

The Dogon as *lieu de mémoire*

John Strachan

“...the desire...in Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe’s own state of spiritual grace will be manifest...It is not the differentness that worries Conrad [in *Heart of Darkness*] but the lurking hint of kinship, of common ancestry.”

Chinua Achebe¹

In February 1933, as he crossed the Mediterranean on his return from Africa to Europe, Michel Leiris read three books by Joseph Conrad.² His choice appears curious and, perhaps, revealing. Leiris had completed nearly two years as secretary and philologist to the Dakar-Djibouti mission, traversing the continent from west to east, acquiring extensive collections of African artefacts, and making some of the most important contributions to date to the practice and popularity of French ethnography. Seventeen years later, in the preface to a new edition of *L’Afrique fantôme* (his mission journal), Leiris wrote that the Africa he had encountered in the early 1930s appeared strange and unfamiliar precisely because it resembled so little the Africa he had read about in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*.³

Leiris – a dissident surrealist, sometime poet, jazz and bull-fighting enthusiast whose range of intellectual pursuits is difficult to describe concisely – devoted much of his later life to the study of Africa.⁴ In *L’Afrique fantôme*, Leiris contrasts the mythical Africa of the nineteenth-century Western mind with his own experiences, and, in doing so, makes

John Strachan is Lecturer in History at Lancaster University, UK. He works on social, cultural and intellectual histories of modern France and the French overseas empire.

¹ Chinua Achebe, *An Image of Africa* (1977, reprinted London, 2010), 2-4.

² He does not say which ones. This is the final entry of *L’Afrique fantôme*, dated 16 February 1933. Michel Leiris, *Miroir de l’Afrique*, ed. Jean Jamin (Paris, 1996), 867.

³ Leiris, *Miroir de l’Afrique*, 92.

⁴ Major studies of Leiris include Aliette Armel, *Michel Leiris* (Paris, 1997); Joëlle de Sermet, *Michel Leiris : poète surréaliste* (Paris, 1997); Catherine Maubon, *Michel Leiris : en marge de l’autobiographie* (Paris, 1994); Guy Poitry, *Michel Leiris: dualisme et totalité* (Toulouse, 1995); Maurice Nadeau, *Michel Leiris et la quadrature du cercle* (Paris, 1963); Phyllis Clarck-Taoua, “In Search of New Skin: Michel Leiris’s ‘L’Afrique fantôme’,” *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 167 (2002).

important interventions in contemporary debates about exoticism, primitivism and the nature and practice of late colonialism. Like Conrad, but in a different way, Leiris was animated by the tensions between the differentness, *and* the lurking hint of kinship that Africa offered to Europe.

In June 1933, Leiris, Marcel Griaule (the mission's leader) and others began to publish the fruits of their research in an acclaimed special issue of André Breton's surrealist periodical *Minotaure*.⁵ Among their writings were the first significant contributions to the ethnography of the Dogon people of present-day Mali (with whom the mission spent a little under two months in 1931).⁶ After the Second World War, this body of knowledge was extended by a new generation of French ethnographers, notably Germaine Dieterlen and the film-maker Jean Rouch.⁷ Now, in an era of decolonisation and *guerres de mémoire* over the colonial past, the Dogon retain privileged status in the pantheon of France's former colonial subjects – an importance attested to by a major 2011 exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly.⁸ This essay explores the shifting – and heretofore understudied – place of the Dogon in the definition, stabilization and contestation of French identity in the late colonial and postcolonial eras.⁹ It considers whether French thinking about the Dogon merits a place among the *lieux de mémoire* that Pierre Nora has identified at the heart of the modern nation-state.¹⁰

Making the Dogon French

Marcel Griaule died in Paris in February 1956. Two months later, the Dogon staged their own funeral for the man they called *père Griaule*.¹¹ In the absence of his body, a mannequin of Griaule became a focal point of the ceremony. To the contemporary student of the Dogon and their ethnographers, the Griaule mannequin bears a striking resemblance to the figure of the “White Man” (*Onyeocha*) photographed by Herbert M. Cole at the Igbo masquerades in south-east Nigeria in 1982 and reproduced, memorably, as the frontispiece to James Clifford's 1988 collection of essays *The Predicament of Culture*.¹² Like the Dogon mannequin, the Igbo *Onyeocha* is unmistakably ethnographic, complete with pith helmet, notebook and pencil. Put another way, both Griaule's Dogon funeral and the Igbo masquerades present the ethnographer as an archetype of Western man.

