

## **Indians and Africans in Slave Society**

by: Stephanie Legleu

On November 28, 1729 the Natchez Indians attacked the French and in less than two hours they destroyed the French presence at Fort St. Rosalie. The Natchez Massacre displayed the power of a joint African-Indian alliance that effectively displaced French rule. Desires for land and power under the Company of the Indies destroyed a precedent established by Iberville of peaceful alliances with the Indians. This resulted in an African-Indian resistance to French rule. Although the initial French policies hoped to create conflicts between the races, their union during the Natchez massacre incited fears of rebellion throughout the colony and warned the French settlers of the importance of establishing peaceful relations with the Indians in their efforts of developing a successful plantation economy.

French alliances with the Indians provided stability within the nascent colony of Louisiana. The colony was established by the French monarchy to profit through the development of a commercial economy. The Indians provided protective buffers from English expansion in the Carolinas and that provided the French with military support that allowed the French to extract minerals, furs, and crops for the mother country. When Sieur de LaSalle claimed the territory of Louisiana in 1682, he established peace with the Indians. During his early voyage he secured trading alliances with the Quapaw, Taensa, and the Natchez Indians who lived along the Mississippi River. The early French explorers in Louisiana including LaSalle, Tonti, and Iberville understood the importance of effective alliances with the Indians, which provided protection in the early colony.<sup>1</sup> Effective alliances with the Indians supported the early settlers in Louisiana. Since King Louis XIV was involved in the War of the Spanish Succession in the early 1700's, the French did not supply the settlers with food or goods. Because the original intentions of the French monarchy involved a search for mineral deposits, the early settlers consisted of soldiers, sailors, and artisans from urban, unskilled backgrounds. Iberville's initial exploration of the colony determined that they would develop a plantation economy that exported tobacco, indigo, and other agricultural staples in exchange for supplies and goods. Lacking the skills or desires to farm the land yet starving, the French relied on their alliances with the Indian's for food.<sup>2</sup> French interactions with the Indians also provided them with a powerful French ally for protection against the British who decimated their tribes through slave raids and diseases.<sup>3</sup> Although the monarchy viewed the French-Indian trade as an economic failure, it benefited both races within a marginal colony of France.

French and Indian trading alliances would establish French forts near Indian villages since they were dependent on Indian villages for supplies. The early forts provided marketplaces for exchange and interaction between Indians and the French. Although the proprietorship under Antoine Crozat banned trade between the French and Indians to develop a monopoly, trade along the French posts flourished. In 1716 the French settled Fort Rosalie among the Natchez and three years later they established Fort St. Pierre and extended their trade alliances to the Ofagoulas, Chaciumas and various neighboring tribes. By 1720, the trade alliances established a flow of trade from the interior posts within the colony to the coastal settlements of Mobile and New Orleans. This 350 mile-

extended radius from the Quapaws in the present day state of Arkansas, to the Caddoes along the Red River to the Upper Creeks along the Tallapoosa River. Creation of French forts near Indian settlements encouraged trade and interaction between the races.<sup>4</sup> Although the early developments within the colony of Louisiana resulted in the interactions between the French and the Indians they failed to produce revenues for France. France's economic motives would transfer the power from Antoine Crozat to John Law and the Company of the Indies. Hoping to establish a viable commercial economy through the production of tobacco, the Company of the Indies required labor and land for the creation of plantations in Louisiana. The motives of France conflicted with the alliances established by Iberville and Bienville. Increased demand for labor and profits led to massive importation of French settlers and slaves to Louisiana and the desire for lands would establish plantations along the rich, fertile Indian lands. The demands of the French colonists under the Company of the Indies sowed the seeds of conflict between the French, Indians, and Africans.

Prior to the massive importation of African slave in 1720, French settlers relied on Indian slaves for labor. Despite Iberville's original opposition to slavery, the French demanded the use of war captives as slaves for cultivation of crops. Indian slaves consisted of captives from various tribes whom the French had fought in the early 1720's such as the Alibamons, Taensas, and Chitimachas. Although the early planters had relied on the use of Indian slaves, they complained of their inefficiency. They also hoped to preserve their relations with the Indians that were destroyed by slave raids.<sup>5</sup>

The importation of African slaves resulted from the demands for labor by the Company of the Indies and settlers within the colony for the development of a commercial economy. Between 1717 and 1721 the Company of the Indies imported 2,000 African slaves from the region of Senegal.<sup>6</sup> Due to the trade monopoly that existed between Louisiana and Senegambia where they had exclusive trading rights, the imported slaves were from Bambara. Known for their defiant attitudes the Bambara slaves were actively involved in rebellions within the city of New Orleans. They campaigned with the Indian to displace French rule. <sup>7</sup>

