

# The Genesis of African and Indian Cooperation in Colonial North America: An Interview with Helen Hornbeck Tanner

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**Abstract.** Dr. Helen Hornbeck Tanner, a senior research fellow at the Newberry Library, studied American Indian and colonial American history for over six decades. In this interview she discusses little-known themes including African and Indian coexistence and cooperation, beginning in 1619 in the Chesapeake Bay region, and spanning Louisiana, Minnesota, New York, Northern Mexico, Ohio, Spanish Florida, and Texas in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including an Underground Railroad from Michigan into Canada. Also discussed are a system of inter-Indian diplomacy that stretched across the United States east of the Rocky Mountains and the long history of attempts by the U.S. government to assimilate American Indians.

## Introduction

Helen Hornbeck Tanner was the first woman to receive a PhD in Latin-American history at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor (1961). She led the way in research in the second Spanish period of Florida history, post-American Revolution (1783–1821). The results of her work in the beginning of that period were published as *Zespedes in East Florida, 1784–1790*.<sup>1</sup> She was also the first historian to appear as an expert witness before the Indian Claims Commission in Washington, DC, where most of the previous expert witnesses had been anthropologists. She is a pioneer in combining oral history with historical documents to reconstruct the postcontact dynamics of native and transatlantic populations in North America. From 1962 to 2005, she continued to appear in various stages of Indian Claims Commission litigation, though the commission officially ceased operations in 1970. She



Figure 1. Helen Hornbeck Tanner at the Newberry Library, 2002.

has continued to consult as an expert witness in other cases involving Indian treaties. As an outgrowth of testifying in cases involving Indians in Michigan and Ohio, she collected information that was the basis for producing *The Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History*, a project funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.<sup>2</sup> The volume has become an established reference work, with a new printing in 2006. Tanner is a senior research fellow at the Newberry Library in Chicago, and her papers are archived there.

Ivor Miller is a research fellow at the African Studies Center at Boston University. As a student of African influence in the Americas, he recognized the wealth of anecdotes that Helen Tanner can recount on that subject from her years of research and reflection. The following is an edited transcript of their conversations about these topics.

**Ivor:** I have learned from conversations with you about the long history of mixed African and Indian communities in colonial America. How did you come to be interested in this aspect of American history?

**Helen:** I started thinking about the variety of American Indian populations back in 1947, when I first started doing research on Florida's Spanish colonial history. At first I thought that the only Florida history that was important was Spanish colonizing, so I expected to devote most of my research to what was going on in Spanish colonial settlements.<sup>3</sup> I didn't read far before I realized that the power in that area actually belonged to the Indians. Spanish control in the post-Revolutionary War era was confined to a very small area of northeastern Florida, which the British had defined in treaties with the Creeks and Seminoles. This Indian population was very diverse, consisting in a great measure of people who had come down from the Creek towns to central Florida. In Creek terminology, these are sometimes called "daughter towns," offshoots of "mother" towns in Georgia. Down in Florida, these were considered people in flight, people who had run away from the larger communities along the Chattahoochee River in Georgia. By the 1780s, these Indians were aiming to get out of an area of potential American jurisdiction, since Georgia was one of the colonies that was a part of this nascent American republic. In coming down to Florida they really were runaways, and I am among those who go along with the idea that they were called "Cimarrones." Since the Creek or Muskogean languages didn't have any *r*'s, this turned into the word "Seminoles." Of course, I realized that "cimarron" and "maroon" also referred to runaway blacks, so I started looking at the people who were in these communities. Soon I realized that there was an African-origin population among these Indian towns in Florida. With the increase in runaway slaves from the American South, there were larger and larger groups, to the point where late in Florida's colonial history, there were whole communities that were African American.<sup>4</sup> Leaders from African-origin groups played important roles in the history of the Seminoles and Muskogean people in Florida.

Then I began to look into the presence of Africans in other Indian tribes, and I found that a number of the active fur traders who came into the northeast by way of the St. Lawrence River were people of African origin. In most cases they had come from the islands of the West Indies and were working for British fur-trading companies based in Montreal after the Treaty of Paris in 1763. They came west with those fur-trading companies and some of them stayed as independent traders, and as *all* traders in the upper Great Lakes did, they married into the tribes with whom they were trading. By the early nineteenth century there was a group of African Americans among the Chippewa of Minnesota, living where you would not expect to find people of African heritage.<sup>5</sup> The original trader, named Bonga, had four sons who were also named Bonga.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, I met a Chippewa named Bonga in Chicago in the 1980s. There are pictures from the nineteenth century of these

Chippewa leaders named Bonga that show undeniably an African heritage. I also read that Ottawas on the upper Grand River in Michigan—where there is a large Ottawa community—during the War of 1812 had captured children on plantations down south. In one case, they brought back a young African from slavery and raised him in their community. Finding he had exceptional abilities, they made him a leader. So that there was an Indian chief in a major group in Michigan who was of African origin. His name was Mucketycoocoose, which translates affectionately as “Old Black Hog.” Descendants of that family have remained in Michigan.

