

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 66

Gregory Mann, *Native Sons: West African Veterans and France in the Twentieth Century*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2006. 333 pp. Illustrations, maps, bibliography and index. \$84.95 (hb); \$23.95 (pb). ISBN: 0-8223-3755-X (hb) 0-8223-3768-1 (pb).

Review by Mary Dewhurst Lewis, Harvard University.

This year's Oscar nominees for best foreign film included Rachid Bouchareb's "Indigènes," an Algerian motion picture that might have been viewed as a stock war film had its political implications in France not been so great. The movie depicts the heroic contribution of troops from France's empire in North Africa to the liberation of Italy and France from the Nazis. It ends with an epilogue that lets viewers glimpse the straitened circumstances (a small room in a dormitory-style apartment) in which one of the main characters, now elderly, is slated to spend his last days, alone, and, we're meant to conclude, forgotten. Just before the credits roll, we learn that the pensions of veterans from France's former colonies were "frozen" at their 1959 levels and that, although the Council of State ruled this unlawful in 2001, no government since had repaid France's debt. After French president Jacques Chirac watched the film in a private screening this past fall, he announced that the pensions of veterans from the former colonies would be "aligned" with those of veterans from mainland France. Doing so would be an "act of justice, solidarity, and recognition of all those who came from the former French empire to fight under our flag," he proclaimed on September 25.

Gregory Mann, a historian of Africa at Columbia University, began work on *Native Sons* when the only people talking about the injustice of France's discriminatory pension scheme were the veterans themselves. Unlike the film, the book is about West Africans, not North Africans, but it illumines at once the more general problem of France's fraught relationship with its imperial subjects (and former subjects) in the twentieth century, and the very special significance of this relationship to the persons and territories of what was once known as Afrique Occidentale Française (AOF), French West Africa. It is different from earlier studies of similar topics, both because it engages more deeply with local repertoires of meaning over multiple generations and also because it asks broader questions about the colonial and post-colonial relationship between France and West Africa more generally. [1]

The central theme of the book, like the ultimate message of the film, is that of unpaid debt. But unlike the film, whose moral vision is pretty Manichaean, Mann's story is far more nuanced and complex. "Debt" is not just what the French government owes veterans from the colonies; [2] it has a much longer lineage in West African understandings of social hierarchy, interdependence, and justice. According to Mann, these "regional idioms and ideals of social exchange, mutual obligation, and uneven reciprocity intersected with French ideas about the special relationship between a nation and its veterans." (p. 4). Given the author's interest in elucidating the "unfinished product" (p. 4) of Franco-West African relations, the choice of Mali (the former French Sudan and the native state of many--perhaps most--immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa currently living in France) makes sense. Mann argues that Mali is not just a "post-colonial" society; it is still very much a "post-slavery" society. Herein lies the originality of this work: Mann shows how repertoires of obligation between Malians and the French cannot be disentangled from complex local and familial webs of dependence, themselves rooted in a long history--and, just as important, transgenerational collective memory--of enslavement. Just as the relationships set in motion by slavery did not "end" when France ceased its legal recognition of the institution in West Africa in the early twentieth century, neither did the relationship between France and the men who fought in its name end when independence was gained.

Mann's opening vignette takes the reader straight to the heart of this transgenerational logic. According to present-day word on the street, a taxi driver takes a client to a swank villa in the capital city of Bamako and, upon arriving, hands the client 1,000 CFA francs, instructing him to give it to the proprietor of the villa, his *woloso*, whom he was obliged to support. A *woloso*, Mann explains, is a house-born slave, or the slave's offspring. Long after the end of slavery, the sense of obligation it fostered remains deeply entrenched among the descendants of slaves and masters. As recently as the late 1940s, descendants of masters still could determine whom *wolosow* descendants were allowed to marry (p. 32). Armies, of course, also rely on subordination, and officers, like former masters, could approve or block the marriages of enlisted men (p. 177). As this and many other examples provided by Mann illustrate, army paternalism, though racist, resonated with the uneven relationships of reciprocity to which these men were accustomed. After all, many had been sent off to the military by local chiefs because they were *wolosow*, and many of these enrolled as *tirailleurs sénégalais* (a misnomer, since many were not from Sénégal) under their masters' names to signify that connection (pp. 37-39). As Mann tells it, this relationship almost sounds like *noblesse oblige* rather than the extraordinarily coercive institution of slavery; a quick overview of the differences Mann sees between West African slavery and the New World chattel slavery with which his American readership may be more familiar might have been useful here. [3]

