from his identity. In letters from 1839 and 1865, Bonga respectively refers to himself as part of a group of “Half breeds” and “half breeds and traders.” In May 1874, he writes, “I would blame myself if I did not do all I could to save those ignorant Indians from getting in the trap that is laid for them.”³⁸⁰ And in **June**, he writes, “I have no chance to explain to [the Indians], who are their sincere friends for I am aware that many will come, & pretend to be sheep & will prove to be wolves to their tribe.”³⁸¹ By positioning himself in this way, Bonga portrayed himself not only as being rightfully entitled to “half breed” annuity payments, but also as a “civilized” man who knew what was best for the “ignorant Indians.” Whether or not he actually viewed himself in this way is difficult to ascertain, but it was an effective position to take when advocating for the Pillagers’ rights to men like Henry Whipple and Joel Bassett.

The Ojibwe Indians he lived among also seemed to target him at times as someone who was firmly aligned with business interests, rather than the best interests of the Ojibwe community. Viewed from this perspective, George Bonga was sometimes at risk of incurring violence from the Pillagers. On October 23, 1866, Bonga was at the Crow Wing trading post and wrote to Bassett, “My son James has just got down, and he says there is a good deal of unsatisfactory talk among the Indians—I think it will be best for me and my sons to lay still this winter—for if the Indians use bad language to the agents you and I am sure will be laid to me [*sic*], for I will be alone—if I was sure that the Bishop would be on the ground, I would not care—for I intend to keep my mouth shut.”³⁸²

Although George Bonga’s identity seemed to be in some ways defined against the Leech Lakers’ identities, there are indications of their influence on his way of thinking. There are several instances in which Bonga writes to Bishop Whipple and Agent Bassett and reveals the influence of Ojibwe spiritual notions. He writes, for example, “I hope the Great spirit will favor you,” and “the Great Spirit will so guide our ways.” Rather than using flowery Christian religious language, Bonga uses an English translation of the Ojibwe word *Gichi-manidoo* to convey ideas about non-human beings.

In his letters, Bonga portrays himself as possessing unique insight into the Pillager Indians, and he leverages this in his advocacy for particular policies. In this sense, he sought to interpret their ways to non-Indian outsiders. For example, he wrote to Whipple in 1874, “As perhaps you do not know the exact character of the Inds as well as I do, you may not fully understand what they really meant by expressing themselves as they did at the council with you at this place.”³⁸³ He also wrote that same year, “But know the Indians character as I do, I think it is a great responsibility as there treaty’s are mixed up.”³⁸⁴ Bonga’s portrayal of his Ojibwe kin ties were convincing to Bishop, who wrote to an acquaintance and explained that Bonga was “a member of the Indian tribe.”³⁸⁵

³⁸⁰ Bonga to Whipple, May 28, 1874, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁸¹ Bonga to Whipple, June 22, 1874, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁸² Bonga to Bassett, October 23, 1866, Bassett Papers, MHS.

³⁸³ Bonga to Whipple, March 16, 1874, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁸⁴ Bonga to Whipple, February 28, 1874, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁸⁵ Whipple, August 4, 1868, Whipple Papers, MHS.

Bonga's advocacy for the Ojibwe included speaking out against unjust treaty negotiations, against the government's failure to adequately disburse annuity payments, and against unfair collaboration between traders and Indian agents. Bonga worked for Agent Edwin Clark for a time in the mid-1860s, and it was the beginning of a contentious relationship. Bonga wrote of it in 1866 to Whipple, "I was employed by the Agent, but gave up my salary, for I felt I could not keep my mouth shut (to white men)."³⁸⁶ He also wrote in November 1866, "Since the Govt has paid annuities to the Chippewa, most of the agents have proved themselves to be rascals. But the present Agent [Clark], is the most barefaced scoundrel that has ever came to the Ind country, you cannot imagine how he acts."³⁸⁷

Bonga's main complaint to Whipple centered around a trading monopoly headed by Charles Ruffee and Augustus Aspenwall. Agent Clark refused to grant trader licenses to anyone except for these men, and they not only crowded out other traders but also frustrated the Ojibwes who wanted fairer options. For example, Bonga wrote in October 1866, "Agent Clark is about playing a most desperate game, so much so, that I really feel fearful, that it will cause trouble to the frontier country, only imagine, he won't allow any trader in the country, but the firm of Aspinwall & Ruffee and those that take goods from them."³⁸⁸ Concerned that violence could erupt between the Indians and the traders due to the inflated prices, Bonga rallied heartily against the monopoly. He wrote a stream of letters to Whipple and Bassett in 1866, dutifully detailing the activities of Ruffee, Aspinwall, and Clark. Bonga wrote in November 1866 to Bassett, "The Agent starts today to Make the Leech & Red Lake payments. Some of the traders, that could not get licenses, are a taking goods to the Leech Lake payment. If Agent Clark does as he did last year to shut up their stores, I expect there will be a big howling by the Indians."³⁸⁹

Aspinwall and Ruffee were traders from Crow Wing who were part of a cohort that had profited enormously from trade and annuity payments gouged from the Mississippi Ojibwe. In 1866, these traders were vigorously opposed to the proposed removal of the Ojibwe to White Earth because it threatened to break up their monopoly. They also developed a heated conflict with the Ojibwe chief Hole in the Day at this time, who was not somebody they could buy off.³⁹⁰

George Bonga vehemently spoke out against Ruffee, who had been vying for the Indian agent's position for years as a way to extend his monopoly westward. In 1866, Bonga wrote a letter to Whipple describing Agent Clark's unscrupulous practices, and arguing that Bassett was more fit to fill the position.

The goods for the Leech Laker Indians (annuities) started up today. I write in case that Agent Clark might take a notion to make the payments without the Board of Visitors, which I have seen done once before, by a former Agent. The goods of Aspenwall & Ruffee started up to Leech Lake yesterday. Which is a sure sign that payments are near... Most Reverend Sir, you will not fear that I will say a word to the Inds about the ways that they receive of the Whiteman. The year of

³⁸⁶ Bonga to Whipple, November 14, 1866, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁸⁷ Ibid.

³⁸⁸ Bonga to Whipple, October 21, 1866, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁸⁹ Bonga to Bassett, November 4, 1866, Crow Wing, Bassett Papers, MHS.

³⁹⁰ Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 174-175.

1862 is too fresh in my mind to think for a moment of such a thing on any consideration. I know that yourself & Mr. Rice is doing all you can to effect a change, among this clan of Robbers. Since no one can get license, except those who take goods of Ruffee, my son James is a going to build a shanty store where he live. It is not on the Ind reserve. Somewhere near the 10 mile lake. Most Rev Sir allow me to say here, I now know Mr. J. B. Bassett well, he has a big heart for the Ind. O how I would like to see him Agent to cooperate with the missionary then their great work would be begun.³⁹¹

Aware that he is raising points that shed light on practices that are inherently unfair for the Indians, Bonga assures Whipple that he will not “incite unrest” among the Indians by raising these points with them. Noting that the Dakota uprising of 1862 is “fresh in his mind,” Bonga adopts a paternalistic attitude towards the Indians by suggesting that he and Whipple should manage the affairs without consulting among the Ojibwes. Whether or not Bonga actually did “say a word to the Indians” about the trading monopoly is uncertain, but he nonetheless wanted Whipple to think that he was more in league with him than with the Ojibwes.

After the annuity payments took place, George Bonga reported to Whipple on the procedures. He noted that there was “some howling from the Indians to the Agent” because only Aspenwall and Ruffee were allowed to sell provisions at first. However, after urging from the Board of Visitors and “the officer in command of the Soldiers,” another trading partnership was allowed to sell their goods. Not all the traders in attendance were allowed to sell, however, as Bonga noted:

Capt Beaulieu had to take back his goods without opening them. O how long will Matters be allowed to go on in this way. Will the Govt not put a stop to these barefaced frauds on the Inds. I will not say any more now. But will let the Board of Visitors, say what they think of matters, I regret that they are powerless to remedy the many wrongs.³⁹²

The Crow Wing faction that Bonga was up against was dangerous. Treuer argues that this clique of Crow Wing traders plotted the assassination of Hole in the Day. The murder was planned for over two years, according to Treuer, by Ruffee, a white man, and the mixed-bloods Clement H. Beaulieu, Charles Beaulieu, George Fairbanks, Robert Fairbanks, John G. Morrison, George D. Morrison, William MacArthur, Peter Roy, and others. Hole in the Day had lobbied to exclude mixed-bloods from settling on the reservation in the 1867 treaty, presenting the possibility of taking away their annuity rights. As a result, Ruffee and the other Crow Wing traders felt their control over the trade was being thwarted by the chief.³⁹³

George Bonga was clearly on the side of Whipple and others in supporting the Ojibwes’ removal to White Earth, to the frustration of the Crow Wing traders. He said of the proposed removal of 1867: “This last treaty gives the Chippewas such a chance, that

³⁹¹ Bonga to Whipple, October 23, 1866, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁹² Bonga to Whipple, November 14, 1866, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁹³ Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 173-178.

none of their tribe has ever had before.”³⁹⁴ He also wrote to Whipple giving updates on the movements of particular bands to the new location at White Earth, and offered suggestions on how to persuade more to go:

I am glad to be able to say, that Mon E Too Waub & 2 other chiefs of the Gull Lake band & some of there band, have started for there new reservation (White Earth)... The Mille Lakers seems to be the hardest task. Major Bassett left yesterday to accompany Mon e too waub & the others. They certainly deserve credit for taking the lead. Mr Johnson has many friends among the Mill Lakers, & if he was to follow the track would perhaps induce many of them going to that good country.³⁹⁵

Overall, George Bonga’s letters depict a man who was determined to call out the unfair and unjust practices of the Crow Wing traders, even though it was a dangerous move. Although he adapted a paternalistic tone towards the Leech Lakers in his letters, he took a position that advocated for improving their options and access to desperately needed goods and provisions. His support of the removal to White Earth suggests that he was concerned with the Ojibwes’ ability to adapt to the changing economy, and viewed the opportunity to learn agricultural techniques as invaluable.

Conclusion

George Bonga and Stephen Bonga’s careers transcended the fur trade, lasting into an era when Ojibwe people had need for intermediaries who would help them in dealings with the U.S. government. They both succeeded in making use of the situations in which they found themselves, including bloody, violent, and hostile situations. After they and their brother Jack had married into Ojibwe families that proved useful to their careers and status, George and Stephen leveraged their educations and religious training to work as interpreters for prominent men.

In the end, these men were secure in the identity their fur trade family and careers had constructed: they were members of the reputable Bonga family, friends and associates of powerful “civilized” men, and kin members of the Ojibwe Pillager band. Although the early 19th century treaties with the Ojibwe failed to reflect the reality of their daily lives, the Bongas were able to correct this oversight by 1837 by getting included on the roll for “mixed-bloods.”

The legal context of the treaties constructed ambiguous identities for the families of mixed ancestry in the region, using inconsistent terminology and conflating race with class. George and Stephen Bonga succeeded in attaining the half-breed status for their family in the 1837 treaty largely because of their upper-class status. Although their father Pierre was a “success” by fur trade standards, his sons had more firmly entrenched identities in the upper echelons of fur trade society because of their Eastern educations, affiliations with influential “civilized” men, and accumulated wealth.

The debates over “whiteness” and “civilized” Indians in the Minnesota constitutional conventions indicate what type of environment the Bonga men were

³⁹⁴ Bonga to Whipple, June 24, 1867, Whipple Papers, MHS.

³⁹⁵ Bonga to Whipple, June 6, 1868, Whipple Papers, MHS.

dealing with. As discourse about identity fluctuated between notions about race, culture, lifestyle, and language, legal definitions of identity were constructed that were designed to clarify concepts that had long been ambiguous. In a region where identity had been something as easily changed as a hat or a pair of pants, now newcomers into the region wanted to establish guidelines and criteria that would prevent individuals from slipping between identities.

As the region was administratively transformed from a territory into a state, the Ojibwe-Dakota warfare raged on. Interpreters like Stephen Bonga and George Bonga were hired to mediate in the midst of these conflicts, and faced dangerous circumstances. Their ability to perform well in these circumstances attests to their communication skills as well as their composure and steadfastness. Although they were situated as mediators in these roles, there were times when their kin ties to the Ojibwe posed a particular risk, especially when in Dakota territory.

George Bonga's advocacy continued throughout his life, and he maintained a relationship with Whipple until the end of his life, always turning to him for help for the Ojibwe Indians. From Bonga's early legendary status as a "mixed blood Indian and negro" man capable of tracking a murderer in the January cold, to his later years calling out the "rascality" of the monopoly by the traders and agents, he displayed a determination that was truly impressive. Regardless of how he was racially or culturally identified, George Bonga was a man of conviction and power, and not afraid to speak out for his Ojibwe kin.

Overall, judging by their work as mediators in dangerous situations, both George and Stephen Bonga clearly had deep concern for the well being of the Ojibwes. Although George Bonga's writings reveal a sometimes paternalistic attitude towards the Ojibwe based on his status as a "civilized" man, both he and Stephen lived their whole adult lives among them. They may have been considered "negros," "white," and "colored," in some legal contexts, but on a daily basis they were "half-breeds," which denoted a particular type of Ojibwe identity.

Chapter 4

“Civilizing” the Pillagers:

Identity, Race, and Domesticity in Ojibwe Country, 1830-1890

Introduction

For Susan Bonga, the Euro-American notion of “race” did not become an issue in her life until well into her adulthood. As a leading Ojibwe tribal spokeswoman and the daughter of the prominent and respected fur trader George Bonga, Susan was educated and had considerable status by her adult years among both whites and Indians. However, in 1880, Susan Bonga’s identity was at the center of a discussion about notions of race and the importance of domesticity in Ojibwe communities. It was at this time that Susan Bonga became engaged to marry an Ojibwe Episcopal deacon, Charles Wright, the son of an important Ojibwe civil leader. Charles Wright had been carefully groomed for missionary service and needed a marriage partner who could fill a position of female authority in the community at Leech Lake, where he was the Episcopal missionary. Both he and the Church leadership were concerned with how a wife would support his missionary work and raised the question of whether Susan Bonga’s authority would be undermined by notions of race. In the spring of 1880, Joseph Gilfillan, the Episcopal missionary to the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota, expressed his concern about the prospective marriage and sought the advice of Henry Whipple, the Episcopal Bishop of Minnesota, in the following letter:

Dear Bishop,

Rev Charles Wright of Leech Lake asks me to write you about the propriety of his marrying Miss Susie Bonga, daughter of the late George Bonga of Leech Lake whom you knew. She has the reputation of being an exceedingly wise, chaste and good religious young woman, one who is exceedingly highly thought of by all the white employes [*sic*] at Leech Lake, and respected by all Indians and whites... She had done a truly wonderful work at Leech Lake... and in fact I think it is owing in great measure to her that there are any Christians there at all, as she was the means of the conversion of most of them... She is a very good housekeeper, speaks English pretty well, has considerable learning, is of spotless character, and has been on all these accounts been [*sic*] advanced by the agent to the position of Matron of the Indian school, which she fulfills perfectly... There is no doubt whatever that if she continues on as she has done in the past she would advance his work far more than any wife he could find Indian or white. He wishes to marry her, there is only one thing sticks in his mind, her negro blood. He has heard that white people look down on negroes... The only sticking point with him is the negro blood, and the apprehended ridicule of the young Indians. I have asked the clergymen at Red Lake. Rev George Smith highly approves of it; while Fred thinks they would ridicule Charles...

In haste, Respectfully Yours, J.A. Gilfillan³⁹⁶

This discussion about Susan Bonga shows how colonial concepts of “civilized” and “race” awkwardly intersected, producing tensions in conceptions of her identity. Gilfillan’s description of Susan Bonga identifies her as a “civilized” Indian within a civilized/savage framework. She was a “wise, chaste, and good religious young woman” who was “a very good housekeeper” and “[spoke] English pretty well.” However, Gilfillan’s references to concerns about Susan’s “negro blood” indicate that *another framework* for conceptualizing identities was being increasingly imposed on the region’s inhabitants. At a time when Susan had achieved considerable status as a “civilized” Indian, the notion of race was threatening to undermine her standing. Now she was being scrutinized for her African ancestry and was in danger of being “looked down on” as a “negro.” Even though Gilfillan asserts the incontrovertible evidence of her standing as an Indian who is “exceedingly highly thought of... And respected by all Indians and whites” he suggests that this identity may be toppled by ideas about race.

