

## Sarraounia, love, and the postcolony

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For over two decades, I have been engaged in what seems like a never-ending comparative exploration focusing on a set of privileged interrelated literary and filmic narratives in the epic mode, reconstructing a bloody, obscured page of FrançAfrique history which played out in 1899 in the Nigerien Sahel.<sup>1: 2: 3</sup> Colleagues from the International Society for the Oral Literatures of Africa (ISOLA) like Hein Willemse, with whom I worked closely for over a decade, have heard me broach aspects of this vast and fascinating worksite from the perspectives of the novel, oral literature, film, gender, identity construction, and the myth of nation.<sup>4</sup> My corpus, comprising fieldwork materials as well as novels and films from France and a part of its former African colonial empire, forms an exceptional research site from which to contemplate the oppositional post-colonial construction of memory of France and its former Sahelian colonies.

Despite concerted French efforts, the historical experience of the 'pacification' of the Sahel stubbornly refuses to be silenced. Artistic and other memory work reclaiming and revivifying as lived experienced the bloody history of the Voulet-Chanoine military expedition, in charge of the colonial penetration of the Sahel, provides an excellent illustration of the politics of memory, involving catharsis, hero making, contestation, justification, or explanation. Fieldwork, carried out in sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) such as Lougou and Bagagi, forms part of the comparative methodology through which I explore elements of the politics and poetics of the colonial history that link France and its former colonies in the Sahel.<sup>5</sup> However, comparative study of a selected corpus of novels and films forms the prime materials on which this study is based. Since most readers of this essay are probably unfamiliar with the works in question, it seems important to include a short preliminary note on the corpus prior to delving into a few considerations on love and the post-colony, from my situated interpretation of one film: *Capitaine des ténèbres* (The Dark Captain, 2004) by Serge Moati, portraying a colonial adventurer from the viewpoint of the conquerors. Regarding the corpus as a whole, a striking common denominator is the polarisation of the narratives. Other shared features include the insistence on historical truth and the use of the epic/mythic registers, front-staging a central character of extraordinary dimensions: a hero

or heroine. Also obvious are the massive or sporadic intertextual relations threaded between these narratives and the conflicted, oppositional manner in which the intertextuality inevitably operates. Polarization pits the French hero, Paul Voulet, against the Pan-African/Nigerien heroine, Sarraounia Mangou; the Pan-African/Nigerien novel *Sarraounia* (1980) against the French novels *La mort du revolté* (The Death of the Revolution, 1930) and *Le Grand Capitaine* (The Great Captain, 1976); and French films *Capitaine des ténèbres* and *Blancs de mémoire* (Devoid of Memory, 2006) against the Pan-African film *Sarraounia* (1987).

The politics and poetics of memory also play out in the bush, on sites where the colonial action occurred. Meanwhile, the official discourse of the Nigerien government features an ambivalent heroization of the non-Muslim Sarraounia Mangou (our only female ‘national heroine’, our ‘warrior queen cum sorceress’, who ensured that, despite French colonial domination, we—Nigeriens, Sahelians, Africans, colonized peoples—did not ultimately lose). To the contrary, Abdoulaye Mamani’s Pan-Africanist novel *Sarraounia, le drame de la reine magicienne* (Sarraounia, the Drama of the Sorceress Queen) and Med Hondo’s Pan-Africanist film *Sarraounia* (based on the novel) assure us that we won. Vicariously, through the mediation of literature and film which exalt our warrior queen in their reconstructed history. Not only does Sarraounia have agency, she is agency personified to the utmost, not only as a freedom fighter, but also in what can only be seen in the mirror of present-day social life in the Sahel as her radical freedom to love whom she chooses and to spurn, moreover, the domestic bonds of motherhood and marriage. But the heroization of an ante-Islamic woman of power is not without its difficulties in the context of a Nigerien nation which proudly proclaims its Muslim identity while struggling with radical extremism, acts of terrorism, and various problems of equality and human rights. Because these politics and poetics of memory involve civic and political, urban and rural, official and popular symbolism and processes of identity construction, I have bowed to the necessity of adding fieldwork to the mix of disciplines and methodologies in the elaboration of my work in progress, *The Warrior Queen and the Civilizing Mission: Poetics and Politics of Memory*, to which this essay is indebted.