Though Mann argues for the recognition of transhistorical relationships, he is careful to show they are not static; to the contrary, he shows how their intersection with the changing dynamics of colonial rule not only created profound rifts between veterans and the French state, but also fostered conflict within Malian society. Mann follows the vicissitudes of these relations from the dawn of the twentieth century, through the devastating experience of the First and Second World Wars, to the wars of decolonization in Vietnam and Algeria (in which France relied heavily on the *tirailleurs*), to French efforts to redefine its relationship with the AOF along commonwealth lines, and finally to the drama of independence. The travails of a single family across two generations exemplify these shifts: two brothers, Kérétiği Traore and Nianson Coulibaly (one who evidently took the family name of his patron while the other did not), and Kérétiği's son, Sékou Traore. After discovering to their dismay in the 1930s and 1940s that military service did not translate to influence, the two brothers later benefited from the French state's efforts to cultivate the loyalty of veterans in the 1950s, only to be chastised as "slaves of the whites" by members of the pro-independence party the Union Soudanaise - Rassemblement Démocratique Africain (US-RDA), whose insults drew on well-circulated understandings of the slave origins of soldiers. Sékou's sense of military loyalty, meanwhile, landed him in the service of this same US-RDA and Mali's first president, Modibo Keita. Having heeded Keita's call for soldiers to return to Mali to serve the new state, Sékou wound up on the wrong side of a coup in 1968. Mann has an uncanny ability to locate historical irony: Loyalty no longer paid; the lieutenant who reversed his master was now in power.

The first sign of strain in the relationship between France and the *tirailleurs* came in the wake of the First World War. Veterans returned to the AOF from the bloodbath in Europe expecting some recompense for their sacrifices. Instead, they encountered a colonial administration more concerned with quelling veterans' disruptive potential than with compensating them for their loyalty. Demobilization was chaotic, in part because the French administration had inadequately planned for it, naively assuming that soldiers would simply return "home"-never mind that "home" was often nowhere near the location of their discharge, that some of their villages no longer existed, or that veterans wanted to avoid returning to places where they would have to be "subordinate to elders, or in some cases, former masters" (p. 79). As thousands of former soldiers wandered the roads of the AOF, desperate veterans sometimes became what Mann calls "unruly clients," exhibiting behavior that at once exemplified their understanding of the colonial state's obligation to them as subjects and at the same time questioning that state's authority. Bolstered by their exemption from the discriminatory indigenous code (this privilege had been offered in order to lure them into service in January 1918), veterans acted out in ways that surely would have landed them in prison had the *indigénat* been in force. To provide just one of the many vivid examples Mann recounts, one demobilized soldier explained his theft of a bull as follows:

“everything that belonged to the Commandant was his, [and] that having risked his life for France, he was certainly owed a bull” (p. 77). To mark this sense of entitlement and newfound power, World War I veterans, in another fascinating detail unearthed by Mann, continued to wear their uniforms (despite rules to the contrary) until they were in tatters (p. 94).

Despite (or perhaps because of) the chaos of demobilization, the colonial state tried to cultivate veterans as clients after the war. At the same time, soldiers’ experience in the war gave them skills that proved valuable. As a result, veterans entered the colonial administration in unprecedented numbers. By the 1930s, they had become such a “visible symbol of the administration” (p. 86) that chiefs began to enlist their own families in the military “as a strategy for enhancing their access to political power and maintaining a diversity of connections with the state” (p. 92). But the Second World War dealt a new blow to this relationship. Analyzing the spectacular defeat of June 1940, one colonial soldier opined, “Contrary to what we had been told, our equipment was ridiculously insufficient. We are brave, but a loser—whatever you say—is always a slave (*captif*). We are a warrior race (*une race de guerriers*) and we will never accept captivity” (p. 111). Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, it was ex-prisoners of war who were responsible for one of the most serious mutinies in *tirailleur* history, when they finally made it back to the AOF from captivity in 1944.

