

“Give Us a Little Milk”

Bruce M. White

GIFT GIVING was an essential custom followed by both Indians and Europeans to pursue trade and diplomatic relations in North America during the 18th and 19th centuries. Historical studies of this custom, however, have concentrated on European motives and machinations: historians have equated it with bribery and have suggested that it was introduced by Europeans. But why did fur traders give gifts at all? How did this expensive social act creep into what has usually been portrayed as merely an exercise in capitalism? One plausible explanation for the widespread use of gift giving lies in its social and cultural meanings for American Indians. A promising area in which to seek answers is the Lake Superior region, where the Ojibway Indians were the focus of important and long-lasting relations with the French, British, and Americans.¹

What was it about the meanings of gifts in Ojibway culture that made their use important in trade and diplomacy? First, a trader arriving in the Lake Superior country to set himself up in business was one of only a few Europeans living far away from home in that foreign land. To his intended producers and customers, the Ojibway, he was a stranger, potentially either an enemy or a friend. In order to do business, the trader had to prove to the Indians that he was trustworthy; he also had to make sure that he could trust these people with whom he wanted to trade. He needed to establish a reciprocal confidence that would minimize the risks on both sides.

The trader could not use European methods to do this. He could not, for example, take the Indians before a notary to sign legal contracts, for there were no written laws and no courts to enforce them. Rather, the trader had to make an agreement with the Ojibway on their

own terms, using Indian techniques to establish a binding relationship. The most common way was gift giving.

On the simplest level the Ojibway, like many other cultural groups, believed that tangible objects could be used to signify feelings. The traveler Johann Georg Kohl, who visited Lake Superior in the 1850s, recorded a fur trader's belief that for the Ojibway giving gifts was a necessary way of demonstrating one person's esteem for another: "If you say to one of them 'I love thee,'" wrote Kohl, "have a present ready to hand, to prove your love clearly. You will lose in their sight if a present, or some tangible politeness, does not follow on such an assurance. But it is often sufficient to hand them the plate

¹The author thanks Deborah L. Miller, Roger Buffalohead, Donald F. Bibeau, and Trevor Barnes for their valuable advice and criticism during the writing of this article.

Gift giving in diplomacy is described in Wilbur R. Jacobs, *Wilderness Politics and Indian Gifts: The Northern Colonial Frontier, 1748-1763* (Lincoln, Neb., 1967). Fur-trade gift giving is mentioned in Wilcomb E. Washburn, "Symbol, Utility, and Aesthetics in the Indian Fur Trade," in Dale L. Morgan, *et al.*, *Aspects of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the 1965 North American Fur Trade Conference*, 50 (St. Paul, 1967). On the supposed European origins of gift giving, see Ida Amanda Johnson, *The Michigan Fur Trade*, 65 (Lansing, Mich., 1919).

Bruce White, an editor with the Minnesota Historical Society, wrote this article while he was on a sabbatical leave awarded through the MHS Charles E. Flandrau Research Fund. An earlier version of this was given as a paper at the 1981 Fourth North American Fur Trade Conference held at Grand Portage and Old Fort William, Ontario.

0026-5497-82/0014-60 \$01.75/0

The Social and Cultural Meanings of Gift Giving in the Lake Superior Fur Trade

from which you have been eating, and on which you have left a fragment for them."²

Gifts also aided in establishing and affirming more elaborate relationships. Depending on the situations in which they were given and on the words and ceremonies that accompanied them, gifts communicated something about what each partner to the relationship wanted.

Among the Ojibway the family or kin group served as the basic producer and distributor of goods and services. The parents did not exert the same kind of authoritarian power over their children that European parents might have, and in a very real sense family members' roles were defined less by authority than by the ways in which

²Johann Georg Kohl, *Kitchi-Gami: Wanderings round Lake Superior*, 133 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1956). To allow someone to eat from your plate is an intimate gesture characteristic of family life. The implications of this are discussed below.

³This is neither an argument for nor against theories of the "atomistic" social organization of the Ojibway discussed in Harold Hickerson, *The Southwestern Chippewa: An Ethnohistorical Study*, 9-11 (American Anthropological Association, *Memoir 92* — Menasha, Wis., 1962); Victor Barnouw, *Wisconsin Chippewa Myths & Tales and Their Relation to Chippewa Life*, 5-8 (Madison, Wis., 1977). To argue that the family was the basic unit of organization among the Ojibway is not to suggest that there were not other important institutions of society. What is proposed here is that the family provided a metaphor for other more extensive links between individuals in Ojibway life. On parental authority see Peter Jones, *History of the Ojibway Indians*, 67 (London, 1861).

⁴Ruth Landes, *Ojibwa Sociology*, 27 (New York, 1937).

⁵Landes, *Ojibwa Sociology*, 43; Sister M. Inez Hilger, *Chippewa Child Life and Its Cultural Background*, 155 (Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin 146* — Washington, D.C., 1951).

they cared for, or were cared for by, others in the family. Infants were fed at their mother's breast. When they were weaned the father or elder brothers provided them with meat and clothing by hunting and fishing, and the mother or elder sisters might also fish and trap, harvest agricultural products, prepare the food, and make the clothing. The parents' role when the offspring were young was reversed when the grown children took care of old and feeble parents.³

The flow of goods and services along family lines was not limited to the nuclear family, although the extent of participation by cousins, uncles, aunts, grandfathers, and grandmothers in the family's material life might vary. Once an individual had grown up and married, many new patterns of exchange would be established, and these also might vary. In any case, marriage would probably broaden a person's economic possibilities and obligations.⁴

Another extension of material relationships was the *dodem* or totem. Every child inherited his father's totem through which he was related to a wide variety of individuals in his own and other Ojibway communities around Lake Superior. These people, whom he would address as "brother" and "sister," were an important set of relatives to whom he could appeal when in need and to whom he himself would be obligated should they be without closer kin nearby.⁵

WHAT then did this social pattern have to do with the dealings between Ojibway who were not related, as well as with the society-wide institutions of trade and diplomacy in which the Ojibway confronted non-Indian societies? Since the exchange of goods and services was

basically a function of kinship, it appeared that the flow of these goods and services taking place outside the bonds of kinship was structured in kinship terms.