Although the hierarchies based on notions of “race” and “civilized” were both underpinned by colonial notions of Anglo-American superiority, these hierarchies clashed at times in Ojibwe communities. This is evident in the case of Susan Bonga, a woman who could not be simultaneously cast as a “civilized” Indian and a “negro” because she would have been ranked in strikingly different ways within two hierarchies. In Minnesota in 1880, she would be ranked at the top of a civilized/savage hierarchy, but at the bottom of a white/black hierarchy. The resulting tension between these hierarchies meant that a woman like Susan Bonga could not claim her African ancestry without negative repercussions.

These tensions in Susan’s identity point to changing notions of identity *about* and *among* Indians in the region, as Gilfillan’s letter suggests that new ideas that have been externally imposed are becoming internally enforced as well. There are indications that “race” as a notion based on the “one-drop rule” of “blackness” is beginning to seep into and be embraced by the community, as the “ridicule of the young Indians” is anticipated and clergymen are divided over its significance.

This chapter argues that although scientific theories of race were widespread in popular and intellectual discourse in the U.S. by the mid-nineteenth century, they were just beginning to infiltrate Ojibwe communities by 1880. This phenomena marked the clashing of colonial hierarchies, as well as the slow and reluctant spread of racist ideas into Ojibwe country.³⁹⁷ One of the broader implications of this point is that it illustrates

³⁹⁶ Joseph A. Gilfillan to Henry B. Whipple, May 20, 1880, Whipple Papers, Box 14, Minnesota Historical Society.

³⁹⁷ Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: the Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 305n1. I borrow Reginald Horsman’s use of the terms *racialism* and *racialist*, which he uses to differentiate from the terms *racism* and *racist* in order to “draw some distinction between *racist* thought in the context of present knowledge of racial matters and *racialist* thought in the context of nineteenth-century knowledge.” He further notes that “The terms *racism* and *racist* are charged with meanings that can cause confusion when applied to the thought of the... nineteenth century.”

that theories of racial difference spread unevenly throughout the country. As people in the South embraced racialist theories to justify slavery, in the northern Ojibwe region, race was not important or even useful to supporting any social structures or political economy.

In order to understand the conflicts between notions of race and a “civilized” identity, this chapter describes what occurred when missionaries attempted to impose ideas based on the “civilizing” hierarchy in Ojibwe communities. On the one hand, the Ojibwe often pursued alliances with missionaries because they understood religious power as inseparable from political power. On the other hand, cultural clashes occurred between missionaries and the Ojibwe largely based on conflicting ideas about property, resulting in missionaries repeatedly being driven from Indian communities.

Susan Bonga’s community has a complex history with missionaries, and in seeking to overturn simplified narratives of acceptance or rejection, I strive to recover the particularity of this community’s history. This means portraying the complex social relations of the community, their indigenous political structure, and the diversity of ideas and political stances among different Ojibwe bands and communities. This helps to overturn not only narratives of Indians as a homogenous or monolithic group, but also similar narratives of the Ojibwe. Understanding the specific history of the Leech Lakers, and their particular political and social structures, is key to understanding how the “civilizing” program both succeeded and failed. However, Ojibwe attitudes toward the “civilizing” program changed and fluctuated over time. Looking at the relations between the civil leadership and the warriors at Leech Lake shows why missionaries were resisted in some parts. By looking at how the Ojibwe of the Mississippi, Gull Lake, Leech Lake, and Red Lake bands specifically responded to the presence of missionaries, the distinctiveness of the community where Susan Bonga grew up is highlighted and her identity is better understood.

Gilfillan’s letter also highlights the successful mastery among some Ojibwe Indians of “domesticity.” The adaptation of these skills was not especially widespread, however, and Susan was considered exceptional in this regard. When missionaries introduced gendered aspects of colonialism into Ojibwe communities, including practices that sought to transform the balance between women and men, some women learned ways to leverage their own power by mastering domestic skills.³⁹⁸ Susan Bonga was one of these women, and as a way to illuminate her story this chapter looks at the ways in which the “civilizing” program specifically targeted women and families. Specifically, I focus on the importance of the Ojibwe deacon’s wives as models of domesticity and subverted attempts at the domestic subjugation of women in social, political, and

³⁹⁸ Rebecca Kugel, “Leadership Within the Women’s Community,” in *Native Women’s History in Eastern North America before 1900*, edited by Rebecca Kugel and Lucy Eldersveld Murphy, 166-200 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 175, 173. Kugel examines Susan Bonga’s leadership role in the Ojibwe women’s community at Leech Lake in this chapter, and argues that Bonga assumed the “classic Métis role as bicultural mediator or broker.” As such, Kugel argues, Bonga exploited her social standing among the whites to reinforce her leadership role among the Ojibwes by engaging in subtle actions that were “open to dual interpretation.” Kugel also argues, however, that the Episcopal missionaries among the Leech Lakers focused mostly on transforming Ojibwe men within the “civilizing” program.

economic realms. Moreover, the imposition of Christian values and attempts at restructuring property relations resulted in tensions with Ojibwe social systems that persisted into the late nineteenth century.

Introducing “Civilization” to the Ojibwe Indians

The federal “civilizing” program

In the mid- to late nineteenth century, Native Americans throughout the United States were resisting American encroachment on their territories and grappling with federal removal and assimilation efforts. During this period, a federal policy of acculturating and assimilating Indians into American society was implemented through both military force and the methods of a reform movement constituted of white, Christian humanitarians.³⁹⁹ In the early part of the century, the fledgling federal government had promoted the “civilization” and education of Indians as it struggled to assert its authority. It established the regulation of trade and commerce with tribes, territorial boundaries between whites and Indians, and the use of treaties to maintain peace with tribes and to purchase Indian lands; all the while seeking to inform states that they lacked any constitutional authority in the field of Indian policy.⁴⁰⁰ During this early period, in which severe restrictions were placed on whites from entering Indian lands to trade or settle, the Civilization Fund Act of 1819 was passed, establishing the U.S. goal to “civilize” the Indians as an “act of humanity.”⁴⁰¹ Moreover, in 1849 the Office of Indian Affairs was moved out of the War Department and into the Department of the Interior, a further signal of the federal policy to “domesticate” Indians.

In the 1850s, following the period of Indian Removal marked by the 1830 congressional law pushed through by President Andrew Jackson, the federal government implemented the reservation policy.⁴⁰² The discovery of gold in the 1830s, the acquisition of Texas in 1846 and much of the Southwest in 1848 under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, and the construction of transcontinental railroads spurred the government to view reservations as necessary.⁴⁰³ Reservations were also viewed as a protective measure to both Indians and whites. Accordingly, Indians were shielded from the degenerating influence of the whites, and white settlers from the “savage” Indians. However, the reservations were soon promoted as spaces that could function as convenient social laboratories where “civilizing” efforts could be implemented without disturbance.⁴⁰⁴

³⁹⁹ Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis: Christian Reformers and the Indian, 1865-1900* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976).

⁴⁰⁰ Francis Paul Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years: The Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts, 1780-1834* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 2.

⁴⁰¹ David E. Wilkins, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 107.

⁴⁰² Indian Removal was a period when many tribes were compelled to sign a number of removal treaties in which they ceded virtually all their aboriginal territory in the east in exchange for new lands west of the Mississippi.

⁴⁰³ Wilkins, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*, 108.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 110; Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*.

In the wake of the U.S. Civil War, federal and military agents handed control of the “civilizing” work to Christian reformers. Historian Francis Paul Prucha notes that this change in policy was instigated by changing sentiment: “[All the political leaders] were nearly unanimous in their conviction that the handling of Indian matters had to be a civilian, not a military matter. The emphasis was on peace, not war; on civilization, not subjugation; on preservation, not extermination.”⁴⁰⁵ This turn in Indian affairs continued to emphasize the use of reservations to “civilize” Indians, and pointed at citizenship as the ultimate goal for the Indians.⁴⁰⁶

During this same period, President Grant’s so-called “Peace Policy” reiterated a call for “civilizing” the Indians and delegated authority to religious groups. Church leaders were given the right to nominate Indian agents and to direct Indian education activities, a shift in policy that indicated “the pervasive moral and religious influences on the national outlook.”⁴⁰⁷ David Wilkins argues that as Christian churches assumed a dominant role in Indian lives by the late 1860s, this period represented the first significant break of the separation of church and state outlined in the First Amendment.⁴⁰⁸

The aims of the “civilizing” program included inducing Indians to adopt agrarianism, homesteading, Christianity, a particular form of dress, the English language, and notions of Western domesticity. Because reservations were the designated social spaces for the project, the Indian agent was to play a key role. Indian service regulations bluntly stated, “The chief duty of an agent is to induce his Indians to labor in civilized pursuits. To attain this end every possible influence should be brought to bear, and in proportion as it is attained, other things being equal, an agent’s administration is successful or unsuccessful.”⁴⁰⁹

Schools were established both on and off reservations as a way to assimilate Indians through a process of providing a Western education to Indian children. One of the main goals of the schools was the instruction of English, which was seized upon by some educators because it served as an easy symbol of American civilization.⁴¹⁰ By the end of the nineteenth century, efforts to “civilize” Indians through education included instilling within them a wide range of skills and behavior, as noted by William Torrey Harris, U.S. Commissioner of Education, in 1889:

The new education of our American Indians...undertakes to solve the problem of civilizing them by a radical system of education not merely in books,

⁴⁰⁵ Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*, 73.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 106. For example, in 1867 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs urged the consolidating of the Indians on large reservations where they could be “educated intellectually and morally, taught to be self-supporting, and ultimately clothed with the rights of citizenship.”

⁴⁰⁷ Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*, 33.

⁴⁰⁸ Wilkins, *American Indian Politics and the American Political System*, 110.

⁴⁰⁹ Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*, 195.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 284. Prucha writes, “After the Civil War, English for the Indians became a theoretical principle, and its implementation became almost an obsession, not only with Pratt but with all the Indian reformers. If the Indians were to become civilized, the civilization they were to adopt was American civilization, and for that a key means and a key symbol was the English language.”

nor merely in religious ceremonies, but in matters of clothing, personal cleanliness, matters of dietary, and especially in habits of industry.⁴¹¹

Day schools were initially provided on the reservations, but a federal boarding school system developed in the late nineteenth century that removed children from their homes and families. Living conditions were often poor at the schools, where there was a pattern of deprivation, abuse, starvation, lack of medical care, overcrowding, and the rampant spreading of disease. Furthermore, many of the schools operated as labor camps and vocational schools. The gender divide in the school taught the girls domestic work and the boys farming work, and they were often hired out to perform these duties for white families during the summer and holidays. However, the schools did not comprehensively meet their assimilation goals, since students often experienced a strengthening of their tribal identity or developed a sense of a pan-Indian identity through their relations at school.⁴¹²

As a measure accompanying education efforts, the allotment of land to Indians in severalty was proposed as a way to create “the incentive to work that came only from individual ownership of a piece of property.”⁴¹³ Allotment of land in severalty was a major component of the civilizing project as part of the drive to individualize Indians by teaching them about private land ownership.

The intentions of the allotment policy were framed in humanitarian terms by reformers and lawmakers and clearly linked to the process of “civilizing” Indians. For example, in 1880, the chairman of the Committee on Indian Affairs, Senator Richard Coke of Texas, reported a bill in the Senate to remove the Ute tribe and clearly stated it as a humanitarian effort:

The policy of this bill is to break up this large reservation, to individualize the Indians upon allotments of land; to break up their tribal relations and pass them under the jurisdiction of the Constitution and laws of the United States and the laws of the States and Territories in which the lands are situated, to aid them with stock and with agricultural implements, and by building houses upon their allotments of land, to become self-supporting, to be cultivators of the soil; in a word, to place them on the highway to American citizenship, and to aid them in arriving at that conclusion as rapidly as can be done.⁴¹⁴

The Dawes Act, passed in 1887, implemented the general allotment plan at the federal level and resulted in a surge in Indian education efforts. In sum, the nineteenth century was a time of massive change and upheaval for Native communities, as the U.S. government struggled with how to manage a population that appeared as obstacles to

⁴¹¹ Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*, 292.

⁴¹² Brenda Child, *Boarding School Seasons: American Indian Families, 1900-1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000); Tsianina Lomawaima, *They Called it Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

⁴¹³ Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*, 228.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 238. Also note, the extensive debate in the Senate, April 1-12, 1880, is in *Congressional Record*, X, 2059.

incoming white settlers. In order to understand how Susan Bonga and her family fit into these broad efforts, it is necessary to look at how “civilization” attempts unfolded specifically in the region in which they lived.

Missionary ideology

Generally speaking, the Christian reformers who were in charge of the “civilizing” programs were not subscribers to racialist theories, but rather believed in assimilation theory.⁴¹⁵ Francis Paul Prucha writes,

The goals envisaged for the Indians were deemed possible because of the belief in the unity of mankind held by the humanitarians. If the Indians were basically no different from other human beings – except for the conditioning coming from their environment – then there could be no real obstacle to their assimilation.⁴¹⁶

In Ojibwe country, the missionaries often taught the Indians in their own language and believed they could become as “civilized” as white people. They did not subscribe to the idea that inherent racial qualities separated Indians from “civilized” people, but rather believed environmental factors were the reasons behind their differences. For example, James Lloyd Breck wrote of the northern Ojibwe in 1853, “I could narrate some things concerning these poor Indians, that would satisfy the most doubting ones, that these people are not only men, but capable of improvement, and men ambitious for improvement, equal to any nation that has been rescued in time past, from poverty and degradation of soul, mind, and body.”⁴¹⁷

However, these missionaries also believed that in order for the Ojibwe to become like white men, they needed to adapt governing structures that were fundamentally in conflict with Ojibwe structures. Mainly, this included the notion of individualism that was in conflict with tribal principles. As Prucha notes,

The fight for individualization was carried on on many fronts by the evangelical reformers. They intended to break up tribal ownership of land and to substitute allotment of Indians lands in severalty. They wanted to break up tribal jurisdiction and to treat the Indians as individual citizens before the law. Their individualism, moreover, was tied closely to the Puritan work ethic. Hard work and thrift were virtues that seemed to be at the very basis of individual salvation.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁵ For more on the racialist theories of the nineteenth century in America, see Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*.

⁴¹⁶ Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*, 155.

⁴¹⁷ Breck to Miss Edwards, November 26, 1853, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck; Chiefly from Letters Written by Himself* (New York: E. & J. B. Young, 1883. Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, Minnesota), 286.

⁴¹⁸ Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*; Cathleen Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers: A Social History of the United States Indian Service, 1869-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 153-154.

A main locus for attempts at restructuring tribal relations was the home. This involved changing the fundamental nature of Native familial and social systems, and instituting gender-specific training that emphasized the domestic arts. Furthermore, as Cathleen Cahill argues, missionaries and teachers in Native communities strived to embrace the roles of surrogate parents to Native children.⁴¹⁹ This intimate approach to the “civilizing” project was an organizing factor of the missions, as Prucha points out,

Individual development and the stimulation of honest labor, in the evangelical Protestant worldview, were possible only in the perspective of the family. Glorification of hearth and home was an essential element in their program for Christian living, for the Christian purity and virtues that they extolled could take root and be nurtured to full maturity only with the Christian family.⁴²⁰

The Upper Mississippi Ojibwe and missionaries

As a family heavily involved in the fur trade, the Bongas regularly interacted with the missionaries in Ojibwe country because missionaries often developed dependent relationships with fur traders. The earliest missions were located at trading posts, missionaries relied on traders for material support while, in turn, educating traders’ children, and missionaries also cultivated marriage alliances with traders. This close relationship was sometimes a detriment to missionaries’ goal of gaining the trust of Indians, because it made missionaries a target of the hostility directed at traders in times of scarcity when disagreements over trading and resources arose.

