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The Colour of War Memory: Cultural representations of tirailleurs sénégalais

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Abstract:

This article examines French and francophone cultural representations of the roles played by tirailleurs sénégalais during the First and Second World Wars. It analyses how such representations (produced by authors from both within and outside this group) can be considered as examples of what Max Silverman has defined as ‘palimpsestic memory’, containing traces of the present and the past. Key myths and stereotypes of French African troops have reappeared with relative frequency in images, texts and films. This article explores the ideological and political purposes to which these representations have been put at different historical moments up to the present.

Keywords: Colonial Soldiers; tirailleurs; World War One; World War Two; Commemoration.

In an article published in *The Guardian*, Santanu Das notes that in contemporary British commemorative culture ‘There is an understandable impulse to retrospectively turn [colonial soldiers] into heroes and martyrs, even though many enlisted to keep hunger at bay. [...]

While it is essential to challenge the colour of war memory, it is also important to keep a watch on the way it is being done’ (Das, 2014). The same impulse to reduce the complexity and diversity of French African soldiers’ experiences in both World Wars into well-worn stereotypes that serve particular political or ideological purposes is discernible in francophone culture. The figure of ‘Samba’, a heroic tirailleur sénégalais¹ who both fights

¹ Tirailleurs sénégalais were initially recruited from West Africa, but were subsequently recruited from Central and Eastern French African colonies, despite retaining the reference to Senegal in their name.

for and learns from the French patrie, for example, made frequent reappearances in French cultural production throughout the twentieth century, as did the image of the African soldier as a fierce and fearless ‘instinctive’ warrior. The ways in which certain images and stereotypes are re-invoked and re-purposed at different points across the decades suggests that rather than interpreting each cultural iteration of the *tirailleur sénégalais* as a response to a particular set of historical and socio-cultural circumstances, it is more apposite to view the range of cultural representations produced since 1914 as examples of ‘palimpsestic memory’. As Max Silverman has observed in relation to cultural texts that re-invoke traumatic episodes from the past: ‘the relationship between present and past [...] takes the form of a superimposition and interaction of different temporal traces to constitute a sort of composite text, like a palimpsest’ (Silverman, 2013: 3). In this article, we will explore further the ways in which a diverse range of cultural representations of *tirailleurs sénégalais* not only bear witness to their moment of production, but contain within them traces of past representations. We will consider the ideological and political purposes to which these representations have been put at different historical moments, and will conclude that, even in the case of recent attempts to recuperate the ‘lost voices’ of French African soldiers into the cultural memory and commemoration of both World Wars, there remains an ongoing reliance on a limited number of pre-existing cultural stereotypes.

Around half a million colonial troops fought for the French Empire in the First World War, including approximately 165,000 West Africans, 170,000 Algerians, 60,000 Tunisians and 24,000 Moroccans (Sarraut, 1923: 44). Unlike British Africans, most French Africans served in Europe, although there were also thousands who worked as labourers or carriers in Africa. During World War Two, nearly 74,000 West African colonial troops fought in the 1939-1940 campaign in France. 24,000 died in combat, while others were massacred by

German troops² and 15,000 were imprisoned in Vichy-run prisoner of war camps (Kamian, 2001: 341-343).³ North and West African tirailleurs also made up a significant number of the Free French Army which fought from 1942 to 1945.⁴ Yet there are relatively few studies of tirailleurs, and in particular studies focusing on their cultural representation.⁵ First World War tirailleurs have been the subject of pioneering work by historians Marc Michel, Joe Lunn, Gregory Mann, Myron Echenberg, and Richard Fogarty, who have helped us to understand the functioning of the military institution, combatant and veteran experience, and the broader political contexts in which these men were mobilised and demobilised. There have also been cultural analyses of racist propaganda featuring tirailleurs, particularly in relation to the German campaigns during the occupation of the Rhineland (Le Naour, 2004). In relation to the Second World War, too often the tirailleur simply remains a footnote in wide historical narrative of either the 1940 defeat or the more glorious liberation process.⁶ Although the release of the film *Indigènes* (Bouchareb, 2006) prompted both scholarly articles and general public debate in France, there was little wider examination of the *tirailleurs*' history during the Second World War and such a focus was short-lived. Existing studies of cultural responses to and memories of tirailleurs largely fail to take account of the connections and relations of influence between representations produced at different historical moments.⁷ For example, novels and films featuring First World War tirailleurs sénégalais produced during the period of the centenary of the First World War hark back not only to novels and images of the 1920s and 1930s, but equally to more recent cinematic

² It is said that these massacres were in retaliation for the supposed rape of German women by French African soldiers during the occupation of the Rhineland following the Versailles Peace Accords of 1918 (Le Naour, 2004).