In such nonfamilial circumstances the bond would be invented, not inherited. The power and extent of these new relationships were based on the degree in which they could be made to resemble the social and economic relations that existed among family members. To have relationships with someone in a material sense was to be related in a metaphorical sense. John Tanner, a white man adopted by an Ottawa family, found this to be true when he and his adoptive kin were in need west of Lake Superior in the early 1800s. An Ojibway family took them into its lodge, offering to care for and feed them during the winter. Later on, said Tanner, whenever he or his Ottawa family saw any member of the other family, they would call them "brothers" and treat them like relatives.⁶

On the other hand, if one person wished to establish with another a close relationship that encompassed all those rights and obligations found most clearly in the family, he would turn to a tangible definition of such bonds and give gifts. In recent times, anthropologist Ruth Landes noted that, among the Ojibway of western Ontario, if a person wanted to adopt someone else, the relationship would be partly affirmed by gift giving. One of Landes' female informants told of being adopted by an older woman: "She took me for her daughter after her daughter's death, and she called me by her daughter's name. She asked me if she could not have me for a daughter. I said it was alright and I called her 'mother.' She gave me things and I gave her things as I would to my own mother." When the woman's husband died, her adopted mother helped provide gifts to her husband's family in a practice known as "paying off the mourning."⁷

Gifts made for a close relationship, just as a close relationship would result in gifts being given. If you wished to receive or to present goods to someone, you would address the other person as your brother, sister, father, or mother. A mixed-blood named William Johnston, who traded near Leech Lake in 1833, offered an example of this in the hospitality shown him by several Ojibway: "The Indians claimed relationship with me, from some remarks that I made, and that since I had the same totem I should partake of what they had: They gave me a bag of Rice." It was Johnston's mother who was Ojibway; since the totem was usually inherited through the father, the Indians may have invented the relationship with Johnston to explain their kindness.⁸

Crucial to certain kinds of gift giving and their meaning in the idiom of kinship was a concept that has been translated as "pity" or "charity." These words occur not only in transcripts of Ojibway meetings with traders and European diplomats but also in more modern ethno-

graphic texts. Landes wrote that "In Ojibwa idiom, to 'pity' another is to adopt him and care for him as a parent or grandparent cares for a child." To give someone a gift with no thought of an immediate return was to "pity" him and thus in a sense to adopt him. This idea was applied not only to relationships between persons but also to those between humans and supernatural beings. A child fasting in search of a vision, for example, sought to evoke the interest of a supernatural spirit. By fasting he made himself "pitiful," hoping to obtain a long-term relationship with a spirit being. Later on, if he were in need, perhaps because of poor luck in hunting, he could call upon his spiritual "grandfather" or "grandmother" for help. One old man described his vision quest to John Tanner: "When I was yet a little boy, the Great Spirit came to me, after I had been fasting for 3 days, and told me he had heard me crying, and had come to tell me that he did not wish to hear me cry and complain so often, but that if ever I was reduced to the danger of immediately perishing of hunger, then I should call upon him, and he would hear and give me something."⁹

The Ojibway endowed the animals they hunted with human qualities, frequently addressing them in terms of kinship. The trader Alexander Henry, the elder, who lived with the Ojibway family of Wawatam near Michilimackinac in the winter of 1763-64, discovered that the killing of a bear was an occasion for elaborate ceremony and feasting. As soon as Henry had shot the bear, some of the Ojibway took its head "in their hands, stroking and kissing it several times; begging a thousand pardons for taking away her life; calling her their relation and grandmother; and requesting her not to lay the fault upon them, since it was truly an Englishman that had put her to death."¹⁰

⁶Edwin James, ed., *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, 24 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1956).

⁷Landes, *Ojibwa Sociology*, 16, 17. See also Hilger, *Child Life*, 34.

⁸William Johnston, "Letters on the Fur Trade 1833," in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 37:177 (Lansing, 1909, 1910).

⁹Ruth Landes, *The Ojibwa Woman*, 6 (New York, 1938). See also Johnston, in *Michigan Pioneer and Historical Collections*, 37:182; James, ed., *John Tanner*, 143.

Here and throughout this article, English translations of Ojibway words and speeches are used; unfortunately there are no Indian versions of most of these documents. In using these translations, the author assumes that there is a fair accuracy on the part of the translator and that the consistencies found in many of these translations are not accidental but are a reflection of real consistencies in the original Ojibway terminology and the ideas in back of them. Work with modern Ojibway informants by researchers skilled in the Ojibway language may be the only way to deal linguistically with the issues presented here.

¹⁰Here and two paragraphs below, see Alexander Henry, *Travels and Adventures in Canada and the Indian Territories*,



ALEXANDER HENRY, *the elder*

Back at their lodge, the Ojibway took part in ceremonial gift giving designed to allay the bear's anger. "As soon as we reached the lodge," wrote Henry, "the bear's head was adorned with all the trinkets in the possession of the family, such as silver arm-bands and wrist-bands, and belts of wampum; and then laid upon a scaffold.

Near the nose, was placed a large quantity of tobacco.

"The next morning preparations were made for a feast to the manes [*bear spirits*]. The lodge was cleaned and swept; and the head of the bear lifted up, and a new stroud blanket spread under it. The pipes were

73, 143, 144 (Reprint ed., New York, 1976). See also Landes, *Ojibwa Woman*, 15. Wawatam was an Ojibway whom Henry had first met at Michilimackinac and who adopted the trader as a brother soon after the two met.

¹¹ Hilger, *Child Life*, 47, 92.

¹² Thomas L. McKenney, *Sketches of a Tour to the Lakes*, 462 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1959). The spelling of Ojibway names throughout this article follows that in the cited source; variations may be found in Newton H. Winchell, *The Aborigines of Minnesota: A Report*, 707-731 (St. Paul, 1911).

