

Interventions

“Vous ne serez plus des Indigènes, vous serez des Français”: A Reading of Mathieu Vadepied’s *Tirailleurs*¹ (English translation)

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Contrary to a common misconception that was reinforced when Mathieu Vadepied’s film *Tirailleurs* (featuring Omar Sy and released as *Father and Son* in English), was released last January, the *tirailleurs*, or soldiers, from the African colonies and protectorates who took part in the two world wars, are not totally absent from French collective representations, and especially not from literary and cinematic fiction.²

As early as 1915, the *Banania* brand identified itself with a laughing Senegalese rifleman, adopting as its slogan the phrase “*y’a bon*,” referring to the *tirailleurs*’ apparently perfunctory use of French, the famous “*petit nègre*,” which was in fact an idiom invented out of whole cloth by the French administration. In 1916, a manual of “simplified French” was distributed throughout the French colonial army so that European officers could make themselves “understood more quickly by their men.” For example, the book suggests putting all verbs in the infinitive and leaving out specifications of gender and number. It was not until 1926 that a regulation put an end to these racist practices. It was through this *Banania* advertisement that the Senegalese rifleman entered the French consciousness, the slogan and iconography of the brand referring to the unabashed racism of the time.

Literary fiction, for its part, has taken up the figure of the colonial soldier in a number of novels and films. Algerian author Mouloud Mammeri’s novel *Le Sommeil du juste* (The Sleep of the Just) evokes the Second World War and, as early as 1955, criticized the false promises made to colonized people regarding their integration into the French nation once peace had been restored. Several decades later, filmmaker Rachid Bouchareb directed the 2006 film *Indigènes*, which follows four Algerian volunteers who join the French army in 1943 to liberate France from Nazi Germany. The film’s four lead actors, Rochdy Zem, Samy Naceri, Sami Bouajil, and Jamel Debbouz received the Best Actor Award at Cannes. During the festival’s closing awards ceremony, they sang “Le Chant des Africains,” a gesture that was received with some

¹ English translation of the original French text prepared by the JWSFH team.

² See Christiane Chaulet Achour, « Colonisés au front. Cinéma et littérature », *Diacritik*, 26 janvier 2023, <https://diacritik.com/2023/01/26/colonises-au-front-cinema-et-litterature/#more-94064>.

reservations as the military march written in 1915 for a Moroccan division was later taken up by supporters of French Algeria during the Algerian war of independence. As we will see, Omar Sy showed an even more assertive political maturity following the release of *Tirailleurs*. As for *Indigènes*, despite its mixed reception, the film was nevertheless a landmark in its highlighting of the figure of the Maghrebi/North African colonial soldier in the French collective imagination.

As for the *tirailleurs* of sub-Saharan Africa, Sembène Ousmane, in 1965, in *Vehi-Ciosane*, created the character of Tanor, who returns from the Great War completely traumatized. Sembène, who served as a *tirailleur* in the 6th Colonial Artillery Regiment in the Nigerien desert during the Second World War, returns to this conflict in several of his works. The best-known is the film *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988) in which he recounts the massacre at the Thiaroye camp. In November 1944, 300 of the 1300 *tirailleurs* who had been held prisoner in German *frondestalags*, refused to embark for Africa, not believing the promise made to them that they would receive their pay once they returned home. Those who agreed to return were placed in the Thiaroye transit camp, where they realized the promise of compensation was a lie. They demanded their due by briefly taking a general hostage. The repression was extremely violent. The official death toll was 24, with 35 wounded and 49 arrested, but historians have questioned these numbers, putting the figure at 200 dead. The film, a South-South (Senegal, Tunisia, Algeria) co-production, caused a scandal in France and was banned from theaters until 1998, when it was screened as part of a retrospective devoted to the work of Sembène Ousmane. In 2012, Guinean author Tierno Monémbo published *Le Terroriste noir* which was adapted for the screen in 2017 by Gabriel Le Bomin, under the title *Nos Patriotes*. The novel and the film are dedicated to Addi Bâ, whose real name was Mamadou Hady Bah (1916-1943), a *tirailleur* during the Second World War and later a member of the Resistance in the Vosges. More recently, David Diop's *Frères d'âme*, published in 2018, revives the figure of the Senegalese *tirailleur*. After seeing his best friend fatally wounded, Mademba Diop, is unable to finish him off despite the latter's pleas and decides to avenge him. The novel received the *Prix Goncourt des lycéens* and was a critical and public success.