³ No colonial troops were held in POW camps outside of France. These colonial POW camps were run by Vichy officials on behalf of the German occupying force (Mabon, 2006).

⁴ Eric T. Jennings believes that the figure of 30,000 colonial subjects in the Free French Army in 1943 'certainly needs to be revised upwards' (Jennings, 2015: 4).

⁵ For an overview of published scholarship on French colonial troops see Deroo and Champeaux, 2013.

⁶ The only major historical study into the African Free French Army is Jennings, 2015.

⁷ For analyses of the cultural representation of the tirailleur sénégalais see Berliner, 2002; Blanchard et al, 1993; Ezra, 2000; Hale, 2008; Little, 2009; Riesz and Schultz, 1989; Riesz and Bjornson, 1996.

heroizations of Second World War West African soldiers. The approach we take in this article will thus both shed fresh light on evolving French attitudes towards its African troops, and illustrate the ways on the ways in which cultural memories need to be analysed diachronically in both directions, exploring the interplay between past and present.

First World War tirailleurs in the interwar period

The mobilisation of African combatants and workers during the First World War by the French Empire resulted in an evolution of existing stereotypes. African men recruited as combatants were often presented as fierce warriors, embodying Charles Mangin's notion of races guerrières (warrior races) evoked in *La Force Noire* (1910) as he lobbied for the use of colonial troops in a European war. These images drew themselves on the broader construction of 'martial races' amongst colonial subjects across Empires in the decades preceding 1914: Scottish Highlanders, Punjabi Sikhs and Nepalese Gurkhas, for example, were all believed to possess a biological or cultural disposition for war in British imperialist ideology (Streets, 2004). First World War French postcards and posters depicting tirailleurs sénégalais on the battlefield belong to this tradition, showing West African soldiers charging forward, yelling and brandishing their weapons, such as the central figure in Lucien Jonas's 1917 poster for the 'Journée de l'Armée d'Afrique'. But alongside these 'savage warriors' were reassuringly paternalistic images of troops as loyal simpleton soldiers, as 'bons enfants' (good children) gaining a measure of 'civilization' as they risked their lives for the French empire. The latter images most often showed the troops behind the lines: in hospitals, in towns or in training camps. The 'bon enfant' stereotype was most famously reproduced and disseminated in the 1915 Banania advertisement, in which a grinning tirailleur declares 'Y a bon' (It's good) in the pidgin French taught to French African soldiers (Blanchard et al., 1993). Both stereotypes were equally embodied, this time for humorous effect rather than

commercial gain, in the character of Prince, the *tirailleur sénégalais* ‘adopted’ by the popular cartoon heroine Bécassine in her role as *marraine de guerre* (‘soldier’s godmother’) in the 1915 edition of the comic strip. Initially terrified as she assumes he is a savage cannibal, Bécassine comes to admire Prince’s bravery (he is awarded a *Croix de guerre*) and loyalty to the French Empire, after learning that he was ‘civilized’ when adopted as a child by missionaries (Fell, 2011).

The interwar period saw the continuation of these kinds of images, but also saw the emergence of counter-discourses which challenged the dominant dichotomy of bloodthirsty warrior/loyal child-subject. The cultural representation of *tirailleurs* was inflected by three important new contexts during this period: the heroization of First World War combatants in memorial culture, the occupation of the Rhineland by French African troops, and the rise of communist and socialist interpretations of the war as an exploitation of the working man by imperialist capitalists. The crudely racist German propaganda campaign that depicted the French African troops occupying the Rhineland as ferocious rapists of white women (and which garnered support and provoked debate beyond Germany, particularly in the USA and in Scandinavia) was countered to some extent by their heroization as war veterans in commemorative culture in France and French African colonies. However, the construction of war memorials and inclusion of *tirailleurs* in annual Victory celebrations was always double-edged, as at the same time as such activities were commemorating the sacrifices of black Africans on European soil, they were simultaneously – and perhaps predominantly – celebrating Empire (Michel, 1997). This was certainly the case with the statue of a *tirailleur* that topped the display set up by colonial officials in the 1922 ‘Exposition nationale coloniale’ in Marseilles, who was represented marching side by side with a French colonial soldier ‘towards victory’ (Hale, 2008: 101). And it was equally evident in the ‘Monument aux héros de l’armée noire’ (Monument to the Heroes of the Black Army) which was unveiled in