¹³ For a discussion of the roots of traditional Ojibway authority, see James G. E. Smith, *Leadership among the Southwestern Ojibwa*, 17 (National Museums of Canada, National Museum of Man, *Publications in Ethnology*, no. 7 — Ottawa, 1973). The words "chief" and "leader" are used interchangeably here to mean a person of influence rather than an individual with coercive power.

now lit; and Wawatam blew tobacco-smoke into the nostrils of the bear, telling me to do the same, and thus appease the anger of the bear, on account of my having killed her."

As this description indicates, one gift given in such exchanges was tobacco. The importance of tobacco as a way of reconciling people and spiritual beings was evident in Ojibway society into the 20th century. Ethnographer Inez Hilger, after interviewing Ojibway on a variety of reservations in Wisconsin and Minnesota, compared the role of smoking to praying. She quoted an interpreter discussing a Lac Courte Oreille man's spiritual guardian: "Lighting a pipe is the same as praying, for when he lights his pipe he asks his helper to help him." Hilger also cited the words of an Ojibway woman who, taking a root cutting from a plant for medicinal use, placed a small amount of tobacco with the remaining roots, saying, "I'll take just a little for my use, and here is some tobacco for you!"¹¹

This use of tobacco reflected the fundamental role of smoking in mediation among individuals in Ojibway society. Peezhikee (Buffalo), an early 19th-century leader at La Pointe, Wisconsin, described clearly the importance of tobacco at an 1826 treaty meeting with United States government treaty commissioners. He compared his own authority with that of the government agents: "You are strong [enough] to make your young men obey you. But we have no way, *Fathers*, to make our young men listen, but by the pipe."¹²

GIFT GIVING, as shown in these examples, was an important factor in Ojibway life. Linked specifically to the idiom of kinship, it was used in a variety of human, animal, and spiritual relationships. It remains to show how it extended to the Indians' associations with people outside their society.

Many examples can be found in their dealings with their neighbors, the Dakota. Although warfare between the two groups often occurred, there were also occasions when they made peace. In a society with no central authority and where chieftainship was the result of winning public support through persuasion, the process of peacemaking often consisted of individual Ojibway making friends with individual Dakota.¹³

When groups of Ojibway hunters traveled into territory occupied by the Dakota, they might turn their potential enemies into friends by an exchange of goods as well as a mutual smoking of tobacco in a calumet. One special kind of exchange involved clothing. A well-known painting of the Ojibway leader Okeemakeequid in Thomas L. McKenney's and James Hall's Indian portrait collection shows the result of such an exchange. He is dressed not in Ojibway costume but in the garb of a Dakota warrior obtained during negotiations at the United States-sponsored treaty of 1825 held at Prairie du

Chien. Okeemakeequid and a Dakota exchanged their clothing, and the Dakota called him "brother."¹⁴

Eight years later William Johnston, trading at Leech Lake, reported: "Ten canoes arrived[.] The Principle [sic] Chief among the number and two of the young warriors, were drest in Sioux dresses[.] While hunting they met the Sioux, who came up, and extended the hand of friendship: and to ratify it, as is their custom they exchanged all there [sic] articles of clothing." The two incidents show that by making this even trade the two individuals established a relationship, however little binding on other members of their societies, in which each renounced his own self-interest. In the process they ceased being enemies and became brothers and friends.¹⁵

Another, possibly more permanent, kind of exchange by which the Ojibway and Dakota made peace with each other was intermarriage. As anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has clearly shown, intermarriage can be an important way for two societies, by joining their kin groups, to establish a reciprocity of trust and allow many other peaceful exchanges to take place. Describing a period in the early 1700s, historian William Warren noted: "On the St. Croix the two tribes intermingled freely. They encamped together, and intermarriages took place between them." Warren told of one case where the daughter and only child of a leader of the Rice Lake, Wisconsin, band of Ojibway married a Dakota chief who belonged to the wolf totem of his tribe. "He resided among the Ojibways at Rice Lake during the whole course of the peace, and begat by his Ojibway wife, two sons who afterward became chiefs, and who of course inherited their father's totem of wolf. In this manner this badge became grafted among the Ojibway list of clans." Another example Warren used was that of two celebrated Indian leaders, Ma-mong-e-se-da, an Ojibway, and Wabasha I, a Dakota. They were half-brothers, sons of an Ojibway woman who married twice.¹⁶

DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS between the Ojibway and representatives of European governments had many of the formal characteristics of the Indians' friendly relationships with each other. Tobacco, food, and hospitality were shared, and goods such as clothing, guns, and household equipment were also given. One special item transcended kinship diplomacy: it was wampum, belts or strings of shell beads, and it served as a record of transactions in diplomatic exchanges between tribes as well as with Europeans. Wampum represented in an enduring way the words spoken in an encounter. When two parties had not met face to face, wampum, accompanied by a speech delivered by a messenger, could initiate a transaction. The speech came to be called by the French word *parole*, and the wampum was the tangible, physical manifestation of the message. It was preserved and

honored just as were the written treaties that Europeans professed to respect so much. If someone were not interested in making an agreement or did not accept the substance of the *parole*, he would refuse the wampum and any other gifts, just as European governments might refuse to sign treaties or accept diplomatic notes.¹⁷

Another feature of Ojibway-European diplomacy, however, was somewhat different from the Ojibway-Dakota relations discussed above. While the kinship of brother to brother may have come to typify certain peacemaking efforts of the two Indian groups, it was the relationship of parent to child that often embodied diplomatic relations between European governments and the Ojibway.

It is part of traditional knowledge of Indian-white relations throughout North America that Indians would sometimes refer to a European king, an American president, or a diplomatic agent as "father" and that Europeans similarly called the Indians their "children." Who initially established this metaphor is not known, but the diplomatic idiom fits with what is known about the paternalism of European authority structure just as it coincides with the Ojibway tendency to project the family metaphor onto a multitude of other situations. The key questions are: how did this idiomatic language reflect the aims of the treaty meetings between Europeans and American Indians? How were these purposes reflected in the objects used in accompanying gift exchanges? In the 19th century these meetings usually had to do with land purchase. Looking further back into the 17th and 18th centuries, however, it is clear that European powers in the area of the Great Lakes vied with each other mainly to win Indian loyalty to their military causes.¹⁸

Although it has yet to be shown in a quantified way,

¹⁴Thomas L. McKenney and James Hall, *The Indian Tribes of North America*, 256 (Edinburgh, 1933).

