

# Natchez Class and Rank Reconsidered

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During the brief period from 1700 to 1731 French missionaries, explorers, and colonial administrators recorded the features of Natchez social life. In 1731 a war with the French led to the surrender and sale into slavery of one sector of the tribe and the dispersal of the remainder, who later were assimilated into the Creek confederacy. In writing the first modern ethnographic reconstruction of Natchez society and culture, Swanton (1911) had to rely upon somewhat fragmentary accounts of the French, principally those of Pénicaut, Du Pratz, Dumont, and Charlevoix (notes on early contacts are supplied in Appendix 2).

The Natchez are the best described ethnographic example of the Temple Mound cultures of the Lower Mississippi valley, whose archeological record dates back to about 700 A.D.<sup>1</sup> As such, they provide the most striking instance of a stratified social system in aboriginal North America.

The historical Natchez villages were scattered along St. Catherine's Creek, which empties westward into the Mississippi River below the present city of Natchez, Mississippi. They comprised a population, in 1700, of about 3,500 persons in nine villages (Swanton 1911: 39-44). Over this population ruled a divine king, the Great Sun,<sup>2</sup> who administered the capital village directly and appointed a number of high officials, including a Head War Chief, a Master of Temple Ceremonies, two peace or treaty chiefs, a maize chief, an official responsible for public works, and four administrators for public festivities. Four of the other villages were each headed by a War Chief appointed from among the Sun nobility, the matrilineal relatives of the Great Sun. Of four lesser villages, one or two were inhabited by remnants of the formerly independent Tioux tribe and had their own village chiefs but were nonetheless under the authority of the Great Sun. In the central or Great Village, the residence of the Great Sun occupied a raised mound situated across the central plaza from a mound and temple devoted to Sun ancestors and the Sun deity. Former Sun rulers and the sacrificial victims who accompanied their death were interred in the temple. Among those sacrificed were a large retinue of lifelong personal servants, assigned as suckling infants to the Great Sun at his birth as an heir to the throne. Royal succession, as in many of the chiefdoms of the Southeast, was matrilineal.

Swanton's (1911) "collated model" of the Natchez social classes, pieced together from the early French accounts, has been a subject of recurrent

interest and discussion among anthropologists for the past half century (see Bibliography). Although the system as Swanton describes it has no analogue in the ethnographic literature, it is still widely accepted as a classic ethnographic interpretation (Hoebel 1949, 1966; Driver 1961; Stern in Spencer, Jennings *et al.* 1965; Eggan 1966; Brain 1971). It nevertheless remains an unsatisfactory account because of ambiguities surrounding the principles of descent and class membership. This paper brings to light new evidence which supports an interpretation contrary to Swanton's reconstruction.

### Swanton's Class Interpretation

The Natchez class system, in Swanton's (1911: 100-108) formulation, was composed of a nobility divided into Suns, Nobles, and Honored People, and a class of commoners. Marriage was exogamous for all members of the nobility, who nonetheless sometimes referred to commoners as "Stinkards" (Swanton, unfortunately, did so consistently). Members of all three noble classes, both male and female, married commoners. The commoners, numerically predominant in the population, also married among themselves. The inheritance of class membership, in Swanton's interpretation, was matrilineal, with the exception that the children of Sun fathers were Noble, and the children of Noble fathers were Honored. Only in the case of the Suns, however, was noble status determined exclusively by heredity. Swanton (1911: 107) cites a statement from Du Pratz that the sons of Noble men, upon falling to the rank of Honored men, "might by their warlike exploits be able to reascend to the rank of Nobles, but their children again became Honored men, and the children of these Honored men, as well as those of the others, were lost in the people and placed in the rank of Stinkards." Nor was the title of Honored purely hereditary. Dumont, cited by Swanton (1911: 104), says:

With regard to the Honored men . . . besides birth there are other means by which a Stinkard may raise himself to this degree of nobility in the nation.

Honored rank could be achieved by a Stinkard man by acts of valor in war, or by his participation in the ritual sacrifice of a relative at the mortuary ceremonies of a Sun, or, if he was married, by the sacrifice of his infant.

From the evidence available in Swanton (1911), there is no doubt about the perpetuation of the royal Sun matriline and about descent from the Sun Chiefs in the male line. The French sources agree that the sons of Sun men were Noble men, the sons of Noble men were Honored men, and the sons of Honored men were commoners. However, subsequent discussions of the Natchez (MacLeod 1924; Hart 1943; Tooker 1963; Stern 1965) raised doubts as to the correctness of Swanton's inferences outside of the royal matriline and the agnatic line descending from male Suns. For three components of the descent system in particular, there remains a great deal of ambiguity: (1) do matrilines within the Sun class that are collateral to the royal line remain Suns in perpetuity? (MacLeod, 1924: 205-207); (2) of what affiliation is the daughter of a male Noble—an Honored woman (MacLeod 1924: 204) or a commoner? (Hart 1943: 382); and (3) of what affiliation are the children of an Honored woman? (Tooker

1963: 366; Stem 1965: 414; Hart 1943: 382).

Swanton's interpretation is defective in that his resolutions to the first and second of the foregoing questions are at least partially contradicted by statements in the original sources, and the sources are ambiguous on the third. Swanton did not offer any positive evidence whatever that Sun lines collateral to the royalty are Suns in perpetuity, that the daughter of a male Noble is an Honored woman, or that the children of an Honored woman are themselves Honored. Yet his "collated model" is dependent upon these assumptions.

#### A Logical Defect: The Natchez Paradox

In societies with segmented social organization, as Hart (1943: 376) pointed out, "the possibility of one of the segments becoming decreased in size through the demands made upon it by the local rules of marriage and descent" is generally "guarded against by the incorporation in rules of same form of symmetry." Swanton's model of the essentials of the Natchez system of marriage and descent, as it would operate over time if all marriages had an equal chance of reproduction, violates Hart's principle of demographic symmetry. Under conditions of equal biological reproduction in marriage, the numbers of Nobles and Honoreds would burgeon in successive generations, and the commoner class would be depleted until the system ultimately reached the point where commoners would be insufficiently numerous to provide spouses for all members of the nobility. This is the Natchez "paradox" which in Hart's opinion made Swanton's model a biological impossibility.