Rheims in 1924; an almost identical monument was erected the same year in Bamako, Mali. The twin sculptures, by Paul Moreau-Vauthier, depict four African tirailleurs surrounding a white French officer holding the tricolor aloft. The sculpted tirailleurs do not share the exaggerated features of the stereotypes of either ‘bloodthirsty warrior’ or grinning ‘bon enfant’, but are more realist depictions of heroized infantry soldiers, echoing the thousands of white French poilus who appear on other First World War memorials. However, the monument depicts the African soldiers in protective mode in relation to the white officer they surround; they are perpetually on watch, ready to fight and defend the patrie, which is represented metonymically in the national flag.⁸

This vision of the tirailleur as loyal soldier of the Empire can also be found in the popular French novel *La Randonnée de Samba Diouf* (The Long Walk of Samba Diouf) (1928). This colonial novel, written by successful novelist brothers Jean and Jérôme Tharaud, draws on an orientalist tradition of authors such as Pierre Loti and Ernest Psichari, and presents the psychological journey undergone by its protagonist, Samba, according to deeply-rooted colonialist beliefs about the benefits of Empire. In the novel the ‘Toubabs’ (white Europeans), despite some evidence of having committed injustices, are seen to have ‘civilized’ West Africa by bringing peace between warring tribes and abolishing slavery. Samba is brave and virtuous, but naïve and lacking in direction. He is suspicious of other tribes, and his wealth and social standing are threatened by the dishonesty of his relatives. He is forcibly recruited as a tirailleur, yet his journey to the Western Front provides him with a higher social status, a different view of both Africa and France, and a new, deeper self-understanding.

⁸ It is also noteworthy that the dead are not named, and therefore individually sacralised, as is the case on the majority of French war memorials. Rather, the names of the principle battles in which the Armée noire fought are inscribed, offering a collective vision of a ‘unified’ Empire rather than focusing on the ‘blood tax’ paid by individual citizens.

This Bildungsroman depiction of the benefits of the encounter between African soldiers and France during the war is to some extent mirrored in the only published memoir by a tirailleur sénégalais, Bakary Diallo's *Force Bonté* (1926), whose narrator also presents his journey to France as one of education and self-discovery. The broadly positive image Diallo gives in his memoir of French culture and its 'enlightening' possibilities meant the novel was critically assessed by later postcolonialist critics in the 1970s and 1980s. As Janos Riesz notes in his summary of criticism of *Force Bonté*, Diallo was accused by some of 'servility' and 'sheepish conformism' in his praise of certain aspects of colonialism, and his novel was dismissed (Riesz, 1996: 158). Diallo expresses a sense of deep joy in the discovery of the French language and French culture, particularly via his encounters with Lucie Cousturier, an artist who taught French to the tirailleurs stationed in Fréjus during the war (Fell, 2011). Diallo describes Cousturier as having 'a free soul' who was able to 'solve problems that prejudiced people had made complicated' by foregrounding 'the simple goodness and humanity of the human heart, and ends his memoir by evoking a dream of mutual understanding and exchange:

I won't deny it, my very being was full of misunderstandings about France. I was told [the French] were wicked. I feared them, and when one fears someone, one runs away from them. But chance has thrown us together and contact has brought understanding. [...] Let us help one another without making distinctions of race. Colours are only coverings and we know that bodies respond deep within them to goodness while they only respond superficially to wickedness. Let us all love one another, despite the superficial ideas that would divide us (Diallo, 1926: 204).

This can be interpreted as political naivety or the subconscious internalisation of colonial discourse. However, if we interpret Diallo's memoir in dialogue with that written by Lucie Cousturier, *Des Inconnus chez moi* (*Strangers in my home*) (1922), these two unusual and

important examples of autobiographical accounts of the interactions between French civilians and African soldiers should not be dismissed as merely parroting colonialist stereotypes. They both turn to humanist understandings of universal qualities of goodness, beauty and love in their attempts to find common ground and to express the pleasures of the discovery of another culture and its impression on their own cultural lives and understandings of self. Of course, French colonialism also turned to universalism as a means of justifying economic and political repression. But neither Cousturier nor Diallo are naïve about the economic and political realities of colonialism. While neither of them advocate revolution or independence, they do argue for change, in a desire to reap the benefits of cultural, intellectual and linguistic exchange.

