

# Natchez Sans Paradoxe

David F. Lonergan

## Introduction

Since Swanton's (1911) publication of ethnohistoric data on the Natchez and related tribes of the lower Mississippi Valley, the unique pattern of class exogamy reported for the Natchez has been an anthropological curiosity. When observed in the early 18th century, the Natchez were a predominantly horticultural, matrilineal people residing in nine villages (Swanton 1911:46, 73). Their society was divided into four strata—variously referred to as castes, classes or ranks—known as the Suns, Nobles, Honored People, and Stinkards. According to Swanton (1911:105), members of the three highest ranks were permitted to marry only Stinkards. The children of noble women retained their mothers' ranks, while the children of noble men and Stinkard women descended one step in rank below their fathers (Swanton 1911:107). Thus, a Sun man had Noble children, a Noble man had Honored children, while an Honored man had Stinkard children. Endogamous marriage was possible only for Stinkards.

This description was accepted for some time, but MacLeod (1924) observed that there must have been occasional lapses in class exogamy. If, as it was claimed, Stinkard couples could be advanced to Honored rank in reward for ritual infanticide during royal funerals (Swanton 1911:105), they would then become endogamously married Honoreds. This was the first critique of internal inconsistencies in the ethnohistoric reports.

Somewhat later, C.W.M. Hart wrote that the Natchez system of marriage and descent, as described by Swanton, was a "biological impossibility" (Hart 1943:374). He observed that this system would continually remove men and women from the Stinkard reproductive pool to act as mates for the higher ranks. Only endogamous Stinkard, and male Honored-female Stinkard, marriages would result in Stinkard offspring, so the noble classes would have grown, and the Stinkards decreased, over time (Hart 1943:375,378). As Stinkards were the sole source of mates for the nobles, the system could not long remain in equilibrium.

Several solutions to what is sometimes called the "Natchez paradox" have been proposed; they will be discussed briefly in order to provide a basis for comparison with the theory to be advanced in this paper. Falsification of previous theories will not be attempted, but rather the construction of a model of Natchez marriage and descent which requires fewer special conditions than previous explanations, is less complex, and has parallels in the ethnographic literature.

## Explanations of the Natchez Paradox

After first stating the problem, Hart attempted to solve it by "recast(ing)" Swanton's summary of Natchez marital patterns "in such a way as to make it more workable" (Hart 1943:381). He concluded that two principles of inheritance were evident in the Natchez system: matrilineality in noble women's hypogynous<sup>1</sup> marriages, and what he termed the

“one-remove” inheritance principle in hypergynous marriages of Stinkard women and male nobles. As described by Swanton, the latter kind of marriage gave children a rank one step below their fathers. Hart calculated that asymmetric inheritance of rank in noblemen’s marriages, with daughters inheriting their mothers’ (Stinkard) rank, and sons descending a step as just described, would have increased the number of Stinkards enough to allow the system to persist (Hart 1943:382).

Several subsequent papers have either attempted to demonstrate how Swanton’s original formulation might have worked, or have paralleled Hart in redefining Natchez inheritance and exogamy to fit the demographic requirements.

Quimby (1946) hypothesized that the frequent assimilation of neighboring tribes—as Stinkards—would have permitted the continued practice of Natchez class exogamy despite dwindling Stinkard births. Evidence of at least occasional assimilation of war refugees existed (Swanton 1911:334). Quimby wrote that such assimilation would “not actually remedy the defects of the Natchez system” (1946:135); it was his belief that class exogamy was a relatively recent development, destined to collapse eventually, although the immigration of refugees could postpone the crisis.

In an elaboration of Quimby’s theory, Brain (1971) suggested that the Natchez system had been developed in *response* to immigration, and was adaptive precisely because of its assimilative potential. According to this theory, changing political fortunes and boundaries caused their unsuccessful neighbors to flock to the Natchez during the 16th and 17th centuries.

Fischer (1964) accepted Swanton’s version of Natchez social organization and proposed that low rates of reproduction by noble women, along with high battle mortality for noble warriors, would have mitigated the demographic demands exogamic marriage placed upon the Stinkards. Like MacLeod (1924), Fischer also proposed the gradual loss of rank by noble matrilineages not closely related to the current Great Sun. Such a rule would have caused a loss of some Noble and Sun personnel to the Honored and Stinkard classes, partially offsetting the other deleterious trend.