The "paradox" also has a political aspect which can be considered in light of the multiplication of the nobility. For purposes of demonstration, assume that every marriage reproduced an equal number of sons and daughters. Starting from a finite number of Suns, married to commoners, there would result from these marriages an equal number of Suns and Nobles. If these married commoners had children, there would be twice as many Nobles as Suns in the second generation, three times as many Nobles as Suns in the third generation and so on. The number of Honoreds, relative to the number of Suns, would increase not merely in multiples but geometrically. The paradox may then be restated in political terms applying specifically to the Natchez, where the Sun nobility stood at the apex of a centralized political system. Given the reality of political power and social control, why should the Sun group have allowed or favored a system in which, in reproductive competition with other groups, they would inevitably become strongly outnumbered by lesser nobility in a few successive generations?

Other factors, such as polygyny by Sun and Noble males and the achievement of higher rank through merit by members of the lower classes (commoner men to Honoreds and Honored men by birth to Noble rank), which are attested for the Natchez, would still further accentuate the increase of the lesser nobility. Under hypothetical conditions of Sun and Noble polygyny, for example, Fischer (1964: 54-55) demonstrated how this would occur even with a limited number of only

sixteen Suns and no Nobles or Honored people in an initial population 6,000. Assuming that Swanton's rules of marriage and descent were followed, and that one male and one female child issued from each marriage, the number of Nobles after eight generations would have grown to sixteen times the number of Suns, and the number of Honoreds to 112 times the number of Suns. In the ninth generation, the nobility would have come to outnumber the commoners.

#### Proposed Solutions that Ameliorate the Paradox

Hart (1943), the first to point out the Natchez paradox, suggested that Swanton's interpretation of the rules of hereditary class membership might be erroneous, and proposed a possible modification, which we will shortly consider, that would resolve the paradox. This suggestion has failed to engender support in the subsequent literature, with the possible exception of Tooker (1963). The reaction of most writers to Hart's proposal has been to accept his analysis of the paradox but to advance hypotheses that would ameliorate the paradox without modifying Swanton's rules.

Quimby (1946) argued that the Natchez class system, as described by Swanton, was of recent origin, and had not endured for as many generations as would be required to develop the predicted class imbalance. He suggested that Natchezan culture in its ultimate form developed after 1600, subsequent to the Plaquemine culture. Quimby's dating of the origin of the Natchez class system is dubious on a number of grounds. First, he was apparently unaware of the specific report of a Sun ruler among the Natchez in 1542. Second, there is evidence of social stratification in the Temple Mound cultures going back 1,000 years, and the later archeological phases are continuous with the historic Natchezan culture. There is no evidence which would negate the presence of the Sun ruler or the class of nobility in the Plaquemine culture or even much earlier.

Quimby also argued that assimilation of outside groups into the commoner class may have served to replace the depleted commoner class and to forestall, temporarily at least, the demographic problems inherent in the rules of class membership described by Swanton. He noted that the Natchez had adopted two Tunican-speaking refugee groups, the Grigra and the Tioux, who lived in distinct villages and were reckoned as commoners.

In extension of Quimby's argument, Brain (1971) hypothesized that the four-class system itself, and the rules of exogamy and descent, represented an adaptation to the assimilation of refugee groups. His argument is even more highly inferential than Quimby's. Even if both were correct, however, a paradox would still exist. Assimilation of outsiders into the commoner class could defer the depletion of the commoners, in terms of absolute numbers, but would not slow the multiplication of Nobles and Honoreds relative to the number of Suns.

Fischer (1969) suggested a solution that ameliorates the Natchez paradox more directly, while preserving the integrity of Swanton's "collated model" of the class system. He simply proposed, in the absence of contrary information, that the reproductive rates were low for the Noble and Honored women, medium

for the Sun women, and high for the commoner women. Asymmetrical reproduction could have thus offset the asymmetry in the rules of marriage and descent.

None of these ameliorative solutions to the Natchez paradox is based upon firm evidence and none has carefully reconsidered the original sources to ascertain the validity of Swanton's interpretation. In view of the substantive inconsistencies between the original sources and the assumptions made in Swanton's "collated model," we do not regard as satisfactory the easy disposal of the Natchez problem proposed by Quimby, Brain, or Fischer.

### Reanalysis of Swanton's Model

A review of the original sources and the secondary literature on the Natchez has led us to three major propositions for modification of Swanton's model of the rules of hereditary class membership. The first is derived from MacLeod's (1924) detailed assessment of the organization of the Sun ruling family. The second is modified from suggestions made by Hart (1943). The third is derived from White (1974). The major piece of supporting evidence which links the second and third propositions was provided by Murdock (1950) and served as a starting point for White's analysis.

#### *Proposition 1: The Suns were not a Class but a Royal Family*

MacLeod (1924: 205) noted that it would be difficult to explain the small number of Suns, recorded as 17 in the year 1700 and 11 in 1730, if Sun status was inherited matrilineally in perpetuity in lines collateral to the royal family. Since great care was taken to assure that Sun women and the Great Sun never met violent death, the descendants of Sun ancestors would have tended to multiply into a sizable class. In view of the strikingly sparse number of reported Suns, MacLeod called attention to a statement by Pénicaut that was ignored by Swanton in formulating the rules of hereditary class membership. As translated in Swanton (1911: 101):

Their nobility is very different from that of our Europeans, for in France the more ancient it is the more it is esteemed. Their extraction, on the contrary, is no more esteemed noble at the seventh generation; moreover, they draw their nobility from the woman and not from the man.

This statement clearly refers, not to degeneration in the agnatic line, but rather to the Sun lines collateral to the royalty. MacLeod (1924: 205) concluded that Sun status in these collateral matrilineal lines is not maintained in perpetuity and that, as a consequence, the Sun class was actually "coextensive with the royal family, this family including only those who stood within several specified degrees of relationship, unilaterally reckoned, to the White Woman" or Sun chieftainess. Pénicaut also stated (see Swanton 1911: 159) that only "the first three families of nobles" were interred in the temple, from which MacLeod adduced support for a rule of Sun family membership whereby only three collateral generations descended from royal ancestry were included in the royal family. By this rule, status in the fourth generation of royal collaterals degenerated to the rank of

Noble. Pénicaut did not recognize the “Honored” as a separate class. Following his interpretation, if the status of Noble matriline also degenerated in three generations to the rank of commoner, then by the seventh generation of royal collaterals in the female line the descendents of Suns would become commoners, consistent with Pénicaut’s observation quoted above.