As Elizabeth Ezra notes, the interwar period also marked ‘the beginning of the end’ of the colonial age, which produced some harder-hitting representations of tirailleurs, such as René Marin’s *Batouala* (1921), whose preface attacks the harsh social and economic conditions of life in French Africa, and accuses the colonial authorities of abuse and corruption (Ezra, 2000: 2-3). Alongside Lamine Senghor’s *Violation d’un pays* (The violation of a country) (1928), Marin’s novel is evidence that the dominant colonial vision of the tirailleur as having benefitted from his service for France was attacked by the anti-colonial voices that were beginning to emerge in this period. But the audiences for such voices were limited to socialist, communist and avant-garde circles; the most influential cultural representations were the state-sanctioned war memorials or popular colonial novels that nuanced rather than challenged the stereotype of the ‘bon enfant’.

The tirailleur as propaganda tool in 1940s France

The figure of the tirailleur was omnipresent in propaganda produced by both sides during the

Second World War. The image of the Empire and the tirailleurs, continually depicted as its most loyal soldiers, were meant to reassure the French population that despite occupation by and collaboration with Germany, the Empire would allow France to remain a world power. This discourse is personified in Gabriel Bonnet's novel, *Samba: Héros de l'empire* (1941). Bonnet was an army officer who had commanded colonial troops in 1940 and post-armistice became a journalist for Vichy's weekly newspaper *Compagnons*. The novel is a thinly disguised work of colonial propaganda which tells the life story of Samba, a tirailleur from Guinea, from his birth to his death on the battlefields of Northern France in 1940. As was the case in the 1920s, the novel places great emphasis on France's civilising mission in its colonies, especially on the long-standing sacrifices of its loyal, if childlike, colonial soldiers. Vichy also sponsored numerous cultural events with a colonial theme, reminiscent of the interwar 'Expositions coloniales'. There was a colonial train that travelled around the Southern Zone and the Paris region in 1942 to publicise the Empire through films, plays and exhibitions. Athletics competitions were held to demonstrate the prowess of the Empire, frequently including displays of strength by the tirailleurs.

The Free French Forces also drew upon the Empire for its propaganda. They sponsored a series of thirteen short adventure stories for children (*La Guerre des Hommes Libres du Commandant de Guyenne*) which were published from summer 1944 into 1945. More than half of these adventures were set in France's imperial territories (Chad, Indochina, Tunisia, and the French Antilles). A trio of soldiers (*Les Trois Gars du Tchad* of the first story's title) appear in three stories: Abou, a Senegalese tirailleur, Kerduff, a Breton foreign légionnaire, who has been coarsened by years living and fighting in the colonies, and Morillon, a French corporal who joined the Free French in London. Abou is the epitome of the loyal and unquestioning tirailleur. He serves both Kerduff and Morillon with dedication and good humour, though sometimes testing their patience with his terrible cooking. When he finally dies, again he seems

almost happy to be able to make the ultimate sacrifice for his *mère patrie* and his beloved Général Leclerc. Echoing 1920s commemorative culture, *tirailleurs* here are depicted as central to the depictions of the ideal soldier-hero for a new post-war society, albeit in a subordinate role.

The *tirailleur* as a malleable figure of cultural representation is also evident in *Boubou soldat* (Fanton, 1945). Here he appears as a comic book character that was an indiscriminate mixture of *tirailleur* and African-American GI. The broad smile of the *tirailleur* of the 1915 *Banania* posters reappears in a US jeep and uniform, with the supposed childlike nature of these African troops physically personified in the character of a young child from Chad. As an orphan he is adopted by a group of Free French soldiers as their mascot. Even though he is only seven, Boubou shows great courage in the fighting in North Africa, Italy and Normandy. He takes two enemy soldiers prisoner in Libya, for which he is awarded the *Croix de Guerre*. Although the story follows a number of colonial stereotypes, such as Africans' supposed inability to stand the cold and their wonder at French civilisation in Paris, Boubou is shown to have real feelings, unlike most other 1940s *tirailleur* protagonists. Equally, Boubou does not have to make the ultimate sacrifice for France; instead the story ends with Boubou awaiting repatriation to Africa in Southern France. He is returning to his homeland, ready to play his part in the next, supposedly more equal phase of French-African relations personified by the new term of *l'Union française*, adopted by the postwar French state.