Tooker (1963) questioned the accuracy of Swanton’s interpretation. She concluded that Suns were more properly considered an exogamous royal lineage than a class, and suggested that the evidence for Noble and Honored exogamy was equivocal. In addition, Tooker felt it was unclear to what extent Noble and Honored ranks were achieved as opposed to inherited (Tooker 1963:365-368).

Mason similarly questioned the importance of descent in the Natchez system, and suggested that advancement to Noble or Honored ranks was probably common (Mason 1964:123-124). She interpreted the two intermediate statuses as titles rather than exogamous classes.

White, Murdock, and Scaglione, after re-analysis of the Natchez data, developed a series of propositions which would reconcile Swanton’s formulation of the Natchez system with Hart’s demographic objections (White et al. 1971:373). They proposed that the Suns were a royal family rather than a class (cf. Tooker 1963); that descent was asymmetric for the children of noble males (cf. Hart 1943); and that there were no Honored women by birth. In addition, they lumped the Honored and Stinkard ranks together in a proposed commoner class (White et al. 1971:373-376). Following Fischer (1964) and MacLeod (1924), they assumed that noble matrilineages would have gradually descended in rank as their geneological distance from the Great Sun increased (White et al. 1971:377).

The theories described above seem to fall into three schools of thought: the Natchez weren’t really comprised of exogamous classes (MacLeod; Tooker; Mason); some special circumstances allowed an otherwise unworkable system to function (Quimby; Fischer; Brain); complex asymmetric inheritance of rank avoided an extreme demographic drain on

the Stinkards (Hart; White et al.).

### Data on Natchez Social Organization

Each of the ethnohistoric reports collated and translated by Swanton presents somewhat different information concerning the Natchez. In some cases the data agree, in some they deal with differing and complementary matters, while in a few cases they are mutually contradictory. It will be suggested below that failure to note inconsistencies led Swanton into a mistaken interpretation of Natchez society.

In this section a number of quotations from various sources used by Swanton, which relate to marriage and descent among the Natchez, will be presented. It is felt that these statements present sufficient information with which to evaluate Swanton's interpretation, and to construct a more logical explanation of Natchez social organization.

1. "The chief of the entire nation is the Great Sun and his relations little Suns who are more or less respected according to their degree of proximity to the great chief" (Luxembourg Memoir, in Swanton 1911:100).

2. Among the Natchez, the "great" are "the chiefs, the Suns, and the Honored men." All others "are called Stinkards." The chief female Sun is the mother or the sister of the Great Sun . . . "her husband, whom she is able to choose if she wishes from among the Stinkards . . . is rather her slave than her master." (Dumont, in Swanton 1911:103).

3. "It is always . . . the son of the woman who is nearest related to him that succeeds [the Great Sun]" (Charlevoix, in Swanton 1911:101).

The preceding statements attest to several commonly accepted assumptions about the Natchez: the four-fold division of society, matrilineal inheritance (at least among the Suns), and marriage between female Suns and low-ranking men.

4. "These people blindly obey the least wish of their great chief. . . . The princesses of the blood never espouse any but men of obscure family, and they have but one husband, but they have the right of dismissing him whenever it pleases them, and of choosing another . . . [a princess] may have as many lovers as she pleases without the husband having any power to complain" (Le Petit, in Swanton 1911:103).

5. "The daughters of the noble families can marry none but obscure persons" (Charlevoix, in Swanton 1911:102).

The requirement that female Suns marry "obscure" or unimportant men is again made clear. The fourth statement refers to Suns, but the fifth statement is less clear. It could mean, by "noble families," all ranks above Stinkards, or merely the Suns, or something in between these interpretations. Statements 2 and 4 strongly suggest that the more conservative interpretation be made, for these statements are more precise (referring to princesses rather than to female nobles in general), while the fifth is somewhat equivocal. In addition, one would not expect a writer to specify that female *Suns* must behave in a particular manner, when this behavior was the norm for all women above Stinkard rank.

6. "There are few but the chiefs who have several wives. The chiefs marry with less ceremony still than the others. It is enough for them to give notice to the relations of the woman on whom they have cast their eyes that they place her in the number of their wives. But they keep one or two in their cabins; the others remain with their relations, where their husbands visit them when they please. . . . The Natchez lend one another their wives . . . and probably from this proceeds the readiness with which they part with them to take others" (Charlevoix, in Swanton 1911:96).