¹⁵Johnston, in *Michigan Pioneer Collections*, 37:186. See also William W. Warren, "History of the Ojibways, Based Upon Traditions and Oral Statements," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 5:265 (St. Paul, 1885); Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 220 (Hawthorne, N.Y., 1976). Sahlins' work, especially his essay "On the Sociology of Primitive Exchange" (185-275), is a very useful guide to understanding the cultural meanings of gift giving.

¹⁶Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 63-68 (Boston, 1969); Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 222; Warren, in *Collections*, 5:164, 219.

¹⁷[John] Long, *Voyages and Travels of an Indian Interpreter and Trader*, 47 (Reprint ed., Toronto, 1974).

¹⁸See Jacobs, *Wilderness Politics*, 11. Michael Paul Rogin examines the diplomatic parent-child metaphor and its role in United States Indian policy in his work *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York, 1976). His discussion of the paternalism of European and American authority is useful (19-26), but his statement that the family metaphor "was not an Indian conceit but a white one" (209) is based on little evidence.

the Europeans apparently did the bulk of the gift giving in many of these diplomatic transactions, just as in the family group it was initially the father who gave to the child. In effect, then, such gifts became an expression of the role Europeans sought to play in relation to the Indians. Indians gave many gifts of furs and ceremonial presents during these exchanges. But they did not necessarily give tangible, equal presents in an economic sense, as in the peace talks between Ojibway and Dakota. Their gift was something more profound — the loyalty that a child feels toward the parent, a long-term tie that was expressed by a defense of the parent against insult and violence and a willingness to avenge an attack. The result was a military alliance cast in kinship terms.

The meaning that this metaphorical kinship had for the Ojibway is evident in the rich and significant speech given by one leader, Minavavana, to Alexander Henry at Michilimackinac shortly after the fall of Quebec in 1761: "Englishman, you know that the French king is our father. He promised to be such; and we, in return, promised to be his children.—This promise we have kept.¹⁹

"Englishman, it is you that have made war with this our father. You are his enemy; and how, then, could you have the boldness to venture among us, his children?—You know that his enemies are ours.

"Englishman, our father, the king of France, employed our young men to make war upon your nation. In this warfare, many of them have been killed; and it is our custom to retaliate, until such time as the spirits of the slain are satisfied. But, the spirits of the slain are to be satisfied in either of two ways: the first is by the spilling of the blood of the nation by which they fell; the other, by covering the bodies of the dead [in new clothing and ornaments before burial], and thus allaying the resentment of their relations. This is done by making presents.

"Englishman, your king has never sent us any presents, nor entered into any treaty with us, wherefore he and we are still at war; and, until he does these things, we must consider that we have no other father, nor friend, among the white men, than the king of France; but, for you, we have taken into consideration, that you have ventured your life among us, in the expectation that we should not molest you. You do not come armed, with an intention to make war; you come in peace, to trade with us, and supply us with necessaries, of which we are in much want. We shall regard you, therefore, as a brother; and you may sleep tranquilly, without fear of the Chipeways.—As a token of our friendship we present you with this pipe, to smoke."

¹⁹ Here and three paragraphs below, see Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 43–45.

²⁰ Here and four paragraphs below, see Edward D. Neill, "History of the Ojibways and Their Connection with Fur Traders," in *Minnesota Historical Collections*, 5:480.



AN unidentified Ojibway mother is shown carrying her child in this colored lithograph based on a water color painted at the Treaty of Fond du Lac in 1826.

For the Ojibway this parent-child idiom was the function of a particular type of diplomatic contact with European governments. The Ojibway might reject the use of the metaphor when whites attempted to impose it on a relationship that did not fit it. In 1832 Eschkebugecushe (Flat Mouth) of Leech Lake objected when Indian agent Henry R. Schoolcraft in a speech to the assembled warriors of his band called them "children." "You call us children. We are not children, but men," he insisted. He criticized the American government for failing to enforce the agreement it had brought about between the Ojibway and Dakota at Prairie du Chien in 1825.²⁰

"Our great father promised us, when we smoked the pipe with the Sioux at Prairie du Chien in 1825, and at

Fond du Lac in 1826, that the first party who crossed the line, and broke the treaty, should be punished. This promise has not been fulfilled. I do not think the Great Spirit ever made us to sit still and see our young men, our wives, and our children murdered.

"Since we have listened to the Long Knives [*American soldiers*], we have not prospered. They are not willing we should go ourselves, and flog our enemies, nor do they fulfill their promise and do it for us."

Laying at Schoolcraft's feet the medals of all the Leech Lake leaders and a string of wampum given to him previously by the Americans, Eschkebugecoshe went on: "These and all your letters are stained with blood. I return them all to you to make them bright. None of us wish to receive them back until you have wiped off the blood.

"The words of the Long Knives have passed through our forests as a rushing wind, but they have been words merely. They have only shaken the trees, but have not stopped to break them down, nor even to make the rough places smooth."

ESCHKEBUGECOSHE (Flat Mouth), a Leech Lake Ojibway leader, as he appeared in 1855



Eschkebugecoshe's objection to the term "children" appeared to have had little to do with resentment at being treated like children. Instead he seemed to resent being called "children" by a representative of the "Great Father," who had not kept the obligations of this metaphorical parenthood defined in the treaty at Prairie du Chien. Eschkebugecoshe rejected not only the term of address but also the representations of the government's words, the medals, and the strings of wampum. Were the government to validate its words through actions, perhaps someone like Schoolcraft would again be able to call the Indians "children," for then the words would not be empty or hypocritical.

