

The driving forces behind a massacre

by David El Kenz

The ritual massacre perpetrated by the Natchez against several hundred French settlers in Louisiana on 28 November 1729 was the starting point of a colonial violence against a tribe that lasted until its near disappearance

About: Gilles Havard, *Les Natchez. Une histoire coloniale de la violence*, Paris, Tallandier/Flammarion, 'Histoire' series, 2024, 608 pages, €26.90.

Gilles Havard, a research supervisor at the CNRS specialising in the history of New France, has published a major work that promotes an understanding of the history of mass violence. Since the 16th century, a significant part of the historical production has denounced the violence and atrocities of European colonisation, from the *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies* by Bartolomé de Las Casas to contemporary works that follow the genocidal paradigm.¹ The virtual disappearance of the Natchez Native American people, who originally lived in the Lower Mississippi Valley, near the French colony of New Orleans, is yet another expression of imperialist domination. By uncovering the views of Native Americans, this survey shows, on the contrary, the relative hybridity of this colonial society and the specificity of the violence that ensued.

¹ Élise Marienstras, "Guerres, massacres ou génocides ? Réflexions historiographiques sur la question du génocide des Amérindiens", in David El Kenz (dir.), *Le Massacre, objet d'histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 2005, p. 275-302.

The contextualisation of violence

The tragedy began on 28 November 1729, when the Natchez slaughtered 237 settlers, including 36 women and 56 children. This massacre came as a surprise, breaking with the coexistence between the two communities that had been established for some thirty years. The French retaliation ultimately resulted in the dispersal of the Natchez people. Contemporaries interpreted the massacre as an uprising, which Chateaubriand wrote about. 'Gilles Havard points out that listing all the Native American acts of war against the colonists under the generic labels of "resistance" or revolt prevents us from reflecting on the specifically cultural forms of the exercise of violence' (p. 31).

At all times, all accounts of this massacre highlighted the disbelief regarding an event deemed unexpected and particularly gruesome. Following the initial shock, a historian's duty is to reappraise the suddenness of the event within a larger socio-political history in search of the underlying tensions between communities.³ Gilles Havard not only situates this massacre within the long history of the Natchez people, in the 'Plaquemine' culture of the Mississippi Indians (11th-16th century), defined by temples built on mounds, but also within the European culture of the colonists, and finally within the much shorter history of the French colony. His investigation is based on three methodological pillars: reconstructing the cultural depth of the indigenous world; characterising the sometimes peaceful, sometimes destructive interrelations between the Natchez, the French and the Native American and African slaves, who are also mentioned; and finally, examining the accounts of the colonists through the rivalry between their authors and their European perception. The book is divided into four chronological sections, namely the French settlement (1699–1729), the massacre of the French, the wars waged by governors Étienne Perier and Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne de Bienville, which led to the dispersal of the Natchez people (1730–1776), and the deportation and invisibilisation of the Natchez people. The historian tells the story of a people of 4,000 individuals from the end of the 17th century to the present day.

³ Jean-Clément Martin, "Massacres, tueries, exécutions et meurtres de masse pendant la Révolution, quelles grilles d'analyse ?", *La Révolution française* [online], Les massacres aux temps des Révolutions, published online on 8 January 2011. URL: <http://lrf.revues.org/index201.html>

A bloody coup

Diving into the heart of this history, Gilles Havard unveils the extraordinary forces behind the massacre of 28 November 1729. The main thrust of the book is to situate this killing within the ritual violence of the Natchez religion. On the death of one of their chiefs, the Sun, the relatives and the servants would perform a self-sacrifice to accompany the deceased to the afterlife, a 'delicious and abundant land'. The last Great Sun, supreme ruler of the Suns in each village, died in 1728. The victims of the massacre would thus have been 'accompanying deaths', a sign of the relative integration of the settlers into native society. However, the historian does not overlook the more classic tensions of cohabitation between the two parties, punctuated by episodes of confrontation, which were quickly put to rest. The killing was therefore a hybrid between religious violence and an act of civil war. The massacre, writes Gilles Havard, 'resembles a domestic war and a ritualised act aimed at claiming a close relationship with a relative, subject to the collective rules of the group' (p. 235).

To achieve this demonstration, the historian applies his art to his corpus, a documentary miracle of sorts, in light of the information it offers. He compares the testimonies, highlights the competition between their authors and identifies the European stereotypes of the massacre: revolt, conspiracy and civil war. For instance, the tobacco grower Antoine-Simon Le Page du Pratz interpreted the massacre as a long-planned plot against the colonists. He justified the conspiracy theory on the basis of what a Sun King's mother had secretly revealed to him. According to du Pratz, the female Native American explained that, as a woman, she could not take part in the coup. And had she been informed, she added, she would have protested against this dreadful plan. This argument, despite an apparent consistent narrative, is not compatible with family relations in Natchez society, however. There was no special bond between a sovereign and his mother because of their blood relationship. In other words, the concept of 'Queen Mother' did not form part of the Native American society. On the other hand, this interpretative scheme of a political crisis based on intra-family conflict was central to the tragedy of the Grand Siècle. Hence, our witness du Pratz was delivering a Western projection of events.