The years of decolonisation

During the years following the Second World War, and particularly after 1968, France saw a wave of cultural productions re-examining its past. Some of these re-examinations took a critical political stance, exposing uncomfortable or shameful episodes in France's recent past. The 1960s and 1970s also saw novels and films in which the French colonial project was

attacked, such as the 1961 film *Le Président*, directed by Henri Verneuil, in which the French Empire's 'civilising mission' is dismissed (Jimiez Aguilera, 2009). The 1960s and 1970s also saw renewed cultural engagement with the First World War, filtered through the experience of the Second, including the role of its former colonies. *La victoire en chantant* (1976), directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud, and which won the best foreign film Oscar in the same year, can be seen as part of this trend. This film, which changed its French title in 1977 to *Noirs et blancs en couleur* (Black and White in Colour), gives a different vision of the use of African troops in the First World War. It is set in Fort Coulais, a fictional small outpost in French Equatorial Africa, on the border of the then German colony of Cameroon, and is a biting satire, attacking colonialism as both ridiculous, cruel and hypocritical, betraying the French Republican principles it is supposed to embody. The film's satirical intent is equally indicated by its title, the first line of the 1793 French Revolutionary song 'Le Chant du départ', a call to arms justifying the Revolutionary citizen army. The film can thus be understood as a kind of anti-colonial fable rather than a work of documentary realism, and shows two kinds of approaches to the use of African men by the French empire. In the early part of the film, once they discover the outbreak of war in January 1915 via an old French newspaper, a group of stupid, racist shopkeepers led by an alcoholic sergeant round up some local troops by bribing them with cooking pots. When they attack the small German garrison they are mown down by machine guns, the sound of which can be heard in the distance while the white French enjoy a *déjeuner sur herbe* with a deliberate nod to the famous Manet impressionist painting and to Jean Renoir's 1959 film of the same title, suggesting a rotten belle époque world of the socially elite.

A young highly educated socialist schoolteacher-geographer, an admirer of Péguy and Debussy, Hubert Fresnoy, takes over leadership of the group and turns instead to a new form of recruitment, negotiating with local chiefs to recruit from a rival tribe, and abandoning his

pacifist and humanist principles in the process. Fresnoy is presented as a more 'intellectualised' – and, in many ways, more chilling - version of colonial violence, which he imposes by exploiting local political rivalries to feed the need for African manpower. In both versions of colonialism, the black African troops are presented as suffering victims of imperial pride, greed and patriotism, particularly in a key scene in which the African soldiers are taught to sing 'Le Chant du départ' while enjoying few of the privileges of a citizen-army and the 'social contract' it brought with it in metropolitan France. In the film's final scenes, we see black African servants preparing food and drink for the white German and French men and women. While one African man resignedly points out the continuation of their behaviours as colonisers, Fresnoy's black African mistress spits towards them in disdain. In this film, then, the dominant/dominated distinction between coloniser and colonised is essentially a Marxist one; any possibility of redemption of the French colonial mission that we saw in the 1920s memoirs and 1940s propaganda is dismissed.

This approach to colonialism and First World War French African soldiers is redolent of the era of its production: a post-68 ridiculing of grand narratives and a deep suspicion of patriotism, as well as an emphasis on combatant coercion and victimhood. While the 1920s saw the heroization of tirailleurs (in part as a response to their demonization in racist hate campaigns), the 1960s-1980s saw their cultural reconstruction as victims. This period also saw a renewal of interest in the figure of the Second World War tirailleur in short stories, testimonials, plays and novels of the 1970s and 1980s. This appears to have been motivated by the appearance of new publishing houses, either in Dakar (Nouvelles Editions Africaines, created by Senghor in 1972 and which ceased its activity in 1988) or in Paris (L'Harmattan, established in 1975 to publish books about the Third World, especially Africa, and Kathala, established in 1980 with the same aims). A quarter of the novels, plays and autobiographical

texts from the period were published by these three publishers.⁹ In the wake of African independences, there was a desire to offer publishing opportunities to a new generation of African authors and to permit them to offer a much stronger critique of colonialism. The focus of the texts altered during this time, with the criticism of the authors being directed more squarely at African colonial leaders who are portrayed as having co-operated, or even conspired with, the French colonial authorities in the recruitment of African soldiers for the French Army (Diakhaté, 1975).