The Pillager band of Ojibwe – among whom the Bongas had married – saw a number of Episcopal and Congregational missionaries come and go from the 1830s to the late 1850s. These missionaries were continually challenged by lack of community support and several were driven away by the Pillagers for lack of adaptation to Ojibwe social practices. It was not until 1878 that a stable mission post was finally established, and this was only after an *Ojibwe* missionary moved into the community. Reviewing the tumultuous history of unstable missions and infrequent conversions among the Pillagers highlights cultural tensions that arose among missionaries and the Ojibwe, as well as changing attitudes towards missionaries as the Ojibwe were increasingly pressured to adapt to the influx of white people.

Although the Pillagers had had regular contact with traders and Indian agents since the early nineteenth century, there had been no Euro-American missionary activity in the region since the period of the explorations of Pierre Gaultier, Sieur de La Vérendrye, in the 1730s. At that time, the Cree, not the Ojibwe, were living in the region. The ancestors of the Pillagers had last had contact with missionaries when the Jesuits came through the Lake Superior region in the late seventeenth century.⁴²¹

When missionaries in the early nineteenth century visited the Ojibwe in what is now Minnesota and Wisconsin, the Ojibwe were distributed in roughly thirty villages in the region south and west of Lake Superior, varying from a few families to several

⁴¹⁹ Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers*.

⁴²⁰ Prucha, *American Indian Policy in Crisis*, 155.

⁴²¹ Harold Hickerson, “William T. Boutwell of the American Board and the Pillager Chippewas: The History of a Failure,” *Ethnohistory* 12, no.1 (Winter 1965): 3.

hundred individuals.⁴²² They were engaged in the fur trade, fishing, hunting, wild rice collection, and maple sugar production. There were some non-Indians present, including fur traders, Indian agents, and a sprinkling of Presbyterian missionaries who had recently arrived. They held an interest in converting the Pillager band because of their great numbers, and of the relative security from violent Ojibwe-Dakota encounters.

When the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) missionaries started coming into the region in the 1830s, the Ojibwe were firm practitioners of the *Midewiwin* (Grand Medicine Lodge), which was “deeply intertwined with all aspects of [Ojibwe] life from birth to death.”⁴²³ The *Midewiwin* provided teachings, medicinal knowledge, social codes of conduct, and a philosophical framework that imbued with meaning human relations with the cosmos. Although it had local variations, *Midewiwin* theology had basic guidelines for living responsibly in communities and core teachings.⁴²⁴

This philosophical framework described religious power as inseparable from political power. In this view, the Ojibwe believed that a strong spiritual power was behind politically and militarily strong social formations. Given this, and the fact that the Ojibwe “freely accepted open, direct, and personal communication with *manidoog* beings [spirits],” communities were generally willing to incorporate new religious ideas into their philosophical framework that could strengthen their lives. This most often occurred through making alliances with groups that shared their new religious practices, and therefore their power. Cary Miller notes:

The Anishinaabeg believed that the religions of all peoples had some truth and power to them—it must be so in order for those communities to survive and prosper—and did not decry the belief of others, whether of other tribes or the colonial powers, as false and without basis. The Anishinaabeg recognized that Americans had power. The Americans had beaten the British and driven them from the land. American authority must therefore have a strong spiritual basis, according to Anishinaabe definitions of power.⁴²⁵

Recognizing the Americans’ ascendant power, the Ojibwe decided to build alliances with them in the early nineteenth century. Inviting missionaries affiliated with the Americans into their communities was one way this was done.

Reverend William Boutwell of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) was the first of these missionaries who attempted to live among the Pillagers.⁴²⁶ Boutwell first visited the Pillagers in 1832 as part of an

⁴²² Hickerson, “William T. Boutwell of the American Board and the Pillager Chippewas,” 1. The Pillager Indians were the largest band of the Ojibwe in the region, ranging from 900 to 1200 people in the nineteenth century.

⁴²³ Cary Miller, *Ogimaag: Anishinaabeg Leadership, 1760-1845* (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 150.

⁴²⁴ Edward Benton-Banai, *Mishomis Book* (St. Paul: Red School House, 1988), 64.

⁴²⁵ Miller, *Ogimaag*, 9.

⁴²⁶ Founded in 1810, the ABCFM founders believed that involvement in mission activities, whether as actual missionaries or through donations, promised to revitalize the

expedition led by Henry Schoolcraft, and he moved into the Leech Lake community in the fall of 1833. As the terms of his stay, Boutwell offered to teach the Ojibwe men cultivation and animal husbandry and Boutwell's wife offered to teach women and girls to read and sew. In exchange, the Boutwells asked for the opportunity to provide religious instruction to both children and adults. In four years among the Pillagers, however, Boutwell had no converts.⁴²⁷

Part of Boutwell's problem was that he succeeded more at cultivating relationships with the traders than with the Indians he was aiming to convert. Boutwell arrived among the Pillagers in the company of an American Fur Company clerk, William Davenport, and maintained a close association with him throughout his tenure at Leech Lake.⁴²⁸ Boutwell also made an alliance in 1834 with the President of the American Fur Company, Ramsey Crooks, by marrying his daughter Hester Crooks. As a result, Boutwell was identified with the traders from the perspective of the Pillagers, who had developed a relationship of ongoing tension with local traders. The Ojibwe resented traders for periods of starvation they endured because the fur trade kept them occupied in the trapping grounds at the time when supplies of fish were always harvested. When conditions were not favorable and the wild rice crops failed and not enough wild game was procured, the Ojibwe would have to resort to buying fish from the traders. This occurred in 1834, 1835, and 1836, and was something the Pillagers clearly resented. Being expected to pay traders and missionaries for resources that were traditionally common property was unfair from the Pillagers' view, and therefore they forced traders and Boutwell "to share" by regularly looting their stores of food.⁴²⁹

Boutwell's biggest problem with the Pillagers was embedded in his social conduct. From the Ojibwes' perspective, he displayed increasingly antisocial and selfish behavior as an affluent man who was not willing to share. Among a people "who had no restrictions on coming and going within the community, and for whom hospitality and sharing was a way of life," this was the gravest of faults.⁴³⁰ Boutwell took steps to keep the Ojibwe away from his establishment based on accusations that they were looting his property, and he also insulted people when he refused to follow the French custom of exchanging kisses with the women on New Year's Day. His seemingly antisocial behavior finally crossed a line when he outraged community members by attempting to

Christian religion and convert more people. They sent a number of missionaries from New England and New York to Wisconsin and Minnesota as part of their worldwide efforts at conversion.

⁴²⁷ Hickerson, "William T. Boutwell of the American Board and the Pillager Chippewas," 4, 6, 24.

⁴²⁸ Hickerson, "William T. Boutwell of the American Board and the Pillager Chippewas," 7, 8. Boutwell first visited the Pillagers in 1832 on an expedition with Henry Schoolcraft. He was from New Hampshire and a Dartmouth graduate, and had decided to go to Leech Lake after being initially assigned to Sandy Lake with Edmund Ely; Boutwell relied on Davenport for housing, for help in building his house, for procuring winter provisions, and for providing space in the Company store to meet with the Indians.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 10-14.

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

buy land from an elderly Ojibwe woman. In doing so, Boutwell had asserted an economic transaction in a socioeconomic sphere in which only communal ownership was recognized, and had appeared to do so with a vulnerable individual.⁴³¹

In 1836, activities were set in motion to force Boutwell out of the community. The Pillagers set “impossible conditions” for his remaining at Leech Lake, stating that he must give them an unusually generous amount of goods if he wanted to stay. They demanded

a great many mirrors, vermilion, and other small articles for the young men. And when your provisions come, you ought to give us a feast of something that we don’t always have, and tell the young men it is to pay them for the fish you get out of their lake. And when your tobacco comes, you ought to give it to the old men. And your clothing that is sent to you—you should give it to the children that are poor.⁴³²

Clearly, the Pillagers’ demands were tailored to the infractions Boutwell had committed. They asserted the notion that the fish supply in the lake was communal Ojibwe property by commanding Boutwell to “tell the young men” he was giving them a feast “to pay them for the fish you get out of their lake.” The Pillagers referenced Boutwell’s selfishness by implying that only acts of incredible generosity could make things right between Boutwell and the community. They concluded by frankly telling Boutwell, “You don’t do us any good, at all, by being here, but the traders bring us goods, and therefore the Indians are determined that you shall not stay another year.”⁴³³ Boutwell was gone by the spring of 1837.⁴³⁴

George Bonga was probably well-acquainted with the next missionary, Frederick Ayer, who came to live among the Pillagers and had slightly more success than Boutwell. In the winter of 1832, Ayer lived with the trader William Aitken at Sandy Lake, the chief post in the Fond du Lac department of the American Fur Company. Ayer opened a small school at the post where he taught “the half-breed and Indian children of the vicinity.”⁴³⁵ Since George Bonga was working directly under Aitkin at the time, and his family had been living in the region for at least the last few years, probably longer, it is likely that some of the Bonga children attended Ayer’s school.⁴³⁶ At this point, the children were not George Bonga’s, but rather, his cousins.

⁴³¹ Hickerson, “William T. Boutwell of the American Board and the Pillager Chippewas,” 14, 17-18.

⁴³² Ibid., 23. Hickerson cites Boutwell’s Journals, 390-392.

⁴³³ Ibid., 14.

⁴³⁴ Ibid., 24.

⁴³⁵ Grace Lee Nute. “Early Day Missionaries to Indians: Missionaries Among the Sioux and Chippewa in Minnesota,” *Western Magazine* 24, no. 4 (Oct 1924): 110.

⁴³⁶ Return Holcombe, *Minnesota in Three Centuries 2* (Mankato: The Publishing Society of Minnesota, 1908), 55, 125-127; Edward Neill, *The History of Minnesota: From the Earliest French Explorations to the Present Time* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1858), 322. Bonga was working for the AFC from 1822 to 1838, usually in the Fond du Lac department, where Aitkin was the chief trader. In the summer of 1820, when George Bonga was working as an interpreter for Governor Lewis Cass on

Roughly ten years later, when George Bonga had three young children of his own, he probably heartily encouraged Ayer to set up a post in the Pillager area. Ayer was evidently enthusiastic about setting up a post in the remote region, which was most likely due to encouragement he received from leaders and traders from the Pillager community.⁴³⁷ Under the auspices of the American Board, Ayer and missionaries he recruited from Oberlin College founded missions at both Red Lake and Leech Lake.⁴³⁸ As a result of the Ayers' petitioning on behalf of "the Ojibwas" in the summer of 1842, there were "several men [at Oberlin] who [were] ready to enter this field."⁴³⁹ By the fall of 1843, the Ayers and one staff member were at Red Lake and two missionaries from Oberlin were at Leech Lake. By the next summer, Oberlin had contributed ten people to the missions, with more to come in the next years. Although the Red Lake mission operated until 1857, the Leech Lake post existed less than three years.

Historians note that Ayer only made twenty conversions between 1843 and 1859, of which the Bongas and their relatives most likely constituted a large part.⁴⁴⁰ As such, the Bonga family was one of the early documented families among the Pillagers to convert to Christianity. When Ayer moved north to Leech Lake and Red Lake in 1843, George Bonga probably supported the missionary efforts in the interest of having a school in the area. With three young children, he probably remembered the school for "half-breed" children Ayer had run a decade earlier and was interested in securing

an expedition into the region, the group "came to an Ojibway village of fourteen lodges. Among the residents were the children of an African, by the name of Bungo, the servant of a British officer who once commanded at Mackinaw."

⁴³⁷ William Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Beginning of the Red Lake Mission," *Minnesota History* 45, no. 1 (1976): 27. One of the reasons Ayer selected Red Lake and Leech Lake as places to establish mission stations was because of their remoteness. He viewed this as an asset, considering the spots were far from white civilization and its attendant vices, especially liquor.

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.*, 22, 24. Bigglestone notes, "Oberlin was a religious school – Congregational, but never formally so – which had been founded in 1833 by a visionary minister and a former missionary to the Choctaw Indians to educate people to work for God's cause as Protestant Christianity interpreted it...With all its zeal Oberlin was not looked upon with favor by conventional religious leaders of the day...The strongest objections to Oberlin stemmed from its belligerent antislavery posture. The leaders of the college spoke loudly against the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions because the board accepted donations from slaveholders and also allowed them membership in the organization."

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 31. On the twenty conversions made see Bigglestone. The evidence that suggests the Bongas were converted during this period is the 1880 conversion of the Bonga and Taylor families to the Episcopal Church. The record states that their "religious antecedent" is Congregationalist. It is most likely that George Bonga was converted by Ayer, because the earlier missionary, Boutwell, apparently made not one single conversion. George Bonga's relationship with Ayer, the politics of the period, and the fact that he had children, all suggest he would have converted then. The next missionary in the region was an Episcopal man.

accessible education for his children. Since George already knew Ayer and his work, he could trust him, and Ayer had proven himself capable through his study of the Ojibwe language and willingness to persevere in harsh conditions.⁴⁴¹

According to one historian, the Oberlin missionaries encountered many of the same problems with the Pillagers that Boutwell had faced. Bigglestone notes,

The real reason there were so many short-lived stations was that a majority of the Indians regarded the missionaries as intruders upon their land and forced them to leave. The produce they grew and the livestock they grazed were considered by the Chippewa to belong to all, and what was robbing a garden to a missionary was something else to the person he had come there to serve. At various times crops and livestock were destroyed, promising enterprises such as sawmills were sabotaged, and missionaries' persons were threatened. Chippewa kept their children out of schools and in the end told the white men they must first plow for Indians and build for Indians if they wished to enjoy the privileges of remaining. During the entire sixteen-year effort only twenty conversions had been made, and most of those occurred in the early years.⁴⁴²

Although the Pillagers were not pleased with Ayer and the Oberlin missionaries, they did not give up entirely on the idea of having missionaries in their community. By 1853, after Ayer's missionaries had left Leech Lake but were still in the nearby Red Lake area, the Pillager leader Flat Mouth and George Bonga both personally began cultivating a relationship with the Episcopal missionary, James Lloyd Breck. In June 1853, Breck wrote, "Mr. Bungo has somehow taken a fancy to me, and is determined that I shall benefit by the Chippeway side of his 'progenity.' Therefore it is that I have come hither to examine the finest of the Chippeway country."⁴⁴³ Apparently George Bonga discussed his Ojibwe kin ties with Breck, indicating that they provided him with the power to make Breck welcome and comfortable among the Pillagers.

This encounter occurred while Breck made an exploratory journey to the Pillager region and George Bonga served as the expedition's guide. Bonga seemed to make a strong impression on Breck, who was from Pennsylvania and had probably met few black men like Bonga in the less than ten years he had been in the Western Great Lakes region. Breck wrote of his meeting with Bonga in a letter to his brother:

Our leader in these parts is an Africo-Ojibwa—the respectable and quite well-educated descendent of a negro that was kidnapped by the Chippeways in 1778, and brought from Chicago to the St. Croix River, who, on coming to manhood, intermarried with these people, and hence the negro blood already in a variety of families. This man, George Bungo, as his name runs, is *coal* black, and

⁴⁴¹ Bigglestone, "Oberlin College and the Beginning of the Red Lake Mission," 21-31. Ayer spent the winter of 1830-31 teaching the children at the La Pointe AFC trading post while he studied the Ojibwe language. When Ayer went to Sandy Lake, he continued studying the Ojibwe language and completed an Ojibwe spelling book, "a much-needed article in the mission school."

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 31.