For over two decades, from deep within this challenging worksite, I have been addressing questions such as: What is the story of 1899 in the Sahel, one which most people in the know still designate as that of the Voulet-Chanoine (also called the Central African) Mission? (Mathieu). Why is it important beyond the actors and their heirs? Whose past is it? Why was it silenced and how was the law of silence transgressed? How has it been remembered and narrated? Clearly this is a not a ‘single story’. However, does multiplicity incur innuity? How have ‘coherent narratives’ been created from necessarily selective reconstructions? By whom and for whose benefit? Again, why should these practices of remembering, their poetics, and politics matter to us?<sup>26</sup> What new *materia* does their network of stories or their interrelated mythic constellations bring to our understanding of ‘the structures and patterns’ at work in narratives, outside of history proper, aimed at thinking about the

(colonial) past as lived experience? How do these narratives relate, beyond their insertion into the politics and aesthetics of national identity, to larger questions of transnational identities and interrelations, in art and life, inevitably spawned by the deliberate hegemonic expansion of the West?

It seems impossible to say what this story is about without taking position and without underling the positioning implied in the ways in which it has been presented by some of the handful of persons—writers, historians, filmmakers, and scholars—who have chosen to focus on it. Common sense holds that there are two sides to every story. Seen from one angle, that of a certain French officialdom, the colonial adventure which played out in the Sahel in 1899 is the story of two young, ambitious officers sent by France to accomplish its ‘civilizing mission’ of carving out for the nation an empire in the heart of Africa. A story of how these former heroes regressed from glory to a barbarity that made the motherland writhe with shame and hasten to blot out their crimes and their names from official history—the history preserved and disseminated by schools and universities, the history that feeds and sanctifies France’s national memory, the same history which largely silences and expurgates colonial crimes whilst conscientiously censoring artistic, and specifically filmic, efforts to unsilence it (see, for example, Oscherwitz 1–32).

Seen from a certain Sahelian perspective, on the other hand, 1899 is the story of invasion and resistance in the year of Sarr-sarr (of cut-burn-and-kill), when a handful of unknown white men led an incomprehensible punitive expedition into places the Sahelians called home. And the story of how an African queen, the Sarraounia Mangou, her warriors, and her people fought back.<sup>7</sup>

But history—and the same holds for its reconstruction—is not a coin that one may conveniently flip to view its two sides. Consequently, my objective has been to *consciously* focus on some of the oppositional yet interconnected ways in which the larger story—that of the imperial epic of 1899, staged in the Sahelian heart of Africa—has been reclaimed from an official French project of erasure by a handful of writers and filmmakers, among others.

It seems regrettable that francophone African scholars in literature and film have shied away from taking their place, when proper, in the study and teaching of colonial and post-colonial history. I know that many francophone historians believe, incorrectly, that *they* deal with facts whilst literary and film scholars deal only in fiction, and that fiction in text and on film has nothing to contribute to the understanding of the African past and the construction of the African present. Sadly, the fact that African novelists and filmmakers (the likes of Peter Abrahams, Chinua Achebe, Sembène Ousmane, Chimamanda Adichie, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Mariama Bâ, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Amadou Kourouma, Wole Soyinka, Med Hondo, Haile Gerima, Souleymane Cisse, Abderrahmane Sissako, Jean-Marie Teno, Sembène Ousmane—again, for he played on both registers, alongside countless others) have made the most powerful contributions to knowledge production on colonial and post-colonial Africa presently seems to elude us more than ever before.

I would like to add, before closing these parentheses, that there also appears to be pathological self-deprecation among literary scholars themselves. In the

academic spaces in which I work, oral literature studies, which were once vibrant and meaningful for the construction of the present, are currently succumbing to the aging and retirement of pioneering scholars. Meanwhile, younger researchers, who play it safe by shunning the challenges of fieldwork, transcription, and translation, show a tendency for tedious repetition which frets, frays, and deteriorates once novel materials and problematics. Francophone African comparatists, for their part, seem to have slithered into the misunderstanding that comparative literature stops at the boundary of written literary texts; that it does not include orality; that it opens no conversation with the other arts, with the social sciences, or with other fields of knowledge. Comparing a theme across written literature, oral literature, and film fails to fly with these provincial gatekeepers (Bourdieu called those of his day “*gardiens du temple*”, or temple guards; see his 1992 introduction to *Les Règles de l'art: Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*) who are allergic to cosmopolitan scholarship and research and publication in any other language save that of the empire language in which they have been schooled. Never mind that comparative literature is all about crossing borders of geography, culture, disciplines, art forms, and languages.

Nevertheless, my life, scholarship, and writing are intricately linked. And my life-work is all about healthy curiosity, encounters, and crossing boundaries. In this ordinary pursuit of knowledge, I have delved, hopefully with conscience and relevance, into the field of comparative literature. Mining the exciting and perilous possibilities that comparative literature offers has led me, logically, to fieldwork, then to film studies in the course of the elaboration of *The Warrior Queen and the Civilizing Mission: Poetics and Politics of Memory*.