Another group of Indians that I studied quite closely, the Wyandots in Sandusky, Ohio, had runaways who took refuge with them. One of these was adopted by an important chief of the tribe named Tarhee, whose English name was “the Crane.” The adopted boy was known as Jonathan Pointer. During the War of 1812 he was mentioned in a description of an encounter when [the] British, with Indian allies, took over Detroit from Americans at the very beginning of the war; so this was another tribe that had black members.

The more I read about these Indian communities, the more I realized that every one of them had some Africans living among them. Another well-known leader was called Colonel Louis, a person of African origin who was active during the American Revolutionary War period among the Iroquois people of New York. So there is a pretty good geographic spread that indicates African Americans among all the tribal people. I feel that when you run across separate accounts of individual people, this is more persuasive than some vague statistical accounts. Even as recently as a few months ago, when we were talking about Indians and Africans in American tribes, a very good friend of mine, who grew up on a Dakota reservation, said adamantly that she knew there weren't any blacks among her people. Then she caught her breath and said, “Oh, except for one family on the reservation.” I thought, well you know, with eight big Dakota reservations out west she knows of one family on her reservation and there are other reservations, and Africans probably were equally sprinkled amongst them. The phenomenon of fugitives—people who escaped from various plantations—moved in all different directions. The added fact that the bigger tribes in the south—Creeks, Cherokees, and Chickasaws—had plantations and had their own black slaves starting in the eighteenth century makes it quite obvious that there have been blacks intermingled with Indians from way back.

I came to this realization from my own experience with Florida, but as all American historians now know, the genesis of Indian and African mixture is in the Chesapeake Bay region, where the first African slaves were brought in 1619. At that time, the British colonists were already enslaving Indians.

Indians and Africans were enslaved together along the Atlantic coast, and later along the Gulf coast. There is a large population of Indian people with African heritage that I'm sure in early census records were called the blacks in records of Virginia and Maryland. The census only had two categories, black or white, and anybody who was nonwhite was black.

More recently, these ideas were reinforced while [I was] visiting the black Seminole communities in Texas. They came west with other Seminoles and the Creeks, an exodus that really began with Andrew Jackson's invasion of Spanish Florida that was contemporary with the War of 1812. A number of these tribes did not want to stay under American jurisdiction, and so moved first into Spanish Texas and Louisiana, and, later, they moved into Mexican Texas.<sup>7</sup> They came as parts of Indian tribal people, maintaining an Indian identity more than an African identity. The first of these so-called black Seminoles who moved into present-day Mexico are still there in a community called Nacimiento; they called themselves the “Maskogees.”

The United States wanted to get rid of all the Seminoles, whether they were blacks or of long-term native heritage. This began in 1812. Florida was purchased from Spain in 1819, but not firmly occupied until 1821. Jackson claimed that he wanted to recover escaped slaves, and he was aided by Creek allies. In all colonial wars in America, Indians fought against Indians.<sup>8</sup>

The biggest exodus took place later, after the first and second Seminole wars. The second Seminole war, in 1837, had the most violent results, and removed a major population. By the 1830s there were Seminoles out in Mexican Texas, looking for areas of land they could call their own. They weren't particularly successful, but the Mexican government needed to have northern barriers to keep the Apaches and Comanches from raiding the ranches in the northern providences, taking cattle as well as whole populations and enslaving them. The Comanches were great slave raiders. The Mexican government was inviting American Indians to come and settle along the borders and act as a defense force. Through my own investigations, I believe that the Caddo tribe of Oklahoma were the first people down to Nacimiento. I am certain that some of them were there and well established by the 1840s.<sup>9</sup>

Tribes who came to North Mexico later include Kickapoos, Shawnees, Cherokees, probably some Potawatomes, and the Seminoles. There is still a black Seminole community near Nacimiento that knows their origin. They came there with a man named Horse, who in Mexican history is now called “Juan Caballo.” Horse was a companion of the great Seminole leader Wild Cat, who was also in Nacimiento. The Seminoles had a treaty with the Mexican government in the 1850s. After the U.S. acquired Mexico and was looking for somebody to protect the incoming Texas popu-

lation from Comanches and Apaches, they turned to the same group. The Seminoles were very famous as border scouts. Some of those in Texas were called "buffalo soldiers." I ran into one of these a few years ago—I have his picture. They still have meetings of the descendants of these "buffalo soldiers." I don't know how widespread geographically the term "buffalo soldier" was, but the black Seminoles have a big community near Bracketsville, Texas, located near the fort where they had served, close to Del Río, Texas. Black Seminole communities still exist along both sides of the border. One group is Spanish-speaking and lives in Nacimiento, in Coahuila Province. In Mexican documents of the mid-nineteenth century they are called "Maskogeese." That must be the name they gave to the Mexican officials when they came over. These were people who had been living with an Indian tribe long enough to use that name. I don't know of their speaking any other language other than Muskogee, which is a language family, but the term historically has referred to Creeks; most Seminoles are of Creek origin.

