From Indian to French: A Female Name Curiosity

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IT IS NO REVELATION to state that many of the French *voyageurs*, trappers, and soldiers cohabited with and sometimes married Indian women. However, careful investigation of some of these unions reveals certain naming patterns that should interest the historian as well as the ethnologist. Inasmuch as the French, moreover, had trade contact with the three great tribal divisions in the Great Lakes region (Iroquoian, Siouan, and Algonquian), and because of the lengthly, peaceful association with the Algonquian, most of the examples in this paper will be from Algonquian tribes.

Pre-contact names of Indian women, incidentally, are practically impossible to translate; even names given during the past 100 years present numerous translation difficulties, not to mention names taken from previous generations.

The following are translations of Ojibwa names: Wassahjewun-equay, "Woman of the Bright Foam"; Wahbunnung-oquay, "Woman of the Morning Star"; Omiskabugoquay, "Woman of the Red Leaf."[1] The Treaty of 1826 at Fond du Lac (Duluth) listed many females;[2] some of their names as translated by Harry Dever are Monedoqua, "Supernatural woman"; Sawgonoshequa, "British woman"; Waubunequa, "Dawn (or Eastern) woman."[3] Almost every Ojibwa or Ottawa female name had the suffix *equay* (or *quay*, *kwai*, *eskwai*), meaning "woman."

The previous paragraph demonstrates the difficulties of interpretation. Wahbunnung-oquay and Waubunequa refer to the same

[1] Janet Lewis, *The Invasion* (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1932), p. 258. Mostly concerned with Ojibwas of the Sault Ste. Marie region.

[2] Treaty is included in Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour To The Lakes* (Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, Inc., 1959), pp. 479–486. Originally published in Baltimore, 1827.

[3] Personal communication, Harry Dever, Cedarville, Michigan.

woman; yet, we have the possibilities of "Woman of the Morning Star," "Dawn woman," or "Eastern woman."

Algonquian male and female names, on the other hand, consisted of only one word, rather than the later personal and surname distinctions. The above examples are from the Upper Lakes tribes. To show how widespread and consistent was this one-word naming pattern, Professor Hamill Kenny gives the following as examples of Algonquian names in early Maryland: Ababco, Mancotamon, Pinna, Epimore, and Kittamaqund.[4]

French authorities consistently discouraged marriage between Frenchmen and Indians. They felt, with much justification, that such marriages would mean that the Frenchmen would tend to go native, rather than influence the Indians to become Gallicized.[5] However, several hundred marriages did take place during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Whenever this happened, the Indian women were given new names, dropping by tribal custom their aboriginal name at the time of marriage.[6]

Because the Indians had no personal-surname system, those females who married Frenchmen were given names which would appear more European. For personal names, most of these women were given typical French names, such as Françoise, Madeleine, and Marie.

Our knowledge of the female surnames comes from marriage contracts, which, fortunately, were carefully recorded. Almost always the surname of these women contained some tribal designation, such as Marie Jeanne Illinoise, Madeleine Algonquine, Marie Angelique Iroquoise.

Two surnames deserve special mention, *Panis* and *Sauvagesse.* Many Indian women took or were given *Panis* (Pawnee) as their surname, but it was usually not a tribal designation. The Pawnee, a Plains tribe, being extremely hard-pressed by their northern Algonquian and Siouan neighbors, were victims of many military excursions and often were taken as slaves by their captives. Even-

[4] Personal communication, Professor Hamill Kenny.

[5] Benjamin Sulte, *Origin of the French Canadians* (Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada, Vol. XI [1905–06]), pp. 118–119.

[6] In some few cases a single name appeared on the marriage contract, but it was not the aboriginal name; rather, it was a tribal designation, such as Ouataouaise, Sauteuse, Iroquoise.

tually, therefore, the word *panis* came to signify "slave" throughout mid-America.[7] Thus, women surnamed *Panis* could be any women captured from another tribe, not necessarily Pawnee. Of the 104 names of Indian women listed by Tanguay,[8] *Panis* is second in frequency, appearing eleven times.

Sauvagesse was the most common of the surnames in Tanguay's list, appearing fourteen times. Although *Sauvage* (Savage) was a fairly common French surname, its feminine form of *Sauvagesse* seems to have been restricted to Indian females. This gives us then the two most common surnames, *Panis* and *Sauvagesse*, which are not tribal designations, but instead more general terms which mean "Indian slave," and "Indian Savage."