However, the most well-known depictions of the Second World War *tirailleur* in the post-decolonisation period appear in the film by the Senegalese director, Ousmane Sembène, *Le Camp de Thiaroye* (1987). Sembène was himself a volunteer *tirailleur* (though he was not at Thiaroye, so the work cannot be described as a first-hand account). It is one of only two works about the *tirailleurs* during the Second World War to be authored by a former *tirailleur*.¹⁰ This paucity of *tirailleur* authored narratives is problematic, leading to both the dominance of stories of European theatres and/or experiences of war and highly instrumentalised images of the *tirailleur*. *Le Camp de Thiaroye* depicts the *tirailleurs* being held in an army camp outside Dakar in the Autumn of 1944, waiting to be demobilised. The soldiers are evidently physically and mentally scarred by their experiences of warfare. Unrest breaks out when it becomes apparent that the *tirailleurs* are to be sent home without their full demobilisation pay and the soldiers take the camp commander captive. The French administration panic and kill a large number of soldiers. Sembène based his film on the massacres that took place at the Camp de Thiaroye on 30 November and 1 December 1944. This cinematographic commemoration pre-dates the official state commemorations by either

⁹ See Joseph Issoufou Conombo, *Souvenirs de guerre d'un tirailleur sénégalais* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989); Lamine Diakhaté, *Prisonnier du regard* (Dakar: Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1975); Boubacar Boris Diop, *Thiaroye, terre rouge* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1981); Doumbi-Fakoly, *Morts pour la France* (Paris: Karthala, 1983).

¹⁰ The other work was the collection of poems by Leopold Sédar Senghor, *Hosties Noires* (1948).

the French or Senegalese state by more than twenty years.¹¹ The film was banned in France for two years following its release, demonstrating the refusal of the French government, even in the late 1980s, to acknowledge different and negative colonial narratives. The massacre itself symbolised the unfilled promises, both material and ideological, of the French towards their colonial troops, as well as the fear amongst the French officers of the supposedly savage and untamed *tirailleur*, the very myth created by colonial propaganda.

Numerous links are drawn in the film between the soldiers' experiences of fascism in Western Europe and their life under French colonial rule, most obviously the visual links between the conditions of the French army camp of Thiaroye and those of the Nazi concentration camp of Buchenwald, in which one of the soldiers, Pays, has been held. This character is haunted by the watchtowers and barbed wire at Thiaroye which bring back memories of his suffering in Germany. Several *tirailleurs* wear items of German uniform, some even with SS insignia. A massacre in a Senegalese village committed by Vichy troops is compared by one of the *tirailleurs* to Nazi atrocities in the French village of Oradour sur Glaine (Murphy, 2007: 60). All such comparisons are roundly rejected by the French officers, men who had not experienced the same violence and privations as the *tirailleurs*, having spent the majority of the war in safety in the colonies.

The link between the *tirailleur* and the African-American GI is also present in Sembène's film. However, instead of being a symbol of disregard for the *tirailleurs*' unique history as in the character of Boubou soldat, here the director aims to create a form of Pan-African dialogue between two cultures - though as Parent notes, the dialogue between Diatta and the American GI ultimately leads to total misunderstanding about their daily lives (Parent,

¹¹ François Hollande attended commemorations of the massacre in Dakar in December 2014. See 'Sénégal: Hollande rend hommage aux tirailleurs massacrés à Thiaroye', RFI, 1 December 2014. <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20141201-hollande-senegal-hommage-tirailleurs-tiarroye-guerre-histoire-1944-massacre-soldats-senegalais/> [accessed 19 May 2016].

2014: 114-115). The massacre at Thiaroye is also the subject of a short story, a novel, a play and an animated film making it the most widely depicted of all the historical events from the Second World War involving the tirailleurs.¹² Although these cultural representations of the massacre was key in bringing this ‘hidden history’ into the public eye, they also, at least to some extent, continued the tendency seen in Annaud’s film to turn tirailleurs into an undifferentiated innocent body of men united by their victimization by violent colonial oppression.

Twenty-first Century tirailleurs

In the last twenty years there has been a shift to depict stories of real individuals in cultural representations of the tirailleur of the Second World War, based on increased historical research, conducted at a local level by amateur historians who wish to accurately record the numerous roles played by the tirailleurs (especially in numerous Resistance movements throughout France) and nuance dominant national myths. There is also a desire to record testimonies of tirailleurs and other colonial troops before they die, through works such as the 2015 Memoria photography exhibition in Corsica and Morocco, which sought to depict the colonial troops that liberated Corsica in 1943.

This work of historical research and cultural representations has been showcased and supported by national organisations such as the Musée de l’Histoire de l’Immigration (established in 2007) which has detailed the role of colonial troops in France’s wars from 1870 onwards in both its permanent exhibition and its online counterpart.¹³ The French Ministry of Defence, through its Secretary of State for War Veterans and Memory, has co-sponsored a series of fifty very short documentaries about the life and war stories of foreigners who fought

¹² ‘Aube africaine’ (Keita Fodéba, 1951); Doumbi-Fakoly, 1983; Diop, 1981.