The fact that the Second World War was a watershed in imperial relations is well known and need not be rehearsed here. Suffice it to say that the AOF was no exception. To facilitate its own political and economic reconstruction, France sought a new relationship with its sub-Saharan colonial subjects, offering them a greater stake in the political process but stopping short of equalizing citizenship laws. Deeming veterans crucial to this new compact, the colonial state “energetically pursued a politics of patronage” (p. 203) by offering veterans pensions (albeit still unequal ones), loans, preferential employment, and other special privileges. To do so, the colonial state had to overcome some baffling shortcomings: it did not even know who its veterans were, and had to undertake an enormous investigation in order simply to count them! (pp. 123–29). Those scholars interested in the origins of modern bureaucracy will be fascinated to learn from Mann that it was not *raising* the colonial army that forced the state to count and classify its subjects, but *paying* their pensions as veterans—and then only because it was politically expedient to do so, as anti-colonial political parties waged a battle with the colonial state for veterans’ allegiance.[4] Veterans were often wary of anti-colonial politics, but this is not to say that they were content with all that the French state offered them. It was not until 1950, when France promised pensions for colonial veterans that were equal to those paid metropolitan counterparts, that veterans fully cast their fate with the French Union.

The benefits of doing so were short-lived. In December 1959, France’s parliament voted to reclassify pensions as gratuities rather than as transferable property, which meant that surviving spouses and children could no longer claim any benefits. The same law also promised to freeze pensions at 1959 rates in the event that any part of the Fifth Republic’s newly minted “French Community” became independent. Already Guinea had voted not to join the Community in 1958, and within a few years, all of AOF would be independent, forever altering the patron-client relationship upon which veterans depended. Sékou Traore cast his lot with the new regime, which turned out to be a fateful mistake. Others struggled to redefine the relationship of mutual obligation, no longer claiming rights as *nationals* but nonetheless disputing the contention that they were “strangers to the French state rather than former intimates with whom a relationship should be maintained” (pp. 191–92). Mann surely wants his reader to make a connection to another relationship that had been formally severed—that between master and slave—but that persisted in repertoires of mutual obligation among their descendants. Here and through much of the book, Mann seems reluctant to force-feed such connections to the reader, but a phrase here or there drawing attention to the links he sees would have been welcome. He does a better job connecting present-day claims made by Malian immigrants in France to notions of the “blood debt” owed their forebears than he does elucidating the relationship between “post”-slavery idioms of obligation and the “post”-colonial claims-making of veterans and their families. This is largely a

question of mechanics; the argument is there, in lucid prose; it just is not always there precisely where the reader wants it.

Indeed, my principal criticisms of this book have to do with structure. As my tacking back and forth between page numbers in this review suggests, the argument in *Native Sons* does not unfold in a linear fashion. A fascinating chapter on the experience of soldiering might usefully have come earlier in the book. I suspect Mann makes it chapter four because it covers a broad chronological scope, but at a minimum, the information on the First World War might have come earlier. Nonetheless, this is otherwise a well written and thought-provoking book. Not only does it tell us something really new about the nature of the colonial relationship, and its endurance to the present day, but it is also methodologically shrewd—very effectively combining archival research and oral history. Indeed, Mann's discussion of how he approached doing oral histories (pp. 11–15) should be read by all history graduate students (or for that matter, faculty) embarking on an oral history project. Briefly, Mann contends that oral testimonies are as much “historiographies” as “histories.” As such, testimony must be seen not so much as evidence, but as argument. “Once generated,” he continues, “these stories have themselves become generative” (p. 14). Perhaps this is why Mann hesitates to connect all the dots; he is keenly aware of the generative power of a story, and he might not wish to privilege his own voice as narrator. Even so, his argument is a memorable one, and *Native Sons* is sure to generate, in its own right, much discussion among scholars of Africa and Europe alike.

NOTES

[1] The main works of reference on colonial troops are Myron Echenberg, *Colonial Conscripts: The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in French West Africa, 1857–1960* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; London: J. Currey, 1991) and Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann; Oxford: J. Currey; Cape Town: D. Philip, 1999).

[2] The 2001 Council of State decision, Mann explains, recognized pensions as debts and declared the nationality of the pensioners irrelevant to the question of repayment of that debt. However, as Mann points out, and as is often misunderstood, the decision only applied to a single individual, not the entire class of veterans. Mann, *Native Sons*, pp. 193–94. This is the situation that Chirac has now pledged to remedy.

[3] Mann does distinguish between *wolosow* and *jonw* (house-born slaves as opposed to those taken captive), but he could elaborate on the significance of this distinction.

[4] This suggests that Frederick Cooper's warning regarding the applicability of Foucauldian understandings of state power to the colonial context is apt. See Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), pp. 48–49.

Mary Dewhurst Lewis Harvard University mdlewis@fas.harvard.edu

Copyright © 2007 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Review Vol. 7 (June 2007), No. 66

ISSN 1553-9172