SIR WILLIAM JOHNSON, a member of the British Indian department in the early 1760s, recognized better than most Europeans the importance of gift giving. The year after the Ojibway-led attack on Michilimackinac in 1763, Johnson sent a messenger to the western Great Lakes with a wampum belt and a speech inviting the Indians to a feast at Fort Niagara and promising them presents that would establish the tangible concern of the British government.²¹

Alexander Henry, who was at Sault Ste. Marie when Johnson's messenger arrived, helped to persuade the Ojibway to accept the spirit of Johnson's words and accompanied a group eastward. Henry described an incident that took place en route which graphically showed what the Ojibway expected of Johnson and helped to place this act of diplomacy in the context of other types of exchanges that occurred in Ojibway society. One day Henry discovered a rattlesnake not more than two feet from his naked legs. He ran to get his gun.

"The Indians, on their part, surrounded it, all addressing it by turns, and calling it their *grandfather*; but yet keeping at some distance," wrote Henry. "During this part of the ceremony, they filled their pipes; and now each blew the smoke toward the snake, who, as it appeared to me, really received it with pleasure. In a word, after remaining coiled, and receiving incense, for the space of half an hour, it stretched itself along the ground, in visible good humour. at last it moved slowly away, the Indians following it, and still addressing it by the title of grand-father, beseeching it to take care of their families during their absence, and to be pleased to open the heart of Sir William Johnson, so that he might *show them charity*, and fill their canoe with rum."

It is significant that these Ojibway should have associated rum with "charity," for in diplomatic dealings between the Ojibway and the Europeans rum, brandy, whisky, or other forms of alcohol seem to have crystal-

²¹ Here and two paragraphs below, see Arthur Pound, *Johnson of the Mohawks, A Biography*, 404-409 (New York, 1930); Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 176.

lized the idiom of kinship more than any of the other gifts. The names given alcohol are important. Although it was known in nondiplomatic situations by a term translated as "firewater," when it was given away by European government agents in a ceremonial way, the Ojibway referred to it as "milk," meaning mother's milk.²²

One could postulate various psychological explanations for this metaphor. For example, under the influence of alcohol, a drinker might revert to childish behavior. What also of the possible associations between sucking from glass bottles — in which rum was sometimes given to the Ojibway — and sucking from a breast?

There are also possible ironies in the use of the term, "milk." One can imagine the thoughts of the military officers at Drummond Island in 1816 when a noted leader of the Sandy Lake Ojibway, Katawaubetai (Broken Tooth), stood before them and said: "Father — I come from a great distance and have waited patiently in hopes of getting some of your milk to drink but I find you do not seem inclined to let me draw near your breast." What did Thomas McKenney and his fellow commissioners at the treaty of Fond du Lac ten years later think when Peezhikee said: "*Fathers*, — you have many children. But your breasts drop yet. Give us a little milk, *Fathers*, that we may wet our lips."²³

There probably was no better way for the Ojibway leaders to insult the Europeans while at the same time getting what they wanted. In effect, they could be saying: "You call us your children. We do not think so much of you. You are women. Are you our mothers? Then feed us as a mother should." This rich, suggestive image contains many contradictory facets of relations between Europeans and Indians. But the image probably derives from the cultural meanings of mother's milk.

Milk is the first gift that a child receives when he is born. It is no exaggeration to suggest, as Marshall

²²Friedrich Baraga, *A Dictionary of the Ojibwe Language*, 1:216, 2:158 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1969); Alexander Henry, *New Light on the Early History of the Greater Northwest*, 203 (Reprint ed., Minneapolis, 1965).

²³Minutes of Councils (bound volume), July 22, 1816, p. 16, in William McKay Papers, McCord Museum, Montreal; McKenney, *Tour to the Lakes*, 462.

²⁴Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 194. For some the material exchange between mother and child symbolized the relations between all people in a "primitive tribal community." Karl Marx, for example, sees the primitive individual as "man . . . who has not yet severed the umbilical cord that unites him with his fellowmen." Marx, *Capital*, 1:79 (New York, 1977).

²⁵Martha Coleman Bray, ed., *The Journals of Joseph N. Nicollet: A Scientist on the Mississippi Headwaters, with Notes on Indian Life*, 188 (St. Paul, 1970).

²⁶The variety of works which suggest this last possibility is discussed in Donald F. Bibeau's valuable paper, "The Fur Trade from a Tribal Point of View: A Critique," given at the 1981 North American Fur Trade Conference.

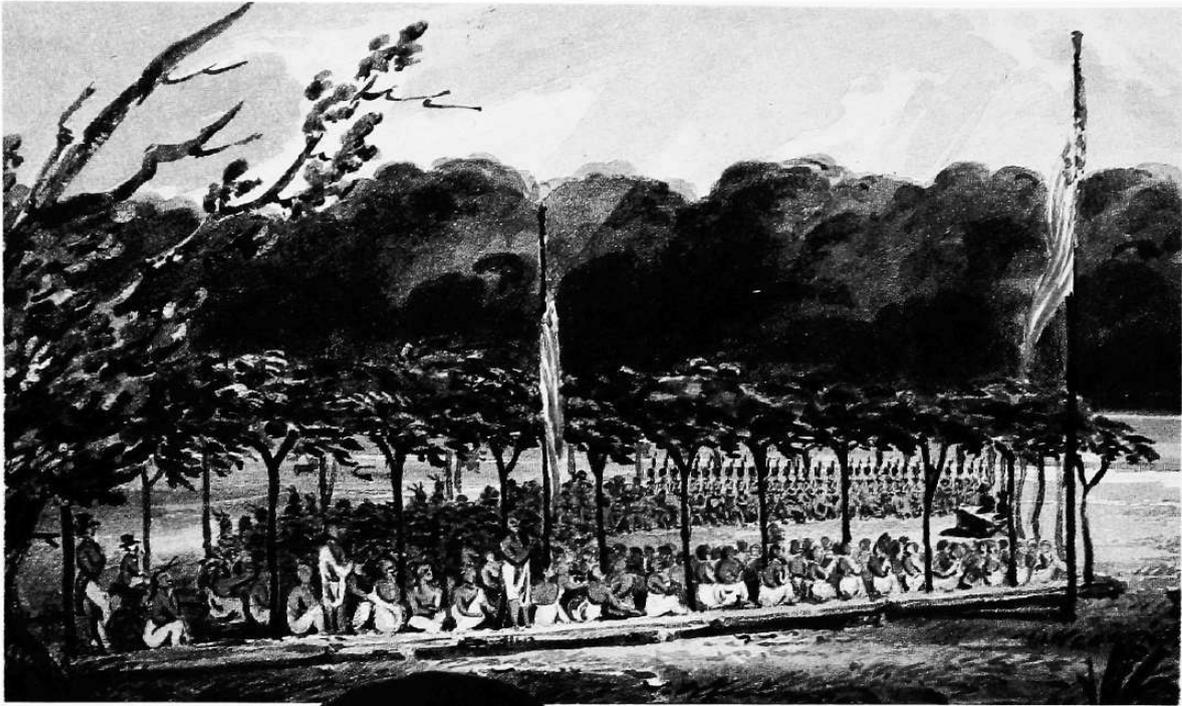
Sahlins has, that it is a prime example of the pure gift. It is the quintessence of all gifts that a parent gives to a child, because it flows freely from the mother to the infant and is given with absolutely no thought of a return gift. The obvious exchange for mother's milk is the loyalty of child to parent, perhaps one of the strongest manifestations of kinship.²⁴