Indians and Africans initially interacted as fellow slaves under French rule in a slave society. Since the slaves outnumbered the settlers, the French required polices that would control the Africans and Indians whom they relied on for sustenance, protection, and labor.<sup>8</sup> A census in 1726 indicates the marginal status of the French within the colony. The 1,663 habitants were French settlers within the colony that could move and acquire lands while the esclaves consisted of the men, women, and children who were bonded for life and included 159 Indians and 1,385 blacks. By 1732, the slaves accounted for over sixty percent of the native population.<sup>9</sup> The French were aware of the large population of Africans and Indians. They relied on policies that sowed differences between the races capable of threatening French rule. Although the use of Indian slaves waned in the 1720's, records indicate problems associated with the mixing of African and Indian slaves. General Commissioner Hubert advocated the use of both Indian and African slaves as skilled workers in the city of New Orleans. Indians and Africans worked under the same master. For example, Thomas Dezery, a carpenter living on Rue Royale owned two Indian slaves and four Negro slaves. The census of 1726 indicates that of the 108 slaves living in New Orleans, 30 were from various Indian tribes.<sup>10</sup> Since many of the Indian slaves were women, many of the African male slaves married the Indian women,

which increased their interactions.<sup>11</sup> Although the Indian slaves were a minority among the Africans within the colony, early interactions between the two races increased their ability to threaten French rule.

Interactions between the Indians and Africans justified French fears of their power to threaten French rule. Since the Indians were familiar with the land, they could easily escape into the woods. Escaped slaves plundered the city of New Orleans searching for goods, and the Attorney General complained of raids that resulted in groups of armed Indian slaves that surrounded the city of New Orleans, stole ammunitions from their masters, and incited fear among the settlers who feared a full-blown Indian attack.<sup>12</sup> The Indians also encouraged African slaves to escape the confines of the city, which led to the development of maroon communities on the outskirts of New Orleans. After the discovery of the maroon community of des Natanapalle that consisted of runaway African and Indian slaves who encouraged raids of the city in search of food, supplies, arms, and ammunition, Governor Périer under Company of the Indies discouraged the use of Indian slaves. He declared: "These Indian slaves being mixed with our Negroes may induce them to desert with them, as they maintain relations with them which might be disastrous to the colony when there are more blacks."<sup>13</sup> Although the enslavement of Indians was not prohibited until the Spanish acquisition of Louisiana, the French settlers realized the importance of encouraging conflicts between the races.

French polices rewarded Indians for the capture of runaway slaves and discouraged the development of maroon communities. They created conflicts between the Africans and Indians. For example, the Indians received gifts for the return of escaped slaves and the French rewards included over 160 pounds worth of desirable goods including muskets, shirts, food, mirror, knives, and musket stones. With the establishment of this reward system, Périer hoped to encourage conflicts between the two races that would use the Indians to prevent the blacks from escaping and prevent cooperation between the two races. To further strengthen this conflict, he also forbade French living among the Indians to have black slaves.<sup>14</sup>

The desire for a steady labor source under the Company of the Indies resulted in the importation of slaves from Senegal and facilitated interactions between Indians and Africans. French policies under Governor Périer designed to sow differences between the races indicated the fear of African-Indian alliances. Another crucial element under the Company of the Indies included the desire for lands, and settlers would develop plantations near the fertile Indian villages. This increased tensions between the Indians and the French and encouraged alliances of African and Indians against French rule. Desire for fertile lands for the production of tobacco resulted in the development of French plantations near Indian lands. As early as 1701, Iberville had established a precedent of protecting the Indian tribes along the interior of the colony from French intrusion and would use French outposts to support trade between the French and Indians while remaining a cohesive culture. Except for the Jesuit missionaries, Bienville discouraged the settlement of lands near the Indian villages in the interior of Louisiana. Indians living on French settlements along the coast would be assimilated into French culture through intermarriage. This continued the basic Indian policy that sought alliances with the Indians to provide protective buffers for the French against British expansionism. However, economic motives under the Company of the Indies would conflict with Iberville's policy. The best lands for the cultivation of tobacco were in the

interior of the colony particularly on the fertile, yet sacred grounds of the Natchez Indians. The Company of the Indies ordered the establishment of tobacco plantations in these sacred areas but Bienville resisted by only developing plantations along the lower Mississippi, mostly around the city of New Orleans.<sup>15</sup> This upset the Company of the Indies. They realized that by 1726, ninety-two percent of the land developed was contained along the narrow band of agriculture in the lower valley and ninety-five percent of the slaves imported to Louisiana inhabited plantations along this limited tract of land.<sup>16</sup> Although Bienville had hoped to support effective diplomatic alliances with the powerful tribes along the interior, the Company of the Indies fired him and aggressively developed plantations along the interior of Louisiana.