⁴⁴³ Breck to his brother, June 13, 1853, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 256.

a large, fine-looking man, enjoying the confidence of all who know him. His wife is an Ojibwe woman, but his children are of a light complexion, and very finely featured. He has been living many years in these parts, being now forty-six years of age. He received his education in English and French in the Canadas.⁴⁴⁴

Of course, Bonga was not the only one who encouraged Breck. The Pillager civil leader Flat Mouth wrote a letter to Breck that same spring in which he clearly expressed his desire to form a partnership with the missionary. Flat Mouth wrote,

My friend, you cannot imagine how anxious I am to have you come and live among us... This lake has been owned by my forefathers and no one will have a word to say when I have made my promises. I now say to you, come and choose out a place which is not occupied anywhere about our lake, and take and use freely anything, wood, hay, etc., which will make you comfortable... My friend, when I get back from my hunt and see you getting ready to live among us, I will then be glad to know that some of our people will have the opportunity to learn from whence the whites get their knowledge.⁴⁴⁵

Flat Mouth and Bonga were eager to cultivate an alliance because they had observed Breck working in an Ojibwe community sixty miles south of them at Gull Lake, where Breck moved in 1852 to found a mission. Breck and the Indians there were engaged in activities such as building houses, training the girls in the domestic arts and the boys in gardening, religious instruction, and reading in both Ojibwe and English.⁴⁴⁶ At this point, George Bonga and his Ojibwe wife *Ashwewin* had five children spanning the ages from one to eighteen years, and were probably interested in establishing relationships with people who could educate their children near home, as well as make arrangements to send them to school in the East.⁴⁴⁷ Having Breck in their community would be a potential boon to their childrens' upbringing.

Breck accepted an invitation from Flat Mouth to visit Leech Lake in March 1853, making an arduous journey in which he "camped out, sleeping upon the ground for thirty nights in succession whilst traveling" in weather that "ranged from 12° to 18° below 0."⁴⁴⁸ He gave an optimistic report of the visit and emphasized his need for Native women's supports of his efforts, noting that "Several devoted females have offered their

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵ Theodore Holcombe, *An Apostle of the Wilderness: James Lloyd Breck, D.D. His Missions and His Schools* (New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1903), 123-124.

⁴⁴⁶ James Lloyd Breck, *Chippeway Pictures from the Territory of Minnesota, 1857* (Hartford: Church Missions Publishing Company, 1910); Holcombe, *An Apostle of the Wilderness*.

⁴⁴⁷ 1860 U.S. Census, Leech Lake, Cass county, Minnesota, enumerated by Peter Roy (22 June, 1860) Roll: M653_567; Page: 459; Image: 450; Family History Library Film: 803567.

⁴⁴⁸ Breck to Mrs. Dimock, April 24, 1853, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 247.

pious labors, which are most truly required in teaching Christianity and the *domestic life* to the pagan.”⁴⁴⁹

Breck’s efforts to teach domesticity and convert Indians was, in fact, soon supported by articles in treaties with the Pillagers. The Leech Lakers were signatories to an 1837 treaty that introduced the first land cession for the Minnesota Ojibwe.⁴⁵⁰ In 1847, the Pillagers signed a treaty that they believed would help protect them from Dakota attacks.”⁴⁵¹ Neither of these treaties, however, included major provisions for missionary activities among the Pillager band. These kinds of provision did not appear until 1855, when a treaty signed with the Mississippi, Pillager, and Winnibigoshish bands explicitly put forth “civilization” goals.⁴⁵² Also a major land-cession treaty, its terms included “to have ploughed and prepared for cultivation, two hundred acres of land, in ten or more lots, within the reservation at Leech Lake.”⁴⁵³ It also laid out a training opportunity for the Pillagers, as it stated “*Provided*, That the Indians shall make the rails and enclose the lots themselves.”⁴⁵⁴ Furthermore, the treaty allowed for the missionaries already there to remain in the communities, and to “each have the privilege of entering 160 acres of the said ceded lands, at one dollar and twenty five cents per acre.”⁴⁵⁵ And finally, emphasizing social expectations, the treaty concluded by noting that the signatories stipulate that they will settle down in the peaceful pursuits of life, commence the cultivation of the soil, and appropriate their means to the erection of houses, opening farms, the education of their children, and such other objects of improvement and convenience, as are incident to well-regulated society; and

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 248.

⁴⁵⁰ “Treaty With the Chippewa, 1837” July 29, 1837, in *Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties*, vol. 2, ed. Charles J. Kappler (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1904), 493. This treaty included large delegations of the Ojibwe leadership from eleven bands from central and eastern Minnesota and Western Wisconsin. This treaty ceded a triangular section of land north of the Mississippi River and South of Mille Lacs Lake, adjacent to the St. Croix River. There were few white settlers in Minnesota at this time, and the Ojibwe retained usufructary rights over the ceded territory, so the treaty had little impact on Ojibwe daily life.

⁴⁵¹ “Treaty With the Pillager Band of Chippewa Indians, 1847,” Aug 21, 1847, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 569. This treaty ceded a large section of land along the Long Prairie River in central Minnesota with the understanding that the Ho-Chunk and Menominee Indians would relocate there.

⁴⁵² Article 4, “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1842,” October 4, 1842, in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 543. In contrast, a treaty concluded in October 1842 at La Pointe inspired missionaries to return to work in previously unwelcoming Ojibwe communities. This treaty with the Mississippi and Lake Superior bands included payments of “two thousand dollars for the support of schools for the Indians party to this Treaty.”

⁴⁵³ Article 3, “Treaty with the Chippewa, 1855,” February 22, 1855,” in *Indian Affairs*, ed. Kappler, 688.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., Article 6.

that they will abstain from the use of intoxicating drinks and other vices to which they have been addicted.⁴⁵⁶

In the wake of these treaties, the Pillagers and other Ojibwe bands encountered jarring changes. The 1847 and 1855 treaties had led to the closing of the fur trade economy and the beginning of a new annuity-based economy. As Anton Treuer explains,

As Ojibwe lands were ceded and settled by non-Indians, the economy of the fur trade collapsed because of lost land on which to trap, over-trapping, and a declining market for furs. Annuities from land sales initially helped compensate for losses and maintain the Ojibwe standard of living, but then the Ojibwe were boxed in. They became increasingly dependent on annuities, which then created incentives for more and more land cessions.⁴⁵⁷

Beginning in the 1850s, many Ojibwe civil leaders recognized that alliances with missionaries provided opportunities to learn new ways of surviving in the changing economy. Rebecca Kugel writes, “Hard-pressed to find means of self-support now that the resources of their former land base were denied them, the Ojibwes were particularly interested in the possibilities that increased reliance on agriculture seemed to promise.”⁴⁵⁸

Breck was an ardent believer in the idea that bringing “civilization” to the Indians would lead them not only to Christ, but also to their ability to survive within a growing new republic. Breck’s efforts yielded concrete results in Gull Lake, which no doubt were noted by the Pillagers. Breck reflected on his apparent success at helping the Gull Lakers turn to a new way of survival in a letter he wrote in 1852,

Three Ojibwas are now building houses for themselves... And this beginning will, we trust, soon be followed by others. Indeed the principal chief of this place informed me, a few days ago, that he should recommend to all his young men, the adoption of the *fixed* life, meaning the *civilized*. And this, I trust, they will do, for it alone can save them from ruin as a people. And if they are brought to this, they must come to the acceptance of the Gospel along with it.⁴⁵⁹

Breck moved to Leech Lake in November 1856, probably assisted by Bonga, much as other fur traders helped missionaries set up in other communities. Initially optimistic about the new mission at Leech Lake, which he referred to by its Ojibwe name, *Kehsahgah*, Breck cheerfully noted four months into his stay that he had already baptized sixteen children and expected to baptize four adults the next Sunday.⁴⁶⁰

However, Breck had arrived in the community at a time when most of the men were away collecting annuity payments, and when they returned in the spring after their

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., Article 9.

⁴⁵⁷ Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 150.

⁴⁵⁸ Kugel, “Leadership Within the Women’s Community,” 172.

⁴⁵⁹ Breck to the Rev. Mr. Van Rensselaer, October 19, 1852, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 227.

⁴⁶⁰ Breck to Miss Edwards, March 10, 1857 and Breck to his brother Charles, October 21, 1856, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 322, 315.

winter hunts many of them were abusive and threatening towards Breck and his party.⁴⁶¹ He described the treatment he received in his journal:

The past six weeks at Leech Lake has been dearly-bought experience [*sic*] with our Mission. The drunken Indian has visited us at our Mission House at various times. My own experience has been, to be kept at bay in Mrs. Breck's private room, by the drawn knife of the half-drunken savage, who entered to gratify his unreasonable demands. On another occasion, a heavy-framed, drunken Indian, danced like a maniac in the midst of the broken glass of our front windows, which were smashed to atoms by himself and others, who would enter our house.⁴⁶²

Breck described additional violent encounters, and wrote that the civil leaders and the community confessed to being afraid of these men as well.⁴⁶³ Since there was a lack of military protection in the region at the time, the missionaries decided to abandon their post until they could receive government assistance. In July 1857, Breck notified one of his colleagues of the volatile situation, explaining that fleeing Leech Lake was the only option, "except we should arm ourselves and fight, or be continually basely trodden upon underfoot by drunken Indians."⁴⁶⁴

Although Breck initially blamed alcohol as the main factor fueling the Ojibwes' contemptuous behavior towards them, after some time had passed Breck acknowledged that political and social conditions arising from treaties played a significant role in the events. Two months after his hasty departure, Breck wrote to his "benefactress" in Connecticut about the failed mission and the dismal prospects for its future,

The increasing troubles on our Indian frontier, both amongst Sioux and Chippeways, occasioned by late treaties that have banished them from much of their country, the removal of all troops from the entire Chippeway frontier, and the introduction of fire-water after the manner of a flood, into the whole of the Indian country about our Missions, leave us little hope (soon at least) of re-entering our labors in the Red field.⁴⁶⁵

The results of treaty negotiations not only polarized Indians and whites, but they also resulted in factionalization within Ojibwe communities. The men's antagonizing of the missionaries signified a split in the community along the line of the civil leaders and the warriors. In fact, Breck acknowledged that the angry warriors were "a people who were offended with their Chiefs for selling their country, they then rose up against *us*,

⁴⁶¹ Breck, July 19, 1857, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 327. Breck noted that when he and his people arrived at Leech Lake in November, the men "were absent at the payment (sixty-five miles from [Leech Lake]), and only a few of the men returned to pass the Winter" there.

⁴⁶² Breck to the Rev. Mr. Wilcoxson, July 16, 1857, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 327.

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, 328.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 325-329.

⁴⁶⁵ Breck to Miss Edwards, September 4, 1857, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 331.

because, in carrying out the terms of the treaty, we had made ourselves partisans with their Chiefs. These last have had to conceal themselves up to the present time from the assaults of their own people.”⁴⁶⁶

The civil chiefs and the warriors were often divided in opinion, particularly about missionaries and government agents. However, this was how their community was traditionally governed. At Leech Lake, warriors maintained a distinct presence in the community, working in tandem with the more moderate civil leaders despite their commonly opposing stances. There was a balance to this type of governance formed of opposing factions, in which the “gray-haired” civil leaders were typically older men more inclined towards peaceful strategies, and the “hot headed” warriors were younger men “who were the first to defend and quick to seek revenge and pillage.”⁴⁶⁷ The way the warriors functioned upheld Ojibwe political authority, as they generally lent their support to the civil leaders, but it also ran against the grain of “civilizing” efforts, as historian Rebecca Kugel notes:

[The Leech Lakers] were ‘lawless’ and ‘unruly’; they ‘talked ugly’ to disconcerted American officials; but they remained committed to the aboriginal vision of governance and bifurcated political responsibility. Simply put, the Leech Lakers never divided over the issues of the warriors’ power or their legitimate place in the political order, as the Mississippi Ojibwe had.⁴⁶⁸

In contrast to some of the nearby Ojibwe bands, the Leech Lakers did not temper their political governance system in a way that marginalized or diminished the warriors’ power. The warriors at Leech Lake maintained a strong presence, and oftentimes stood up against decisions their civil leaders had made, particularly concerning missionaries and government agents.

One sign that the civil leaders at Leech Lake diverged in opinion from their warriors was their attempt to extend an olive branch to the Episcopal clergymen after Breck was driven out. Sometime around November 1862, nearly five years after the incident with Breck, the Leech Lakers made a conciliatory gesture by sending George Bonga as a type of ambassador of the Pillagers. The clergyman Enmegahbowh noted:

While at Crow Wing, Mr. George Bungo, a very intelligent man, of mixed African and Indian blood, came to see the Bishop on behalf of the Leech Lake Indians, to express their deep sorrow that their foolish young men had driven Mr. Breck from the country, and to say for them that “all the Indians agreed they never had a better friend, and they hoped he would forgive them.”⁴⁶⁹

⁴⁶⁶ Breck to William Chauncy Langdon, September 30, 1857, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 340.

⁴⁶⁷ Melissa Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy: Ethnicity and Dispossession at a Minnesota Anishinaabe Reservation* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 22.

⁴⁶⁸ Rebecca Kugel, *To Be the Main Leaders of Our People: A History of Minnesota Ojibwe Politics, 1825-1898* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1998), 168.

⁴⁶⁹ Enmegahbowh to Whipple, November 7, 1862, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 402.

Bonga went to visit Henry Whipple, the Episcopal Bishop of Minnesota, with whom he had developed a strong relationship over the years. In 1868 Whipple described Bonga as “a truthful man, intelligent, a good interpreter, & worthy of confidence.”⁴⁷⁰ The fact that George Bonga was sent to help repair relations between the Pillagers and the Episcopal clergyman suggests that the civil leadership had not abandoned their view that there was a lot to be gained from cultivating alliances with the missionaries. Although it is not certain how much of an impact George Bonga’s diplomatic gesture made, it is clear that the missionaries were not prepared to give up on Leech Lake.

Domesticity Among the Pillagers

Susan Bonga’s Identity

Although Susan Bonga conformed in many ways to the goals of the “civilizing” program, she was by no means an “assimilated” Indian. Susan had a firmly entrenched identity as an Ojibwe woman, and found ways to leverage her own power and reinforce Ojibwe social practices by mastering domestic skills. Born around 1853, Susan was fortunate to be part of a prosperous and respected family. Not only did she and her daughter Mary live among their Pillager relatives all their lives, but they were raised primarily by their Ojibwe mothers. In Ojibwe family life, mothers assumed the full responsibility for their infant children until they were weaned.⁴⁷¹ As children grew older, fathers played an active role in caring for and raising sons, while mothers took the responsibility for raising daughters.⁴⁷² In keeping with this practice, Susan was educated differently than her brothers. Unlike them, Susan was never separated from her family to attend school in the east, but instead attended the Indian boarding school at Leech Lake. Susan’s mother most likely played a big role in her upbringing, and imparted important Ojibwe values and skills. Moreover, her mother’s parents probably had a great influence in her life. Grandparents frequently lived in the lodge of their daughter or nearby, and were also active in raising their grandchildren. They were especially important as caretakers of infants and small children when parents were busy at other tasks.⁴⁷³ This family structure and the fact that Susan was never removed from it (as her brothers were) help explain why she was qualified to assume a leadership position among Ojibwe women.

In contrast to Euro-American hierarchical notions of gender, Ojibwe society had work and social spheres that were gender-dominant, but also equally valued in the community. Activities were generally separated into male and female domains, yet to a large extent the domains overlapped so that women and men often worked together. Men generally did the hunting and trapping, while women dominated the activities associated

⁴⁷⁰ Whipple, August 5, 1868, Whipple Papers, MHS.