Another important example of African and Indian cooperation was the Indian-operated Underground Railroad. Nothing about this activity appears in historical literature. An Indian story from northwestern Michigan, however, provides a detailed narrative describing the efforts of the Ottawa Indians to guide fugitive slaves to Canada. The circumstances of the story indicate that this instance took place in 1840, when southern slave owners converged on the Detroit area to recover fugitives and cut off escape routes in that area. The only safe routes remaining were across the Mackinac Straits, the upper peninsula of Michigan, and the St. Mary's river. The intriguing sentence in this account is: "Every Indian in Michigan knew the seven routes for getting Blacks to Canada."<sup>10</sup>

**Ivor:** Is there evidence that American Indian people were in communication with Africans in the Caribbean?

**Helen:** One of the most interesting pieces of information I came across was that in 1792, a Mahican Indian from the East Coast came out to Ohio with messages from the American government. His official assignment was to take messages from the American government to an Indian conference on the Maumee River near Toledo, Ohio. He also brought them news of the outside world to the assembled Indian leaders. Among the things he reported was the 1791 uprising of blacks in Haiti. If information about a Haitian rebellion was getting out to Ohio within months after it started, you know that information was moving far and wide and very rapidly among Indian populations. I published this information in an article called "The Glaze in 1792," appearing in *Ethnohistory* in 1978.<sup>11</sup>

**Ivor:** Since news was transmitted so rapidly across the U.S. east of the Mississippi, there must have been a well-organized network of communications.

**Helen:** Based upon the evidence that I had accumulated of eighteenth century long-distance travels, I believe Indian people maintained pervasive information systems. I think that this was the survival of a system of inter-community protocol that had been in place for centuries, usually for inter-Indian diplomacy. The word "tribe" in Anglo-parlance has been fastened on to the Indian people, but their own words for themselves invariably meant the "people" or the "allies." Their communities are held together by kinship relations. They have a strong sense of community and a strong sense of territory that I don't think incoming European populations appreciated. Major communities had a meeting in the springtime to entertain and receive representatives from other tribes. They re-cemented alliances and decided who were their friends and who were their enemies. If there were enemies, they organized and planned their war expeditions for the military season. Nearly everybody participated: you hold your spring meeting, plant your crops, go to war, then harvest your crops, and then hunt in the winter. As near as I could make out, there was a summer season in which people went on war expeditions. They always interchanged information. Major leaders had couriers who were expert runners. The Indian groups around Detroit considered running time from Niagara Falls and back a weekend run. The great Mohawk leader Joseph Brant, who was extremely influential in the late eighteenth century, had a courier who turned up out in Ohio, then traveled amongst southern tribes as far south as Georgia. He spoke eight Indian languages plus French and English. He was a courier who'd covered a great deal of territory and knew a great many people. If you read anything about combat or wars in the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, communication among Indian people was much faster than communication among non-Indian people. The official couriers of any European government couldn't get to another outpost with information as fast as Indian runners.

The concept of tribe was reinforced in American parlance by all the discourse about the possibility that Indians were part of the "Lost Tribes of Israel." I don't know any native people who love to use "tribe." In the governmental system, you cannot receive any benefits from the federal government unless you are a recognized tribe, and the government uses the term "tribe." Whatever were the organizations or lack thereof, Indian people must prove they are a tribe of long standing in order to get government recognition, hence be eligible for government programs. Indian people now prefer the word "nation." They argue about this all the time. "First nation" was an important term in Canada for a while. They argue about terms like

indigenous, aboriginals, and so on. But mostly, if they have a name, just call them, "The Cherokees" or "The Creeks" or whatever it is, because that identifies a people. Anything you can think of as meaning the people. I used to say "Ojibwa" in the singular, inferring the name "people," but it seems more satisfactory to say "the Ojibwas."