In the case of the Dogon such an identification is not surprising, their contact with the West having been relatively minimal before the arrival of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission. Fleeing Almoravid-driven Islamisation of the Mandé region after the fall of the Ghana Empire in the thirteenth century, the Dogon moved south, eventually settling on and around

⁵ *Minotaure* 2 (June 1933).

⁶ Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme* (Paris, 1934); *La langue secrète des Dogons de Sanga* (Paris, 1948); Marcel Griaule, *Masques dogons* (Paris, 1938); *Dieu d'eau: entretiens avec Ogotemméli* (Paris, 1948); Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen, *Le Renard pâle* (Paris, 1965); Dieterlen, *Les âmes des Dogons* (Paris, 1941); Solange de Ganay, *Les Devises des Dogons* (Paris, 1941).

⁷ Rouch made his first film about the Dogon, *Les hommes qui font la pluie*, in 1951. Many of his African works are collected in *Jean Rouch: une aventure africaine* (Paris, 2010). See also Jean-Paul Colleyn, ed., *Jean Rouch: cinéma et anthropologie* (Paris, 2009); Joram ten Brink, ed., *Building Bridges: The Cinema of Jean Rouch* (London, 2007); Paul Henley, *The Adventure of the Real: Jean Rouch and the Craft of Ethnographic Cinema* (Chicago, 2009).

⁸ The exhibition ran from 5 April to 24 July 2011. See Héléne Leloup, *Dogon* (Paris, 2011).

⁹ Brett Berliner argues that “representations of the exotic nègre helped define and stabilize French identity during the interwar years,” in *Ambivalent Desire: The Exotic Black Other in Jazz-Age France* (Boston, 2002), 7.

¹⁰ Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1984-1993).

¹¹ Dieterlen, “Texte des allocutions prononcées au cours des funérailles de Marcel Griaule à Sanga (Soudan Français),” *Journal de la Société des Africanistes* 26 (1956): 273-77.

¹² James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988)

the Bandiagara Escarpment between Mopti in present-day southern Mali and the Malian border with Burkina Faso. Small-scale cultivation of sorghum, millet and onion replaced hunting as their principal means of subsistence. Important interlocutors included the Mossi, Fula and Soninke peoples. Brief encounters with Europeans occurred in the late nineteenth century, but it was not until 1904-1905, at the same time as the ill-defined territorial acquisitions that constituted the French Sudan were being organised into the super-colony of Afrique Occidentale Française, that a military expedition led by Lieutenant Louis Desplagnes made the first significant study of the Dogon.¹³ Just as Griaule was later identified (and celebrated) as an archetype of Western man, the Dogon began to be described, in these early studies, as an especially exotic archetype of black Africa, undiscovered and untouched until late-on in the life-cycle of French colonialism. Swiftly their sculpture, architecture, animist beliefs and funerary rites became objects of fascination to the emerging discipline of colonial ethnography. Masks—already a central aspect of the Western fascination with African material culture—were cited as evidence of an almost fanatical commitment to an ancient and mystical past that appeared strange and unnerving because diametrically opposed to Western post-Enlightenment rationality. Paul Morand, travel-writer and later Vichy ambassador to Romania and Switzerland, is representative of this tradition. In 1928, remarking on their pagan, cannibalistic (and decidedly non-Western) ancestry, Morand wrote of the Dogon that “les indigènes se dessaisissent très difficilement de leurs masques anciens, qui sont fétiches...les falaises de Bandiagara, endroit d’ailleurs sinistre, habité par les Habés anthropophages.”¹⁴ (the natives did not like to be drawn in their ancient masks that are fetishes ... the cliffs of Bandigara, a sinister place, inhabited by the cannibals.)

Such views were an important part of an interwar psyche that is incomprehensible, as Gary Wilder has argued, without reference to its imperial and racial dimensions.¹⁵ Founded in Paris in 1878, the Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro became a repository for all things ethnographic. Pablo Picasso, who would later downplay the influence of African art on his *oeuvre*, nevertheless studied there for his 1907 masterpiece *Les Femmes d’Alger*.¹⁶ Dedicated to an explicit pedagogy of racial hierarchy, the Musée d’Ethnographie functioned as a conduit between the scholarly and ethnographic establishment and more popular representations of race such as the late nineteenth-century phenomenon of human zoos and the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale.¹⁷ In the late 1920s, the museum’s directors, Paul Rivet and Georges-Henri Rivière, capitalised on the groundswell of interest in Africa to

¹³ Louis Desplagnes, *Le plateau central nigérien: une mission archéologique et ethnographique au Soudan français* (Paris: 1907)

¹⁴ Paul Morand, *Paris-Tombouctou* [1928], reprinted in Morand, *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1981), 79.