Our questions, then, are: Why were the French so unimaginative in bestowing these surnames? Why did they make it obvious that the women were Indian? Why did most of the surnames identify their tribal origins?

Mr. Dever suggests[9] that the translation and orthographic problems were such that the easiest way out for the Jesuits and civil administrators was to give them an easily understood surname: their tribe of origin. Anyone familiar with the complexities of Indian personal name derivation can appreciate Mr. Dever's logic.[10] For example, many Indian names contained as many as seven or eight syllables. Mr. Dever's wife, an Ottawa, is named Neebnaygahbohweekwai (suggested translation, "Summer Graze").

Professor A. Irving Hallowell has viewed a partial list of these names. He suggests that the acculturation process accounts for the personal names being largely names of saints (Marie, Madeleine, Catherine). He agrees that the reason for the surnames is somewhat puzzling. However, Hallowell mentions that, in his re-

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[7] Letter 67 of Antoine Denis Raudot, in W. Vernon Kinietz, *The Indians of the Western Great Lakes, 1615–1760* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1965), pp. 402–403. F. Clever Bald, *Michigan In Four Centuries* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1961), p. 64.

[8] Cyprien Tanguay, *Dictionnaire généalogique des Familles Canadiennes* (7 vols., Montreal, 1886), VII, 687–688.

[9] Personal communication, Harry Dever.

[10] On this point, Prof. Kenny writes: "If these names had been used as surnames, instead of the tribal names that were used, they would give meaningless and difficult sounds – Madeleine *Eneniwe* is less significant (and less meaningful genealogically) than Madeleine *Illinoise*." Personal Communication, Professor Hamill Kenny.

searches among the northern Ojibwa, the surname *Berens* occurred, which was taken from the name of an officer of the Hudson's Bay Company.[11] Therefore, it could be that the surnames *Illinoise* and *Péorias*, like Berens, were primarily names of association and identification.

It might be suggested that these surnames were given in order better to keep track of the movements of Indians, by knowing of the tribe of origin. This does not seem reasonable. These surnames were almost never used or referred to after the date of marriage and were probably a matter of formality the Jesuits insisted on so as to make the marriage Christian (or European). Furthermore, naming someone "Nipissing" would not have been very useful in the seventeenth century. Not only were these tribes considerably nomadic, but often heterogeneous.[12] In the 1670's, for example, Hurons, Ottawas, Ojibwas, Nipissings and Cree often lived together, moving with the shifting fur trade.

It is also not likely that surnames were given to designate the woman as an inferior being, i.e., Indian. Although many Frenchmen and half-breeds went native, many half-breeds and Indian women lived in French communities, as the early histories of Mackinac, Detroit, Duluth, and Chicago demonstrate. Indians and half-breeds were certainly not unusual in the Quebec-Montreal vicinity. Benjamin Sulte, a prominent French-Canadian historian, wrote of this attitude towards half-breeds:

> Their children make up the most intrepid population, the best physically formed of all of North America.[13]

Professor Kenny raises an interesting question by pointing out the Indian name-taboo: "The literal meaning of an Indian personal name ... is usually an Indian's secret."[14] This was the typical Indian attitude towards names, and partially accounts for the

[11] Personal communication, Professor A. Irving Hallowell.

[12] Professor Kenny (personal communication) brings attention to a modern naming practice that does not materially differ from the problem under consideration: many people now carry such surnames as French, Ireland, Scott, English, Spain.

[13] Benjamin Sulte, *Histoire des Canadiens-Français* (8 vols., Montreal, 1882–83), III, 99.

[14] Personal communication, Professor Hamill Kenny.

popularity of nicknames among the North American tribes. Grinnell reports of a western Algonquian tribe:

> A Blackfoot will never tell his name if he can avoid it. He believes that if he should speak his name, he would be unfortunate in all his undertakings.[15]

Therefore, even if there were French pressure to translate literally the female names at time of marriage, it is doubtful that the Indian women would have cooperated fully.

This writer believes that the surnames represent tribal origin because that was the most obvious name to give these women. True, the Frenchmen responsible for these Indian surnames were not very imaginative, but neither were they very creative concerning their own personal names and surnames. To read a list of seventeenth century French personal names is to read monotonously of Jean, François, and Joseph; Jeanne, Françoise, and Josephte. Furthermore, this was not peculiarly a French characteristic. As recently as the last century, personal names in the United States were very limited in number.