In the eighteenth century, British administrations aimed to find some reasonable handle for controlling and regimenting any population that they contacted. Sometimes this was on a language basis. Sometimes they would ask "Who are you and what is your tribal territory?" If areas seemed overlapping or indecisive, they would engage their populations in treaties, because they wanted to have something they could use to establish an administrative system covering a large territory. This system was devised to control the Indian population. There were always people who are willing to act as intermediaries in order get some advantage from the British government for this service. I think that the kaleidoscopic nature of Indian populations and probably of African populations as well was equally puzzling to Europeans. There never was an Indian town that was all one tribe. There always were people who were captives, slaves, visitors, or who had married in for one reason or another. The tribal people, when they were confronted with this situation, just said that they are part of our community. If people were living as part of the community, then they were accepted as members, regardless of their origin. Origin was considered cultural, rather than biological. For example, there is a saying around Chicago that the Indians called an African American trader named Jean Baptiste Point DuSable "the first white man in Chicago," because his lifestyle and occupation were attributes that belonged to European culture rather than Indian culture. That's the way they identified him. You will never see references in Indian speech to anything about Jean Baptiste Point DuSable's skin color. It was irrelevant.

**Ivor:** What kind of "secret" or initiation societies did American Indians have?

**Helen:** The Midewiwin society wasn't utterly secret, but information about it was kept away from whites initially. This was a very widespread curative group that was renowned for herbal medicine and for prayers and ritual of a healing nature. As my friend Kewaydinoquay ("Kee"), who was a traditionally trained healer, said, "You can know what the plants are, but you really have to know the prayers that go with their use for the plant medicine to be effective."<sup>12</sup>

The Midewiwin society was important; it probably developed among the Ojibwa people. The "Mide" society was widespread certainly in the Midwest and observed among the Miami as early as the 1670s, which was

the first time any European happened to make an observation. To indicate how widespread Mide was, therefore how old it must have been, I would add that my late friend Bill Fenton, who was considered "the dean of Iroquois studies," published a book called *The Little Water Medicine Society of the Senecas* that he thinks was very similar to the Midewiwin among speakers of Algonquian languages.<sup>13</sup> One of the things I've noticed about this society is that it still exists today in the upper Great Lakes region among people who follow these ways and have initiations, and there are several levels of Midewiwin. My friend Kee was given a magnificent stuffed owl as the award for mastering the knowledge required for attaining the fourth level. When I was at a large powwow meeting someone said there would be a Midewiwin service. I said, "Where was it going to be?" Someone reported, "Well they're handing out maps." After I located a copy, I looked at the map, and found it fairly bewildering. To one of the people who was going, I said, "That's the type of map you give somebody when you don't want them to get there." He said, "Exactly. The real people will know that when they come to the right road, there will be something hanging from the tree where they're suppose to turn in." It is still a somewhat secret society today.

That's the reason that a modern anthropologist named Harold Hicker-son was quite wrong in his much-quoted statement about the Midewiwin. He claims that since "one can find no early evidence of this society, it must have been a post contact development," making the standard assumption that this secret society was a reaction to European invasion and conquest, simply because we haven't heard about it in any earlier era.<sup>14</sup> The Jesuits, who were out in the Lake Superior region around the 1660s, didn't write about the Midewiwin. My reaction to that is that the Jesuits did not find out. They had absolutely no luck among the Ojibwa people. In fact, I think that the Ojibwas burnt them out by arson, a fact that was never reported in the Jesuit relations.

I know that the Jesuits were kept from finding out anything about the Ojibwa society and about their antipathy. One of the best indications is from records of the nineteenth century from 1840s to 1850s when the Jesuits tried to come back into the Great Lakes. On the basis of that experience, they published, in 1974, 900 pages of the letters they wrote back and forth to each other. These are candid letters among members of the same order.<sup>15</sup> The seventeenth-century Jesuit relations were doubly edited, very carefully edited; there was a lot that was left out and changed. In the nineteenth-century letters, I found a letter that was written after a Jesuit mission on the Walpole Island—which is in the delta of Lake St. Clair—burned down mysteriously about 1:00 a.m. in the morning, the only occasion where no one was there. An Ojibwa from Sault Ste. Marie, the heartland of early

Ojibwa country, came through there somewhat later. And according to the local Jesuit missionary's letter, he said, "Don't bother to build it again, even if you build it of bricks it will burn again. At Sault St. Marie we had to burn them out twice."<sup>16</sup> I think that that happened more than once, and it is perfectly understandable that the Jesuits would learn nothing about the Mide society, because of the Ojibwas' complete antipathy. The Jesuits were just as unsuccessful among Ojibwas in the nineteenth century as they were in the seventeenth century. The Ojibwas summarized Christianity as a "no-good religion": What kind of religion is it if those overseas people killed the son of the Great Spirit that was sent to them? It's no good for us.<sup>17</sup> This is another example of how Indian people have always managed to conceal their spiritual activities.

Furthermore, William Whipple Warren, the great historian of the area southwest of Lake Superior, whose mother was Ojibwa and whose father was a fur trader, talks about the Mide society as being very ancient.<sup>18</sup> Whipple conducted extensive research about his people in the early nineteenth century. His history of the Ojibwas was published in 1885. In addition, the earliest monograph for the Bureau of American Ethnology by W. J. Hoffman, also speaks of the Midewiwin society as being ancient.<sup>19</sup> I think that nineteenth-century evidence by an Ojibwa speaker is far more reliable than the investigation of a 1970s Anglo anthropologist with no language skills.