⁴⁷¹ Priscilla Buffalohead, “Farmers, Warriors, Traders: A Fresh Look at Ojibway Women.” *Minnesota History* 48, no. 6 (Summer 1983): 241. Available evidence suggests that two or three children constituted an average family, a relatively small size which may have been controlled by high infant mortality rate, a lower fertility rate, longer periods of sexual abstinence, and the option of abortion.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁷³ *Ibid.*

with the specialized harvests of maple sap and wild rice and the gathering of other wild plant foods. Women also oversaw the planting and harvesting of small fields of corn, pumpkins, and squash.⁴⁷⁴

Leadership had a wide variety of contexts in the yearly round of Ojibwe life, and women helped govern groups “as small as a single family or berry-picking party or as large as intertribal war parties or the people who came together for village ceremonials.”⁴⁷⁵ Women not only supervised these activities, but they exercised ownership and distribution rights to food and other resources and held leadership roles in political affairs. Having control over distribution rights was very significant in Ojibwe culture because “generous giving and sharing of valued goods was a major means of spreading one’s influence.”⁴⁷⁶ Women also exercised power by negotiating directly with traders for products they had processed and for male-acquired resources.⁴⁷⁷ Specifically, women’s work included the following:

The women butchered, roasted, and dried the game, waterfowl, and fish. They dried wild plant foods, made sap into Maple sugar, and dried and stored corn and wild rice for future needs. Women also did most of the cooking that took place in and around the lodge. They decided when to cook and what portions each family member would receive. They cooked co-operatively for communal feasts and served the food. While male hunters provided the animal hides used in clothing, the women tanned the hides and sewed dresses, shirts, leggings, and moccasins for their families. They fashioned furs into blankets and used rabbit fur in cradleboards and in the interior of children’s moccasins.⁴⁷⁸

The leadership roles that Ojibwe women held in political affairs usually took place in the spheres of the women’s political councils and in work groups.⁴⁷⁹ However, it

⁴⁷⁴ Buffalohead, “Farmers Warriors Traders.” The Ojibwe subsistence economy was in harmony with the cycle of the seasons. Summer village life depended on fishing, hunting game, gathering wild plant foods, and planting small fields of corn. In late fall and winter, village residents dispersed into smaller family or band units to pursue large game and to trap or snare fur-bearing animals.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁷⁷ Buffalohead, “Farmers Warriors Traders,” 240-41; Barry M. Gough, *The Journal of Alexander Henry the Younger, 1799-1814*, vol. 1 (Toronto: The Champlain Society, 1988), 156. For example, “In the mid-19th century, the German writer Johann Kohl reported that at Chequamegon Bay, ‘His [the hunter’s] feeling of honour insists that he must first of all consult with his wife how the deer is to be divided among his neighbours and friends.’ And in households with more than one wife he noted: ‘The hunter also entrusts the game he has killed to her [the first wife] for distribution.’” Furthermore, Alexander Henry the Younger wrote in the early 19th century, “I went to the upper part of the Tongue River to meet a band of Indians returning from hunting beaver, and fought several battles with the women to get their furs from them.”

⁴⁷⁸ Buffalohead, “Farmers Warriors Traders,” 240.

⁴⁷⁹ Buffalohead, “Farmers Warriors Traders,” 170. She notes that given the gender-segregated organization of much of Ojibwe life, women and men formed separate

was not unheard of for Ojibwe women to exercise political influence in spheres that were usually dominated by men.⁴⁸⁰

At different times in her life and in different contexts, Susan Bonga was identified as an Indian, a “negro,” a “mulatto,” “civilized,” and by the Ojibwe name *Mookomaanikwe*. Although these many appellations were applied to her, Susan Bonga was legally categorized as an Indian when she was enrolled and allotted as a Leech Lake Ojibwe Indian. Allotment of the Minnesota reservation lands of the Leech Lake Band of Chippewa Indians was implemented through the Nelson Act of 1889, which brought the national Dawes Act (1887) policy to bear in Minnesota. Susan was also legally identified as an Indian in the federal Indian census, which was mandated by Congress in 1884 to keep track of Native Americans. In the Indian census, Susan is identified as a “Leech Lake Pillager Chippewa” Indian as early as 1885 and continuing through the early twentieth century.⁴⁸¹ In these records, which often contain both “Indian” and English names, Susan’s daughter Mary is at times identified as *Mookomanequaince*, or the Ojibwe equivalent of “Little Mookomaanikwe.” Susan’s mother *Ashwewin* was also listed in federal records as a Leech Lake Pillager Indian. In the 1894 Indian census her “Indian” and English names are recorded respectively as “Ah Shwa Win” and Mrs. George Bonga.⁴⁸²

Susan’s upbringing and membership in the Pillager band and her Ojibwe kin ties support the argument that she considered herself Ojibwe. However, the U.S. federal census records point to the beginning encroachment of racial paradigms that would eventually challenge Susan’s Ojibwe identity. Susan Bonga was recorded in two federal censuses, in 1860 and 1870. Although Susan was categorized as “black” and “1/2 black,” she clearly was not part of any black community in the region. Her African ancestry may have influenced the census takers’ notations, but in the eyes of other Ojibwe people she would not have been viewed as “black.” Although her father and uncles had played with the notion of race, oftentimes calling themselves “white” despite their “coal-black complexions,” Susan was part of a different generation.⁴⁸³ Individuals from “mixed-blood” fur trade families were struggling to wield power differently as the fur trade waned. No longer part of a class that could gain advantage by claiming a “white” identity, these individuals, including Susan, had no need to identify themselves as other than Ojibwe. Moreover, her appearance did not thrust the issue on her as it had on her father. While the older Bongo generations had been called “negro” and “black” at times,

political councils. “These two political bodies met together to create community policy, with the leader of the women’s council presenting female opinion ‘to the men at their meeting.’ While only the female leader, or ogimakwe, spoke, in keeping with Ojibwe political protocol, all other interested women could and did attend these joint meetings.”

⁴⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁴⁸¹ Indian Census Rolls, 1885-1936, White Earth Agency; National Archives Microfilm Publication M595, Rolls 649-662; Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75; Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration.

⁴⁸² Indian Census Rolls, 1894; White Earth Agency, roll M595 651, page 18, line 15.

⁴⁸³ The discussion of how Susan’s father and uncles played with the idea of race is in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

the term was very foreign to her. Significantly, Susan's sister, Nancy Bonga Taylor, once claimed "we call one another as Indians."⁴⁸⁴

However, Susan did have an interest in portraying herself as a "civilized" Ojibwe Indian, since the tenor of state politics and federal assimilation policies would have afforded her an advantage in doing so. This was a simple task, due to her family's status in the region. Her father George and uncle Stephen, having attended schools respectively in Montreal and Albany, New York, had cultivated "civilized" habits from their Eastern educations and lifelong careers. Additionally, her family's early conversion by the Congregationalists in the 1830s distinguished them as a "civilized" Christian family among the "wild" band of Pillager Indians. Considering the Pillagers' reputation and history with missionaries, Susan Bonga and her family probably stood out within the band as one of the earliest converted fur trader families. In a sense, Susan appeared as a "civilized" woman within a rebellious and "uncivilized" band of Indians.

Domesticity at Leech Lake

Susan Bonga learned domestic skills at the Leech Lake boarding school that was open as early as 1860 and run by a Congregationalist missionary.⁴⁸⁵ Here she excelled at learning housekeeping skills, speaking English, and religious instruction, and was eventually appointed by the Indian agent to the position of matron of the school. Moreover, when she was only seventeen years old the Indian agent indicated her occupation was "keeping house" on the census. In contrast, her twenty-year-old sister, Mary Bonga, was listed as having "no occupation," indicating that women, particularly women of mixed ancestry, were not labeled as "housekeepers" simply by default.⁴⁸⁶

The housekeeping tasks that Susan mastered were one aspect of a broader program that aimed to transform how Native people organized their homes and families. Cathleen Cahill has usefully applied postcolonial scholars' framework of "intimate colonialism" to describe the reformers' methods of transforming how Native people organized their homes and families.⁴⁸⁷ By targeting "the most intimate of relationships" they honed in on transforming Native nations. Cahill writes,

⁴⁸⁴ Testimony of Nancy [Bonga] Taylor, March 3, 1914, Ransom Judd Powell Papers, Box 6, MHS, quoted in Kugel, "Leadership Within the Women's Community," 179.

⁴⁸⁵ 1860 United States Federal Census, free schedule, Leech Lake, Cass, Minnesota: roll M653_567, page 459, image 450. Family History Film 803567. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration; 1870 United States Federal Census, population schedule. Cass, Minnesota; roll T132 2, page 466, image 235. Family History film 830422. Washington, DC: National Archives and Records Administration. A missionary from Oberlin College, S. G. Wright, was teaching at Leech Lake from 1860–1870, although it is not clear exactly how long he was there. S. G. Wright was listed in the 1860 and 1870 Federal Census as living at Leech Lake, and his occupation was "School Teacher."

⁴⁸⁶ 1870 United States Federal Census, population schedule, Cass, Minnesota.

⁴⁸⁷ Ann Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 7.

Restructuring Native families, administrators believed, held the key to the total conquest of Native nations. Policy makers knew that the intimate decisions about how to raise children, how husbands and wives should relate to each other, and what their homes should look like were not private questions but key political concerns upon which the fate of federal Indian policy rested.⁴⁸⁸

The meshing of the political and the personal was common on colonial terrain across the globe, and scholars have pointed out that connections between “the broad-scale dynamics of colonial rule and the intimate sites of implementation” should not be studied merely as “touching examples of, or convenient metaphors for, colonial power writ large.” Instead, as Ann Stoler asserts, they should be examined “because domains of the intimate figured so prominently in the perceptions and policies of those who ruled.”⁴⁸⁹

Where Susan Bonga lived, there were overt signs of political stakes embedded in what is commonly called the private sphere. As missionaries in her community clearly identified a relationship between the organization of the domestic sphere and the structure of Native communities, they likewise indicated that the organization of the state was also at stake. For if Ojibwe communities were properly organized, they could not only make way for white settlers and towns, but also help to uphold the principles and governing structures of American society as agrarian farmers, domestic housekeepers, and theoretically, citizens. Breck highlighted these aims in stating, “The Indian of this country will become valuable as a citizen just in proportion to his Christian possibilities. It is the fact that to-day the only Indians advancing in civilization are those under Christian influence, make of it what we will.”⁴⁹⁰

The Episcopalians sought to reorganize Ojibwe families by focusing on transforming their complementary gender roles into conventional Euro-American gender roles. The head missionary, Gilfillan, argued that “as long as Ojibway women continued their traditional subsistence pursuits (including agriculture), men would never accept their proper role of family provider. Once women were made into ‘housekeepers,’ however, Ojibwe men would be forced to adopt the corresponding male work of farming.”⁴⁹¹

Ojibwe women were instructed to learn a particular form of housekeeping framed by political theory in which the household lay at the very foundation of society. In this thinking, a “civilized” home was not only clean and orderly, but inhabited by a husband and wife. The relationship was important to reformers because it assigned gender roles and also “endowed couples with a particular relationship to the state and to each other while also creating and reinforcing Anglo gender norms.”⁴⁹² Moreover, legal marriage established a particular and gendered relationship to property, children, and helped the Indian Office keep track of populations.⁴⁹³

⁴⁸⁸ Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers*, 58.

⁴⁸⁹ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, 7.

⁴⁹⁰ Holcombe, *An Apostle of the Wilderness*, 83.

⁴⁹¹ Kugel, “Leadership Within the Women’s Community,” 173.

⁴⁹² Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers*, 39.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 40. Cahill notes, “Indeed, knowing who was married to whom, who owned which property, and which children belonged to which parents helped the Indian

In pursuit of their aims to teach domestic relations and skills, missionaries opened up their own intimate spaces to the Ojibwe as sites of instruction. At Leech Lake, the Giffillans regularly had Ojibwe Christian guests over for dinner, using their home as an ideal model of what Christian male and female spheres looked like.⁴⁹⁴ Some missionaries also brought Native children into their homes, taking on the role of surrogate parents so they could intimately instruct their students. For example, in 1852 James Lloyd Breck wrote, “We hope to be able to receive a few children into our House the present Winter, upon whom special care will be bestowed, that they may, by example, teach others.”⁴⁹⁵ Years later, Breck’s approach was illustrated in an excerpt of a letter he shared with a patron in the East. He claimed it was written by “one of our devoted female Missionaries” who was “writing to some of her former Sunday-School pupils” in New York.

We have many children in the school every day, who are not in the family; but they are anxious to learn, and some of them come very regularly. We have had a little girl in the family, part of the Winter, that was named *Selina Dimock* after a dear good lady at the East, who has done, and is still doing, much for the Mission. This little girl is a bright-eyed, amiable little creature, and very mild and gentle in her manners. Mr. and Mrs. Breck persuaded her parents to give her up to them, and she left them and the wigwam without making the least objection. We learned afterward that she had been teasing her father for some time to let her come, telling him she did not like to live in a wigwam, and if he would let her go and live with the white people, she would be a good girl all the time. And so she has been. She is a dear little creature, and we all love her very much.⁴⁹⁶

In this letter, the Ojibwe girl was identified only by the English name that was bestowed on her in honor of a patron in the East. In this way, Selina Dimock represented a god-parent, much as Mr. and Mrs. Breck represented her adopted parents. Moreover, the little girl was portrayed as making the decision to leave her Ojibwe family in the wigwam, for the more “civilized” home of the Brecks. The portrayal of agency on her part, and the assertion that she “did not like to live in a wigwam” suggests she had not yet been degraded into the ways of the Ojibwe lifestyle, and therefore could recognize the superiority of “civilized” ways. This portrayal naturalizes Protestant concepts of domesticity, as the child apparently slipped easily and happily into her new family at her own bidding.

Office coerce tribal populations. For example, in order to impose the configuration of male heads of household on unwilling people, it became Indian Office protocol to distribute rations and annuities according to a family member’s relationship to the husband and father rather than to individuals.”

⁴⁹⁴ Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: ‘Woman’s Sphere’ in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), see chapter 2 on the cult of domesticity.

⁴⁹⁵ Breck to Rev. Mr. Van Rensselaer, October 19, 1852, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 227.

⁴⁹⁶ Breck, March 29, 1857, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 325.

The matron's role

The fact that Susan was hired for the matron position shows that she had met the cultural criteria for being viewed as a “civilized” Indian and as a model of domesticity.⁴⁹⁷ Her job was dependent on these factors because, as Cahill notes, “In the most distant posts, the Office of Indian Affairs intended its employees to serve as examples of ‘civilized’ living in places where no white communities existed.”⁴⁹⁸ The matron’s job was to help “change every aspect of Native households, especially the drive to transform Native women and girls into the vehicles for perpetuating ‘civilization’ in their communities.”⁴⁹⁹

As the matron of the school, she was fulfilling a role that had been reserved for educated, oftentimes “mixed-blood” women. For example, Julia Spears held the job in 1868, the daughter of Lyman Warren, a powerful trader who had been based at La Pointe, Wisconsin in the early nineteenth century representing the American Fur Company.⁵⁰⁰ Her mother was Mary Cadotte, of Ojibwe–French descent, whose parents were the respected and influential trader Michel Cadotte Sr., and the daughter of *Waabajjaak* (White Crane), chief of the Crane clan of the Chequamegon region.⁵⁰¹ This was a family built from the French fur trade practices, having amassed wealth and status through strategic marriage alliances and participation in fur trade culture.

Although the Warren family was considered “mixed-blood” as a fur trade family, and was legally identified as such in treaties, the term had wide meaning. Susan Bonga was also considered “mixed-blood,” but as is evident, she had a very different cultural identity than that of Julia Spears. The Warrens had mixed Ojibwe and European heritage like most other trader families in the region, but they did not identify as Indians, did not participate in traditional native religious ceremonies, and did not live in Indian villages. However, when it came to treaty negotiations, the Warren family “made sure that they

⁴⁹⁷ See Chapter 3 of this dissertation for the argument that “mixed-blood” was considered a racial category informed by class and cultural distinctions, largely based on the status of wealthy and politically-connected fur trade families.

⁴⁹⁸ Cahill, *Federal Fathers & Mothers*, 82.

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 80. Breck, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 285. In another example, Breck wrote in 1854, “Since I have spoken of the dress of these Indians, I will remark the pleasing feature that is already apparent amongst many of them—the evident desire to be clean and neat in person and apparel on Sunday, above all other days in the week. The girls are taught by the Christian ladies of our household to make their own dresses, whilst the young women perform all the domestic work of our Missionary establishment under the same supervision.”

⁵⁰⁰ Anton Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 64. Julia Spears was the sister of William W. Warren, the noted historian of Ojibwe history and also trader, interpreter, and farmer. Lyman Warren was noted as an “unscrupulous” trader by some historians, as especially measured by how he engaged in “gouging unjustified amounts from U.S. government annuity payments to [Ojibwe] Indians” in the 1830s and the 1840s. This practice, as well as other dimensions of the so-called “Indian business,” are discussed in Chapter 3 of this dissertation.