¹⁵ Gary Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State: Negritude and Colonial Humanism Between the Two World Wars* (Chicago, 2005).

¹⁶ Various perspectives on Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger* are offered in Christopher Green, *Picasso’s ‘Les Femmes d’Alger’* (Cambridge, 2001). For a more extensive treatment of the place of Africa in Picasso’s thinking, see André Malraux, *La tête d’obsidienne* (Paris, 1974). Malraux identifies the Dogon antelope-mask in the Musée de l’Homme as an important influence on Picasso.

¹⁷ On human zoos, see *Zoos humains: au temps des exhibitions humaines*, ed. Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch, Éric Deroo and Sandrine Lemaire (Paris, 2004). On the Exposition Coloniale Internationale, see Charles-Robert Ageron, “L’Exposition coloniale de 1931: mythe républicain ou mythe impérial,” in Nora, *Les lieux de mémoire I: la république* (Paris, 1984); Patricia Morton, *Hybrid Modernities: Architecture and Representation at the 1931 Colonial Exposition, Paris* (Boston, Mass., 2000). Wider perspectives include Blanchard and Lemaire, eds., *Culture coloniale: la France conquise par son empire, 1871-1931* (Paris, 2003); *Culture impériale: les colonies au cœur de la république, 1931-1961* (Paris, 2004); Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur, eds., *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France* (London, 2002); Dana Hale, *Races on Display: French Representations of Colonized Peoples, 1886-1940* (Bloomington, Ind., 2008); Claude Liauzu, *Quand on chantait les colonies: colonisation et culture populaire de 1830 à nos jours* (Paris, 2002); William Schneider, *An Empire for the Masses: The French Popular Image of Africa, 1870-1900* (Westport, Conn., 1982).

solicit government funding and the contributions of wealthy private patrons for an expedition whose mandate was part-ethnographic, part-celebration of the extent of the French Empire in Africa and part-focused on the acquisition of “booty.” Griaule, a First World War aviator turned student of Marcel Mauss who had acquired limited field experience in Abyssinia in the late 1920s, was recruited to lead it. On its return to Paris, the Musée d’Ethnographie dedicated a special exhibition to more than 3,000 artefacts and 6,000 photographs amassed by the members of the Dakar-Djibouti Mission.¹⁸

Exoticist and primitivist ideologies insisted on hierarchy and the profound difference of Africa; unreconstructed race prejudice nevertheless faced new and formidable challenges in the interwar years. Ethnographic studies of the ambition (if not the scale) of Dakar-Djibouti began to proliferate, and, in 1935, the Musée d’Ethnographie was reimagined as the ostensibly more inclusive Musée de l’Homme.¹⁹ A new generation of students from the colonial world launched the literary and political movement of Negritude.²⁰ Large communities of colonial troops and African American GIs, veterans of the First World War, chose to remain in metropolitan French cities, testing the limits and longevity of the *union sacrée*.²¹ In 1925, Josephine Baker arrived in Paris, a city already fascinated – some would say traumatised – by jazz. Thereafter, the aural and visual appeal of *Paris Noir* would rest on a potent combination of conventional representations of the exotic black Other and never-to-be-fulfilled promises of proximity, transgression and *métissage*.²²

Griaule and Leiris made their studies of Africa in precisely this turbulent context – a context in which the vogue of collecting African artefacts was beginning to take root and categories of primitive art were being developed and refined according to what John Monroe has called an “elaborate system of connoisseurship.”²³ For James Clifford, Africa appeared to the Parisian avant-garde as a vast “reservoir of other forms and other beliefs.”²⁴ Perhaps the

¹⁸ Clifford references the use of the term “booty,” *The Predicament of Culture*, 55-56.

¹⁹ For an overview, see Emmanuelle Sibeud, *Une science impériale pour l’Afrique ? La construction des savoirs africanistes en France, 1878-1930* (Paris, 2002). On museums in the interwar period and after, see Daniel Sherman, “Peoples Ethnographic’: Objects, Museums, and the Colonial Inheritance of French Ethnology,” *French Historical Studies* 27 (2004); Alice Conklin, “Civil Society, Science, and Empire in Late Republican France: The Foundation of Paris’ Museum of Man,” *Osiris* 17 (July 2002); Conklin, “L’ethnologie combattante de l’entre-deux-guerres” in *Le siècle de Germaine Tillion*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Paris, 2007); Herman Lebovics, “The Dance of the Museums” in *Bringing the Empire Back Home: France in the Global Age* (Durham, N.C., 2004).