Governor Etienne de Périer, an ally for the Company of the Indies began the development of Indian lands for the production of tobacco, which proved disastrous for the colony. Many of the early plantations under John Law's company were situated near the Indian villages of the Chaouachas, Colapissas, Bayougoulas, Houmas, Tonicas, Natchez, and Yazoo.<sup>17</sup> They provided attractive lands for the settlers and boosted the economy but encroached on sacred Indian lands and disrupted alliances that were essential for stability within the colony. The development of plantations along the lands of the Natchez Indians led to a brutal rebellion and provided a powerful example of the ability of Indians to ally with Africans and overturn power within the colony.

Contact between the French and the Natchez Indians dates back to the early 1700's and early conflicts between the French and the Indian's provided a foundation for a reversal of French rule. As early as 1700, Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville smoked the peace calumet with the Natchez Indians and the initial encounters with the Indians indicated their cultural dominance among the tribes of Louisiana. The Natchez had developed a centralized form of government where the chief, Grand Soliel, was the absolute master of the tribe whose power was established through his relationship to the sun. The centralization of authority, the development of a caste system, and the monotheistic overtones of the Natchez Indians indicated their cultural superiority among the tribes in Louisiana.

Initial interactions between the Natchez and the French also indicated the potential for agriculture on the sacred grounds of the Natchez lands. Although the alliances with the Natchez were questionable and the British lured the Indians with European goods, the French realized the importance and fought for good relations with the Natchez tribe. They provided a protective buffer from the English and the French could profit through the cultivation of their lands. Settlement and development of the Natchez lands began in 1716 under Antoine Crozat through the establishment Fort Rosalie. This facilitated trade and exchange between the French and the Indians and awakened the settlers to the potential for profit through cultivation of their fertile lands.<sup>18</sup>

Brief skirmishes existed between the French and the Indians with the initial establishment of Fort Rosalie that resulted in tensions between the settlers prior to the introduction of a plantation economy under the Company of the Indies. For example, when visiting the Indians, Antoine La Mothe Cadillac, the governor of Louisiana under the proprietorship of Crozat, refused to smoke the peace calumet with the Natchez and insulted the Indians. This indicated war for the Indians, and the Natchez attacked French traders living at the fort. Bienville punished them by executing the Indians involved in the deaths, which made the peaceful relations with the Natchez difficult. However, the settlement of Fort

Rosalie developed prior to the massive importation of settlers and slaves to Louisiana under John Law's company. The settlers who demanded lands were encouraged by the aggressive policies for settling the land which exacerbated the conflicts between the French and the Indians.<sup>19</sup>

Promotion of the lands near the Natchez villages enticed settlers who sought fertile grounds for the production of tobacco. The lands of the Natchez were situated above the lowlands of the Mississippi, which frequently flooded and destroyed crops. The Company allowed colonists who could independently finance their settlements land concessions among the Natchez and by 1720 more than 100 settlers farmed on the two major concessions among the Natchez. The former commissioner Marc Antoine Hubert had developed the St. Catherine concessions, also known as Société de St. Catherine. This was a group of professional businessmen who sought to profit through the production of corn and tobacco. The Company of the Indies managed Terre Blanche and hoped to develop a thriving tobacco culture. Although the early developments of the communities were relatively peaceful, tensions arose in the colonies that turned the French against the Indians. Desire for French products increased Indian debts, and when a sergeant failed to receive his payment for corn, he killed several Indians. They retaliated by attacking the French and raiding their goods, which included horses, cows, and pigs. In response to the raids, the French established penal taxes on the Indians. Also, as their contact with the French increased, they were destroyed by deadly diseases such as smallpox and grew resentful of French rule. Although the Indians and French maintained friendly relations with each other, the increased presence of the French on their lands divided the Indians and French at Fort Rosalie.<sup>20</sup>