7. "Those [women] who are not married have great liberty in their pleasures; no one can disturb them." (Luxembourg Memoir, in Swanton 1911:94)

These statements characterize the Natchez as sexually quite free, at least when compared to early 18th-century France. Polygyny is known but relatively rare; post-marital residence varies, but is sometimes duolocal. In addition, although the absence of data or of commentary is far from conclusive, it is of interest that writers on the subject could make statements such as numbers 6 and 7 above, without mentioning that all nobles must marry Stinkards, if such were indeed the case.

8. "The Natchez nation is composed of nobility and people. . . . The nobility is divided into Suns, Nobles, and Honored men. . . . [The children of male Suns] bore only the name of Nobles, and the male children of Nobles were only Honored men. . . . The women are free from this unpleasantness. The nobility is maintained from mother to daughter, and they are Suns in perpetuity" (Du Pratz, in Swanton 1911:105-106).

9. In the Natchez creation myth, as explained to Du Pratz, the original Great Sun said that his son "should take from among the people a girl that pleased him . . . , that his sons should not be even princes, but only Nobles; that the children of the [Great Sun's] daughter, on the other hand, should be princes and princesses" (Du Pratz, in Swanton 1911:170).

10. "The nobility [will] be perpetuated through the women and degenerate through the men . . . [and the children of the Great Sun] are only Nobles. The children of these last fall back into the rank of Stinkards." A "Stinkard may raise himself to [Honored rank] . . . by some action of valor" (Dumont, in Swanton 1911:103-104).

The inheritance of rank from one's mother, at least among the Suns, is clearly attested to by these statements. The ninth quotation also illustrates that among the Suns the children of a woman and of her brother will, respectively, maintain their Sun mother's rank, on the one hand, and take up a lower rank than that of their Sun father, on the other.

The eighth and tenth statements suggest that the offspring of male Suns must lose rank over the generations, apparently ceasing to be noble at all by the third generation (according to number 10). The phrasing of the eighth quotation, concerning "the male children of Nobles" becoming "Honored men" seems to have led White, Murdock and Scaglione (1971) to the conclusion that there were no Honored women by birth. It may well be that "the male children of Nobles" was meant to read "the children of male Nobles" become "Honored men"; in any case, statement number 10 clearly contradicts any idea of asymmetric inheritance within a sibling group on the basis of sex.

11. "It must be noticed that a grand chief noble can marry only a plebian, but that the children which come from this union, whether boys or girls, are nobles. . . . A girl noble, that is to say, a daughter of a wife of a chief noble, when she wishes to marry, is only able to marry a plebian. . . . The children who come from these marriages are reputed nobles or Suns" (Penicaut, in Swanton 1911:101)

This quotation is the only statement in Swanton (1911) indicating that a male Sun *must* marry a plebian (Stinkard), though number 9 states that the original Sun instructed his own son (but not heir) to do so. There can be no doubt that a male Sun would have had to marry outside his rank or caste, but only Penicaut, whom Swanton characterized as disorganized and often unreliable (1911:3-4) claimed that male Suns, like their sisters, must marry Stinkards.

None of the writers cited by Swanton state that Natchez nobles (other than Suns) were required to be rank-exogamous and none state that anyone other than a female Sun was compelled to marry a Stinkard. Penicaut appears to have attributed to the male Suns a mirror image of the behavior required of their sisters.

If, as seems reasonable, Penicaut's unsupported statement that male Suns must marry Stinkards is disregarded, then few discrepancies will be found between statements quoted above and the theory proposed below. These discrepancies or inconsistencies will be dealt with below, after an alternate theory of Natchez social organization has been presented.

### Natchez Social Organization

Natchez society was divided into four strata, which resembled castes or relatively inflexible classes. Every individual inherited a social rank; in every case it was the mother's rank.<sup>2</sup> The small Sun class (or uniquely powerful lineage—it makes no difference) was completely exogamous, but no other class was. The Suns enjoyed great power over their subjects, female Suns taking lovers as they chose while male Suns married many lesser-ranked women. Female Suns married only Stinkards. Male Suns may have been able to arbitrarily raise the rank of their wives (Le Petit, in Swanton 1911:97), and therefore of their children. However, male Suns probably most often married among the nobility.

The mate competition which polygynous male Suns represented to male Nobles and Honoreds caused a significant number of hypergynous marriages to occur. For status reasons, the average Honored man would probably have preferred to marry endogamously and have Honored children; even if he were unsuccessful in this attempt, he was virtually assured of at least obtaining a commoner for a wife. This tendency toward hypergynous marriages would have made it difficult for some Stinkard men to marry. Unlike the Swanton interpretation, this theory would parallel most known stratified societies—where low-ranked males are the least, rather than the most, desired mates. The small group of female Suns would not provide a very large marital outlet for male Stinkards.