And yet, when Mathieu Vadepied's film *Tirailleurs* was released in France in January 2023, we often heard, and the media returned again and again to the idea that we were *finally* discovering the history of these African *tirailleurs*. If the film is indeed the first cinematographic work aimed at a broad public -and its 1.7 million admissions confirm this- to look back at the *tirailleurs* who fought for France in the Great War of 1914-1918, it is interesting to examine the reasons for repeated amnesia and the persistence of a memorial sequence in which the phenomena of omission and forgetting, memorial reminders and feigned or sincere postures of surprise and (re)discovery of the past alternate.

The cleverly chosen title, *Tirailleurs*, plays on a historical, memorial, and linguistic distortion, the term *tirailleur* having come to be associated in France exclusively with the adjective "Senegalese." During the First World War, 200,000 Senegalese *tirailleurs* were drafted and 30,000 lost their lives. As the film points out, however, these soldiers also came from Upper Niger, Guinea, and Sudan. They were not all Senegalese. Congolese author and academic, Alain Mabanckou, has pointed to this lexical distortion, a generalization with racist underpinnings, recounting the many times during his stay in France when he was asked if he was Senegalese.

Sometimes reluctant to take the time to explain that he was Congolese, Mabanckou observes: 'Looking back, I realize I was unconsciously echoing the reaction of my Congolese ancestors who, in the French army, and in everyone's minds, were also called "Senegalese *tirailleurs*" and accepted themselves as such.'³ The "*Indigènes*" were and still are a group within which it is useless to distinguish between territorial affiliations and linguistic and cultural specificities.

The film strives to combat this indistinction of personalities and this erasure of particularities and backgrounds by insisting on the complexity of these soldiers. Among the soldiers' trajectories. Some certainly enlisted voluntarily, but many were forcibly conscripted, like Thierno, played by Alassane Diong, who is captured in Senegal by French soldiers in a scene reminiscent of the way slave traders kidnapped villagers during raids before dragging them to slave ships. Another of the film's strengths is the way it reminds us of the continuum between slavery and colonialism, superimposing through images two historical realities that the official French narrative tends to keep separate.

To protect his son Thierno, Bakary (played by Omar Sy), voluntarily enlists, lying about his age. The dialectical and intergenerational relationship between the two characters runs throughout the narrative of the film, allowing it to unfold in ways that reveal the complexity of individual situations. While the son learned French at the "white school," and his young age explains that he is impressed by the war and attracted by promises of glory and recognition, the father speaks only in Fulani and has no illusions about the reasons for the presence of the *tirailleurs* at the front. The film is often shot from Bakary's point of view, lucid and horrified by the butchery he and his son are witnessing. While Thierno is seduced by the warlike and patriotic speeches of Lieutenant Chamberau who also has things to prove to his own father-general, Bakary sees the lieutenant as a madman and never stops plotting ways for him and Thierno to escape the front and the fighting.

We can regret the use of two hackneyed narrative clichés. First, Thierno's romance, silent like the young French woman with whom he shares it throughout the film, before returning to Senegal is a very strange way of recalling that, until 1918, *tirailleurs* were forbidden to approach the population, particularly because it was feared that they might have sexual relations with French women. Then there's the narrative redemption *in extremis* of Lieutenant Chamberau who sacrifices himself to German soldiers to ensure Bakary and Thierno's retreat. The film thus perpetuates the cliché of the "white savior" through the character of Lieutenant Chamber, to whom Thierno ultimately owes his life as much as to his father.

Nevertheless, despite these two narrative blunders, telling a universal story about the devotion of a father and a son's rebellion as he tries to assert his individuality, the film enables the viewer to identify with the characters, and to feel the alienation, the symbolic and physical violence, the false promises of glory and recognition, and the grief the conflict imposes on Thierno and his family back in Senegal. But while the characters are thus made more human, the director takes great care to show that at no point are they, or will they be, considered French, despite

³ Alain Mabanckou, *Lettre à Jimmy*, Paris, Fayard, 2007, p.95.

General Chambreau's promise, in a fiery speech, that their fight will earn them the status of French citizen rather than *Indigènes*.

Reflecting on the identity of the unknown soldier whose remains lie under the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, the film reveals one of the blind spots in the history of France, whose "sites of memory" erase and exclude the colonial past, itself totally absent from the reflections of Pierre Nora, the historian who coined the expression. If, as Nora indicates, sites of memory "are born and live from the feeling that there is no spontaneous memory, that archives must be created, anniversaries maintained, celebrations organized, eulogies pronounced and acts notarized, because these operations are not natural,"⁴ it is clear that the colonial past is never mobilized in official efforts of celebration and memory. What if the unknown soldier whose bones are buried under the Arc de Triomphe was a Senegalese *tirailleur*? This is the hypothesis the film puts forward, pointing to France's inability to reconcile its history and its obstinacy in keeping everything related to the colonies out of the official discourse. This largely explains the repeated amnesia (mentioned above) with respect to the *tirailleurs'* participation in the two world wars. Since commemorations, sites of memory, and school textbooks only evoke the image and memory of the *poilus* in relation to the Great War, the Senegalese *tirailleurs*, without being totally erased from the consciousness, are kept at a distance from a history in which they are never the actors in the official French discourse. By retracing the journey of two of them from Senegal to the Ardennes, the film thus becomes not a "site of memory" frozen in a conception of the past, free of the colonial past, but a "memory knot"⁵ that connects several temporalities and several spaces, linking several histories: that of France, its colonies, world conflicts, and slavery. This memory knot is not fixed and rigid; on the contrary, it makes it possible to go beyond logics that are confined to the geographical and territorial limits of the nation-state.