²⁰ See Irving Markovitz, *Léopold Sédar Senghor and the Politics of Negritude* (London, 1969); Lilyan Kesteloot, *Black Writers in French: A Literary History of Negritude* (Washington, D.C., 1991); Wilder, *The French Imperial Nation-State*

²¹ Richard Fogarty, *Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army, 1914-1918* (Baltimore, Md., 2008); Joe Lunn, “*Les Races Guerrières*: Racial Preconceptions in the French Military about West African Soldiers during the First World War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 34:4 (1999); Tyler Stovall, “The Color Line behind the Lines: Racial Violence in France during the Great War,” *American Historical Review* 103 (1998); *ibid.*, “National Identity and Shifting Imperial Frontiers: Whiteness and the Exclusion of Colonial Labor after World War I,” *Representations* 84 (2003); Clifford Rosenberg, “The Colonial Politics of Health Care Provision in Interwar Paris,” *French Historical Studies* 27 (2004); Jennifer Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis: The Urban Grounds of Anti-Imperialism and Feminism in Interwar Paris* (Lincoln, Neb., 2010); Mary Lewis, *The Boundaries of the Republic: Migrant Rights and the Limits of Universalism in France, 1918-1940* (Palo Alto, 2007).

²² See Berliner, *Ambivalent Desire*; Elizabeth Ezra, *The Colonial Unconscious: Race and Culture in Interwar France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000); Stovall, *Paris Noir: African Americans in the City of Light* (New York, 1997). On jazz, and Leiris’s interest in it, see Jeffrey Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham, N.C., 2003).

²³ John Warne Monroe, “Surface Tensions: Empire, Parisian Modernism, and ‘Authenticity’ in African Sculpture, 1917–1939,” *American Historical Review* 117 (2012): 451.

²⁴ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 120. See also Julia Kelly, *Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects: Paris, c. 1925-35* (Manchester, 2007).

most striking thing about the issues of *Minotaure* in which the early Dakar-Djibouti publications appeared was their radical and deliberately provocative juxtaposition of African and European art. Reflecting on his revelatory teenage experience of seeing these issues of *Minotaure* displayed in the window of a bookshop on the boulevard Montparnasse – where Dogon statues appeared alongside the work of Constantin Brâncuși, Alberto Giacometti, Jacques Lipchitz and Jean Arp – Jean Rouch declared himself convinced of the common ancestry that was the unstated but clearly implied message of the journal's surrealist editors. The unexpected and often unsettling similarities between Dogon and European culture could be neatly summarised, he later reflected, through Breton's counter-intuitive notion of "évidence poétique."²⁵

Griaule and (especially) Leiris rejected such comparisons. Their scholarly output was of a different order to that which had preceded it, the connections between knowledge and colonial power more subtle than in the Dogon writings of Desplagnes or Morand. In the introduction to *Dieu d'eau*, his account of a thirty-three-day conversation with the blind hunter Ogotemmêli, Griaule wrote of his profound appreciation of the value of Dogon spirituality: "ces hommes vivent sur une cosmogonie, une métaphysique, une religion qui les mettent à la hauteur des peuples antiques et que la christologie elle-même étudierait avec profit" ("these men live on a cosmology, a metaphysics, a religion that puts the people of antiquity at the summit, and that Christology itself could profit from studying").²⁶ His dedication to the ethnographic study of the Dogon and his numerous return visits throughout the 1930s and 1940s had, it seems, endeared him to his subjects. Rouch described Griaule's Dogon funeral as "cet événement historique que nous versons au dossier de l'amitié franco-africaine" ("this historic event that we put in the file of Franco-African relations").²⁷ His most recent biographer, in a phrase that takes on its full semantic freight in the French language, describes Griaule as a *citoyen Dogon*.²⁸ More recent (and more nuanced) evaluations have emphasised the limits to Griaule's ethnographic methodology and the implicit threat of force that underpinned the mission's ability to procure Dogon artefacts for the Musée d'Ethnographie.²⁹ Leiris broke with Griaule on this latter issue and, in *L'Afrique fantôme* and elsewhere, was both more critical of French colonialism than Griaule and more persistent in his attempts to describe spaces and forms of dialogue between African and Western civilisation.³⁰