Using a similarly subtle method, this time ethnographic, Gilles Havard gives meaning to certain acts of mass murder. For example, the killers disembowelled pregnant Europeans. The researcher could interpret this cruelty in the light of the Wars of Religion, when the perpetrators inflicted such torture to publicly demonstrate their

refusal to allow heretics to have children. In truth, disembowelling links back to the Native American motif of anti-birth: the unborn baby also had the right to their own death and salvation in the next world. Similarly, Gilles Havard shows how displaying of the decapitated heads of 'officers' alongside those of ordinary 'inhabitants' replicated the dual Natchez society that distinguished between the noble class, referred to in French as the '*Soleils*' (the Suns) and the commoner class referred to as the '*Puants*' (the Stinkards).

Colonial violence

Colonial reprisals are analysed from the same perspective of defining warlike practices, this time in Europe. Gilles Harvard shows the shift towards a systematisation of violence stemming from the 'culture of carnage', as it emerged in military tactics on the Old Continent at the end of the 17th century. The historian notes the French strategy of retaliation against hostile Native Americans. Fugitives, who took refuge in the Chicacha villages in particular, were hunted down as if on a 'manhunt'. However, the Natchez captives were not summarily executed, as the German Schenappans were in the Palatinate in the 1680s. The ethical and legal concept of the law of nations was established in the Age of Enlightenment. In colonial times, it was also much more profitable to turn the defeated into slaves to be deported to the plantations of Saint-Domingue. As of 1743, the Natchez were no longer a French issue. They dispersed to the north-west, under British rule. They now form a diaspora within other indigenous nations, mainly the Cherokee in North Carolina and the Creek in Alabama.

A lost memory?

In the final part of his investigation, Gilles Havard uncovers the traces of the 'last Natchez' in American history. Although Hutke Fields, the last self-proclaimed Great Sun alive, claims that 211,000 Creek and Cherokee are likely to identify with his nation, there are in fact only a few hundred who do. Not recognised as an official tribe and having shared in the deportations of the host Native American nations in what is now Oklahoma during the 19th century, the initial dispersal was covered up by

subsequent historical traumas. In other words, the massacre of 1729 and the war of the 1730s and 1740s no longer play a fundamental role in the historical memory of the Natchez people.

In the early-20th century, the collaboration between anthropologist John Reed Swanton and Natchez speakers, followed by the revival of the Native American identity from the 1960s to the 1980s, led to the revival of Natchez ceremonies, such as the 'Mosquito' dance, once practised at corn harvest festivals.

However, by the start of the 21st century, the Natchez have still not been officially recognised. Paradoxically, the historian shows how this competition within the Native American world today revolves around the 'degree of Indian blood', even though the ideology of blood was originally alien to Native American culture. The dispute over a 'racialised' genealogical heritage even affects Hutke Field. The historian concludes with a more optimistic epilogue. A Franco-Natchez reconciliation ceremony is planned for the Grand Village site in Natchez, Mississippi. This commemoration is meant to restore a past largely erased by the subsequent traumas that the Natchez people endured along with other Native American nations over the course of the 19th century.

The interdisciplinary nature of anthropology and history

This book offers an outstanding contribution to the historiography of New France, of Native American civilisations and of mass violence. It makes evident not only the complexity of the massacre, but also a social totality. The rigorous treatment of the corpus allows for a multiplicity of viewpoints, including the perpetrators', the bystanders' and the victims', all captured in their agency. The interpretation that brings to light the predominant role of the religious factor in the initial massacre is based on an extremely detailed social and ethnographic description. Finally, the author is also a historian, sensitive to the chronological dynamics of violence and its memories. The book's extensive critical apparatus illustrates this method, with numerous maps, biographical appendices and a timeline.

The author also has a fine sense of style. He takes us into the world of travel writing based on an enigma that unfolds in the course of his narrative. His exotic, pathos-free descriptions remind us of the adventures of John Smith and Pocahontas,

but also of the – quite dreadful – adventures of Charles Marlow in *Heart of Darkness*. With the help of rich iconography, the reader follows the fate of the Great Sun, the governors and Hutke Field, as well as the humblest of the Natchez people who survived the successive dispersals. At no point does the author judge any of the players involved, instead presenting the logic behind their actions in a scientific manner.

Finally, the investigation stands as a model of interdisciplinarity between anthropology and history. The former supports the eschatological thesis of the bloody coup of 1729. In this respect, this grammar is reminiscent of Denis Crouzet's seminal work on the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, which revealed the sacred element in the slaughter.³ As for the latter, the causal chain of violent events and the accumulation of their memories, at the heart of the book, shed considerable light on the future of the Natchez people.

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³ Denis Crouzet, *Les guerriers de Dieu. La violence au temps des troubles de religion vers 1525 – vers 1610*, (1st ed. 1990), Seyssel, Champ Vallon, 2022.