Further supporting evidence for proposition 1 is given in our Appendix 1. Stern (1964: 414) and Fischer (1964: 60-61), it might be noted, view MacLeod’s hypothesis favorably, but we have found additional supporting evidence in a genealogical reconstruction of the Sun Royal family (Appendix 2 and Figure 2).

*Proposition 2: Descent was Asymmetric for Children of Noble Males*

Hart (1943) approached Swanton’s reconstruction “in the same trial and error spirit as one approaches an incorrect algebraic equation.” On a purely logical basis, as a resolution to the Natchez paradox, he suggested that the rule of descent may have been asymmetric for the children of Sun and Noble males. This interpretation would make the rule of descent consistently matrilineal for females, as the daughters of Sun and Noble men would acquire commoner status through their mothers, while the sons would fall one rank below that of their more illustrious fathers.

Pénicaut (in Swanton 1911: 101) states explicitly that the daughters as well as the sons of Sun males are of Noble rank. While this contradicts Hart’s interpretation in part, the primary sources contain no information inconsistent with that portion of Hart’s hypothesis which concerns the daughters of Noble males. Under Swanton’s interpretation these would be Honored women; under Hart’s interpretation they would be commoners. Even this part of Hart’s hypothesis has never been seriously considered in the literature, however, because of the absence of supporting evidence.

Evidence brought to light by Murdock (1950) supports Hart’s interpretation of asymmetric descent as it applies to the children of Noble males. Murdock (1950: 11-12) noted a report of asymmetric descent by Swanton (1911, 1946) for the Caddo, close neighbors of the Natchez, and with whom the Natchez had long engaged in salt trade:

The possibility of different rules of descent for the two sexes, advanced as a hypothesis by Hart, is converted into a strong probability by the existence of precisely such a differentiated rule among the neighboring Caddo. In this tribe . . . the children of a union between parents of different status groups were affiliated with the mother’s group unless that of the father was of higher rank, in which case daughters followed their mothers but sons were classed with their fathers.

On the strength of this distributional evidence favoring Hart’s hypothesis of asymmetric descent, at least for the daughters of Noble males, the authors decided to re-evaluate the original sources.

There is a curious asymmetry in the French sources regarding the children of male Nobles. We have the following statement by Du Pratz (in Swanton 1911: 105):

The man and woman who gave laws to the Natchez had children. . . . Their male and female children were equally called Suns and respected as such, but with this difference, that the males enjoyed this

privilege only during their lives and personally. Their children bore only the name of Nobles, and the male children were only Honored men.

The last sentence clearly reflects a certain kind of agnatic viewpoint, in that one must read “the male children of male Nobles” in order not to imply that the male children of female Nobles were also Honored men, which contradicts the principle of continuity of the nobility through the female line, as well as the explicit statement by Pénicaut that the male children of female Nobles were Nobles.

A similar agnatic bias is evidenced by Dumont, who states (see Swanton 1911: 104) that at the death of the Great Sun:

his children are only nobles. The children of these become simply Honored. . . .

Again, we must read this statement as meaning “the children of male Nobles become simply Honored,” and we are uncertain as to whether the actual meaning, from a strictly agnatic viewpoint, should be “the male children of male Nobles become simply Honored men.” However, later in this same passage, Dumont clarifies his meaning:

With regard to the Honored men, it is seen . . . that birth gives this rank to all the grandchildren of the great chief.

This statement likewise reflects an agnatic viewpoint: “grandchildren,” in this context, clearly means “male grandchildren.” The statement is consistent with other reports only if we interpret it as meaning “grandchildren in the agnatic line.”

The above statements are the only ones in the original French texts which specify descent into the Honored category. As we have seen, each of them must be read from an agnatic viewpoint (a bias that was common in eighteenth century French writing) in order not to be both internally inconsistent and in conflict with other statements concerning descent. If they are read from a consistently agnatic viewpoint, the statements by all the French authorities, including Pénicaut, are mutually consistent and corroborative. They indicate that the male children of Noble men were Honored men, but say nothing about the female children of Noble men. And they do indicate some kind of asymmetry for the children of Noble men.<sup>3</sup>

*Proposition 3: There Were No Honored Women by Birth*

Direct supporting evidence for Hart’s hypothesis that the daughters of Noble men were commoners, rather than Honored women as Swanton supposed, has been provided by White (1974). In a reanalysis of the French sources, he found that there was no mention of Honored women in the texts except with reference to the wives of Honored men. Swanton merely assumed the existence of Honored women by birth, and then went on to assume that the daughters of Noble males were Honored women, and that the children of Honored women were also Honored. Nowhere does Swanton advance any support for these assumptions.

Analysis of the French texts revealed fifteen cases of Sun men who were mentioned individually, three Sun women individually mentioned, and three

specific mentions of Noble females. Noble males were explicitly mentioned in connection with War chieftainships (cf. Swanton 1911: 107), and individual Honored males were frequently mentioned in connection with specific offices or events. By contrast, there was not a single mention of an individual Honored female by birth anywhere in the texts.

The lack of mention of individual Honored women might be attributed to their lack of individual distinction in Natchez society were it not for the fact that there are no generic references whatever in any of the French texts to Honored women. We counted 25 generic references to Sun men in the French texts, 13 to Sun women, 5 to Noble women, 5 to Noble men, 17 to Honored men, and none to Honored women. The only mention of Honored women which we found in our analysis of the primary and secondary literature occurred in a passage by Stern (1965: 412). This turned out, on inspection of the original passage in French (Le Page du Pratz 1758: ii, 113), to be a mistranslation of the term for Noble (Fr. *noble*).

On the basis of this evidence, we have concluded that there were no Honored women by birth. If the evidence is accepted, the Honored category was exclusively a rank of men rather than a class which was biologically self-perpetuating. Even for men, Honored rank was acquired through descent only for a minority; the bulk of the Honored men were commoners by birth who had achieved distinction. Honored rank was part of the system of warrior grades, and there were ranks within the Honored men as well as lesser grades prior to the attainment of Honored status, such as apprentice warrior (see MacLeod 1924: 208.215). Wives of men who attained Honored rank were elevated in status with them, but apparently not given a title (Dumont in Swanton 1911: 104-105), although privileged to adorn themselves with special tattooing. The title of Honored could not be transmitted to children, either through males or through females.