This essay focuses on one aspect of this vast worksite: Moati's film *Capitaines des ténèbres*. Whilst referencing and answering back to Hondo's *Sarraounia*, Moati's film also entertains obvious intertextual relations with Jacques-Francis Rolland's novel *Le Grand Capitaine*. Accordingly, *Capitaine des ténèbres* narrates on film the story of 1899 from the viewpoint of empire. Yes, colonial violence was necessary, even inevitable. But there was also love. Love for Africa. Love for its women, too, as evidenced (surely?) by the Dark Captain's romantic involvement with a barely nubile and submissive African beauty. The film's discourse on colonial violence and its 'necessity' in the Sahel in 1899 is ultimately worrying in its ambiguity. This is part and parcel of the indelible ambiguity at the heart of the post-colony. From the standpoint of the film's intrigue, the action is propelled forward by three critical moments, largely related to a narration from Voulet's perspective: the disappointment upon arrival on the African continent regarding the lack of logistical support from the home country and French local administrations; the anger arising from the attack by the 'natives' on the Fort at Birni, unleashing a punitive expedition to serve as an example; the letter from France, sent to divest Voulet of 'his' mission following slow travelling reports on his 'excesses'. This decision to divest him of the mission provokes Voulet's outright revolt against the administration of a 'sissified' metropole. Each crisis accentuates the personalization of the mission by the captains in charge, but primarily by Voulet. Each predicament

also highlights the French captain's staunchly heroic determination to press on despite lack of aid from the mother country, despite lack of water in the dry months in the Sahel, despite native revolt. Voulet's legitimizing discourse, entailing arguments of honour, patriotism, and virile willpower, is assorted with a low opinion of Africans, whom he places in a completely subaltern role.

At various points in the film the spectator is offered explanations for the violence: it was necessary because the military and food supplies given by France were grossly insufficient, leading to forced recruitment and pillage; it was obligatory because the invaded natives, including the mercenary soldiers of the column, although 'inferior' and 'born to obey', clearly understood no other language except force; it was mandatory because this was invasion and invaders, inevitably, live off the land and at the expense of its inhabitants. Because conquest, though 'necessary', is never gentle. No. War is work for 'real men', for 'real Africans' (a term the French colonials in the field applied to themselves) who wash their dirty linen in private and never tell tales to sissy bureaucrats in Paris. What happens in the Sahel stays in the Sahel. Taking territory is for real patriots who love their county better than the government does, for alpha males who have the right to raise their glasses to the virile toast: "to our women and our horses and to those who ride them!" This dry 'heart of Africa' is no place for officers who are gentlemen, for soldiers like Péteau, a character in the film and a player in the colonial history of 1899. Péteau thought that there were limits to the barbarity into which a Frenchman may descend, even in the hellish heart of Africa. Despite his higher moral values, the spectator for whom *Capitaine des ténèbres* is made is not induced to identify with Péteau, who is portrayed as a romantic, soft-spoken weakling who staggers ineffectually when compulsory violence is unleashed upon the recalcitrant natives. The pragmatic, egocentric Voulet is thus much closer to the demands of colonial history in the making, a history on the move which the Dark Captain par excellence nonetheless considers primarily through the keyhole of his personal and patriotic intentions. These, of course, still leave room for 'love'.

In *Capitaine des ténèbres*, declarations of love for Africa are pronounced, from the liminal voice-off to tragic end, but exclusively by the French conquerors. The film begins with Voulet's strong voice-off, professing identification with and undying love for Africa: "My name is Paul Voulet, I am a captain in the army of Africa, this Africa that I love and where I love to live". It offers as its final love song the enlightening declaration, just before his assassination at Voulet's command, of a malaria-infected Klobb, who has spent thirty years of service in the "army of Africa": "I love my army, I love it!" Both statements have in common the reduction of 'Africa' to the arena of these Frenchmen's preferred mode of (adventurous) existence, hardships and all. Their declarations of colonial love fail to assert a more general appreciation of African people, a more encompassing endearment to things African, with respect to their intrinsic value. The Doctor, another character, provides healthcare to the African and French soldiers alike. He falls for a beautiful African woman. Voulet himself is shown attending, episodically, to the well-being of key African elements of his

mercenary column. But such reactions seem instrumental and hierarchically possessive.

However, the film treats spectators to an Afro-French 'love affair' which seems to answer back to portrayals of colonial rape in Hondo's film *Sarraounia*. Based, as we have seen, on Mamani's eponymous novel, Hondo's *Sarraounia* also zooms in on Voulet's sexual abuse and casual disrespect of African women. Not so in Moati's *Capitaine des ténèbres*. Here we meet Fatouna, a young, slender, and beautiful Fulani woman, who formerly 'belonged' to the good doctor Henric. Voulet steals her from Henric for Fatouna is herself a (minor) territory: she can be taken, traded in, repossessed. The development of this colonial romance is elliptical. There is little elaboration on this love interest. But it is love, not rape. Not a pragmatic female coping with the economy of war. We must believe this.