¹³ <http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/histoire-de-l-immigration/dossiers/les-etrangers-dans-les-guerres-en-france> [accessed 29 February 2016].

for France, entitled *Frères d'Armes*.¹⁴ These films were written by the colonial historian Pascal Blanchard and directed by Rachid Bouchareb (whose filmography includes *Indigènes* and *Hors la loi*), thus increasing these films' visibility and legacy. Of the fifty portraits, twenty-seven are of colonial soldiers, sixteen of whom fought during the Second World War. The men featured range from famous political figures such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, to soldiers otherwise unknown to the general public either in France or in their homeland. The documentaries depict a desire on the part of these politically engaged directors and historians to inscribe the story of the *tirailleur* into the French national historical narrative. They also demonstrate the extent to which the French state's willingness to engage with such a process is highly dependent on the current minister or secretary of state. Much was achieved under the leadership of Kadir Arif (Secretary of State responsible for veteran affairs from May 2012 to November 2014), who sought through numerous initiatives to pay homage to the troops of the French Empire. He had personal knowledge of such histories as his father was a *harki*.¹⁵

The figure of the Guinean soldier Addi Bâ reoccurs in several different recent cultural depictions of the *tirailleur*, and can be seen to incarnate the shifts in representation. Bâ is subject of one of the documentary films in the *Frères d'Armes* series as well as the protagonist in the *Le terroriste noir* by Tierno Monémbo (2012). The graphic novel *Le Tirailleur de Vosges* by Faye Samba (2007), the third volume in the *La Patrouille du Caporal Samba* series, evokes Addi Bâ in passing, not at least in the work's title, but is seeming based on very little historical research. Bâ is also one of the main characters in a 2015 graphic novel, *Résistants oubliés* by Kamel Mouellef. He fought in the French Army during the 1939/40 campaign, escaped after being captured by German troops, and then went onto to establish a resistance group in the Vosges mountains of Eastern France. Bâ is repeatedly remembered in cultural

¹⁴ See www.seriefreeresdarmes.com [accessed 23 May 2016]. Eleven are North Africans (three of who are *Pieds-Noirs*, seven are from the French Caribbean, six are West African, two are from Indochina and one from France's territories in the Pacific).

¹⁵ Rachid Laïreche, Kader Arif, *la gloire de son père*, *Libération*, 9 March 2014 [consulted 12 May 2016].

works not only because of the interesting facets of his story, but also because his life has been extremely carefully documented by the son of one of the Vosgean villagers who knew Bâ personally, the journalist Etienne Guillermont. Although the French state did recognise Bâ's contribution through the naming of a road in his honour in 2003, it is the local population and especially the Guillermont family that have worked to keep the memory of the tirailleur's actions alive. There has been no traceable transmission of this particular story on the African continent. The novelist Monémbo, only became aware of Bâ's story from an article in the *Journal du Dimanche*. This question of non-transmission between France and Africa is reflected in the novel, *Le terroriste noir*, when Bâ's nephews only discover the details of their ancestor's life through the testimonies of the Vosgean villagers.¹⁶

The concentration on Bâ equally reveals a drive in contemporary metropolitan France to find 'black heroes' along the same model as Second World War resistance heroes. This is also apparent in the representations of First World War tirailleurs sénégalais that have been produced during the centenary years. The Centenary has seen attempts in both Britain and France to highlight the use of colonial troops by the French and British Empires in the name of 'inclusivity' and the recuperation of 'hidden histories'. In France, this has included recent publications of letters by tirailleur schoolteachers, and the commissioning of radio broadcasts and television documentaries.¹⁷ Yet the majority of twenty-first century cultural representations of First World War tirailleurs re-invoke heroized images of soldiers as defenders of Empire rather than the postcolonial images of Africans as victims of colonialism and capitalism. This trend can be seen, for example, in the re-casting of the Rheims *Monument aux héros de l'armée noire*, which had been destroyed by the Nazis in September 1940. The changing climate of the 1960s and era of decolonization meant that an alternative

¹⁶ Hady Bah, *la dignité retrouvée* (Gilles Nivet, 2004)

¹⁷ See <http://www.rfi.fr/emission/20140712-1-bakary-diallo-tirailleur-senegal-1914>; <http://centenaire.org/fr/dans-le-monde/afrique/senegal/tirailleurs-senegalais-temoignages-epistolaires-1914-1919>; <http://www.tv5mondeplus.com/evenement/3944-freres-darmes> [accessed 23 May 2016].