Given that there were no Honored women by birth, and that the sons of Noble men were Honored men, we are led to conclude, with Hart (1943), that descent for the children of Noble men was asymmetric. We can safely assume that the daughters of Noble men were commoners, since this is supported by the parallel of the Caddo case of asymmetric decent.

#### Reanalysis of Natchez Class and Rank

Our account differs from the prevalent view of the Natchez in that we have shown evidence that there were no Honored women other than the wives of Honored men, and that ascription to Honored rank was asymmetric, applying only to men. Like the Knights in medieval Europe, the Honored men constituted a rank in the system of titles granted by the royalty, rather than a social class. The Suns, likewise, were not a social class but a familial group of royalty again distinguished by their political rank. A similar distinction between political rank and status or social class differences has been made by Murdock (1936: 16-18) in reference to the Haida.

Natchez society was divided into only two classes, the nobility and the commoners. Within the nobility, the royal family was distinguished by the rank of Suns, but this rank was lost at three generations removed from the royal line.



The Sun royal family was also internally ranked, and Sun males filled the top political offices of the nation roughly in order of their genealogical rank (see Appendix 1, where supporting evidence of Natchez rank and kinship is provided). Noble men filled many of the secondary offices in the state, including war chieftainships and presumably some of the state offices mentioned earlier, such as peace chiefs and administrators. Between the nobility and the commoners was a special rank for males, that of Honored men. Honored men by birth may have filled such positions as the head servant or “speaker” of the Great Sun or the Guardians of the Temple, both mentioned by Dumont (in Swanton 1911: 151,161). This rank kept the male descendants of the matrilineal nobility from falling directly into the class of commoners. Men of Honored birth were also allowed to reascend to the class of Nobles if they achieved fame through warlike exploits. The rank of Honored could also be attained by men of commoner birth, through exploits in war, or through the ritual sacrifice of a close relative at the funeral of a Sun.

The rank of Honored man served important functions in Natchez society in connection with the mortuary sacrifices of the Suns. Spouses of deceased Suns were sacrificed at sumptuary funerals, along with commoner servants and a number of other commoners, some of whom were chosen involuntarily by the Great Sun or his heir, and some of whom sacrificed themselves to elevate their male relatives to the status of Honored. Like the Nobles, Honored men were exempt from marriage with Suns, and from mortuary sacrifice through any other means. Extension of the exogamy of the nobility to exempt Honored men from marriages with Suns provided part of a powerful motivation for commoner men to achieve Honored rank. The possibility of achieving Honored status not only gave commoners a sense of continuity with the nobility, but induced their participation in the military and ritual affairs of the state organization.

The rules of hereditary class and rank membership, assuming that the spouses of all nobility and of Honored men were commoners, are summarized as follows:

PARENT(S)	OFFSPRING
Sun mother	Sun rank, Noble class
Sun father	Noble class
Noble mother	Noble class
Noble father	sons: Honored rank, commoner class daughters: commoner class
Honored father	Commoner class
Commoner parents	Commoner class

These rules must be qualified by the provision that descent in the female line of nobility degenerated after three generations, except in the royal line.

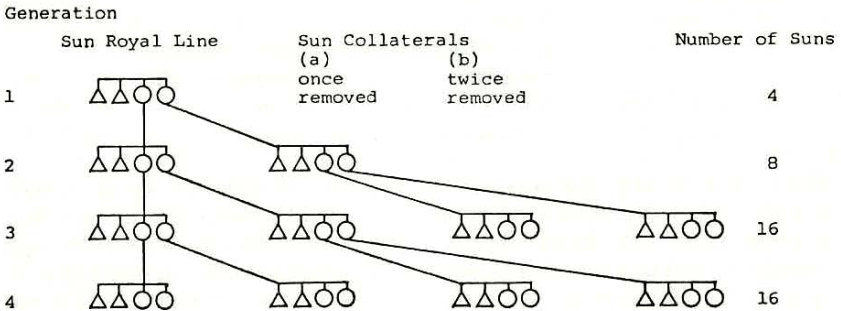
These rules of hereditary class and rank membership, formulated through serendipity rather than intent on our part, constitute an equilibrium solution to the Natchez paradox. First, without the category of Honored women, as in

Swanton's "collated model," the number of hereditary Honored men would always be a reflection of the number of Noble men in the previous generation, and would not grow geometrically. Second, with the principle of degeneration of the nobility, the Noble class could expand only up to a certain point, after which equilibrium in the ratio between classes would be reached.

How would a model of the operation of these rules compare with what is known about the actual numbers of Suns, Nobles, Honored men, and commoners? The French sources give exact figures only for the number of Suns: 17 Suns in 1700 and 11 in 1730 (La Harpe and Le Petit in Swanton 1911: 107) The genealogical reconstruction of the Sun royal family in Appendix 1 indicates that these figures are reasonable estimates for the total number of Sun men and women in all villages at those dates. Appendix 1 also shows (1) an approximately equal number of Sun collateral males as Sun males in the immediate royal family and (2) approximately four siblings to be the normal size of the immediate royal family in each generation. If two male and two female Sun siblings, on the average, lived to reproduce in the immediate royal family and if Sun collaterals had an equivalent family size, then the total number of Suns would grow to an equilibrium point of sixteen Suns, reached in the third generation, as is shown in Figure 1. Assuming that about half of the total number of Suns in three adjacent generations would be alive at one point in time, 24 Suns, more or less, would be a reasonable number for the Sun group under these conditions of reproduction. This figure would be reduced by the greater mortality of Sun collaterals owing to their exposed positions as active War Chiefs in the outlying villages, bringing the figure into line with La Harpe's estimate of 17 Suns for the year 1700. The ratio between the immediate family and Sun collaterals would also seem about right if our model is correct.

Let us assume that the numbers of Suns shown in Figure 1 are approximately representative of the actual reproductive rates of Sun women in Natchez society.