**Ivor:** In the documents of explorers and historians of the colonial period we find references to individual tribes, yet your research has revealed an interconnected civilization. What do you mean by this?

**Helen:** Yes, a multicomunity civilization. In other words, I think there were times when everybody from the Mississippi Valley to the Appalachian Mountains built mounds of different kinds. Raising corn doesn't distinguish one group from another. Forty years ago I asked a major anthropologist—Erminie Wheeler-Voegelin—how many Indian societies practiced the Green Corn ceremony. She said that there hadn't been enough comparative work at that time. Now we know that the Green Corn ceremony was observed from the region of Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas to the Iroquois of New York. It was predominant throughout the present southeastern United States. That is an example of a common element over broad areas. Another common behavior pattern over a wide area was having meetings to which representatives from outside communities were invited. I realized the same metaphors about smoke rising and carrying a message to the Great Spirit, the symbolism of using eagles as thunder birds—or message carriers—many of those figures of speech turn up in reports of oratory all

the way from Minnesota to Florida. So I concluded that there was an understood intertribal protocol that linked all these communities together. Indian people of different tribal backgrounds have told me that the most important single factor of Indian society, they thought, was "interconnectedness"—a connection between the two-leggeds, the four-leggeds, those that swim in the water, those that fly in the air, and all the plants and trees and rocks.

In my research I began to find examples of thousand-mile-long diplomatic journeys. The fact that I have found examples of this activity only in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, I think, shows a limitation to the data, rather than reflecting how long the system had been in place. For example, Ottawa in northwestern Michigan in the eighteenth century went to New Orleans to talk to Spanish authorities before going to New York to talk to British authorities; that is a lot of travel. These same Ottawas in their past history made war and took captives all the way out to the Rocky Mountains to the west. I know that Wyandots in Ohio went all the way down to Florida in 1785 to try to persuade the British from moving out of Florida; they wanted them to stay there.<sup>20</sup> I know that Cherokees went all the way to Mackinac Island (an island in the straits of Mackinac between Lake Michigan and Lake Huron) to talk to the British about the course of events during the American Revolution. The Delaware Indians went from Ohio to Pensacola, Florida, to talk to the Spaniards in the 1790s. These examples show the range of diplomatic activities.

The two biggest conferences that I know of in eastern North America involved Indians from the Mississippi Valley to north of the St. Lawrence River in Canada. The first took place in 1701 under French auspices in Montreal, at the end of a half-century of Iroquois warfare. This treaty conference involved Indians all the way from the Kaskaskia village near present-day St. Louis to the Abenakies in Maine to the Crees and their allies, who lived far north almost up to James Bay. That is a vast area of Indian people who all had similar interests in achieving peace. Excluding the northern Crees and their allies, almost exactly the same group was involved in the American Treaty of Greenville, signed in Ohio in 1795.<sup>21</sup> This treaty abrogated the previous treaty of Fort Stanwix in 1768 that had made the Ohio River the permanent boundary between areas of Indian and white occupancy.

The fact that Indians had these multitribal councils indicates to me a very long history of diplomatic interaction knitting together the entire woodlands area east of the Rocky Mountains. This reality makes it important to downplay what happened in a small region, to see how much an activity was characteristic of a vast area. I think the Iroquianists have been the most provincial. They have produced great research on the Iroquois tribes and their ceremonies, but I think those ceremonies are really typical

of ceremonies observed by many native people. Indians are aware of their common beliefs and interests, even if they aren't always peaceful.

**Ivor:** When did the assimilation of Indians become prominent in the policies of European powers?

**Helen:** From the beginning, assimilation of the native inhabitants of the United States has been a perpetual aim of the first colonial administrations and of the federal government once the United States had formed. I traced this idea back to the European acceptance of the fact that the Pope had the right to divide the world in half between Spain and Portugal. According to a papal bull of 1497, the Spanish had the right to one half the globe and the Portuguese the right to the other half, with the implicit duty to convert everyone to Christianity. Since that time, Christian nations have felt empowered with a mission to stamp out all other religions and put down all peoples who would not accept the superior religion, which was Christianity. Accepting Christianity was what made otherwise biologically appearing humans actually real people. The Spaniards wrote copiously about how they would treat these New World civilizations. Of course they were really stumped in coming to Mexico where they found a city that was much greater than anything that existed in Europe at the time.<sup>22</sup> People who had a water system and aqueducts, who had worked out a lot of engineering problems, had superior art, made paper-like substances out of tree bark, kept records, and had an organized administrative society. To call them nonhuman or not civilized was sort of difficult. Spaniards, however, still insisted that if they weren't Christians, it was OK to enslave them. If they weren't Christians they could kill them, but they should be baptized before they were killed.