In a letter of 28 February 1932 to the mission's resident musicologist, André Schaeffner, Leiris was highly critical of William Seabrook's recently-translated *Jungle Ways*, describing it as "une pure saloperie...une complète imbécillité" (pure trash... complete stupidity) that represented a confused and bohemian aesthetic. Seabrook shared Morand's fascination with cannibalism; Leiris felt that both writers gave a distorted idea of colonialism, Africa and its inhabitants. Three weeks later, Leiris confessed to having re-read Seabrook's book and finding it "pas si mal" (not so bad). He noted, however, that it was the only book in

²⁵ *Dogon: chronique d'une passion* (2007, dir. Guy Seligmann). On Breton's notion of "évidence poétique," see Mary Ann Caws, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism: Aragon, Breton, Tzara, Eluard & Desnos* (Princeton, 1970).

²⁶ Griaule, *Dieu d'eau*, 12.

²⁷ *Dogon: chronique d'une passion*.

²⁸ Isabelle Fiemeyer, *Marcel Griaule, citoyen dogon* (Paris, 2004).

²⁹ Walter E. A. van Beek, "Dogon Restudied: A Field Evaluation of the Work of Marcel Griaule," *Current Anthropology* 32, 2 (1991): 139-167; *ibid.*, "Power and Dialogue in Ethnography: Marcel Griaule's Initiation;" and *ibid.*, "On Ethnographic Surrealism" in Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*. For an overview of scholarly assessments of Griaule see Anne Doquet, "Se montrer Dogon: les mises en scène de l'identité ethnique," *Ethnologies comparées* 5 (2002): 3-4.

³⁰ See especially Leiris, "L'ethnographe devant le colonialisme," *Les temps modernes* 58 (1950).

the mission's library.³¹ More revealingly, Leiris's assessment of Seabrook and Morand develops into a wider critique of contemporary exoticism insofar as it sought to essentialise Africa whilst establishing crude dichotomies between it and the West. For Leiris, there were no profitable comparisons to be drawn between black Africa and the jazz musicians of 1920s Paris nor, he argued, should Dogon art be compared (as it had been) to the work of Picasso or Brâncuși. Rather, in *L'Afrique fantôme*, Leiris was attempting to elaborate more subtle ideas about the potential of Africa (and the Dogon) to serve as *miroir* to the West. In a 1948 lecture to the Institut français in Port-au-Prince, Leiris described the reciprocal influence that he felt could and should exist between African and Western civilisation, describing black Africa as "un fil conducteur" that could offer "fraîcheur" to an increasingly- and overly-technologised West.³²

Ultimately, neither Griaule nor Leiris saw the Dogon as the diametrical opposite of French civilisation. Both resisted easy comparisons (and oppositions), and neither laboured the point about the extent of their contributions to ethnographic knowledge and to French colonialism. Nonetheless, by the time of Griaule's death and the beginning of the age of decolonisation, the Dogon were emerging as significant interlocutors to the West in general and, crucially, to France in particular. An important explanation for this lies in the popularity and visibility of the Dakar-Djibouti mission in interwar France, the unprecedented and scholarly nature of its output and the supposed authenticity of its collections as displayed in the Musée d'Ethnographie and Musée de l'Homme. Griaule was awarded the Sorbonne's first doctorate in ethnology for his eight-hundred-page treatise on Dogon masks and in his lifetime was widely acknowledged as the pre-eminent French anthropologist. Occurring at a time of what could be described as racial crisis in metropolitan France, the Dakar-Djibouti mission's popularisation of the Dogon had the paradoxical effect of providing a reassuringly distant and therefore stable image of the black African Other. At the same time, the Dogon were represented through the prism of ethnographic practices developed and refined by Griaule and Leiris in a specifically French intellectual context. Reflecting on the body of Griaule's work, the British anthropologist Mary Douglas remarks that "the Dogon now seem so unmistakably French, so urbane, so articulate, with such philosophical insight. The very themes central to their philosophy are themes in the main stream of Greek and Christian thought. For example, their reflections on sexual dualism echo those of Plato in very similar vein. And their use of anthropomorphic symbolism for the corpus politic and the mystical body is a preoccupation of Christian philosophers as well. Nuer myths, by contrast [under the lens of British anthropology], are as crude as their way of life."³³