The abusive rule of Sieur de Chepart provided the impetus for the Indians to implement their attack on the French living among the concessions at Fort Rosalie. Governor Périer appointed de Chepart to commandant in 1725 and he transported African slaves to the concessions to facilitate the development of plantations. His economic motives conflicted with the Natchez as he ordered the removal of the Indians among the White Apple Village to facilitate the establishment of plantations. Disrespect for the Indians and their sacred lands resulted in anti-French sentiments among the Natchez tribes. Sympathizing with the African slaves laboring among the plantations, the Indians expressed their loss of freedom and independence to the French presence among the tribes:

What need did we have of the French? Do you think that before them we were not living better than we do now that we deprive ourselves of a part of our Corn, game, and fish that we kill for them even when we need them? Was it their Guns? We used to use our bows and arrows, which sufficed in providing us a good living. Was it their blankets, white, blue, or red? We have animal skins which are warmer. Before the arrival of the French we were living as men who know to survive with what they have: in place of this, today we are walking as slaves...<sup>21</sup>

The Indians felt that they were reduced to a position of virtual enslavement under French rule and after ensuring the support of the African slaves implemented a massacre that destroyed the French at Fort Rosalie.

The Natchez Indians attacked on the morning of November 28, 1729 and ignited fears of

African and Indian rebellions within the colony. By manipulating French trading alliances, they “feigned that they were going out for a great hunt, and undertook the trade with the French for guns, powder, and ball.”<sup>22</sup> In less than two hours, they destroyed over two hundred men, which was approximately one-eighth of the white population along the Mississippi. Since they exceeded the white population within the colony, the French set out on a brutal campaign to punish a rebellion that, “fundamentally altered the power structure of Louisiana and set sharp limits to French domination in the following decade.”<sup>23</sup>

The French retaliation of the Natchez Massacre established a precedent of the military strength of the French in Louisiana. Aware of the weakness of their regime, the French realized that the response to the African-Indian revolt would “establish the framework for a post-war stability that recognized French vulnerability among the population.”<sup>24</sup> Governor P rier played an instrumental role in the punitive campaign against the Africans and Indians. He warned the posts along the Mississippi of the Indian rebellion and distributed arms and ammunitions to the settlers on both the plantations and the cities. He also erected fortifications along the city of New Orleans and organized militias of men that attacked rebellious tribes.<sup>25</sup>

P rier recognized that many of the plantations along the Mississippi contained Indians and Africans that were upset with the French regime, he set out on a campaign to divide and rule the Africans and Indian alliances. Using a militia of black slaves that were promised their freedom if they sided with the French, he destroyed the Chaouchas. P rier described his motives for the attack:

The Chaouchas, a nation of 30 men below New Orleans, caused our settlers to tremble. This made me decide to have them destroyed by our blacks, which was carried out promptly and secretly. These examples made by our blacks had held the other little nations below the river in respect. If I wanted to use our blacks I would have destroyed all the nations who are not at all useful to us and who can, on the contrary, push our blacks to revolt, as we have seen from the example of the Natchez.<sup>26</sup>

This assured black support of the French while increasing conflicts between the races. P rier also sent officers to restore alliances with the Indians nations living along the Mississippi. P rier realized that “the Indian villages south of the Natchez has also lost their lands to the encroachment of the French planters during the 1720’s and speculation that the Africans of the nearby plantations would not remain in submission should the Indians revolt.”<sup>27</sup> By strengthening alliances with the tribes along the Mississippi he could prevent rebellions from various tribes. Although they did not pose a problem as individually, if they combined with other slaves and their tribes could be disastrous to French rule.

The French utilized Choctaw Indians along with black militias to effectively destroy the Natchez Indians. On January 27, 1730 P rier dispatched Choctaws and blacks under Sieur Jean-Paul LeSeur. In the battles against the Natchez, the African slaves who had allied with the Natchez played a decisive role by carrying supplies of powder, which prevented the Choctaws from defeating the Natchez. On February 8, 1730, the French sent another militia of Choctaws against the Natchez and by February 25, the Natchez settled a peace treaty and returned the hostages over to the French. This included

Africans that had played a key role in the massacre. Although the French defeated the Natchez on the Red River in 1731, the rebellious Africans undermined French authority in New Orleans.<sup>28</sup>