The Protestants coming to New England didn't do much better. After first excluding Indians, they tried converting them into native [Christian] communities. A number of Christian Indian communities were created in New England. The Indians who became Christians found that they still were not accepted as equals. The arrogance within European society made Indians unacceptable until they took on the whole value system of western European nations. On the other hand, the value system of western European nations was totally opposed to Indian values. This became more and more evident. For example, in North American Indian societies, the status of a man was measured by how much he could give away, rather than upon how much he could accumulate.

After the Revolutionary War, as part of an attempt to assimilate Indians, American denominations sent out missionaries. In 1819, the federal government passed an appropriation to Christianize Indians, with the goal

of transforming them into yeoman farmers.<sup>23</sup> The idea of men going hunting and women doing all the gardening didn't fit with the European ideal, where men were supposed to be in the fields and the women were supposed to be at home spinning and weaving. Missionaries considered it a real plus if they could get the men out behind a plow, but that usually involved a horse. If they could get the Indians into "horse and plow" agriculture, the authorities felt the Indians exhibited one of the attributes of Christian society. They also objected to Indians moving about, not understanding that what looked nomadic—from the point of view of Europeans—was a very well-organized system of utilizing the proper resources: one place to catch fish, a season to hunt, a place to pick berries, a place for ceremonial purposes at a general base camp. What appeared to outsiders like wandering was actually a well-organized seasonal system. Another system of assimilation was promoted in the schools; a great deal has been written about schools for Indians.

Missionaries and government officials thought that if natives didn't look like Indians, that if they cut their hair—an atrocity from the Indians' point of view—and wore European-style clothing, this would signify that they had been assimilated. Indian agents made census reports enumerating how many Indians wore citizen dress and how many wore tribal clothing, not realizing that changing clothing doesn't change what's going on in their heads at all.

Missionaries observed that Indian religions involved dancing, so they tried to forbid dancing. The Indians went off and danced in secret, because some of them were really dancing their history. They recalled their history through dancing and the accompanying songs. For ignorant Westerners, all dancing was equated with war dance, creating a fundamental misunderstanding.

The most disappointing literature I've read about assimilation attempts comes from the 1880s, where missionaries expressed a common disapproval of Indian people, saying that "if only we could teach them to be selfish and self-interested, then we would feel they were beginning to be more like citizens. But they keep sharing, and everything we give them, they give away to other people. We just don't know what to do about this." At the same time, there were Indians protesting to the Bureau of Indian Affairs that they were throwing out a missionary because he was immoral: He showed favoritism by only giving presents to a few, instead of distributing them evenly among the population. They felt the missionary was a bad example for children; he was immoral so they wouldn't allow him in the village anymore. You can see what a conflict there was in these values.<sup>24</sup>

During this period, Congress enacted legislation confining Indians to reservations in order to open up the rest of the land for white people. They

thought Indians would automatically see that the "American way" was a better way to live. Instead, the Indians developed a great scorn for white people, and continued to feel that their own society and value system was superior.

Many historians have commented upon the fact that French people got along with Indian people; that's because the French people didn't want to take away land from Indian people. This message appears in writings from contemporary Indian speeches. The French formed marriage alliances and became incorporated in kinship relations with Indian people. They were certainly exploiting the resources and encouraging the Indian people to harvest animal pelts for the fur trade, but they weren't trying to take their land away from them. The French gave them guns, supplied them with blacksmiths to repair the guns. When the British came along, they also were interested in the fur trade. Once the British acquired French Canada by treaty in 1763, they took over the French fur trade, and to keep lands open for this trade, they tried to keep the non-Indian population confined to territory east of the Appalachian Mountains and along the Atlantic coast.

Of course the British authorities could not keep settlers within any geographic bounds, unless they could build something akin to the Berlin wall, extending from the Great Lakes down to the Gulf of Mexico. That was totally impossible. The avaricious land acquisitions of white people are what set Indian people against the colonists, particularly those from Virginia. They developed a scornful word, "Chemokamen," for Virginians and differentiated them from English people.<sup>25</sup> "Chemokamen" is still a word of scorn: Indian people who resent white people dancing at their powwows say, "Chemokamen get out of the way." On the other hand, an Englishman is called "Sauganosh."

There are interesting differences among the French, Spanish, and British administrative treatment of Indian people. The French never made treaties recognizing Indian sovereignty or land rights. A recent publication by Denys Delâge of Laval University sees the French attitudes towards Indians based in the feudal traditions of medieval France, rather than in the monarchic regimes whereby lands that were conquered belonged to the crown.<sup>26</sup> For the king of Spain, Mexico was his personal possession. The whole philosophy of land tenure and the relationship of landlords to tenants was entirely different for European countries.