Chiaroscuro: The Dogon from guerres de mémoire to lieu de mémoire

After the Second World War, the stars of Griaule and Leiris would begin to fade relative to a new generation of structuralist anthropologists led by Claude Lévi-Strauss, whose influential theories of kinship shared much with Leiris's position on the relationship of Africa to

³¹ Leiris, *Miroir de l'Afrique*, 361-62; 381; William Seabrook, *Secrets de la Jungle* (Paris, 1931); Morand, *Chronique du XX siècle III: magie noire* (Paris, 1928). Morand had written the preface to the French translation of Seabrook's *The Magic Island, L'île magique* (Paris, 1929). On Seabrook, see Marjorie Worthington, *The Strange World of Willie Seabrook* (New York, 1966); Owen White, "The Decivilizing Mission: Auguste Dupuis-Yakouba and French Timbuktu," *French Historical Studies* 27 (2004).

³² Leiris, *Miroir de l'Afrique*, 866-867.

³³ Mary Douglas, "If the Dogon..." *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 7, 28 (1967): 659. For a wider perspective on the specificities of French ethnography, see Robert Parkin and Anne de Sales, eds., *Out of the Study and Into the Field: Ethnographic Theory and Practice in French Anthropology* (Oxford, 2010).

Europe.³⁴ At the same time, Leiris's objections to direct and straightforward comparisons between African and European art have given way to a tendency to make precisely such comparisons. In 1994, William Rubin stressed the similarities between Dogon statuary and the early work of Brâncuși, Picasso and Henri Matisse who at that time, he pointed out, were largely unaware of its existence.³⁵ Stéphane Martin, director of the Musée du Quai Branly, begins his introduction to the catalogue of the 2011 Dogon exhibition by citing André Malraux – who was similarly convinced of the African dimension to Picasso's work – “N'est pas Dogon qui veut en face de Phidias mais n'est pas Phidias qui veut en face des Dogon” (“Is it not Dogon who places himself before Phidias but Phidias, before Dogon?”).³⁶ In these analyses, a delicate balancing of Africa and the West is apparent – one that may be likened to the artistic technique of *chiaroscuro* in which tonal contrasts serve to emphasise volume and depth. Praised for its emphasis on the profound difference *and* familiarity of Dogon material culture, the Musée du Quai Branly exhibition suggests a new era of memory in which postcolonial France seeks to mobilise, institutionalise and make use of its former colonial subjects.

Four months after the Dogon exhibition, the Musée du Quai Branly inaugurated another, *L'invention du sauvage*, co-curated by former French soccer captain and president of Éducation contre le racisme Lilian Thuram and historian Pascal Blanchard.³⁷ *L'invention du sauvage* detailed centuries of visual representations of racial difference, focussing on the lurid sensationalism of colonial exhibitions and extending Blanchard's earlier work on human zoos.³⁸ The exhibition was particularly notable for its explicit engagement with Edward Said's concept of the Other, a central tenet of postcolonial theory that has until recently attracted comparatively little interest in French academic circles.³⁹ Further evidence of what might be described as France's postcolonial turn at the Musée du Quai Branly can be found in the exhibition's visitor book. In an anonymous entry dated 11 January 2012, one visitor has sketched an evidently Caucasian figure drinking from a glass bottle under the title “today: y'a bon CocaCola!” This is a reference to (and inversion of) the infamous and once-ubiquitous advertisements for Banania chocolate drink, marketed under the slogan “y'a bon.. Banania” and depicting a smiling African figure (often a *tirailleur sénégalais*) in a fez. The Banania advertisements attracted widespread criticism for their stereotypical and racially-charged depiction of black Africa, most memorably from Negritude poet and later president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor.⁴⁰

If postcolonial studies has only recently gained significant currency in French academia, memory studies (which has a more substantial pedigree) has earned justifiable criticism for its neglect of France's colonial past. Pierre Nora's personal interest in the Algerian tragedy notwithstanding, only one essay in his multi-volume *lieux de mémoire* collection deals explicitly with colonial memory *as national memory*.⁴¹ Whereas much recent

³⁴ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La pensée sauvage* (Paris, 1962). In his 1948 Port-au-Prince lecture, Leiris observes that “L'ethnographie... nous enseigne que, en gros, les hommes sont partout les memes,” *Miroir de l'Afrique*, 866-867.

³⁵ William Rubin, “Preface,” in Leloup, ed., *Statuaire Dogon* (Strasbourg, 1994), 17.