**Figure 1: Equilibrium of Sun Reproduction, reached after the third generation, assuming two sons and two daughters per Sun marriage (children who are not Suns are not shown).**



We know nothing about the reproductive rates of other women (although various arguments are given by Fischer 1964), nor do we have any estimates from the French sources of the total numbers of Nobles and Honored men by birth. If we assume as a minimal model of reproduction that each marriage of a non-Sun woman produced two children on the average, and a maximal model that each non-Sun woman produced four children, this would at least allow some indication of the minimum and maximum ranges for the size of the other classes and ranks under the set of rules that we have specified. The minimal and maximal models are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Equilibrium of the System of Reproduction for the Nobility as a Whole, reached after the seventh generation, under two models: (A) minimal model where each Sun woman has two sons and two daughters but other women have only one son and one daughter; (B) maximal model where all marriages produce two sons and two daughters

	Generations								
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Minimal Model									
Suns	4	8	16	16	16	16	16	16	16
Nobles by birth		4	12	28	40	48	48	48	48
Honored men by birth			2	6	18	24	32	32	32
Maximal Model									
Suns	4	8	16	16	16	16	16	16	16
Nobles by birth		8	32	96	150	224	224	224	224
Honored men by birth			8	32	128	224	352	352	352

In both the minimal and maximal models of reproduction, or any other model in which the rate of reproduction is varied, equilibrium of the size of segments is reached in the seventh generation. Similarly, even the achievement of Noble status by men of Honored birth, or of Honored status by men of commoner birth, or varying frequencies of polygyny among different segments, would alter the proportions between segments but would not negate the existence of an equilibrium point in the reproductive system at the seventh and succeeding generations.

Fluctuation about the equilibrium point is of interest, given the variability of actual demographic factors. The Sun royal family, by virtue of their small number, were particularly vulnerable to flux in demographic factors. Sometime around 1720 the White Woman, in a remarkable interview with Du Pratz (MacLeod 1924: 215ff.; Le Page du Pratz 1758: ii, 35ff.), expressed her fear that the Sun royal family might become extinct. Although this was during the reign of her two powerful brothers, the Great Sun and the Tattooed Serpent (Nos. 7 and 8 in the genealogy in Appendix 1), she stated that "our Suns lack the will to force obedience from the Nobles. . . ."

Nobles dominated the tribal council, which had authority over the Great Sun and Tattooed Serpent in matters of war, but the Nobles were partly held in check

by Sun War Chiefs in each of the five main villages (Great Village, Flour, Apple, Walnut, and Grigra) who were close relatives of the Great Sun (Appendix 1). However, Sun War Chiefs in three of these villages (Walnut, Apple, Grigra) became aligned in opposition to the French and the pro-French policies of the Great Sun. This split between the central and peripheral villages, and within the Sun group itself, partly precipitated the demise of the nation. The War Chiefs of Walnut and Grigra villages were given to the French in 1716 to be executed, with the blessing of the Great Sun, for their part in an uprising. The War Chief of Apple village fled his execution. In 1724 Old Hair, then the Sun War Chief of Apple village, was also executed by the Great Sun. It was perhaps this virtual extinction of the Sun collateral lines (see Appendix 1) that led White Woman to fear the extinction of her family. There were no Suns to occupy the chieftainships of the rebel villages after these incidents. Even in the Flour village, which had been aligned with the Great Sun up to his death in 1728, when a young heir succeeded to the throne, the chieftainship was usurped by a War Chief who was not a member of the nobility (Swanton 1911: 245-251). The defection of the outlying villages created the incidents leading to the last war with the French, in 1731, ending in the capture and sale into slavery in Santo Domingo of the young Great Sun and nearly 400 followers, and the dispersal of the remaining segments of Natchez society hostile to the French.

### Conclusions

The principles of Natchez class and rank resemble those of other ranked or monarchical systems with commoner and noble classes much more closely than would be supposed from the classic view of Natchez society. Swanton's (1911) "collated model" of a four-class system is inconsistent with the original sources and erroneous in a number of respects. We have supported the propositions that (1) the Suns were not a class but a royal family, (2) descent was asymmetric for children of Noble males, and (3) there were no Honored women by birth. Suns and Honored men constituted political ranks and titles within a basically two-class system of nobility and commoners.

Our reconstruction of the rules of Natchez marriage and descent, providing an equilibrium solution to the Natchez paradox, gives additional support to the hypothesis (Hart 1943) that segmented social systems are likely to produce agreement on rules of marriage and descent which are symmetrical in their demographic implications. This principle reflects the social dynamics of competing interests, such as were in evidence among the Natchez, by which rules of ascription are formulated in segmented social systems.

The Natchez system of class and rank was obviously well adapted to the entire social, political, and religious system in which it was embedded, and served to knit together the various interest groups in the society. Rewards to commoners and lesser nobility through rank, privilege, and exemption from sacrifice engendered displays of warlike prowess and religious devotion that were considered socially useful. In comparison with other systems of nobility,

even the anomalous element of exogamy of the nobles, extended to exempt Honored men from onerous marriages with Suns, served to provide an important motivation to the attainment of Honored status through socially meritorious deeds.

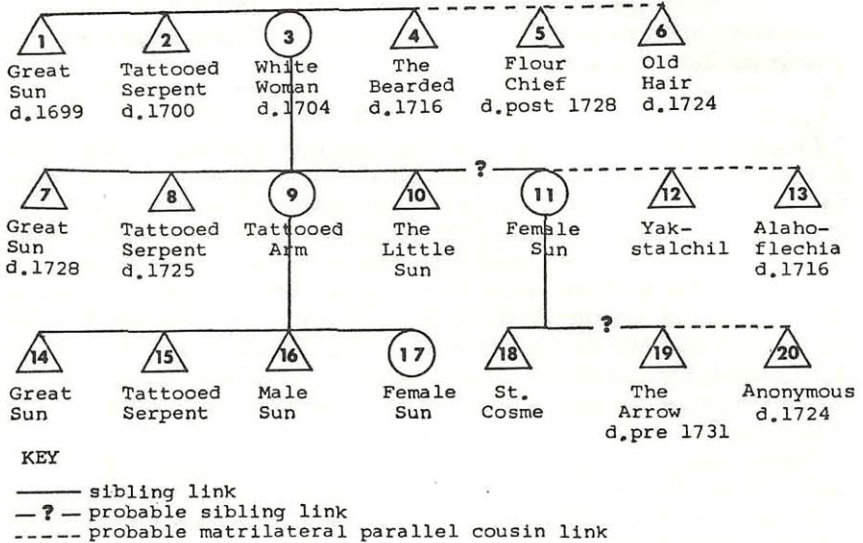
As a test of MacLeod's hypothesis that the Suns constituted a royal family and that collateral Suns lost rank after three generations, specific mentions of individual Suns from the French authorities were compiled and their stated genealogical connections assembled into a genealogical reconstruction of the Sun royal line. Fifteen Suns were found to be directly connected with the immediate royal family, as indicated in Figure 2, either as members or close collaterals. Only five other Suns are mentioned in the sources, and four of these held political office as war chiefs of lesser villages. MacLeod's hypothesis would account for the small number of Suns outside the immediate royal line, in addition to the small overall size of the Sun group.