Opposing the notion of colonial rape, Fatouna and Voulet are shown in a scene of presumably tender, reciprocal sex, ostensibly enjoyed in Voulet's tent. Under the veil of night, Fatouna enters the Dark Captain's tent of her own accord. We see her supine, motionless. Voulet caresses her lean body. Her barely adolescent breasts. Fatouna's lips part ever so slightly. Her nipples harden. This is not a story of nerve endings. Of bodily reflex. It is a story of tenderness, of consent. Isn't it? Is it? Fatouna loves what Voulet is doing to her. Surely. She allows it, whilst taking no initiative, other than that of having repaired to Voulet's tent. Of her own accord, lest we forget. This is love in white on black, on a technicolor film.

Later in the film, the same Fatouna is portrayed as an overindulged favorite, a black Salomé who dances, at her master's bidding. She dances what may be understood as a performance of self, a challenge, a feisty defiance. She can be defiant. This dance is her freedom. Or perhaps, her resistance. It is allowed. Fatouna's agency is a present, a reward.

Finally, a scene in the closing sequence of the film shows Fatouna at the foot of a baobab tree caring for a wounded and abandoned Voulet. But it is not clear whether this occurrence is real or simply a dream that Voulet is having. Ultimately, Fatouna vanishes, leaving Voulet to his solitary, tragic fate.

Such sporadic and ambiguous moments aside, *Capitaine des ténèbres* frames Africa as a dangerous place for the white man, a place that is "loved" (and despised), but never for itself. A territory to be taken, at all costs, in various ways, and one that offers the conquerors unbridled power and incommensurable temptations, all to disastrous human and historical effect.

## Notes

1. The term "FrancAfrique" entered the jargon of political science and history thanks to François-Xavier Verschave who served from 1995–2005 as president of the Survie Association militating against France's unsavory neocolonial relations with its former African colonies. Verschave is author of a book entitled *La FrançAfrique* (1999) and of numerous other volumes explaining the underground and even criminal underpinnings of a project of maintaining dependence. Félix Houphouët-Boigny, late president of Côte d'Ivoire, is said to be the first person to have used the term in a positive sense. Former French president, Nicolas Sarkozy, is known for his

- initial attempt to sever some of these ties in a bid to enhance France's involvement in other, more lucrative, or more strategic, political, military, and economic terrains. In this essay, the capital "A" of Afrique is used in preference to English to emphasize the connectedness of this history and of the narratives it has generated, notwithstanding an official project of erasure.
2. The second Voulet-Chanoine Mission covered the years 1898–1899. However, the *events* that precipitated its characterization in terms of disaster, barbarity, and scandal took place in the early months of 1899. These are the events that provoked narratives of exoneration of Voulet—pleading heroic mettle in the face of horrendous conditions, or epic narratives lauding African heroic resistance in the face of a vastly superior firepower. As a consequence, I take 1899 as an emblematic rallying point of memory in this essay.
  3. From the Arabic word '*Sahil*', meaning borderline, the Sahel is the semi-desert region of Africa situated between the Sahara to the north and the savannahs to the south. It currently includes portions to vast stretches of Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Senegal, and the two Sudans. The current state of Burkina Faso was the arena of the 1<sup>st</sup> Voulet-Chanoine Mission. The second took place in today's Niger and Chad.
  4. Publications arising from these presentations include "Sarraouinia et ses intertextes: identités, intertextualité et émergence littéraire"; "Justice from Below: Cultural Capital, Local/Global Identity Processes, and Social Change in Eastern Niger"; and "Niger and Sarraouinia. One Hundred Years of Forgetting Female Leadership".
  5. *Lieux de la mémoire* are sites of memory: "moments, places, people or objects that symbolize a community" (Nora, qtd in Hargreaves 11–2). They construct unifying narratives of nation, what Homi Bhabha would term a narration of nation. (Benedict Andersen refers to these mythicized entities as *imagined communities*.) These narratives are imbibed in the affect-laden, performative, and commemorative discourses of *mythos* and *epos*, highlighting or inventing what Ernest Renan (qtd in Bhabha 19) calls the greatest of all cults, namely the cult of the ancestor, whose legacy is a common glory bequeathed to the present by the past. The term, in French, was made popular by the monumental eponymous work in several volumes, edited by Pierre Nora, faulted for deliberately marginalizing France's colonial history.
  6. Charlotte Linde's book *Working the Past: Narrative and Institutional Memory* (2009), focusing on a totally different context, was nevertheless helpful in the framing of some of these research questions. The terms in quotes are hers.
  7. Meaning to cut to pieces in the Hausa language, it is the name that local people in today's Niger gave to the Voulet-Chanoine expeditionary column, underscoring its violence (see Boureima Alpha Gado; Bertrand Taithe).

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