³⁶ Malraux, *La tête d'obsidienne* cited in Leloup, *Dogon*, 9.

³⁷ This exhibition ran from 29 November 2011 to 3 June 2012. See Pascal Blanchard, Gilles Boëtsch and Nanette Jacomijn Snoep, *Exhibitions : l'invention du sauvage* (Arles, 2011).

³⁸ See note 17.

³⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993).

⁴⁰ Léopold Sédar Senghor, “Poème liminaire” in *Hosties noires* (Paris, 1948).

⁴¹ Ageron's essay on the 1931 Exposition Coloniale Internationale. See note 17. On this debate, see also Noiriell, *Le Creuset français*; Emily Apter, “French Colonial Studies and Post-colonial Theory,” *SubStance* 24 (1995): 1-2. On Nora and Algeria, see Nora, *Les Français d'Algérie* (Paris, 1961); François Dosse, *Homo historicus* (Paris, 2011), 67-82.

scholarship on postcolonial France has emphasised themes of trauma, amnesia and repression, particularly in respect of the Algerian War of Independence, “y'a bon CocaCola” suggests a shift in the field of memory and a move towards inversion, creative appropriation and making use of the colonial past.⁴² Clearly, however, literature, art and advertising – and the Dogon exhibition at the Musée du Quai Branly, we might add – continue to represent Africa in ways that emphasise difference and the exotic whilst obscuring (or effacing altogether) the colonial dimension of its relationship to Europe, a point reaffirmed by Daniel Sherman in his recent study of French primitivism.⁴³

Nonetheless, the visibility of the Dogon in contemporary French culture represents a challenge to unreconstructed paradigms of trauma, amnesia and repression. In stressing their importance to Picasso, and in comparing their sculpture (favourably) to that of Phidias, Malraux was, of course, implying the vital influence of the Dogon at the very heart of the Western canon. Similarly, in *Mille plateaux*, their penetrating investigation of capitalism and desire, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari engage extensively and creatively with Dogon cosmogony. In their analysis, the Dogon egg – the building-block of time and matter—serves as a neat demonstration of their concept of a Body Without Organs – an ideal means of existence that transcends the psychological trauma of modern capitalism. Extending the comparison, Deleuze and Guattari use Dogon Nommo – ancestral spirits or deities – as a means of revisiting the Freudian id and their central argument about desire-as-machine. A primitivist desire to appropriate would be a legitimate concern at this point were it not for the fact that Deleuze and Guattari, like Malraux, invoke the Dogon as a means of questioning the subordinate relationship of Africa to Europe. Taking this argument further, Henk Oosterling compares the intellectual project of Deleuze and Guattari to that of Griaule and Leiris, reflecting on the close relationship of French ethnography to philosophy and surrealism and arguing that all are attempts to fight fascism by stressing common ancestry as opposed to racial difference.⁴⁴

More visible, if not more important, than academic interest in the Dogon is a popular fascination with Africa that has outlasted the ends of empire. Recent literature on the Dogon frequently takes the form of the *récit de voyage*, servicing a booming if problematic tourist industry that has been largely suppressed by the taking of French hostages in Niger in 2010 and major political instability in Mali.⁴⁵ Before 2010, tourism and collecting had firmly established themselves as inescapable facts of life in the Bandiagara region, masked dances being staged specifically for this purpose.⁴⁶ A *flâneur* in modern-day central Paris cannot

⁴² Gérard Noiriel famously describes postcolonial immigration as an “illegitimate object” of scholarly attention in his *Le Creuset français: histoire de l'immigration, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris, 1988). Kristin Ross emphasises France's need to “re-make” itself after empire in her *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Boston, Mass., 1996). On Algeria, see Benjamin Stora, *La gangrène et l'oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Paris, 1991); Stora and Mohammed Harbi, eds., *La guerre d'Algérie 1954-2004: la fin de l'amnésie* (Paris, 2004); Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: the Algerian War and the remaking of France* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2006).

⁴³ Sherman, *French Primitivism and the Ends of Empire, 1945-1975* (Chicago, 2011).

⁴⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2: Mille plateaux* (Paris, 1980), 185-204; Henk A. F. Oosterling, “Oedipus and the Dogon: The Myth of Modernity Interrogated” in *I, We and Body: First Joint Symposium of Philosophers from Africa and from the Netherlands at Rotterdam on March 10, 1989* ed. in Heinz Kimmerle (Amsterdam, 1989), 27-42. Oosterling notes references to Dogon mythology in Spinoza's *Ethica*, Castaneda's *Lessons of Don Juan* and the Japanese *Pillowbooks*. His analysis of the relationship between ethnography, philosophy and surrealism is developed further in Clifford, “On Ethnographic Surrealism” (see note 28).