The genealogical reconstruction is consistent with estimates by La Harpe and Le Petit (Swanton 1911: 107) of 17 Suns and 11 Suns, respectively, in 1700 and 1730. Our reconstruction shows 9 Sun males and 3 known Sun females living in 1700. Assuming an equal number of Sun males and females with some Sun females not mentioned individually by the French authorities but nonetheless known to La Harpe, the total of Sun males and females in all villages from our reconstruction would accord very well with the figure of 17 given by La Harpe. For 1770, our figures of 6 Sun males and 3 known Sun females again accords well with Le Petit's figure of 11.

According to the Luxembourg Memoir (Anonymous 1752: 100), Suns were respected in proportion to their genealogical proximity to the Great Sun. Our genealogical reconstruction supports MacLeod's (1924: 202-203) view that the top political offices were also filled by genealogical ranking, including relative age of siblings and matrilineal proximity to the royal line. The Great Sun himself was selected under the rule of primogeniture, and his next brother took up the office of the Tattooed Serpent or Head War Chief. Matrilineal uncles and nephews (e.g., #4 and #19 in Figure 2) held offices of War Chiefs of outlying villages. The kinship connection of the ranking chief of Flour village is not known, but he also held office as the Master of Temple Ceremonies, the third highest office in the nation, and was given elaborate mortuary ceremonies. If we can infer from Pénicaut's statement (in Swanton 1911: 159) that only "the first three families of nobles" (Suns) were given mortuary ceremonies leading to interment in the temple, the chief of Flour village was probably a collateral, and a close one, to the Great Sun. Chiefs of outlying villages (e.g., Walnut, Grigras) were Suns of lesser rank and presumably more remote genealogical connection, but still collaterals within several degrees.

Direct evidence of degeneration of status in the Sun descent lines collateral to the royalty is found in the case of a female Noble, La Glorieuse, of whom it is noted (Dumont in Swanton 1911: 151) that "This Glorieuse was descended from

Figure 2: Genealogy of Suns of the Royal Line and Sun Collaterals, 1600-1731



GREAT SUNS (Eldest sons of Sun women most closely related to previous White Woman): #1; #7; #14, succeeded to the chieftainship at an early age in 1728, sold into slavery by the French in 1731.

TATTOOED SERPENTS (Head war chiefs, closest brothers to the Great Suns): #2; #8; #15.

WHITE WOMEN: #3; #9.

POTENTIAL WHITE WOMEN: #11, mother of the heir apparent (#18) after 1728; #17, young childless daughter of #9.

YOUNGER BROTHERS OF GREAT SUNS AND TATTOOED SERPENTS (Ineligible to hold political office): #10; #16.

MALE COLLATERALS OF THE GREAT SUN (Held offices of village war chiefs): #4, The Bearded, ranking chief of Walnut village and residing there, died by execution; #5, Old Flour Chief, ranking chief of Flour village and residing there, third in rank in the nation, Master of Temple Ceremonies; #6, Old Hair, ranking chief of Apple village and residing there; #12, Yakstalchil, second ranking chief of Flour village, residing at the Great village; #13, Alahoflechchia, ranking chief of Grigras village and residing there; #18, St. Cosme, named after the missionary, heir apparent after 1728; #19, The Arrow, second ranking chief of Apple village, fled execution in 1716; #20, an anonymous Sun scalped by the French in 1724, probably young and without political office.

the woman chiefs. . . .” Since in Dumont’s usage “woman chiefs” is synonymous with Sun women in the royal line (e.g., the White Woman), the only plausible interpretation is that in this case a Sun line collateral to the royalty has degenerated to Noble status after several generations.

Further evidence of the blood or kinship connections between the Great Sun and other Suns is found in a statement by Charlevoix (in Swanton 1911: 101), in reference to the right of Sun women to chose and dispose of husbands: “This is a

privilege belonging to the blood of the great chief.”

The degeneration of Sun rank by a three-degree rule of genealogical removal is consistent with the general rule among the Natchez, reported by Du Pratz (in Swanton 1911: 98, 170) that prohibited marriages within three degrees, or between relatives up to and including third cousins. The third cousin rule is explicitly stated both as a matter of tribal lore and as a practical consideration for individual marriages.

The proposition that the Suns were coextensive with the royal family would also partially explain the basis for Sun and Noble exogamy. The third cousin rule for marriage prohibitions, if female lines collateral to the royalty degenerated after three generations, is equivalent to Sun exogamy. Exogamy of the Nobles could largely be attributed to this same factor, since a substantial proportion of the Nobles, all descended from Suns within three generations, would also be within the third degree for which exogamy would apply. Nobles were deterred from marrying distantly related Suns by the fact that the spouses of Suns were sacrificed at the funeral of their Sun mate (Du Pratz in Swanton 1911: 106). While the general rule of Noble exogamy reported by Pénicaut (in Swanton 1911: 101) that “a girl noble . . . is only able to marry a plebian” is an extension of the three-degree rule to include the entire Noble class, some of whom would have been related outside of three degrees, we have seen how the extension of this rule of exogamy was functional from the analysis of the Noble and Honored statuses in relation to the practices of mortuary sacrifices and services owed to the state.