Male Suns would probably have been too closely related to many of the female Nobles to permit marriage; some Nobles would have trouble finding endogamous mates for the same reason. Even without competition from higher strata, male Nobles and Honoreds would have been forced into some exogamous, hypergynous marriages because of their numbers and genealogical closeness. Those factors *and* competition from superordinate strata would result in a definite hypergynous trend, such that many or most men would have children in the next lower rank. Some polygynous Noble males might have had children in the Noble, Honored, and Stinkard classes. It is reasonable to suspect that Stinkards with Noble fathers might often be the same Stinkards who advanced in rank through merit, both because of paternal influence and because of their higher expectations.

Unlike Swanton's interpretation of the Natchez data, the present theory would predict a long-term stability of population ratios between classes. A great advantage of matrilineal inheritance in stratified societies is that, given close to equal birth rates, classes should only gradually grow or decline with regard to one another. If, as Fischer suggested, the noblewomen were to have fewer children, it would be quite possible to create more nobles (through merit) when deemed necessary. However, even without postulating an influx of refugees, there would be no worry about a dwindling commoner class. The trick would be to avoid being born a Stinkard, not in providing enough of them.

As Davis (1941) shows, the tendency in inter-caste and inter-class marriage is strongly toward hypergyny. This is due to several factors: male control of resources, frequent polygyny, concentration of wealth and influence in the upper strata, etc. For many women in stratified societies, hypergynous marriage is a distinct step up for them and for their natal families, often the only such step available. In matrilineal, stratified societies this form of marriage is even more advantageous, because high-ranking men need not fear that their polygynous marriages would result in top-heavy ruling classes. Matrilineal

inheritance prohibits the wife and children from ascending in rank while permitting them to enjoy economic (and other) advantages that are under the husband's control.

Hypogynous marriages are rare, and logically so. If there is a significant degree of mate competition in any society, then the low-ranked, poor, or unsuccessful men will probably get last—or no—choice of wives. Why then did female Suns marry hypogynously? The answer lies in the extreme degree of hypogyny practiced. The otherwise programmatic system of stratified matriliney, in which women marry at or above their own rank, contained a contradiction for the women of the highest stratum. Sun women could not marry Noble or Honored men, or their brother and cousin Suns. Any other class of women in Natchez society would be able to marry up, but there was no "up" for the Suns. If allowed to marry Nobles, Sun women (and specifically the sisters of the Great Sun) might have become the focus of political machinations. The next Great Sun might have had a Noble for a father, whose influence might well have compromised the class differences upon which Natchez society was based.

A second, much less compelling explanation of royal hypogyny is that in any stratified society it is advantageous to keep the top stratum small. Nutritional and other factors should make the chances of miscarriage or infant mortality smaller in the upper class, while the surplus royalty that develop are often an economic drain and sometimes a political threat. Forcing a princess to choose between peasants and celibacy might have lowered the Sun growth rate; one cannot be certain that this would have been advantageous in the Natchez case.

Inferential or indirect evidence which supports this theory is available in the ethnohistoric data. There is no evidence of exogamy for Nobles or Honoreds (Mason 1964:123), and indirect evidence exists for Honored endogamy (cf. MacLeod 1924).

We are told that Natchez women were sexually very free, and that the upper classes were very powerful. Neither circumstance makes class exogamy (in the absence of any other option) believable. If a powerful Noble man and a sexually unrestrained Honored woman took a liking to one another, would they really each wait until the right Stinkard came along? It seems unlikely that high-ranking women would unresistingly be married off to the lowest-status men around, while rich and powerful men would compete, not for brides of their own rank, or a slightly lesser rank, but for women of the lowest rank known.

### **Ethnographic Parallels of the Proposed Social System**

In a series of stimulating publications Kathleen Gough has described the marital and descent patterns of the various Nayar sub-castes of Central and Northern Kerala, India. The Nayar were a matrilineal, stratified people engaged in agriculture and as professional warriors during the period before the British conquest of India. The Central Kerala Nayars were divided in ranked sub-castes; women of each sub-caste could marry (temporarily and polyandrously) any unrelated male of their own or higher sub-castes.

Women of the royal sub-caste could mate only with Nambudiri Brahmins, a patrilineal caste which regarded the Nayar women as concubines (Gough 1959, 1961a). Men of the lowest Nayar sub-caste suffered the competition of all higher-ranking males; only the polyandrous nature of their marital system made it possible for all men to marry. Residence in this system was duolocal.