And it is probably this connection about which a large part of the French political class is most reluctant. But since the days are long gone when a film was simply censored and banned from theaters, we now resort to polemics. Interviewed at the time of the release of the film by the daily *Le Parisien*, Omar Sy noted the different reactions to the conflicts that have shaken the planet since the Second World War. Asked if he considers himself a citizen of the world, he replied: "Maybe, but I've always had a thing about war. A war is humanity sinking, even when it is on the other side of the world. We are reminded that man is capable of invading and attacking civilians, including children. One has the impression that we had to wait for Ukraine to realize this. Hey, guys? I've seen this since I was a kid. When it's far away, we tell ourselves that 'there, they are savages, we don't do that anymore.' Like Covid, at first we said: 'it's only the Chinese.'"⁶

⁴ Pierre Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire*, Paris, Quarto Gallimard, 1997, p.29

⁵ Michael Rothberg, *Introduction: Nœuds de mémoire: Multidirectional Memory in Postwar French and Francophone Culture*, *Yale French Studies*, no. 118/119, 2010, pp. 3-12.

⁶ Yves, Jaeglé, "Omar Sy: «Les Tirailleurs méritaient beaucoup plus la Patrouille de France que Tom Cruise»" *Le Parisien*. 1 janvier 2023, <https://www.leparisien.fr/culture-loisirs/omar-sy-les-tirailleurs-meritaient-beaucoup-plus-la-patrouille-de-france-que-tom-cruise-01-01-2023-23FUQ2MGAFGVHE4VDBNOWAZGKU.php>.

A few days later, Sy's comments were taken up on the set of BFMTV by Nathalie Loiseau, former minister of Emmanuel Macron, in charge of European affairs. After taking the time to congratulate -not without a certain paternalism- Omar Sy for making a film that restores the memory of the *tirailleurs*, she said it was "unfair" for him to say that "the French are not interested in conflicts in Africa." After her, far-right deputy Julien Odoul, a member of the National Rally or and Charles Consigny, lawyer who worked with Valérie Pécresse during the presidential campaign, also denounced the remarks as "disturbing" and "ungrateful." The controversy flared up, fueled by social media and right-wing TV outlets, creating a smokescreen that interfered with the film's promotion. Omar Sy was called an "ingrate from Los Angeles," (referring to the fact that he now resides in the U.S.) and was called upon to explain himself. We do not criticize France that way.

What is interesting here is that it was not the question of the *tirailleurs* that mobilized public opinion during this fleeting controversy, but a certain image of France that must not be tarnished. Omar Sy made no apologies and saw the criticisms of him as the expression of racism. On the set of the ARTE show *Le 28 minutes*, he declared "But of course it's racism. Is it because I am the child of an immigrant that I do not have the right to express my thoughts about France? Is it because I'm Black that I don't have the right to express my thoughts about France? People who say and think that are racist: I say it and I own it." What Omar Sy knows perfectly well is that, as a descendant of immigrants or even (Senegalese) *tirailleurs* he is once again being assigned an inferior status and told to stay in line. This assigned place must be at a respectable distance and respectful of the national community. French, of course, but not totally or at least not to the point of criticizing the contemporary French society he owes so much and towards which he is insufficiently grateful. As historian and activist Françoise Vergès reminds us, the conception of the French national community remains rather narrow and excludes from the national body, as soon as it feels the need, not only French nationals living in the overseas territories, but also the inhabitants of the suburbs, immigrant neighborhoods, considered to contain foreign bodies transplanted to France.

It was already bad enough that Omar Sy had spent a decade working with director Mathieu Vadepied on a film that brings to light aspects of the national narrative hitherto kept in shadow. Given that, he should remain docile, especially since his move to the United States. The dynamics of this controversy are strangely reminiscent of France's long-standing relationship with the *tirailleurs* who were required to reside in France in order to receive the minimum old-age pension. This obligation was lifted only after the film's release. It shows just how much proof of allegiance to France must be shown again and again. As if you had to submit to special laws when you are French from a former colony. Always suspicious, still a tiny bit Indigenous, never totally French.

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