**Ivor:** How did these agendas for the assimilation of Indian people continue in the twentieth century?

**Helen:** The British and Americans were confident that "progress is being more like us." This problem persists. A federal project of the 1950s, called

"relocation," was to get Indians off the reservation and into the city where they would be in a thoroughly Americanized environment. The theory was that by acquiring jobs in the city, they would lose their identity as "the people," and would have to fit into the pattern of American society. They were given one-way tickets to far away cities and minimal job training.<sup>27</sup> However, most of the people found their way back to the reservation. Some returnees started a periodic migratory pattern from reservation to city and back again. They'd make enough money in the city to go back to the reservation for a time. In other cases, once one person had a place to live in a city, all the relatives would come and live with them, creating a serious economic problem.

A successful adaptation to the city was made by the Mohawks, who worked in high-rise steel construction in New York. They even had a "longhouse" arrangement in a part of Brooklyn. They definitely kept their social organization intact while in the metropolitan environment. The government attempts at assimilation have been perpetual.

**Ivor:** Whenever people of different worldviews live in contact situations for long periods, a process called transculturation occurs, characterized by a "give and take" process that can enrich all involved. How has Indian philosophy influenced the American society?

**Helen:** Indian beliefs and value systems have affected American society, because there's a tendency for the suppressed native culture of any region to rise to the surface. In this part of Michigan I can see the influence of Indian methods of handling social problems to keep their people out of the criminal justice system. The Indian attitude is that in a serious confrontation between individuals, there's no absolute "right" and "wrong." Everyone in the community is affected. For example, a murder is damaging to the whole social fabric, and everybody has to work to heal the rupture. Killing the person who performed the murder is just an additional wound to the social fabric, that isn't any way of restoring balance and order, everyone has to talk and come to an understanding in cases of conflict. Indian ideas of conflict resolution and healing the entire social fabric are being used in tribal courts here in Michigan. What interests me is that here in Benzie County, the sheriff's office is consulting with Indian leaders about how to handle problems, particularly those of juvenile infractions and domestic violence. They work to resolve problems that would otherwise go through regular courts, where somebody would be found to be "all right," and another to be "all wrong." It's very encouraging to see these efforts to heal social problems outside of the normal legal prosecution system.

**Ivor:** How are tribal groups expressing their sovereignty within the U.S.A.?



**Helen:** Indian tribal people are increasingly asserting their own identity as sovereign nations. Legal treatises will tell you that there are three kinds of sovereignty in the U.S.: national, state, and tribal. There is constant conflict and persistent efforts to work out boundaries of jurisdiction. Many Indian tribes also are seeking justice in the international arena. The Hopi go to the United Nations all the time. Nobody questions that the Six Nations issue passports for their own people to travel abroad; even the federal government has not seen fit to challenge that assertion of sovereignty. The Indians continue to send delegations both to The Hague and to Geneva, separately, as independent nations of indigenous people. There are all sorts of groups of non-Western people who are going to the UN, and particularly to Geneva, to places outside the U.S. to challenge American authority. This is seldom reported in the national press, only in the native press, *Indian Country Today*, where one finds a lot of very interesting information about current Indian activities.

### Notes

This article is based on cassette-tape recorded interviews with Helen Tanner in her home in Beulah, Michigan, conducted by Ivor Miller, 10–11 November 2002. They were transcribed by Charityhope Tolliver and edited by Helen Tanner in April 2004, May 2006, and July 2006.

- 1 Helen Hornbeck Tanner, *Zespedes in East Florida, 1784–1790* (Jacksonville, FL, 1989).
- 2 Helen Hornbeck Tanner, *The Atlas of Great Lakes Indian History* (Norman, OK, 1987).
- 3 Florida was a Spanish colony from 1565 to 1763, a British colony from 1763 to 1783, and a Spanish one again from 1783 to 1819.
- 4 The United States acquired Florida from Spain by treaty in 1819.
- 5 A more complete account of an African descendant living among Indians in the West is James P. Beckwourth, as told to Thomas D. Bonner, *The Life and Adventures of James P. Beckwourth*, paperback ed. (Boston, 2005).
- 6 About the Bongas, see William Loren Katz, *Black Indians: A Hidden Heritage* (New York, 1986), 118–20. The first Bongas were a slave couple brought to Lake Superior by British officers after the American Revolution. Their son Pierre worked for the Northwest Company of fur traders. Pierre married an Ojibwa woman; their son George was educated in Montreal and returned to carry on trading along with his brother Stephen. There are at least a hundred Ojibwa descendants of the Bongas. Cf. George Bonga, "Letters of George Bonga," *Journal of Negro History* 12 (1927): 41–54.
- 7 Louisiana Territory was transferred from France to Spain by the Treaty of Paris, 1763, but later reverted to France in 1802, just prior to sale to the United States in 1803. Texas became part of the Mexican nation created by the War for Independence from Spain beginning in 1810.
- 8 J. Leich Wright, *The Only Land They Knew* (Lincoln, NE, 1999). See also Jane

- Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*. (Urbana, IL, 1999) and John K. Mahon, *History of the Second Seminole War, 1835–1842*. (Gainesville, FL, 1967).
- 9 Tanner found a reference to the Caddos being there in the Mexican archives outside of Monterey. Instituto Estatal de Documentación (de Coahuila). Allende and Manuel Acuña. Edificio Pharmacon. Ramos Arispe, Coahuila, Mexico. Thanks to Susan Miller.
  - 10 Bill Dunlap, "Run to Freedom," in *The Indians of Hungry Hollow* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2005), 55–61.
  - 11 Hendrik Aupaumut, "A Narrative of an Embassy to the Western Indians" in *Memoirs of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania*, vol. 2, part 1, (Philadelphia, 1827), 60–131. This essay has been republished in various anthologies. The original information comes from the diary of Hendrik Aupaumut, a well-known emissary of the United States, whose memoirs were published by the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 1827.
  - 12 Kewaydinoquay means "woman of the north wind" in Ojibwa.
  - 13 William N. Fenton, *The Little Water Medicine Society of the Senecas* (Norman, OK, 2002).
  - 14 Harold Hickerson, *The Southwestern Chippewa: An Ethnohistorical Study*, American Anthropological Association, memoir no. 92 (Menasha, WI, 1962). The term *Chippewa* is being superseded by use of the term *Ojibwa*.
  - 15 Denys Delâge, Helen Hornbeck Tanner, and Pierre Chazelle, "The Ojibwa-Jesuit Debate at Walpole Island, 1844," *Ethnohistory* 41 (1994): 295–321.
  - 16 *Ibid.*
  - 17 *Ibid.*
  - 18 William Whipple Warren, "History of the Ojibways, Based upon Traditions and Oral Statements" in *Collections*, vol. 5 (Saint Paul, MN, 1974 [1885]), 77–80.
  - 19 Walter James Hoffman, "The Mide' winwin; or 'Grand Medicine Society' of the Ojibwa," in *U.S. Bureau of American Ethnology: Seventh Annual Report, 1885–86* (Washington, DC, 1891), 143–300. Cited in Helen Hornbeck Tanner, *The Ojibwas: A Critical Bibliography* (Bloomington, IN, 1976), 52.
  - 20 The Treaty of Paris in 1783 returned Florida to Spanish control.
  - 21 Helen Hornbeck Tanner, "The Greenville Treaty, 1795," in *Indians of Ohio and Indiana prior to 1795*, vol. 1, Plaintiff's Exhibit 101, Indian Claims Commission (New York, 1974), 51–128.
  - 22 Bernal Díaz, who accompanied Cortes in the march on Mexico and the battles for the city in 1519, recalled the experience of approaching Mexico City: "And when we saw all those cities and villages built in the water, and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded. These great towns and *cues* and buildings rising from the water, all made of stone, seemed like an enchanted vision." Once inside the city, he regarded the markets: "Some of our soldiers who had been in many parts of the world, in Constantinople, in Rome, and all over Italy, said that they had never seen a market so well laid out, so large, so orderly, and so full of people." Bernal Díaz, *The Conquest of New Spain*, trans. J. M. Cohen (New York, 1963), 214, 235.
  - 23 On 3 March 1819, legislation entitled "act making provision for the civilization of the Indian tribes adjoining the frontier settlements" became federal law. For concise discussion, see Francis Paul Prucha, *The Great Father*, abr. ed. (Lincoln, NB, 1986), 5.

- 24 See Rebecca Kugel, "Of Missionaries and Their Cattle: Ojibwe Perceptions of a Missionary as Evil Shaman," *Ethnohistory* 41 (Spring 1994): 227-44; and Rebecca Kugel, "Religion Mixed with Politics: The 1836 Conversion of Mang'osid of Fond du Lac," *Ethnohistory* 37 (Spring 1990): 126-57.
- 25 "Chemokamen" is derived from an Algonquian language term "Kitchimokaman," meaning "Big Knife." Originally, this was the identification for the sword-carrying governor of Virginia. (William N. Fenton, personal communication to Helen Hornbeck Tanner, 1987.)
- 26 Denys Del age, "French and English Colonial Models in North America," *Le Journal*, Center for French Colonial Studies, Centre pour l' tude du pays des Illinois, 18 (Summer 2002): 4-8.
- 27 Helen Hornbeck Tanner, "Big City Indians: The Urban Relocation Project, 1950-1970," in *The Settling of North America: The Atlas of the Great Migrations into North America from the Ice Age to the Present*, ed. Helen Hornbeck Tanner (New York, 1995), 168-69.

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