⁴⁵ Éric Bertrand, *Trekking au pays des dogon: une histoire d'amitié entre un Malien, un Dogon et un Québécois* (Boucherville, 2007); Solen Cueff and Thomas Van Ruymbeke, *Voyage au Mali: de Bamako au pays dogon* (Bécherel, 2009); Carole Zizioli, *Aventure malienne à la rencontre du peuple dogon* (Paris, 2011).

⁴⁶ See especially Rogier Bedaux and Diderik Van Der Waals, eds., *Regards sur les dogon du Mali* (Gand, 2004).

escape the proliferation of boutiques and market-stalls dedicated to the sale of African art and sculpture. If the connoisseurship of the interwar period now co-exists with an altogether less refined aesthetic, Dogon material culture nevertheless retains an important place within this vibrant and expanding mini-industry; their masks and statuary command considerable sums, and the online marketplace is flourishing. One recent observer has related this trend to the increasing Islamisation of the Dogon since the 1960s and a concomitant desacralisation of their masks and statues. This new postcolonial phase, he argues, has been characterised by the “entrée des Dogon sur le marché.”⁴⁷ The last quarter-century has seen major exhibitions at the Conciergerie, the Musée de Morlaix, the Musée Dapper, the Galerie Alain Bovis and the Galerie Ratton-Hourdé (all in Paris); other Dogon exhibitions have been held less frequently in French provincial cities, elsewhere in Europe and in the United States. The Dogon, as suggested by reviews of the recent Musée du Quai Branly exhibition, are seen to make for particularly good examples of African civilisation because they remained untouched by the West until the early twentieth century, because of the earnestness of their early ethnographers and because of their firm adherence to tradition. Paris, moreover, is often described as the obvious site in which to reunite and stage this peculiarly French drama of Africa.⁴⁸

It is perhaps impossible to conceive of the Dogon outside of the prism – and the weighty legacy – of French colonial ethnography. Their most recent scholar describes them as “une société ethnologisée” and focuses her own research on the ways in which the Dogon have begun to reclaim a degree of autonomy by making creative use of tourism and other manifestations of Western engagement.⁴⁹ Historically, the Dogon have been objectified as perhaps *the* archetype of black Africa in the French postcolonial mind. Pierre Nora describes *lieux de mémoire* as comforting and sacred sites, refuges from the psychological trauma of twentieth-century France and “moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded.”⁵⁰ This is a tempting description of French interest in the Dogon too, from the ethnographic moment of mid-century through the trauma of decolonisation and the psychological remaking of the postcolonial nation. Colonial ethnography – the scholarly affection of Griaule and Leiris – is highlighted and celebrated, bloody wars of independence in Indochina and Algeria are shaded out of the historical record. Frozen in time, frequently separated from the colonial aspect of their history, Dogon artefacts in Parisian collections say at least as much about Europe as they do about Africa. At the same time, however, cultural and historical processes of *chiaroscuro* at the Musée du Quai Branly and elsewhere speak to a field of national memory in which categories of “West” and “Africa,” “French” and “Dogon” are constantly in play. These complex patterns of difference, kinship and interconnectedness run through French colonial history, echoing the ambivalence of Leiris and suggesting that contemporary interest in the Dogon presents more of a problem than a solution to the thorny question of French national identity. If Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* serve to coalesce and stabilize, the place of the Dogon in the French mind is perhaps best understood as a kind of *lieu de contre-mémoire*.

⁴⁷ Philippe Dagen, “Les arts dogon au filtre de l’histoire: L’exposition du Quai Branly témoigne de la créativité et de la diversité artistiques des peuples du Mali,” *Le Monde*, 7 April 2011, 23.

⁴⁸ See Véronique Prat, “L’austère beauté de l’art des Dogons,” *Le Figaro*, 8 April 2011; Sabine Cessou, “Voyage en monde Dogon,” *Libération*, 20 April 2011.

⁴⁹ Anne Doquet, *Les masques dogon: ethnologie savante et ethnologie autochtone* (Paris, 1999).

⁵⁰ Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” trans. Marc Roudebush, *Representations* 26 (1989): 10-12.