In a 1963 article by this writer it was shown that the names John, James and William were among the most popular in the 1860's, and they still rank high in frequency in the 1960's. Yet, out of 550 names from an 1860 list, John appeared 51 times; in the 1960 list, John appeared only 31 times.[16] In other words, the variety of personal names is a relatively recent occurrence. This earlier lack of variety was not limited to personal names, nor to the United States. An analysis of French-Canadian surnames also demonstrates that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a very limited number of surnames compared to modern times.[17] Therefore, the monotonous list of Indian women surnamed *Sau-*

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[15] George Bird Grinnell, *Blackfoot Lodge Tales* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), p. 194. Freuchen discusses this same attitude among the Eskimo, in Peter Freuchen, *I Sailed with Rasmussen* (New York: The Viking Press, 1961), pp. 69–70.

[16] Donald C. Chaput, "What Were They Called? Name Changes Since the Civil War," *Michigan History*, XLIII (Dec. 1963), pp. 335–337.

[17] French Canadian surnames still have little variety; many of the names can be easily traced to a radix. For example, the surname Sédilot is the parent for Sédilau, Cédilaut, Céduleau, Cédilot, Cédilette, Cédilo, etc.

teuse, *Péorias* and *Huronne* is very consistent with seventeenth century naming practices.

A further example of this lack of imagination is the surname *Nègre* in early French Canadian history. Drouin lists seven males surnamed *Nègre* (Negro). Five of them were married to females surnamed *Négresse*.[18] Since no parents were listed for any of these people, all of whom were obviously part of the very small Negro population in Montreal, the easiest name to give them was Negro (*Nègre* or *Négresse*). So too with the aborigines; more were named *Sauvagesse* (Indian) than any other name. And, if one were Huron, what more appropriate surname than *Huronne*?

The following list is representative of the names discussed in this article. They are taken from two of the most respected geneological works: Cyprien Tanguay's *Dictionnaire généalogique des Familles Canadiennes* and Gabriel Drouin's *Dictionnaire National des Canadiens Français*. The names merit mention in these works on the basis of verifiable marriage documents, the verification being primarily ecclesiastical, secondarily civil.

Parentheses ( ) indicate information supplied by Tanguay or Drouin. Brackets [ ] enclose comments by the author. The locations mentioned refer to the place of marriage. Some of these are shown here to illustrate the wide area of contact, or to aid in further identifying a surname.

NAME	LOCATION
Suzette Sauvage	Mackinac
Algonquin Sauvagesse	
Anna Micmac	
Marie Catherine Péorias (Illinoise)	
Anastasie Nipissing	Mackinac
Madeleine Illinoise	
Marie Madeleine Panise (Sauvagesse)	Beauport
Marie A8endea[19] (Onontaise) [Onondaga]	

[18] Gabriel Drouin, *Dictionnaire National des Canadiens Français* (2 vols., Montreal, 1958), II 992.

[19] The character *8*, used often by early French explorers and missionaries, is most accurately read as *w*.

Marie Charlotte Sauteuse [Ojibwa]	
Marie Madeleine Panis	
Marie Françoise Illinoise	
Marie Anne Sauvagesse	
(husband's name, Pierre "*le sauvage*" Gagnon)	
Madeleine Algonquine	
Suzanne Panis	
Marguerite Panise	
Nipissing Sauvagesse [wife of Jean Nicolet]	Lake Nipissing
Marie Jeanne Mighissens-8ta8oise [Ottawa]	Mackinac
Marguerite Algonquine	
Marie Sauvagesse	Quebec
(daughter of Chief Jean-Baptiste Nanabesa)	
Marie Angelique Iroquoise	
Marie Sauvagesse (Micmac)	
Marie Josephte 8atagamie [Fox]	
Catherine Annennontak (*huronne*)	
Marie Pani8ensa	Kaskaskia
Catherine Kinii8na	
[possibly Keweenaw (Michigan)]	
Dorothée la Sauvagesse	
Catherine Ananonta (*Huronne*)	
Marie Jeanne Sauteuse [Ojibwa]	Sault Ste. Marie
Marie Josephte Nipissing	Mackinac
Isabelle Panise	