While the stratification, matrilineality, and hypergynous tendencies of Central Kerala Nayar society are similar to the proposed theory of Natchez social organization, the Nayar of North Kerala are considerably closer. In all other respects the northern Nayars were like their southern neighbors described above, but polyandry was not allowed, marriage

was more permanent, and there was a tendency toward avunculocal residence rather than duolocal (Gough 1961b). Low-ranked Nayar men suffered from serious competition for acceptable brides, while the women of the royal Nayar subcaste, as in Central Kerala, had to mate with Brahmins or not at all.

The largest discrepancy between Natchez and Nayar is that high-caste Nayar women still could marry hypergynously, though outside the matrilineal system, while Natchez Suns lacked a higher status group. In both cases, however, the royal women married men who were for one reason or another removed from active intervention in politics, and this agrees well with the proposed theory.

## Discussion

Swanton evidently concluded that loss of rank for the descendants of male Suns (as reported by Du Pratz and Dumont in quotations 8 and 10, above) could be reconciled with the other characteristics of Natchez society described in the ethnohistoric sources. To account for this progressive loss of rank, Swanton adopted a two-part explanation. The first part attributed to all Natchez nobles the class exogamy observed among the Suns and compulsory marriage of female Suns with commoners.

This permitted Swanton to hypothesize a system whereby an individual's rank was either a) the same as the mother's rank, if the father were a Stinkard, or b) one step below the father's rank, if the mother were a Stinkard. It was necessary to conclude that every individual had at least one Stinkard parent, to produce a logical explanation of rank loss. Therefore the confusing (and actually observed) pattern of commoner marriages by female Suns was extended to all nobles. There is literally no evidence for such a widespread pattern of marriage between nobles and commoners. Penicaut, the only source which suggests marriage between male Suns and commoners, has been disregarded due to his reputation for inaccuracy, and the lack of corroboration in other relevant sources. The claim of rank loss by descendants of male nobility, made by Du Pratz and Dumont, remains to be dealt with.

In Europeans' eyes the most paradoxical aspect of Natchez society must have been inheritance of the throne by the king's sister's son, and matrilineal inheritance of rank in general. Given royal exogamy, no male Sun could have had children within his own class. No doubt the children of the Great Sun were well-enough known to be pointed out to the French, occasioning attempts to explain matrilineal inheritance to missionaries, explorers, and traders who had never before encountered such a system.

Descriptions of rank loss for the descendants of high-ranking men would seem to reflect both the inevitable differences in rank between male Suns (the dominant figures in Natchez society) and their children, and the effects of hypergynous marriages among the Natchez.

## Conclusions

This paper has been an attempt to develop a theory which relates the Natchez system to less paradoxical social systems. Very little of the available ethnohistoric data has been rejected, and then only the most internally inconsistent parts. Classes, exogamy, loss of rank and hypergynous marriage have been tied together in a pattern which was demonstrably adaptive in Nayar society, and may well have been for the Natchez. Among the Nayar, the men of any given sub-caste looked upon the men of higher sub-castes as their fathers, so that political authority was melded with paternal responsibility and affection (Gough 1961a:323). Those factors which we find most interesting about the Natchez are the results of Swanton's inferences from the data on a defunct society. Just as the paradox

of a system somehow risking demographic collapse—though its population might actually be growing—is an artifact of unquestioning analysis, previous explanations of Natchez social organization have been the artifacts of a desire to reconcile the exotic idea of enforced class exogamy with demographic reality. By addressing itself to ethnographic parallels, and to the adaptive functions of society, this theory has attempted to remove a paradox which is a recent accretion to an old and once flourishing social pattern.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> “Hypogynous” here refers to marriage between high-ranking females and low-ranking males; “hypergynous” refers to marriages where high-ranked men marry low-ranked women. *Hypogamy* and the more frequently used *hypergamy* seem questionable terms, in that a female perspective is implied by context, rather than by actual meaning; any “hypergamous” marriage is also “hypogamous” for one of the partners. The terms “hyperandry” and “hypoandry” have been rejected as clumsy, while -gyny is widely understood as a suffix, due to its use in “polygyny.”

<sup>2</sup> This resolves another Natchez “paradox.” How could an individual be properly socialized to his or her rank, if, for instance, the father was a Noble, the mother a Stinkard, and the child an Honored? If the child inherits the mother’s rank, it is no longer difficult to comprehend how behavior appropriate to various strata could be transmitted.

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