The strength of this image must have been especially powerful for Ojibway society in which mothers nursed their children as long as four years, so that breast feeding might well be a strong memory for all. The geographer and ethnologist Joseph N. Nicollet, who traveled among the Ojibway of the upper Mississippi in 1837, remarked that "One often sees a little boy leave the playground with his bow and arrow, find and unveil his mother's breast, suckle a few moments, then return to his game with his little friends." It is also interesting to note that it was only while she was still nursing the child that an Ojibway mother had any authority over her sons and, in fact, she then had as much authority as the father later had.²⁵

Rum, that valuable European liquid, came to represent mother's milk, the gift that more than any other signified the concern of a parent for her child and the loyalty of a child for his mother. Rum, given in diplomatic dealings, symbolized the seriousness with which the Ojibway and other Indian groups treated these diplomatic transactions; it also demonstrated how the Ojibway could give a foreign product unique meanings far from its original European context. The adoption of European material objects did not, therefore, necessarily endanger the Indians' own cultural values.²⁶

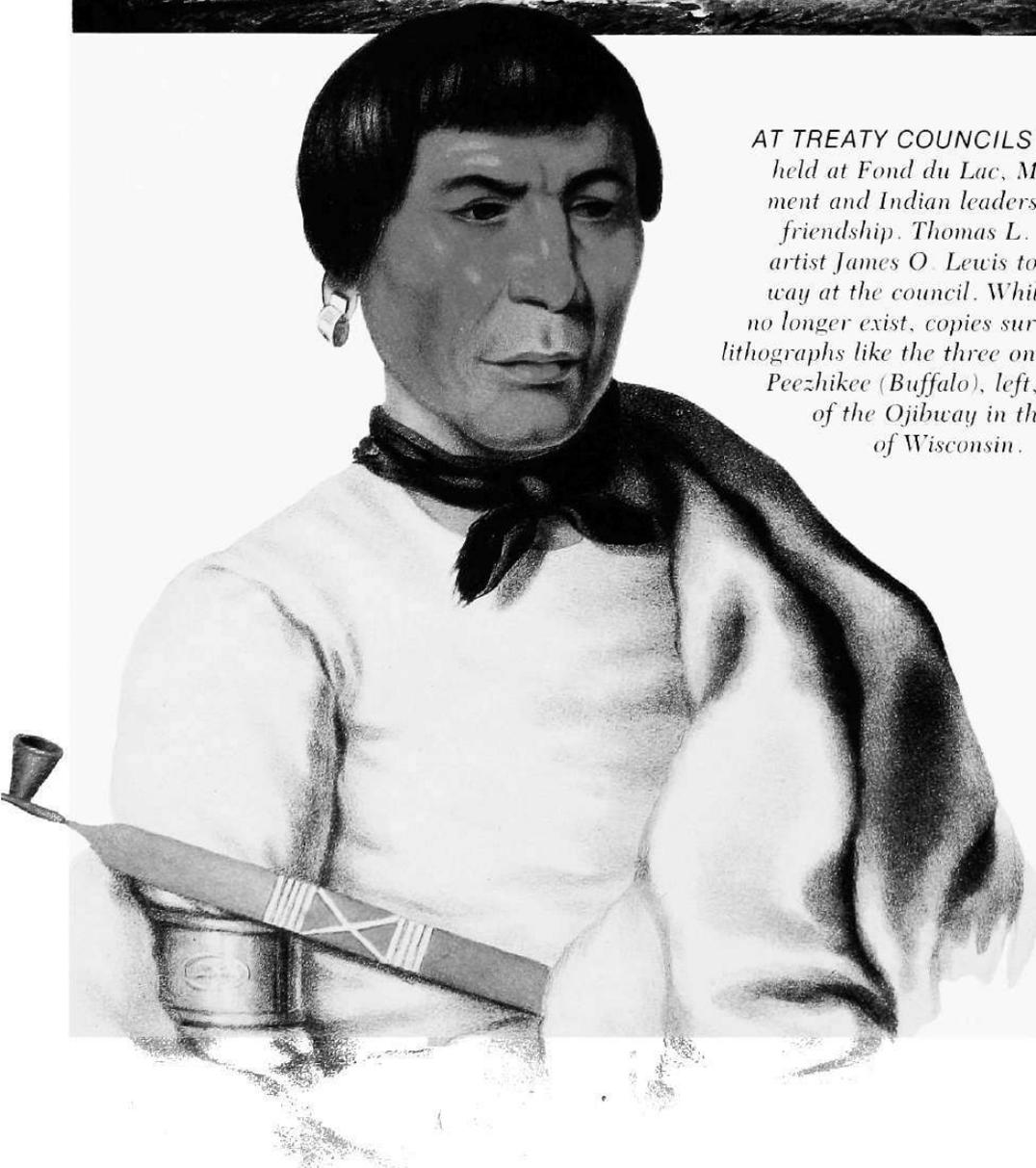
Because rum held this symbolic meaning in diplomatic exchanges with the Ojibway, it would be inaccurate to think that its full significance resided simply in its intoxicating qualities. Who would say the same of the wine which, in Christian communion, becomes the "blood of Christ"?