African slaves captured by the French would maintain alliances with Indians who hoped to displace French rule. The French had hoped to make an example of the rebellious slaves and, “burned alive with a degree of cruelty which has inspired all of the Negroes with a new horror of the Savages but will have a beneficial effect on securing the safety of the colony.”<sup>29</sup> The comptroller of the Company of the Indies, Le Page du Pratz, complained that the Africans who had allied with the Indians at the massacre led rebellions and campaigns against the French. They remained loyal to tribes who opposed French rule including the Illinois, Arkansas, and Miamis. This rebellious group of slaves influenced by the massacre would lead a series of revolts against French rule throughout the summer of 1730. For example, the slave conspiracy under Samba, “could be explained by the revolt of the Indians whom the slaves saw massacring the French every day and the small number of troops they knew to be in the country.” Périer assured the settlers that, “happily there has always been a great aversion between them [the Africans and Indians] which has been much increased by war, and we take great care to maintain it.” The Company of the Indies urged masters to rid themselves of “black slaves who had lived a long time among the Natchez... They were not treated all badly, and they have returned with a spirit of laziness, independence and insolence”<sup>30</sup>

The rebellious slaves in New Orleans disrupted French rule through plots of slave rebellion and anti-French activities. The faltering Company of the Indies was forced to turn its colony over to the crown, and Bienville returned in 1733 to restore peace among the tribes and settle the rebellious slaves who had maintained alliances with Indians who were opposed to French rule. By failing to respect the importance of the Indian alliances and through an aggressive establishment of settlement on their sacred hunting grounds, Governor Périer overturned a successful precedent of alliances that were begun by Iberville. Desire for land and money resulted in profits for France. However, did not understand the importance the powerful Indian tribes, which provided protection against other European powers and had the ability to incite the slave population to rebel. Successors of Bienville were warned of the example of the Natchez. They would follow the precedent of Bienville and preserved the individual nations along the interior. As for the Indians and Africans, the French learned the cost of subordinating a society that was capable of displacing their rule.

## Notes

1 Daniel Usner, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992). P. 13-16.

2 Jerah Johnson, “Colonial New Orleans” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold J. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 32-33.

3 Usner, p. 17-18.

4 Usner, p. 27-33.

- 5 Jennifer Michel Spear, "Whiteness and the Purity of Blood" (Ph. D diss, University of Minnesota, 1999), p.106.
- 6 Usner, p. 32.
- 7 Gwendolyn Mildred Hall, "The Formation of an Afro-Creole Culture" in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold J. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 68-71.
- 8 Spear, p. 110.
- 9 Charles R. Maduell, comp. and trans., *The Census Tables for the French Colony of Louisiana from 1699 to 1732*: (Baltimore, 1972): 25-76, cited in Daniel Usner's, *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy Before 1783* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 47.
- 10 Madeull, comp and trans., *Census Tables*, 50-76 cited in Usner's *Indians, Settlers, and Slaves*, p. 57.
- 11 Johnson, p. 34.
- 12 Gwendolyn Mildred Hall, "The Bambara in Louisiana: From the Natchez Uprising to the Samba Bambara Conspiracy" in *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), p. 97.
- 13 Usner, p. 59 cited in "Records of Superior Council" I, 109, III.
- 14 Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, p. 99.
- 15 Johnson, p. 35-37.
- 16 James Thomas McGowan, "Creation of a Slave Society: Louisiana Plantations in the eighteenth century"(Ph. D diss, University of Rochester, 1976), p. 72-83.
- 17 McGowan, p.28.
- 18 Patricia Dillion Woods, "The French and Natchez Indians in Louisiana: 1700-1731" in *The French Experience in Louisiana*, ed. Glenn R. Conrad (Lafayette, Center for Louisiana Studies, 1995), p. 281.
- 19 Woods, p. 282-284.
- 20 Woods, p. 286-287.
- 21 Le Page du Pratz, *Histoire*, 1:204-205 cited in Woods, p. 289.
- 22 *Jesuit Relations*, p. 165.
- 23 McGowan, p. 97-98.
- 24 McGowan, p.99..
- 25 *Jesuit Relations*, p. 14-15.
- 26 Perier to the Ministry of the Colonies, New Orleans, March 18, 1730, cited in Gwendolyn Mildred Hall, "The Bambara in Louisiana" p. 102.
- 27 McGowan, p. 101-104.
- 28 Hall, "The Formation of an Afro-Creole Culture" p. 73-74.
- 29 Regis du Roulet to Perier, March 16, 1731 cited in Hall, "Africans in Colonial Louisiana" p.104.
- 30 "Mouvements des Sauvages de la Louisiana depuis la prise du fort des Natchez par M. de Perier sur la fin de janvier 1731," July 21 and 28, 1731, C13A 13, fol 87, AN cited in Hall's "The Formation of an Afro-Creole Culture," p.75.