⁵⁰¹ Theresa Schenck. *William W. Warren: The Life, Letters, and Times of an Ojibway Leader* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007), 4.

and their families received payments as if they were regular village Indians and partial owners of the land being sold.”⁵⁰² The Warrens had benefited from U.S.–Ojibwe treaties by receiving government annuity payments, while at the same time serving both the private companies that gained much from the treaties and the government that gained possession of the Indian land.⁵⁰³

Julia Spears was appointed as the matron of the Leech Lake Indian school because as a “mixed-blood” woman, she allegedly provided a particularly accessible model of domesticity to Ojibwe girls.⁵⁰⁴ It was believed at this time, as Schenck notes, “that the ‘civilization’ of the Indians could be affected by the example of mixed bloods settled near or among them.”⁵⁰⁵ Spears surely provided an exemplar model as a mixed-blood who had weak tribal relations and was educated out East. From the age of six, Spears attended school in New York, initially living with her grandparents and then boarding with “genteel families.” After she turned eighteen years old (in 1850), Spears went to live with her sister in St. Paul, Minnesota. She took the matron job when she was thirty-four years old and twice widowed, probably in need of a way to support herself.⁵⁰⁶

When Susan took the matron position, she stepped into a role that conferred a certain status that was associated with “mixed-blood” women. She and her family probably realized the opportunity it provided to maintain a social standing they had long enjoyed as a fur trade family. As a Bonga, Susan was recognized as a member of a politically connected family that already had ties with the missionaries in charge of the schools. Although she had a strong Ojibwe identity, unlike Julia Spear, Susan had the skills and education, the family status, and the appropriate affect to be deemed right for the matron job.

As matron, Susan was expected to take on an affective role with intimate aspects of oversight. In many Indian boarding schools, the matron provided “a motherly figure” and was required to “cook for all the students while instructing the girls in food preparation, helping them create their wardrobes while teaching them how to sew, and bathing them while informing them of sanitary practice.”⁵⁰⁷

One of the main areas of domestic management that the matrons were instructed to focus on was Native girls’ and women’s cleanliness. Criticism by missionaries and Euro-Americans that Ojibwe women and families had filthy practices and kept dirty homes was long-standing in the region. For example, in 1851, in describing the plans for the mission at Gull Lake, Breck noted that the Ojibwe children they chose there “shall be given up to the Church’s training, taken away from the *miserable filth* and idleness of the wigwam, and educated day and night beneath the Mission roof.”⁵⁰⁸ In 1857, Breck

⁵⁰² Treuer, *Assassination of Hole in the Day*, 64.

⁵⁰³ Schenck, *William W. Warren*, 38.

⁵⁰⁴ Julia A. Spears and Family Papers, MHS. In 1868, Julia Spears began working at the Leech Lake agency as the matron in the Indian boarding school, and Susan most likely attended the school during this period.

⁵⁰⁵ Schenck, *William W. Warren*, 6.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 89, 129, 166. It is unclear whether or not Spears had any children with either of her husbands. Nonetheless, she did not bring any children to Leech Lake.

⁵⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁰⁸ Breck, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 182.

reported on the successful transformation of Ojibwe children's appearances and clothing at Leech Lake, emphasizing their cleanliness and neatness.

The children have assembled in their schoolroom, all neatly dressed in uniform. Except for those dark features, they would not be suspected of being Indians. The boys' long hair has been cut off, and caps put on their heads. Their blankets have been laid aside, and nice coats substituted for them. For leggings and moccasins they have pants and shoes...and I am sure, if you could see these little ones, you would love them much, and feel so thankful that you had contributed to the missionary-box to help us take them from out of the wigwam, and *from filth*, and from vice.⁵⁰⁹

The missionaries' drive to transform Native household, dress, and conduct was not tempered, however, by religious goals. The Indian schools were first and foremost interested in teaching the labor of agrarianism and domesticity, even at the expense of religious and academic instruction. Breck unabashedly made this point in 1852 to a colleague in a letter,

The school is to be essentially one of *manual labor*. The Indian can only be raised gradually from his present condition. If they learn enough to read the Holy Scriptures in the English and Ojibwa version, together with the Book of Common Prayer, we shall be satisfied. This much learning will be sufficient for the present generation. But in the arts of civilized life, and especially in the cultivation of the soil, we shall not think *any limit* enough.⁵¹⁰ [Italics not mine.]

Charles Wright and the Native deacons

In 1878, the church from which Breck fled twenty-one years earlier was rebuilt at Leech Lake. This time, however, the Episcopal Church sent an Ojibwe missionary, Charles Wright, to start a new mission among the Pillagers.⁵¹¹ Charles Wright, or *Nashotah*, came from a prominent Ojibwe family. His grandfather, *Waabojiig*, (White Fisher) and his father, *Waabaanakwad* (White Cloud), were both civil leaders for the band of Ojibwe that lived at Gull Lake, Minnesota. *Waabaanakwad* signed a number of treaties with the U.S. government, including the 1867 treaty that created the White Earth Reservation in Minnesota.⁵¹² He believed alliances with missionaries were smart strategies for survival, and he strongly encouraged his people to convert to the Episcopal faith and adopted a Christian name as a sign of his commitment to the "civilization" program. Following in the tradition of adapting names from influential figures, *Waabaanakwad* took the name D. G. Wright out of respect to Sela G. Wright, the Oberlin

⁵⁰⁹ Breck, *Chippeway Pictures from the Territory of Minnesota*, 23.

⁵¹⁰ Breck to Rev. Mr. Van Rensselaer, October 19, 1852, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 227.

⁵¹¹ Joseph A. Gilfillan, *Domestic Missions: The Indian Deacons at White Earth* (S.I.: s.n., between 1881 and 1900). Patrons from the East were still funding the work, as Gilfillan noted, "By the generosity of the late Miss Josie Smith of New York City, a beautiful little church with stained glass windows, costing \$1,600, was built, which the Indians greatly enjoy..."

⁵¹² See the previous chapter for more on the removal to White Earth.

teacher who had been in the region for decades and who taught at Leech Lake in the 1860s and 1870s. Charles Wright thereby assumed his father's adopted Christian surname.

Building alliances with the missionaries was one way for the civil leaders to secure an advocate for them in Washington. *Waabaankwad* relied on Bishop Whipple for help in pressuring federal authorities to send annuities in a timely manner and to fulfill their treaty obligations. In March 1875, *Waabaanakwad* expressed his gratitude for the Church's help:

I am very thankful for the teacher who first came amongst us... When he was here the children were well provided for & comfortable. A good many children are badly off for clothing and where shall we look but to our Christian friends and our Brothers, the Clergy?⁵¹³

As a way of strengthening ties with the Church, *Waabaanakwad* sent his son to be one of eight young Native men trained to be clergy at White Earth. Historian Melissa Meyers explains the mediating role these Native ministers assumed within these roles:

In a manner reminiscent of hereditary lines of descent, a number of sons of important band leaders studied for the ministry, were ordained as deacons, and opened missions of their own among the Anishinaabeg. These native ministers became important leaders in their own right, and were most effective at mediating between Episcopalian church leaders and other Anishinaabeg. They were attuned enough to their native kin to voice authentic Anishinaabe concerns, but also advocated adaptation along agrarian and educational lines.⁵¹⁴

These deacons represented a new generation of leaders for the Ojibwe people who "self-consciously presented themselves to Euro-Americans as 'civilized' and 'Americanized.'" According to Kugel, "Their claims to political autonomy and just treatment were grounded in the assumption that by accepting 'civilization' and Christianity they had removed any differences between themselves and Euro-Americans."⁵¹⁵

Joseph A. Gilfillan spearheaded the project to train the Native men to be ministers "to their own people" after he moved to White Earth in 1873.⁵¹⁶ Gilfillan supervised their training, and once they were sent out to Ojibwe communities "the work of the entire field was closely coordinated from White Earth by Gilfillan."⁵¹⁷ He was proud of the program,

⁵¹³ White Cloud to Friends of the Clergy, c. March 24, 1875, Whipple Papers, Box 11, MHS.

⁵¹⁴ Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy*, 97.

⁵¹⁵ Kugel, "Leadership Within the Women's Community," 182.

⁵¹⁶ Breck, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 284-285, 268, 288.

Although Breck had started the work of training Native deacons in northern Minnesota nearly twenty years before Gilfillan, the work did not succeed because of the particular social and political conditions at the time. Breck wrote in 1853 that "the son of an Ottawa Chief" was being trained and in 1855 that "we have now Indian students preparing for the office of catechist and Deacon."

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*

and in a short essay recounting his work he constructed a narrative of transformation and redemption among the men. About Charles Wright he wrote:

When a young man he was still a heathen and a wild and reckless one, knowing nothing different and delighting in the wild ways of the Indians. He began to go to church for the purpose of making fun and entertaining his reckless companions afterwards with the mimicry of what he had seen and heard. But before he knew it he became entangled in the meshes of the Gospel net, cast into the deep where he sat, and found himself taken for eternal life, and so he who had often 'come to scoff, remained to pray.' He was baptized with full purpose of amendment of life, which purpose he carried out, and was married in church to his wife, who had been brought up as a girl by Bishop Whipple in his own family. At this time he hardly knew a letter, and no English, but having the desire for improvement, the white employes [*sic*] seeing his changed life, took an interest in him and helped him in his studies. Finally he began to study at White Earth for the Ministry and continued a student for three years, doing Missionary work a while.⁵¹⁸

Charles Wright was ordained in July 1877, and after heading the Indian Church of the Epiphany in Wild Rice River, he went to Leech Lake as resident minister in September 1879. By default, Wright also became the teacher of the day-school and Sunday school program. Gilfillan, who strived to reinforce the reformist idea that "civilized" Indians should serve as models and teachers to "savage" Indians, depicted Wright's appointment as a terrific success.

[Charles Wright] was sent to start a new Mission at Leech Lake, ninety-four miles distant among the numerous Pillager Band of Chippewas, whose relative he was, and with whom he had lived in his old reckless, foolish days before he knew the light. They were greatly astonished to see one who, a few years before a blanket Indian, had sat with them gambling, according to their custom, and joining with them in their wild heathen dances and in all their hard and cruel ways, a very dare-devil among them, now standing in the Church of God, clothed with the snow-white ephod reading to them the Word of God, and preaching to them righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come.⁵¹⁹

A year after his appointment, in July 1880, Charles Wright's work at Leech Lake bore unprecedented fruit for the church. Wright presented forty people for confirmation at Bishop Whipple's first visit, and all were members of the former Congregationalist mission. The majority of this group was composed of members of the Bonga family, including "Susie Bonga," listed as age twenty-nine and "single," as well as six other Bonga family members, five members of the related Taylor family,⁵²⁰ and the sister of Flat Mouth. The record of the confirmation notes that the "religious antecedent" for these thirteen individuals was "Congregationalist."⁵²¹ Unsurprisingly, this confirmation was

⁵¹⁸ Gilfillan, *Domestic Missions*.

⁵¹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁰ Susan Bonga's sister, Nancy Bonga Tayler, was confirmed at this time.

⁵²¹ "Leech Lake Confirmations," July 23, 1880, Whipple Papers, Box 38, MHS.

touted by Gilfillan as a grand success. He described it as taking place “a few months after the starting of the Mission” at Leech Lake, although nearly a year (ten months) had passed since Wright’s arrival. He reported that “no less than thirty-nine were confirmed, the very salt of the place gathered out of the surrounding mass of gambling, dancing, grand-medicine heathens.”⁵²²

With the advent of the Ojibwe deacons, there were regular services in Ojibwe, more syncretic forms of religious practices, and a better chance that disagreements over property and distribution practices between missionary staff and the Ojibwe community were peacefully negotiated.

Uncovering African Roots in Ojibwe Country

Raising questions of ancestry

In Susan Bonga’s case, marriage to Charles Wright promised to reinforce and potentially increase her leadership role in the community. As a single and childless woman in her late twenties, marriage had curiously eluded Susan. Considering her financial independence as the school matron as well as from an inheritance from her father, she did not need to marry for economic security. Her matron job was one of the few secure, responsible jobs available to Indian women in the region, and Susan exercised great responsibility and authority in the role. Indian agents preferred to hire married couples as a teacher/matron duo at the schools for the sake of stability, however, which possibly added pressure on Susan to marry. Because Charles Wright was the teacher of the day-school, a marital union between them would have been particularly fitting. Perhaps Charles had even influenced the Indian agent’s decision to appoint Susan as the matron, and already had an interest in her. Regardless, they surely worked closely together as the teacher and matron of the school, and developed a relationship over the first year that led them to discuss marriage.

Susan’s interest in marrying Charles suggests that she finally found a match who was worthy of her status or social standing. A choice made from this perspective was in keeping with the role marriage had played in her family for generations. For her parents and grandparents, marriage had served as a way of cultivating smart and advantageous alliances that would socially, politically, and economically strengthen the family.

There are, however, suggestions of other reasons why Susan was not yet married in 1880. She may have been hard-pressed to find a suitable marriage partner, since she was living among the remote Leech Lakers who were as a group less interested in the “civilizing” program than the other Ojibwe bands. Moreover, there are signs of epidemic impacts on marriage options. Gilfillan noted in 1880 that Charles Wright had limited options for marriage as “the young women at White Earth have all died off.”⁵²³ Also, Wright was once married to another woman, so his wife had probably died. There is no reason to think that the young men were not just as affected by disease and illness, thereby limiting Susan’s options. Gilfillan also stated that “there are no good wives at Leech Lake or Red Lake” for Charles Wright, alluding to the fact that fewer Indians there than at White Earth had converted or adapted “civilized” habits. Susan probably had

⁵²² Gilfillan, *Domestic Missions*.

⁵²³ Gilfillan to Whipple, May 20, 1880, Whipple Papers, Box 14, MHS.

difficulty finding both a healthy young man and one who was “civilized,” considering her membership in the remote Leech Lake community where young women had “died off” and the Indians were “wild.”

There are also indications that Susan Bonga was an obvious choice of marriage for Wright. First of all, in Gilfillan’s description of the mass confirmation, the Bonga and Taylor families are portrayed as exceptions within the “wild” Pillager band – as “the very salt of the place.” This alludes to the elite status of the Bonga family, who were already Christians as former converts to Congregationalism. Additionally, out of the thirty-nine individuals confirmed that day, Susan is one out of only two single women of marriageable age listed. The other woman was aged twenty-one and her “religious antecedent” was listed as “Heathen.”⁵²⁴ As a former Congregationalist, Susan was already a Christian when she was confirmed. These factors, in combination with Susan’s leadership position, made her an attractive choice as a wife for Wright.

One thing that is certain, though, is that Charles Wright and Susan Bonga were well-acquainted with each other and discussing marriage by the time of the mass confirmation in the summer of 1880. Months earlier, Gilfillan, had broached the topic of their engagement as a matter for the church clergy to discuss. In a letter to Bishop Whipple, Gilfillan wrote of Susan in glowing terms, praising her mastery of the domestic arts and her embrace of Christianity. On another note, Gilfillan’s letter revealed a concern with growing perceptions of race in the region. He expressed worry not only over how Susan’s life could be affected, but whether the work of the Native missionaries could be hindered by notions of race. He wrote:

Dear Bishop,

Rev Charles Wright of Leech Lake asks me to write you about the propriety of his marrying Miss Susie Bonga, daughter of the late George Bonga of Leech Lake whom you knew. She has the reputation of being an exceedingly wise, chaste and good religious young woman, one who is exceedingly highly thought of by all the white employes [sic] at Leech Lake, and respected by all Indians and whites. I know her perfectly; having seen her very often at Leech Lake, and she stayed with us at White Earth in our house on a visit for several weeks last summer. She has done a truly wonderful work at Leech Lake during the time of the other Mr. Wright, and in fact **I think it is owing in great measure to her that there are any Christians there at all, as she was the means of the conversion of most of them,** getting the Indian women into her room one by one, praying with and for them, reading the scriptures and explaining them to them, leading them in their devotional meetings, and taking charge of them like a mother everywhere in Church and out. **This is not a sudden burst of zeal since Rev Charles Wright went there, as I saw her repeatedly in those meetings before the mission was started.** In fact she has proved herself a very rare girl, such as there are few any where Indian or white, and she has accomplished a great work at Leech Lake. **She is a very good housekeeper, speaks English pretty well, has considerable learning, is of spotless character, and has been on all these accounts been [sic] advanced by the agent to the position of Matron of the Indian school,** which she fulfills perfectly. Her distinguishing characteristics

⁵²⁴ “Leech Lake Confirmations,” July 23, 1880, Whipple Papers.

are her great wisdom and perfect good sense, and burning zeal in the cause of religion regulated by the greatest prudence. **All her brothers ask her advice about their business and the white people think there is no person like Susie. I have never seen any Indian or Half-Breed like her since I have been in the Indian country,** and am quite sure there is none such anywhere to be found. She has set her mind on marrying Charles Wright, and she has told him it will be a death-blow to her life if she is disappointed. **There is no doubt whatever that if she continues on as she has done in the past she would advance his work far more than any wife he could find Indian or white. He wishes to marry her, there is only one thing sticks in his mind, her negro blood. He has heard that white people look down on negroes or those of negro blood but not at all on Indians, and besides he is afraid of the ridicule of his companions, young Indians, who look down on negroes.** She shows the negro blood but little; her hair is perfectly straight, and her lips not like the negro; but her brothers and sisters show it very much. When Charles Wright was here lately he asked my advice and I advised him to consult you before he did anything. There is one consideration to be taken into account that if he does not marry her it will be hard for him to find a suitable wife; for the young women at White Earth have all died off, and I think there are no good wives at Leech Lake or Red Lake. **The only sticking point with him is the negro blood, and the apprehended ridicule of the young Indians. I have asked the clergymen at Red Lake. Rev George Smith highly approves of it; while Fred thinks they would ridicule Charles.** For my part for the sake of the work and for the sake of the poor girl I heartily wish it could take place if the negro blood be not an insuperable bar, as judging by her past there is no such wife to be found anywhere.