WHAT evidence associates the metaphorical meanings of rum and other diplomatic gifts with those same gifts used in the fur trade? Is it valid to suggest that they served the same purposes in trade that they did in diplomacy? There was a similarity between the traders' requests of the Indians and those of governments. On the simplest level, the trader was a stranger seeking material exchange with the Indians. To succeed, he had to make an agreement, to establish relationships that resembled family ties. He also wanted to obtain loyalty that would bind the Indians to him and not to another trader. But in this respect the trader did not want to do all the giving; he did not want to be a "father" or "mother" to the Indians. Rather, he wanted reciprocity — the Indians providing furs equal in value to the trade goods he offered. Like the Dakota who exchanged cloth-



AT TREATY COUNCILS like the one above held at Fond du Lac, Minnesota, government and Indian leaders met to cement friendship. Thomas L. McKenney brought artist James O. Lewis to record the Ojibway at the council. While the paintings no longer exist, copies survive as colored lithographs like the three on these pages.

Peezhikee (Buffalo), left, was a leader of the Ojibway in the La Pointe region of Wisconsin.





AN OJIBWAY woman, left, shown breast feeding her child; Katawaubetai (Broken Tooth), a leader of the Big Sandy Lake, Minnesota, band of Ojibway, right

ing with his "brother" Ojibway, the trader wanted to give clothing, blankets, and tools and receive in return the Indian's clothing, the beaver robes that he had worn, as well as all the other furs that he did not wear.

In some ways the fur trade relationship could exactly parallel that between the Indian agent and his "children." Sometimes a large fur company took on the characteristics that one would expect only a government to

²⁷ Here and below, see author's translation from François Victoire Malhiot, *Journal, 1804-05*, September 3, 1804, p. 13, in Rare Books and Special Collections, McGill University Libraries, Montreal.

have had. The Ojibway of Lac du Flambeau, Wisconsin, were in the habit of referring to William McGillivray, one of the chief partners of the North West Company, as their "father." When François Victoire Malhiot arrived there in the winter of 1804-05 as North West trader, his men circulated the rumor that he was McGillivray's brother. The Indians thereupon began addressing him as "father."²⁷

McGillivray, a distant figure who did not come to visit the Ojibway, performed in effect the function of a king or president. It was in McGillivray's name that presents were given at the beginning of the trading

year. The actual exchanges of goods took place with a trader who more nearly represented a brother to them. Perhaps for this reason Malhiot undertook to represent himself not as their father but as an equal to the Ojibway, calling them either his comrades or his relatives. In other ways he sought to capitalize on McGillivray's parental position. For example, Malhiot gave some presents to a chief named l'Outarde (Bustard), saying, "My Relation. The coat which I have just placed upon you is sent by the Great Trader [McGillivray]. It is with this clothing that he honors the most eminent of a nation. This flag is [also] a real mark of a leader with which you must feel honored, since we do not give them to just any Indian. You must be what you are to get one, that is to say, you must love the French [*the mostly French-Canadian traders who represented the company in the area*] the way you do and protect them and help make packs of furs for them. Look at me, all of you, see before you the trader sent to you. I am the one you asked for. I received this summer three *paroles* from the chiefs on the prairies to go back to winter in their land. But I refused them in order to live up to what the Great Trader told you. He sent me here to be charitable toward you but not to be scorned. I am devoted to our fort, protect its doors, and I will carry good news about you all to your Father in the spring."

The smaller companies and independent traders, who were more typical of the Europeans trading among the Ojibway, had little chance to win their loyalty by giving gifts in the name of a Great Trader. Often they merely represented themselves. Yet they used many of the same gifts as North West Company traders. The account of John Long, an independent trader among a group of Ojibway northeast of Lake Nipigon in Ontario in the 1760s, demonstrated the process by which inexperienced traders could be initiated into gift giving by the Ojibway themselves.²⁸

On arrival at his wintering place, Long was greeted by a large band of people and their leader Kesconeek (Broken Arm), who gave him skins, dried meat, fish, and wild rice. In return Long gave them some gifts, but he did not report what they were. Then the Indians went into Long's house. Kesconeek, "standing upright with great dignity in the centre of the tribe," delivered a speech that the trader recorded in both Ojibway and English: "It is true, Father, I and my young men are happy to see you: — as the great Master of Life has sent a trader to take pity on us Savages [*the Ojibway version of this speech gives this word as "Nishimorhay," or Anishinabe, meaning simply people or Indians*], we shall use our best endeavours to hunt and bring you wherewithal to satisfy you in furs, skins, and animal food."

In Long's opinion the speech was as an attempt to "induce me to make them further presents; I indulged them in their expectations, by giving them two kegs of

rum of eight gallons each, lowered with a small proportion of water, according to the usual custom adopted by all traders, five carrots of tobacco, fifty scalping knives, gun-flints, powder, shot, ball, &c. To the women I gave beads, trinkets, &c and to eight chiefs who were in the band, each a North-west gun, a callico [*sic*] shirt, a scalping knife of the best sort, and an additional quantity of ammunition. These were received with a full yo-hah, or demonstration of joy."