#### APPENDIX 2: NOTES ON EARLY CONTACTS WITH PERTINENT QUOTATIONS IN THE ORIGINAL FRENCH.

- 1542. De Soto Expedition (see Claiborne 1880). Evidence of contact between De Soto and a Sun ruler in 1542.
- 1882. Tonti (see French 1846.1875). Tonti, a member of the La Salle expedition spent several days in the Natchez Great Village, but recounts little ethnographic detail.
- 1700. De Montigny (see Shea 1861). De Montigny, a missionary among the Taensa in 1699 and among the Natchez for two months in 1700, wrote several letters of general interest before returning to France.
- 1700. St. Cosme (unpublished). St. Cosme succeeded to De Montigny’s post, learned the language, and remained until 1706. when he was killed. Only an unpublished letter remains from his work.
- 1700. Gravier (see Shea 1852; also Journal of the Voyage of Father Gravier, unpublished). Gravier’s journal contains a short description of the Natchez, with primary concern given to a description of the temple.
- 1700. La Harpe (see La Harpe 1831). While La Harpe was a personal observer to only a part of the events which he described, he evidently had access to official records which make his journal chronologically accurate.
- 1704. Pénicaut (see Margry 1876.1886). Pénicaut provides the fullest early account. He had been with Bienville, Iberville, and Le Sueur on three previous expeditions through the lower Mississippi area, and had learned

the Mobilian language well before visiting the Natchez during the spring and summer of 1704. He may have spoken to St. Cosme during this time, but it is apparent that most of his detailed ethnographic information came from direct conversation and eyewitness reports. His first report was evidently written in 1704 after his visit of several months. In 1714 he wrote another detailed report, this time describing the first Natchez war, at a time when he was again visiting the Natchez. Of the Natchez rules of descent Pénicaut writes (Margry 1876-1886: 450-451):

Il faut remarquer qu'un Grand Chef noble ne peut espouser qu'une roturière mais que les garçons qui en sortent, soit garçons ou filles, sont nobles; que, s'il vient à mourir avant sa femme, il faut que sa femme soit étranglée, pour l'accompagner dans l'autre monde. De mesme une fille noble, c'est-à-dire fille d'une femme de chef noble, quand elle veut se marier ne peut espouser qu'un roturier, et si elle meurt après qu'elle est mariée, avant le mary, il faut que celui-ci soit fait mourir aussy pour l'accompagner en l'autre monde. Les enfans qui proviennent de ces mariages sont réputés nobles ou *Soleils*.

Leur noblesse est bien différente de celle de nos Européens, puisque, en France, plus elle est ancienne, plus elle est estimée. Leur extraction, au contraire, n'est plus estimée noble à la septiesme génération; de plus, ils tirent leur noblesse de la femme et non pas de l'homme. Je leur en ay demandé la raison; ils m'ont respondu que la noblesse ne pouvoit venir que de la femme, parce que la femme estoit plus certaine que l'homme à qui les enfans appartoient.

pre-1718. Luxembourg Memoir (see Anonymous 1752). This anonymous memoir contains valuable material, evidently obtained at first hand by the author.

1718 Du Pratz (see Le Page du Pratz 1758). This historian and landowner provides the most complete account. Du Pratz went to the Natchez colony in 1718 to purchase land for himself and several other parties and thereafter became an interested and sympathetic observer of the Natchez. Although Pénicaut later purchased land in the same vicinity, there is no indication that Du Pratz consulted Pénicaut's source materials. Of the Natchez rules of descent Du Pratz (1758: 394-396) writes:

Cet homme & cette femme qui donnèrent des Loix aux Natchez eurent des enfans & ordonnèrent que leur race seroit toujours distinguée du gros de la Nation, & qu'aucun de leurs descendans ne seroit mis à mort pour quelque cause que ce fût, mais qu'il finiroit ses jours tranquillement comme la Nature le permettrait. Le soin de conserver leur sang pur & fidele leur fit encore établir un usage dont on ne voit d'exemples que dans une Nation de Scytes, dont parle Hérodote. Comme leurs enfans étant freres & soeurs ne pouvoient se marier entre eux sans crime, & qu'il étoit nécessaire pour avoir lignée que les uns & les autres épousassent des Puants & des Puantes; ils voulurent, pour prévenir les



suites fâcheuses de l'infidélité des femmes, que la Noblesse ne se transmît que par les femmes. Leurs enfans mâles & femelles furent nommes (également Soleils & respectés comme tels; mais avec cette différence que les mâles ne jouirent de ce privilège que pendant leur vie & personnellement. Leurs enfans n'eurent plus que le nom de Nobles, & les enfans mâles des Nobles ne furent plus que Considérés. Ces Considérés pouvoient néanmoins par leurs exploits guerriers remonter au rang des Nobles; mais leurs enfans redeviennent Considérés, & les enfans de ses Considérés, ainsi que ceux des autres, furent confondus dans le Peuple & mis au rang des Puants. Ainsi le fils d'une *Soleille*, (ou *femme Soleil*) est Soleil comme sa mère; mais son fils n'est plus que Noble, son petit-fils que Considéré, & son arrière-petit-fils que Puant; d'où il arrive que ces Peuples par leur longue vie, voyant souvent la quatrième génération, il est très-ordinaire à un Soleil de voir sa postérité confondue dans le bas peuple (I).

Les femmes sont à l'abri de ce désagrément. De mère en fille la Noblesse se soutient, & elles sont Soleilles perpétuées, sans souffrir aucune altérations dans leur dignité. Cependant elles ne parviennent jamais à la Souveraineté, non plus que les enfans des Soleils; mais le fils aîné de la Soleille la plus proche parente de la mere du Soleil regnant, est celui qui monte sur le Trône lorsqu'il vient à vaquer. Le Soleil regnant porte le titre de *Grand Soleil*.

1720. Dumont (see Dumont 1753). This historian wrote a less ethnographically detailed account than that of Du Pratz. Dumont settled some time after 1720 in the vicinity of Fort Rosalie, which had been constructed in 1716 near the Natchez village of White Earth. He was given charge of the fort about 1724, a position which also entailed direction of the settlement at White Earth. Many of his accounts are secondhand, although accurately transcribed. He adopts a historian's pose in his writings, and is more attentive to material culture and chronology than to social organization. He and Du Pratz were probably in communication. Dumont (1753: 175-179) writes:

On peut considérer dans chacune des Nations sauvages, comme dans toutes les Nations de la terre, deux espèces d'hommes, dont les uns semblent nés pour commander & pour jouir de tous les honneurs, les autres pour obéir & pour ramper dans l'obscurité; c'est ce que nous nommons les Grands & le Peuple. Les premiers sont chez les Sauvages les Chiefs, les Soleils & les Considérés : tous ceux qui ne sont pas renfermés dans cette classe & décorés de quelqu'un de ces titres, composent le Peuple, & s'appellent Puants.