In haste, Respectfully Yours, J.A. Gilfillan⁵²⁵

While Gilfillan's letter makes an urgent appeal on behalf of Susan and her desire to marry Charles, there is no question that there was also much at stake for the clergymen. It was a matter of serious consideration to the Episcopal Church because their Native deacons had been groomed to play important roles in the "civilization" program on the reservations. Ideally, they would find suitable wives who could assist them in their mission. Gilfillan had invested a lot in the deacons' program, and his professional reputation was also at stake.

In short, the Native clergymen were directed to seek out marriages that could reinforce and model to other Indian community members how gender relations operated within a patriarchal paradigm. This was a tremendous challenge for Gilfillan, who was the one responsible for helping the Native deacons set up exemplary family lives. In order to be successful, they needed to secure a wife who understood how to fulfill the domestic role of a woman under a colonial paradigm. As Kugel notes, "Although women's housework was undervalued in Euro-American society, it was centrally important for creating the lifestyle the missionaries wanted the Ojibwes to adopt, and thus

⁵²⁵ Gilfillan to Whipple, May 20, 1880, Whipple Papers.

became for them the defining characteristic of what constituted a good missionary's wife."⁵²⁶

Susan certainly met these requirements, as noted by Gilfillan, who praised her as a "very good housekeeper" in his letter. He emphasized his confidence in her skills and the influence and impact they could have on Charles Wright's role by underlining his conviction that Susan "would advance his work far more than any wife he could find Indian or white." Indeed, according to Gilfillan, Susan was exceptional to the point that her talents and reputation transcended racial barriers. He emphasized that she was "respected by all Indians and whites" and revealed that her character had earned her a place as a guest in his own home. As if that were not enough, Gilfillan injected urgency into the matter by noting that there were no suitable alternatives to Susan. According to Gilfillan, the dearth of Ojibwe women in the region who had excelled at mastering domestic skills made Susan a unique woman because "there [was] no such wife to be found anywhere."

Furthermore, Gilfillan also raised the matter of Susan's sexuality, which reveals another gendered aspect of colonialism. Susan was an attractive candidate to be a deacon's wife because she had "the reputation of being... [a] chaste and good religious young woman" and possessed a "spotless character." The missionaries had long denounced Ojibwe sexual mores as lascivious and degraded. They sought to compel the Ojibwe to transform their sexual practices into conformity with Christian patriarchal models centered on monogamy. However, in the 1870s and 1880s the Ojibwe still regarded premarital sexual activity as normal and natural for young people.⁵²⁷ Notably, Susan managed to keep her chastity – or at least her reputation for chastity – intact and could survive the Protestant clergymen's scrutiny of her sexuality when she was in her late twenties. By establishing such rigid guidelines for sexuality, the Church imposed a social order that supported patriarchy and naturalized social hierarchy. Women were expected to guard against sexual relations outside of Church-sanctioned marriage that could dangerously undermine the colonial order of gender relations. By denouncing fornication and adultery in Ojibwe communities, the missionaries sought to transform the system of balance between women and men.

Ironically, in some ways Susan's characteristics subverted patriarchal and racial paradigms. As Gilfillan wrote to Whipple in 1880, "All her brothers ask her advice about their business and the white people think there is no person like Susie." Although Gilfillan hailed her as a paragon of female domesticity, she soundly advised men on business matters. Her racial identity – whether Indian, "Half-Breed," or "Negro" – *did not define* her because whites admired and respected her. Although Gilfillan argued on behalf of viewing Susan as a "civilized Indian," his testimony to her character depicted her as an individual who had disrupted the notions of how a "civilized" Indian woman behaved. Rather than operating within the strict boundaries of behavior dictated by gendered and racialized ideas of "civilized" Indians, Susan had taken a leadership role not only among Indian women, but also among men in her family and whites in her community.

⁵²⁶ Kugel, "Leadership Within the Women's Community," 181.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

Gilfillan's letter also highlights the gendered nature of conversion. His praises of Susan's history of participating in conversion efforts at Leech Lake and leading women in Christian practices reveal a particular appeal she held. Oftentimes, as in Susan's case, Native women were central actors in the conversion process and crucial to propping up missionary efforts. Her strong leadership role in this realm undoubtedly made her an attractive marriage candidate for Charles Wright. Especially since Leech Lake had been a region holding out from conversion efforts compared to other nearby Ojibwe bands, Charles Wright would have certainly appreciated Susan's success with conversion. Of course, the other Episcopal clergymen were not blind to these facts, and Charles Wright and Susan Bonga married in December 1882.⁵²⁸

There is reason to think that Susan was pressured to demonstrate her effectiveness in conversion efforts, and that the July 1880 mass conversion at Leech Lake may have been the results. Perhaps Susan persuaded her kin, a very large group, to convert as a way to indicate her influence and the strong match she offered as a spouse to Charles. After all, Gilfillan had sung her praises as being "the means of the conversion" of most of the Christian Indians at Leech Lake, so perhaps Gilfillan or Whipple wanted further proof of this commitment. Considering her family likely recognized the benefits of the potential marriage alliance, they probably assented with alacrity. Gilfillan's comment to Whipple that Susan was not exhibiting a "sudden burst of zeal since Rev Charles Wright went there," but had in fact been engaged "repeatedly in those meetings before the mission was started" suggests that he was sensitive to the political benefits of the marriage to both parties involved, including their kin, and wished to present the match as arising out of shared religious conviction.

Finally, when Gilfillan makes reference to Whipple's close acquaintance with George Bonga, Susan's late father, in the letter, it serves as a stark reminder of the rapid changes that have occurred in one generation. There is a sense of a growing perception of racial hierarchy in the region, as Charles is concerned about "the apprehended ridicule of the young Indians" if he were to marry a woman with "negro blood." Furthermore, this racial awareness is linked to the "one-drop rule" of "blackness" that was accepted in white circles. Charles' concern does not stem from Susan's appearance as "a negro," but rather with her ancestry. As Gilfillan noted, "[Charles] wishes to marry her, there is only one thing sticks in his mind, her Negro blood...She shows the Negro blood but little; her hair is perfectly straight, and her lips [are] not like the Negro; but her brothers and sisters show it very much." This indicates that Charles was concerned about notions of "race" that were linked to scientific theories of race as a producer of innate differences.

Ironically, Charles Wright and the other Native deacons were educated by the Church with the underlying assumption that "by accepting 'civilization' and Christianity they had removed any differences between themselves and Euro-Americans."⁵²⁹ This belief in the equalizing effect of education as promised by assimilation theory was instilled in the Native deacons by the Episcopal clergy. The missionaries at Leech Lake

⁵²⁸ A.D. Stowe, *Stowe's Clerical Directory of the American Church, 1920-1921* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1920), 293.

⁵²⁹ Kugel, "Leadership Within the Women's Community," 182.

repeatedly asserted their belief that the Ojibwe were “capable of improvement” and “equal to any nation that has been rescued in the past.”⁵³⁰

But keep in mind, this thinking was in the minority. As Reginald Horsmen points out, by the 1840s, “The dominant scientific position... was that the Indians were doomed because of innate inferiority.”⁵³¹ And by 1850, Horsman writes, “the American public and American politicians had for the most part abandoned any belief in potential Indian equality. They now believed that American Indians were doomed because of their own inferiority and that their extinction would further world progress.”⁵³² This racist thinking about Indians stemmed from the broader idea of distinct races with innately different capabilities, and was firmly ingrained in American scientific thinking by the middle of the century. As Horsman puts it, “American science provided Americans with a confident explanation of why blacks were enslaved, why Indians were exterminated, and why white Americans were expanding their settlements rapidly over adjacent lands.”⁵³³

These ideas that were so widespread in the U.S. by the 1850s, were beginning to make their presence felt in remote Ojibwe communities forty years later, when Charles Wright was concerned about “the apprehended ridicule of the young Indians” if he were to marry a woman with “negro blood.” Clearly, this was a new perspective among the Ojibwe, as the older Bonga generations had not encountered the suggestion that their African ancestry could pose “an insuperable bar.” Fortunately for Susan Bonga, however, this ascendant thinking had not yet spread to the point of limiting her options.

What it means to be a leader

Despite the evidence of Susan’s conduct as a “civilized” Indian and as an unswerving ally of the missionaries, there are indications she modified the “civilizing” program. After marrying, Susan Bonga continued her leadership role among the Leech Lakers, assisting the missionaries and her husband in conversion activities and leading women’s work groups. There is a window into daily life at Leech Lake in the 1890s through the journal of Pauline Colby, a white missionary who worked for the Episcopal Church.⁵³⁴ By examining Colby’s journal, in which she refers to Susan Bonga as Mrs. *Nashotah*, it is clear that Susan Bonga was not as perfectly assimilated as Gilfillan suggested. Moreover, she used her leadership position to exercise Ojibwe forms of political authority and social governance.

While at Leech Lake, Colby tried to assume a caretaker role by establishing a home for the elderly. After the initial difficulties of persuading elders to move in, and having to convince others that she was not gathering them all in one place to kill them,

⁵³⁰ Breck to Miss Edwards, November 26, 1853, *The Life of the Reverend James Lloyd Breck*, 286.

⁵³¹ Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny*, 191.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, 207.

⁵³³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁵³⁴ Colby went to the White Earth Reservation in 1891 to assist in a lace-making school. She went to Leech Lake in 1892 to assist with establishing a lace-making circle among the women there.

Colby encountered unforeseen problems that were rooted in cultural differences. Colby wrote:

I do have some very amusing as well as exasperating episodes in the 'Home'. An old, almost blind couple were admitted, and given a comfortable room. There was a stove and plenty of wood, as well as every possible arrangement made for their comfort. I couldn't remember their names very easily so, in my own mind I named them the Duke and Duchess of Bilgewater, (my olfactory nerve suggested the name) and they settled down quite contentedly in what must have been luxury for them. Imagine my consternation when I found that they had ripped a large hole in their mattress and were burning the excelsior as kindling. I remonstrated forcibly in my limited vocabulary, but could make no impression on them; the mattress was growing more and more attenuated, so I asked the aid of Mrs. Nashotah [Susan Bonga], "Do please" said I, "tell them that they must not burn up the stuffing in their mattress, the great White Father at Washington will feel very very bad if they destroy the nice things he sends to make them comfortable." Mrs. Nashotah laughed good-naturedly for the destruction of Government property is considered quite legitimate, "It is all ours anyway," they say, but she got the wandering attention of the Duke and Duchess, as they sat smoking their pipes on the floor behind the stove, and explained that the mattress was to sleep on, and the wood was for fuel, and that I would be mean to them if they burnt the bed instead of the wood.⁵³⁵

In narrating Susan's response to this situation, Colby portrayed Susan as an adherent to Ojibwe ideas about property, complicating the image of her Victorian domesticity as described by Gilfillan. By dismissing the seriousness of the couples' behavior with a laugh, and referring to the notion of communally-owned property, Susan demonstrated she had not fully embraced the missionaries' teachings about property. This is further demonstrated in another anecdote Colby related about the same elderly couple:

Next thing I found them doing was beguiling the wandering hens belonging to a neighbor into the little storm shed which sheltered the back door and there the old man would deftly capture and kill them, strip off their feathers and burn them, and then cook the fowl, sans any dressing or seasoning, in the big tin wash basin and they would then share the dainty with much gusto. I again appealed to Mrs. Nashotah. "Wagewint is coming to me quite mad because those old people are getting so many of her chickens, please tell them they mustn't do that either," I said. But this time Mrs. Nashotah declined to interfere. "Wagewint got plenty chicken, poor old folks got none, that's all right," she responded rather crisply. What could I do? Wagewint solved the problem by moving her household effects and her fowls to a cabin at some distance.⁵³⁶

In this case, there is an obvious difference of opinion towards property ownership, as Susan and the elderly couple consider it appropriate to take food from those who have more. Reflecting Ojibwe ideas about the communal distribution of food and resources,

⁵³⁵ Pauline Colby, "Reminiscences," MHS, 93.

⁵³⁶ *Ibid.*, 94.

Susan undermines Colby's efforts to maintain ownership rights based on notions of private property.

In describing the Christian services and rites conducted in the Ojibwe community, Colby indicated some bewilderment, on her part, with the syncretic nature of these things. For example, when Bishop Whipple and a new archdeacon visited, a large dinner was served at Leech Lake "in honor of the occasion, and celebrated with the singing of hymns and making of speeches *far into the night*." The next day, Susan Bonga informed Colby that an Ojibwe couple who attended the feast "were anxious to belong to the Christians and forsake their grand medicine," and Charles Wright had agreed to perform a marriage ceremony and to baptize their children that day. In preparation, Colby and Susan searched "the mission barrel" for "garments which would serve the purpose nicely," but could find no dress for the woman.

"Well," I said after some thought, "if you people will help her make the dress, I will buy the goods at the store." "Yes" she was sure the dress could be made in a very few hours, so the goods was bought and Mrs. Nashotah walked off with a bundle that all that obscured her figure, to her own home where all the converts were waiting. "We ring the bell when we ready" was her parting word. So after an interval I listened for the church bell but no wedding bell broke the stillness of the air. "Now," thought I, "they can't get ready today and we will not have the ceremony until tomorrow." My little clock struck ten, and I was mounting my ladder to my attic coach when, loud and clear, the summons came to attend the church. "Oh, how perfectly absurd!" I said, "why didn't they wait until morning?" But after all, what did it matter?... I found about a dozen people [at the little church] beside the family who were to receive the rite of matrimony and baptism. It was a strange scene! In the dim and flickering lights of the oil lamps one could hardly see whether the toilettes of the candidates were "nice" or otherwise, but Nashotah was in his white vestments and read the marriage service first, and then, having pronounced the couple man and wife, he proceeded to baptize them, and then the four children.⁵³⁷

In this excerpt, Colby's amusement and exasperation indicate that the Christian Ojibwe were running Church activities in a manner to which she was not accustomed. The late hours the Ojibwe kept, or rather, their sense of timeliness, seemed "perfectly absurd" to Colby. Furthermore, Charles Wright conducted church services entirely in the Ojibwe language, showing further signs that they were not a fully assimilated community.