monument was erected in its place, but in anticipation of the centenary, a new monument was unveiled in 2013, created from the original mould. The Banania advertisement has undergone a similar evolution, with the tirailleur disappearing from its marketing campaigns in the 1970s only to be reintroduced in 2003 (Achille, 2013). This re-casting of the tirailleurs as heroes of Empire in a move reminiscent of the interwar period is echoed on the website of the French government's 'Mission Centenaire 1914-18', which states: 'The Centenary of the First World War is a time to listen to the voices of these 'Senegalese poilus' who have rarely had the opportunity to express themselves, and to pay homage to these men who sealed in blood Franco-Senegalese fraternity.'¹⁸ This is a telling sentence, re-evoking the idealised notion of Republican 'fraternity' between France and Africa that we find, for example, in Cousturier and Diallo's 1920s memoirs.

There has also been some French-led activity in West Africa with the Institut Français in Dakar hosting several exhibitions and cultural events. These have included 'Tire Ailleurs', a consideration of the representation of tirailleurs sénégalais in French graphic novels, and performances of a new theatrical version of *La randonnée de Samba Diouf*, with story-teller Thierno Diallo playing the central role.¹⁹ Once again, we see a return to interwar colonial discourse, although the effect of having a black French-African narrator on stage recounting his experiences rather than via the pages of a novel authored by middle-class white Frenchmen should not be underestimated. To some extent, the theatrical version offers a fresh vision of the encounter between Africans and France during the First World War, but the protagonist retains, nonetheless, the central characteristics of the brave, naïve and loyal 'Samba' of the 1920s. An interesting example of a recent cultural representation of a First World War tirailleur is the animated film *Adama* (2015) which features as a protagonist a

¹⁸ <http://centenaire.org/fr> [accessed 23 May 2016].

¹⁹ See http://www.thiernodiallo.net/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=24&Itemid=18 [accessed 23 May 2016].

child-tirailleur and is reminiscent of Fanton's Boubou soldat. His journey to France to search for his brother is both a journey into what is presented as the hell-like trenches of the Western Front, and a coming-of-age fable. As in Fanton's text, the tirailleurs experience wonder in relation to the symbols of industrialized warfare, and suffer from the cold. The war is presented as a means of education and learning for the tirailleur; but this twenty-first-century version of the war as development opportunity is placed side by side with a later understanding of tirailleurs as victims of a harsh colonial system. The ending, in which the brothers are led back to Africa, is thus presented as a positive return to a homeland, to a specifically African music, landscape and culture from which the war has temporarily uprooted them.

Conclusion

Within French and francophone culture, tirailleurs sénégalais have frequently been cast as collective heroes or victims to make ideological or political points regarding their war service and their relationship with France, depending on the historical moment of production. Only in a few cases are there more complex and nuanced representations that bring attention to the multiple roles played by the tirailleurs during these world wars as well as the internal divisions that existed between them, and the less palatable realities of their experiences both as combatants and as veterans, as revealed by historians such as Fogerty and Mann. However, cultural representations still continue to be held back by the lack of published primary source material relating to the tirailleurs, which helps to explain the overlaps and echoes that exist between present and past representations. More recently, the figure of the tirailleur has been the object of difficult and uncomfortable discussions over France's contemporary status as a multicultural nation and the question of how to incorporate multiple narratives of the world wars into a national narrative. This has been personified in 2016 by the controversy over the

cancelation of the presence of Black M' (Alpha Diallo) at the 2016 concert for the centenary of the Battle of Verdun, in recognition of the role played by tirailleurs sénégalais during the battle (for which several were awarded the Croix de guerre).²⁰ The rapper has responded by posting a photograph on his Instagram feed of his grandfather in his tirailleur uniform during the Second World War. There has been a resulting backlash on social media claiming that the rapper had borrowed the photograph from a friend. This example illustrates the extent to which debates over the role of the tirailleur and his place in contemporary France remain controversial, with evocations of the tirailleur as war hero/war victim being instrumentalised to make political points about contemporary race relations and interpretations of French national identity. They equally reveal, moreover, the extent to which images of the tirailleur can be understood as examples of palimpsestic cultural memory, in which the photograph of a Second World War French African veteran is presented in an attempt to offer a justification for the inclusion of tirailleurs in First World War centenary commemorations.

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²⁰ http://www.lemonde.fr/musiques/article/2016/05/13/le-rappeur-black-m-et-la-bataille-de-verdun-retour-sur-une-polemique_4919120_1654986.html [consulted 21 May 2016].

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