In the metaphorical relationship of parent to child, the parent is seen, at least initially, as giving the greater quantity of goods. Thus, when an Ojibway wanted to receive gifts from rather than give gifts to someone, he would, like Kesconeek, address the other as "father" and appeal to his "pity." The Ojibway also sought to evoke the pity of spiritual beings by fasting — a way of showing that he was truly in need of any aid that being might offer. Long may very well have been correct in assuming that Kesconeek wanted the trader to give more presents. But did it necessarily follow that ceremonial demonstrations were made strictly with immediate material return in mind? If an Indian told a trader or a government agent that he was "destitute" and in great need, did this mean that he was simply acquisitive? Was it not also possible that he was interested in establishing a social and political tie with the trader or government agent?²⁹

Such a possibility might put into perspective many accounts of diplomatic and trade meetings between the Ojibway and Europeans in which the latter reported their distinct impression that the Indians were suffering, starving, and greatly dependent on them — perhaps far more than was actually the case. The Europeans may have been confusing objects and what they represented, ignoring the important contextual factors.³⁰

An incident recorded by Alexander Henry, embarking on his first trading voyage west of Lake Superior in 1775, suggests that occasionally the Ojibway claimed to be in need when they were really well off. His description of a typical transaction at Lake of the Woods contained many of the elements found in other such trades, but in this case the trader was just as much in need as the Indians claimed to be.³¹

"From this village," wrote Henry, "we received ceremonious presents. The mode with the Indians is, first to collect all the provisions they can spare, and place them in a heap; after which they send for the trader, and

²⁸ Here and two paragraphs below, see Long, *Voyages and Travels*, 55.

²⁹ Among the Australian Bushmen, for example, to ask someone for something was to show your love for him: Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, 232.

³⁰ See McKenney, *Tour to the Lakes*, 460.

³¹ Here and three paragraphs below, see Henry, *Travels and Adventures*, 243.

address him in a formal speech. They tell him, that the Indians are happy in seeing him return into their country; that they have been long in expectation of his arrival; that their wives have deprived themselves of their provisions, in order to afford him a supply; that they are in great want, being destitute of every thing, and particularly of ammunition and clothing; and that what they most long for, is a taste of his rum, which they uniformly denominate *milk*.

"The present, in return, consisted in one keg of gunpowder, of sixty pounds weight; a bag of shot and another of powder, of eighty pounds each; a few smaller articles, and a keg of rum. The last appeared to be the chief treasure, though on the former depended the greater part of their winter's subsistence.

"In a short time, the men began to drink, while the women brought a further and very valuable present, of twenty bags of rice. This I returned with goods and rum, and at the same time offered more, for an additional quantity of rice. A trade was opened, the women bartering rice, while the men were drinking. Before morning, I had purchased a hundred bags, of nearly a bushel measure each. Without a large quantity of rice, the voyage could not have been prosecuted to its completion."

Were the Indians in this ceremonial exchange saying that without the European's aid they would not be able

³²The behavior of the Ojibway chief Keeshkemun (La Pierre à Affiler) toward his son-in-law, XY trader Simon Chaurette, suggests, however, that ambiguities might still be present in the relationship between father-in-law and son-in-law. Keeshkemun seemed to be Chaurette's ally as long as Chaurette was present. When he was gone, Keeshkemun dealt with Chaurette's rival, Malhiot. See Malhiot, *Journal*, August 5, 1804, p. 6, February 4, 1805, p. 27. Even more distant Indian-trader kinship was useful; trader Michael Cadot, at Lac du Flambeau in the 1780s, derived benefits from the intercession of his wife's uncle, Warren, in *Collections*, 5:302.

³³For more about cultural communication and understanding as important by-products of the fur-trade process, see Bruce M. White, "Parisian Women's Dogs: A Bibliographical Essay on Cross-Cultural Communication and Trade," in Carolyn Gilman, *Where Two Worlds Meet: The Great Lakes Fur Trade*, 120-126 (St. Paul, 1982). There are of course many unanswered questions having to do with the economic impact of gift giving on fur trade rates of exchange and traders' profits. At what point did metaphorical and real kinship become an impossible economic burden? The author is engaged in a study of these problems in relation to the Lake Superior fur trade.

THE ILLUSTRATION of the Treaty of Fond du Lac by Fielding Lucas on p. 68 is reproduced with permission of the American Philosophical Society. The other color photos are from McKenney and Hall's *Indian Tribes of North America*, 1:104, 124], 2:178, 3:158 (Philadelphia, 1842). The pictures on p. 63 and 66 are from the MHS audio-visual library.

to survive? Or were they simply following the etiquette of such encounters as they saw it?

THE POSSIBLE ambiguities in the metaphorical kinship ties that the Ojibway used to establish friendship with strangers are evident. In terms of gift giving, for instance, a trader might function as a "father" or "mother"; in terms of direct trade, the relationship might be that of a "brother." Certainly such contradictions in the relationship might cause some confusion in regard to what each party expected from the other. But the trader might make another more durable bond, possibly assuring more clarity in his relations with the Ojibway, by changing a metaphorical tie into a "real" one. He might marry an Indian woman.

Frequently, the influence and success that a trader had with the Indians corresponded to the strength and renown of his father-in-law. Leading traders often married the daughters of leading Ojibway; in marrying a chief's daughter, the trader gained a powerful ally among his Indian customers. Since the authority of a chief was sometimes the result of extended kinship ties, the trader may have formed actual ties with a larger number of people. The chief's influence over kin and nonkin alike depended largely upon his persuasive abilities — especially his oratory. Thus, through marriage, the trader gained an alliance with a man of demonstrated ability to influence his fellows. The father-in-law became in a sense a diplomatic agent for the trader, useful in persuading his people to be friends and customers.³²

For the chief there were comparable advantages. Allying with a trader could bolster his own influence and power with his people, since the chief would often distribute the gifts that his son-in-law brought each year to trade. In so doing, the leader gave material demonstration of concern for the welfare of the other Indians within his family or within the larger group, showing that he was worthy, generous, and unselfish. These attributes might strengthen his ties to nonkin.

In any case, gift giving was of continuing importance to the fur trader. Marrying into an Indian family did not lessen his obligation to give gifts; it simply provided him with a previously defined kinship network in which to carry on his gift giving. Only by continuing this was the trader's position in this kinship system validated.

Far from being bribery, gift giving — whether in personal relationships, trade, or diplomacy — was an important social act among the Ojibway. Without participating in the process a foreigner, whether he be a diplomat or a trader, could not hope to arrive at his political or economic ends. By their participation, fur traders and diplomats demonstrated more than a superficial understanding of Ojibway culture.³³



Copyright of **Minnesota History** is the property of the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, or email articles, however, for individual use.

To request permission for educational or commercial use, [contact us](#).