La soumission des Sauvages est extrême pour leur Chef . . . à la mort de ce Chef, ces enfans, garçons ou filles, n'héritent point de son pouvoir, & ne succèdent point au commandement: ses descendans rentrent dans l'ordre des Puants; & c'est aux garçons à faire des actions de valeur qui puissent les élever à la dignité de Considérés. Il n'appartient qu'i la femme Soleil, qu'ils nomment aussi la Femme blanche, de perpétuer la tige d'où sortent leurs Chiefs. Elle a plus de pouvoir, tant qu'elle vit, que le Chef même, qui peut être son fils ou son frere, & jamais son mari, qu'elle peut choisir, si elle veut, parmi les Puants, & qui est plutôt son Esclave que son maître. Les mâles qui sortent de cette femme, sont les

Chefs de la Nation; & ses filles deviennent comme elle Femmes Soleils ou Femmes blanches.

Pour entendre cette propagation de la Noblesse & du Gouvernement dans ces Nations sauvages, remontons jusqu'i la loi qui en établit parmi elles la succession, & supposons que lors de cet établissement il ne restoit qu'une *Oiiachill-Tamaïll*, c'est-à-dire, une Femme Soleil ou Femme blanche. Supposons encore que cette femme eut deux enfans, un garçon et une fille. Alors, selon la loi qui veut que la Noblesse se perpétue par la femmes et dégénere par les hommes, ce garçon sorti de la Femme blanche sut établià la vérité *Oüiachill-Liquip*, c'est-à-dire grand Chef ou grand Soleil; mais à sa mort ses enfans ne furent que Nobles, les enfans de ceux-ci devinrent simples Considerés (sic), & les enfans de ces derniers retomberent dans l'ordre des Puants. Au contraire des fils de sa sœur, qui fut-elle même Femme blanche, ou Femme Soleil, l'aîné dut être Grand Chef, ou Grand Soleil, le second fut petit Soleil Chef de guerre, & les autres seulement Soleils, leurs enfans devant dégénérer suivant la proportion que j'ai marquée. Quant à ses filles, elles furent non-seulement Femmes blanches ou Femmes Soleils; mais aussi ce fut par elles que les Soleils & la Noblesse se perpetuerent dans la Nation. . . .

A l'égard des Considerés, on voit par ce que je viens de dire que la naissance donne ce rang i tous les petits-fils du grand Chef. Mais outre la naissance, il y a encore des moyens par lesquels un Puant peut s'élever à ce degré de Noblesse dans la Nation. . . .

1721. Charlevoix (see Shea 1872). Father Charlevoix apparently received much of his early information on the Natchez at second hand, possibly from Pénicaud, since he arrived at Natchez in 1721. He evidently remained for several months to minister to the needs of the settlers. His historical material on the 1721-1731 period is generally excellent.

post-1720. Le Petit (see Thwaites 1899: v. 68). Le Petit's account is a summary of some earlier material collected at second hand and a description of the third Natchez war. He draws heavily on Charlevoix, but provides some additional material.

#### NOTES

1. Willey (1966: 293) gives tentative dates for the beginning of Temple Mound I in the Lower Mississippi area in 700 A.D. Although Willey states that this marked the beginning of the distinctive Mississippian tradition which reached a peak in 900 A.D., Ford (1951) argued that the temple mounds date back to around 400 A.D. at the Troyville sites. The Temple Mound II period, according to Willey, began around 1200 A.D., and Plaquemine, from which Natchez was a continuation, was a climax phase of this period, presumably beginning around 1400-1500. Willey (1966: 308) states of the Natchez that "this tribe was still clinging to some remnants of an old hierarchical social and political system."

2. Claiborne's (1880: i, 9-10) account of the De Soto narratives indicates that the Great Sun was in existence in 1542. In traveling down the Mississippi to its mouth, "learning that on the east side of the river there was a rich and cultivated country, he dispatched a detachment to provide supplies. They were driven back. Ascertaining that the people worshipped the sun—no doubt a branch of the Natchez family of Indians—De Soto sent a message to the chief, that he and his men were children of the Sun. The haughty savage thus replied 'That whereas he said he was Child of the Sunne, if he would drie up the River he would believe him: and touching the rest, that hee was wont to visit none; but rather that all those of whom he had notice did visit him, served, obeyed and paid him tributes

willingly or perforce: therefore if he desired to see him, it were best he should come thither: that if he came in peace, he would receive him with special good will: and if in warre, in like manner hee would attend him in the town where he was, and that far him or any other hee would not shrinke one foote backe.”

3. Thus the children of a Noble woman and a commoner man were Nobles, while for the children of a Noble man and a commoner woman the sons were Honored men and the daughters of commoners after their mother. Compare this with Swanton's (1946: 655) description of the Caddo system of matrilineal clan organization:

They were arranged in a sort of caste system in the order of strength. . . and when a marriage occurred between them and the mother belonged to the “stronger” animal, the children all belonged to her clan whereas when the mother belonged to a weaker animal only the girls followed her.

Although this information, applying to the Western Caddo or Hasinai of East Texas, was obtained from a latter-day informant, Swanton (1931: 206) specifically indicates the likelihood of close prehistoric contacts between the Hasinai and the Natchez (cf. Brain 1971: 22,n.2):

the caste features of the Hasinai recall the old Natchez system and may indicate that the Western Caddo were once on Red River south of their kindred.

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Note: This article was reedited in 2007, referencing the publication date for White (1974), and modifying page breaks where needed, and substituting “commoner” for “Stinkard” except for quotations from Swanton, or given the use of the term Puant in French sources cities. Swanton’s usage of “Stinkard” remained as a class designation in the literature on the Natchez Paradox. The 1720 note by Dumont (above: p. 395), that “tous ceux qui ne sont pas renfermés dans cette classe & décorés de quelqu’un de ces titres, composent le Peuple, & s’appellent Puants” shows that the term “Stinkard” was one used by the Natchez rather than invented by the French. Dumont, as in other French sources, also uses the term “le Peuple” for commoners.

The first two sentences in the new paragraph on page 370 were rewritten as:

The Natchez class system, in Swanton’s (1911: 100-108) formulation, was composed of a nobility divided into Suns, Nobles, and Honored People, and a class of commoners. Marriage was exogamous for all members of the nobility, who nonetheless sometimes referred to commoners as “Stinkards” (Swanton, unfortunately, did so consistently).

They were originally:

The Natchez class system, in Swanton’s (1911: 100-108) formulation, was composed of a nobility divided into Suns, Nobles, and Honored People, and a class of commoners or Stinkards. Marriage was exogamous for all members of the nobility.