Aside from her leadership position in solving problems that Colby and other missionaries encountered, Susan also continued to exercise Ojibwe forms of social governance in women's work groups, such as making political decisions through consensus and distributing goods to community members. Susan and her contemporaries participating in a sewing circle which was also a forum for political debate, but which appeared to white missionaries to be spaces where women were perfecting important

⁵³⁷ Ibid., 98-99.

domestic skills, engaging in appropriately female charitable work, and practicing devotional prayer together.⁵³⁸

Examining Colby's diary shows that Susan Bonga managed to maintain her social standing and leadership position among the Ojibwe despite the earlier controversy over her African ancestry. She also maintained her leadership status among the missionaries, as Colby continually sought out her assistance when she encountered problems with the community. Race did not overtake Susan's identity, and neither did the notion that she was a "civilized" Indian alienate her from the Leech Lake Indians. Susan Bonga continued to conduct herself according to Ojibwe ideas, retaining a strong cultural identity that was in harmony with her role as a missionary's wife.

Conclusion

The fact that Susan and Charles eventually married despite the questions that were raised about Susan's ancestry highlights the continued dominance of cultural identity in Ojibwe communities over scientific theories of race in the late nineteenth century. Although there were increasing signs that racialist theories were making headway in northern Ojibwe communities, there were still entrenched notions of identity as culturally-based. Furthermore, the colonial agents in the area – the missionaries and Indian agents – continued to adhere to a social system of stratification based on notions of "civilized" and "uncivilized." As they continued to dismiss racialist theories of innate differences, they judged individuals, both whites and Indians, on cultural characteristics, education, and other learned behavior. Although there was a concern and awareness over the spreading racialist ideas, the notion of race had not gained enough traction in Leech Lake by the end of the nineteenth century to classify Susan Bonga and her relatives as "Negro." This shows that theories of racial difference spread unevenly throughout the country. As people in the South embraced racialist theories to justify slavery, in the northern Ojibwe region, race was not important or even useful to supporting any social structures or political economy.

Moreover, the resolution of Susan's marriage worked to both challenge and reinforce Euro-American norms. On the one hand, the outcome disrupted racialist theories by suggesting that Susan's ancestry did not define her as "black." Conversely, the Bonga-Wright marriage publicly reinforced ideas about the Christian morality of male agrarianism and female domesticity as they both emulated these notions. But these individuals also show that embracing Euro-American practices was oftentimes an effective way of advocating for Native American interests and political autonomy.

Overall, examining Susan's story reveals that scientific ideas about race were beginning to seep into Ojibwe communities by the late nineteenth century, and pushed against already present assimilation theories. Although Susan was accustomed to standing out from her Pillager kin because of her fur trade family status and her domestic skills, being noticed for her "race" was something new and threatening in 1880. This prospect threatened to undermine her "civilized" status and the significance of her kin ties, things that she and her family had assiduously maintained.

⁵³⁸ Kugel, "Leadership Within the Women's Community," 171.

In the end, Susan was more highly regarded for her cultural roles and skills than she was degraded for her race or ancestry. Although census enumerators classified her as “black” and “1/2 black” and the Episcopal clergy noted her “Negro blood,” Susan was viewed by the Ojibwe as a Pillager Indian. This shows that indigenous concepts of identity persisted, as the continued dominance of cultural identity over scientific theories of race was the norm among Indians and whites in Ojibwe communities.

Susan’s case also points to the persistence of the civilized/savage paradigm in Ojibwe country, as Susan’s mastery of domestic skills and her identity as “civilized” ultimately trumped concerns about “race.” Susan was fortunate that this was still the case in 1880, as she was able to marry a man she desired who could reinforce her status in the Ojibwe community and also help maintain her respect among the whites. Although her identity was momentarily under questioning due to clashing ideas about race and a “civilized” identity, her status as a “civilized” Indian prevailed, allowing her to continue her work among her people.

By highlighting the ways in which “intimate colonialism” and domesticity functioned in Ojibwe communities, this chapter shows the gendered nature of the “civilizing” project. By showing how some Ojibwe women successfully mastered the domestic arts, we also see how they learned ways to negotiate with colonial agents and leverage their own power. Oftentimes, Ojibwe women who appeared to be committed to Christianity and the new agrarian lifestyle resisted complete assimilation, and took advantage of the resources missionaries offered to support Native efforts at maintaining tribal relations. This is evident in the sewing circles, and in Susan Bonga’s attitudes as depicted by Pauline Colby. It is important to consider what was at stake; by proving that they were civilized, they were showing that they were capable of remaining on the land and even prospering there. If they could show success, then there was no case for their removal based on the argument that they were doomed if left alone.

Chapter: Conclusion

The arc of identity and race

Beginning the narrative with the lives of Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga, the fluid nature of status and identity is evident, highlighting the region's particularity. Their story shows that black slaves could build successful and prosperous lives after manumission because the social hierarchy was not based on a black/white binary or even on race. Instead, the fur trade community they lived in operated on the middle ground. The system of slavery here was strongly influenced by the Indian system of captivity and notions of Native kinship. As a result, slave status was not viewed as permanent or rigid, nor was it viewed as inherently connected to "blackness." In this region, labor was divorced from race, and the Bongas lived alongside white *engagés*, Indian slaves, and free blacks. In this milieu, manumitted blacks had more opportunities than in regions dominated by rigid systems of identity.

Of course, the particular social customs of fur trade society which were constructed on the middle ground were key to this fluidity. The Bongas were integrated into Catholic kin networks as a black family that was treated the same as French, mixed ancestry, and Native community members and families. The prominent fur trade families that dominated this social hierarchy similarly integrated individuals of different backgrounds. At this point, identity was based more on cultural practices and lifestyle, which were viewed as inextricably connected to religious affiliation.

When the family moved into fur trade employment, Pierre, George, Jack, and Stephen Bonga were not restricted by a racial hierarchy. There was greater mobility for African-Americans in the fur trade world of flexible identities, especially in contrast to the rigid racial structures in the eastern and southern United States. Moreover, the Bonga family is an example of a black family that had cooperative relations with Indians, as opposed to the antagonistic relations that often cropped up in the Southeast.

In the many instances when the African ancestry of the Bonga family was highlighted in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, it was more an indication of the rarity of black people in the region than it was of racist ideas. They were one of the few black families to participate in the fur trade in this region and the only black family to intermarry with the Upper Mississippi Ojibwe at this time. Naturally, outside observers and newcomers were surprised to encounter black individuals, and found their presences worthy of remark. However, the successful careers of Pierre, and especially George and Stephen Bonga, indicate that racist tendencies were not obstructing their goals and work.

In a region where the Bongas' French-speaking African roots had posed no problem for several generations, the sudden scrutiny by Episcopal clergymen in 1880 of the family lineage served as a jarring sign of changing circumstances. Susan Bonga's case shows that racist ideas were beginning to seep into Ojibwe communities by the end of the nineteenth century, but still did not dominate. There were clear signs of this thinking in the state Constitution and the debates surrounding Minnesota statehood, but the Ojibwe continued to resist these ideas. Instead, in addition to indigenous notions of identity, the "civilized"/"savage" paradigm persisted, trumping notions of race. Susan's identity disrupted the racist theory of the "one drop rule" of blackness and instead

hinged on her mastery of domesticity and other “civilized” lifeways. The case of Susan Bonga provides evidence that some individuals could not fit neatly into prescribed categories of identity, but instead slipped among them, oftentimes with little control over the slippage.

The “civilized”/“savage” paradigm, in fact, was a present factor in the Bongas’ lives throughout the nineteenth century. Fur trade society was not homogenous, but rather composed of families and individuals that fit somewhere along a continuum of this paradigm. During the mid-nineteenth century, as more Anglo-Americans streamed into the region and racial identity was reconfigured, “civilized” became increasingly equated with “whiteness.” The growing numbers of Anglo-Americans looked at people of French descent and of mixed ancestry as “other” than white and as less “civilized.” At this point, attempts to establish criteria for determining racial identity clashed with the long-standing system of fluidity in the region. The ambiguity of the terms “half-breed,” “mixed-blood,” “Indian,” and “civilized Indian” was reflected in the legal constructs of treaties and debates and state legislation about suffrage. Although the Bonga family initially struggled to find a privileged place within the reconfigured hierarchy, they succeeded in maintaining their respectable and “civilized” status.

Métis/métis identity

The Bonga family also highlights how the distinctive “mixed-blood” identity was constructed and inhabited in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. Although some scholars have referred to Susan and the Bongas as métis, I would argue that this term is less accurate and useful than the terms “mixed-blood” and “half-breed.”⁵³⁹ Not only has the term métis (Métis) been used to refer to a specific political identity that was constructed at Louis Riel’s Red River Colony, but it is also ahistorical in this case. By using the term mixed-blood, I endeavor to interrogate its meaning within the context of the nineteenth century Ojibwe communities in which the Bongas resided, thereby shedding more light on how identity was constructed. Moreover, I avoid calling the Bonga family a métis family because neither they nor their contemporaries ever used that word. However, the term mixed-blood was used in the nineteenth century to denote members of wealthy fur trade families and people of a particular culture and education. Thus, this term more accurately sketches the social landscape of the times. Much like European children in colonies, fur trade family children were brought up with a careful set of standards “framed to ensure that [they] learned the right social cues and affiliations.”⁵⁴⁰ This upbringing helped ease their parents’ anxieties that they would not be differentiated from the local Native population. The fur trade families may have had kin ties to the Ojibwe, but they also cultivated a distinct fur trade culture that eventually gave rise to what was referred to as the mixed-blood identity, as the fur trade waned and the families were classified legally within treaties.⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁹ Kugel, *To Be the Main Leaders of Our People*; Meyer, *The White Earth Tragedy*.

⁵⁴⁰ Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*, 6.

⁵⁴¹ John Foster, “Some Questions and Perspectives on the Problem of Métis Roots,” in *The New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America*, ed. Jacqueline Peterson and Jennifer S. H. Brown (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society

Four generations of the Bonga family: cultivating kin ties

Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga provided a sturdy foundation for the Bonga family to flourish and prosper over the generations. They underwent a remarkable transition in their own lives, moving from slavery to freedom and establishing their own tavern in the community at Mackinac. They began an intergenerational pattern of paying attention to and cultivating kin ties when they became integrated into the French-Catholic kin network that was dominated by prominent trader families in the community. This also marked the beginning of the family's involvement in fur trade society, as their roles at Mackinac brought them into contact with many traders and resulted in their children being brought up in this particular social world.

Pierre Bonga naturally moved into working in the fur trade, since it was not difficult for him to secure work with voyages and trading outfits from a young age while living at Mackinac. Pierre had a successful career because he was part of a family with strong fur trade ties. This identity was based on the Ojibwe kin ties he established through marriage, integration into a Catholic kin network, and socialization into the fur trade. Moreover, Pierre's links to prominent traders such as Alexander Henry probably helped him send his children to Eastern schools. With this, the family cultivated ties to additional communities, especially since George and Stephen were sent to schools of different religious and ethnic affiliations. This helped extend the family's networks into various branches, and built on their already existing networks.

Although Pierre Bonga had a comparatively successful career, his sons were more firmly entrenched in the upper echelons of fur trade society. His sons' educations, Ojibwe marriages and kin ties, religious affiliations, and respectable statuses were the central factors that advanced their careers and standings. As they built on the foundation of networks their father had established, George and Stephen's careers transcended the fur trade. As their social world faced upheaval, they worked as intermediaries at a time when the Ojibwe were greatly in need of them. In these roles, it is clear that they cared deeply for their Ojibwe kin despite occasional tendencies to describe a distance from them as "civilized" men. Through their marriages and the families they built with their Ojibwe wives, the Bonga men had real ties of affection for the Indians that they lived among and their own progeny of mixed ancestry.

Further, the Bonga-Ojibwe marriages demonstrate that the Ojibwe people based identity on kinship and culture, not race. As the Bonga men were transformed from strangers into kin to the Pillagers through their marriages, they were similarly integrated into Native families as the French had been. Because of their cultural identity as fur traders, they had the standing that made them desirable partners and allies to the Ojibwe.

The Bonga family members took on intermediary roles in a variety of situations, many of which were dangerous. George and Stephen Bonga took formal roles as interpreters at treaty negotiations and for individuals such as the Indian agent Joel Basset and the missionary Alfred Brunson. During these jobs, they faced warfare between the Ojibwe and the Dakota; tense standoffs between traders, Indian agents and Indians; and

Press, 1985), 80-81; Jacqueline Peterson, "Many Roads to Red River: Métis Genesis in the Great Lakes Region, 1680-1815," in *The New Peoples*, 37-71. See these chapters on the development of a distinct fur trade societies and cultures.

starvation and disease from failed annuity payments. George Bonga also put himself at risk by supporting missionary efforts at times, because among the Leech Lakers many warriors were vociferously opposed to their presences.

The role George Bonga took in trying to help repair relations between the Indians at Leech Lake and the Episcopal clergy foreshadowed his daughter Susan's role as an intermediary between missionaries and the Ojibwe. Her eventual marriage to Charles Wright represents a culmination of the Bonga family ties to missionaries. From their Catholic kin ties at Mackinac in the late eighteenth century and their baptism at Leech Lake in the 1830s by Congregationalists, the Bonga family had long recognized the advantage of ties to religious communities. Susan Bonga's role as a missionary's wife was another example of a marriage that enhanced status and social standing, as well as extended networks into a powerful Ojibwe family.

The circumstances surrounding Susan Bonga's marriage illustrates that the family's kin ties and status persisted through the end of the fur trade era and helped fortify her standing as an Ojibwe woman. Susan Bonga was granted the request to marry Charles Wright partly because the Episcopal clergy knew her father George Bonga, and trusted the family's status and her ability to uphold it. While her personal skills and reputation were certainly prominent considerations, her family's overall standing was a sturdy foundation for her case.

French Africans in Indian Country has shown that women were central to all aspects of the fur trade and "civilizing" policy. The intermarriage that occurred during the fur trade arose because of Native women's usefulness to the traders and the benefits they provided through their kin networks. Moreover, these women's families were eager supporters of the process because they wanted to establish a line of access to the traders' goods and provisions. Native women who married traders not only benefited their Native kin and husbands, but they also increased their own status by engaging in these partnerships. When missionaries started appearing in Ojibwe country with the goal of "civilizing" the inhabitants, their work focused on and was largely aided by Native and mixed-blood women. The missionary programs were very gendered, spending a lot of time and resources on teaching the "domestic arts" and reconfiguring the structure of families and the home. Women who were successful at mastering these skills, like Susan Bonga, were greatly appreciated by the missionaries and they placed great store in their capability to convert other women.

Historiographically, I have sought to demonstrate the importance of a regional study that elides the myth of purely Anglo-American origins that is so prominent within American history.⁵⁴² The fluid system of identity that persisted through the nineteenth century was based on a regional history of Indian interactions with namely French newcomers who learned how to negotiate on the middle ground. Never quite understanding how Native social formations functioned, the French newcomers fumbled with national designations for indigenous groups that eluded these bounded identities. Looking at these historical interactions contributes understanding to the way identity was constructed through the fur trade era, and shows that the region that is now Minnesota did

⁵⁴² Karen Ordahl Kupperman, "International at the Creation: Early Modern American History," in *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, ed. Thomas Bender, 103-122 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

not attain its “white” Anglo-American identity until late in the nineteenth century. Moreover, by emphasizing the social and political dominance of the Ojibwe and Dakota social formations from the eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century, this study demonstrates that the region remained Indian country far longer than historical narratives normally account for.

Overall, tracing the Bonga family story over four generations, from the lives of Jean and Marie Jeanne Bonga to Susan Bonga, illustrates changing constructions of identity for Native Americans, Europeans, African-Americans, and Euro-Americans in the Western Great Lakes region in the nineteenth century. It highlights a transition from fluid categories of identity in the eighteenth century, in which race was not a determining factor, to the development of hardening and fixed concepts into the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Changing and overlapping racial binaries were constructed, intersected, and, at times, in tension with one another, as U.S.-Ojibwe treaties, the administration of Indian reservations, Minnesota’s transition to statehood, and Christian missionaries influenced ideas about Indians and “whiteness.” As the Bonga family navigated these tumultuous changes, their own identities were often contested concepts that were being constantly revised. As they fluctuated between being classified as “white,” “negro,” “half-breed,” “mixed-blood,” and “Indian,” to name a few of the categories, they faced the stark reality of colonialism and struggled to gain their foothold. Throughout the generations, they never lost a sense of the communities they were part of through their kin networks, as they stayed connected to them through their work and leadership positions despite how newcomers classified them.

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