

## Introduction

A STORY MAKES THE ROUNDS in a West African town, demonstrating that the aftereffects of slavery may be both a dirty rumor and a secret hidden in plain sight. A taxi picked up a client headed for a luxurious villa in one of the newer quarters of Bamako, the capital of Mali. A self-important man, the client wore the local bureaucrat's uniform, a kind of three-pocketed West African leisure suit known—like the men who wear it—as a *trois poches*. This *trois poches* was going to the villa to ask its owner for a favor, probably a loan. On arriving, the client was surprised to see the taxi driver holding out a 1,000 franc CFA note to him.<sup>1</sup> “Take it and give it to the proprietor,” said the driver, “He is my *woloso*, and I have to give him something to support himself.”<sup>2</sup>

What's a *woloso*, and why would a poor man give to a rich one? The answer to the first question is deceptively simple: A *woloso* is a “house-born” slave, or a person born of a slave into a master's household. In theory, the *woloso* could never be sold, and his descendants would remain attached to those of the master. The second question is more complicated. While the exchange of people as slaves was largely abolished in Mali early in the twentieth century, memories of slavery live on, and relationships between the descendants of slaves and the descendants of masters—such as *woloso* relationships—remain a deep current in contemporary Mali. Even Mali's second president, the soldier Moussa Traore, was commonly if quietly referred to as a slave.<sup>3</sup>

Stories like that of the taxi man are both apocryphal and revealing.

Although they could be understood in many different ways, such stories demonstrate that the social dynamism of twentieth-century Africa allowed old languages of reciprocal obligation to be employed in new ways. They also underscore the ambiguity crucial to these relationships, which are nominally based on constraining personal possibility but allow for a great range of “play,” idiosyncrasy, and individual potential. They allow the listener to entertain the possibility that the woloso owns a villa and acts as a patron to a *trois poches*, while the grandson of his “master” drives a taxi. The contradictions within it make the story worth telling.

Just a few years earlier, another story gripped the same Bamako. This one was not comedy, but tragedy. In August 1996, many eyes turned toward Paris, where a group of African immigrants—known as the *sans-papiers*—and activists who supported them had taken shelter in a church to demand regularization of their status and to avoid the very real possibility of deportation. Several went on a hunger strike. While Radio France International and Africa Numero Un closely followed the ongoing drama in the Eglise Saint-Bernard (Saint Bernard Church), many Malians argued that the conflict there was further evidence that the French had forgotten the debt they had incurred toward Malian veterans—and, indeed, toward Africa as a whole—when France called on young men from the colonies to fight the world wars. As the standoff continued, frustration mounted. In Bamako, people on the street who because I am white assumed I was French reminded me more than once—and more or less politely—of the “colonial debt” they felt existed between France and its former colonies. When riot police stormed the church and expelled the protesters, some of my interlocutors must have felt sadly vindicated: “The French” had once again let them down.<sup>4</sup>

What do these two stories have to do with each other, and what can they tell us about contemporary political alignments, which both emerge from and ignore the colonial past of Africa and Europe? The story of the woloso and that of the immigrant come together in the figure of the colonial military veteran, who was often an ex-slave and always a traveler. The apocryphal tale and the political standoff are both products of a contentious political language of mutual if uneven obligation, the sources of which lie deep in West African history and on the very surface of the colonial relationship between France and Mali. This book is a history of the development of that language.

Anchored in African service in the French colonial military, that language is not a holdover from a bygone imperial era, but a founding element of an active and evolving political imagination shared and disputed between West Africa and France.

Without the West African soldiers known as the *tirailleurs Sénégalais*, the French empire might never have taken the form and shape that it did. In the nineteenth century, *tirailleurs* conquered enormous territories south of the Sahara. In the 1950s, another generation of West African men fought to keep Algeria and Indochina French. Yet none of those engagements would mean as much symbolically as the *tirailleurs'* sacrifices during the two world wars. Africans played an important role in protecting France in the First World War and in liberating it in the Second. Many argue that their actions engendered a debt in blood that has yet to be repaid.

As an exploration of the meaning and the measure of that debt, and of the political and social role of Mali's veterans of the French colonial military, *Native Sons* situates the ex-*tirailleurs* within the broader project of twentieth-century French imperialism. However, while underscoring the power of colonial political and social projects, I work to keep them in perspective. They did not occur in a vacuum. I argue that throughout the twentieth century, evolving social forms with pre-colonial roots provided important and evocative resources for understanding and debating politics. Thus, I offer one regionally inflected answer to the large question of how social forms and the logics that create and sustain them change over time as a result of political struggle and colonial or postcolonial governance.<sup>5</sup>

This book is not only a history of a French–African relationship. In it, I also analyze the consequences of absence, the nature of community, and the meanings of home for several generations of Malian veterans of the French colonial military. Focusing on the period between the First World War and 1968, when a former colonial soldier overthrew Mali's first independent government, I explore the relationships between migrants and communities and between post-colonies and former metropolises. Even as it navigates between a small town, a former colony, and an ex-imperial center, my study is firmly rooted in a sense of place. The story I tell moves from Western Sudanic Africa to the French Mediterranean, the Maghreb, and Southeast Asia, and back again, generating competing histories of travel and return.<sup>6</sup> These histories are anchored in one bustling town in central Mali, the

town of San, from which many soldiers left and to which some veterans returned. I attempt to explore travel and homecoming in the literal and conceptual spaces between the local community of San and the proclaimed transcontinental community of the French empire.

## Arguments

*Native Sons* aims to illuminate the peculiar forced embrace of Europe and Africa—or more particularly, of France and Mali—by scrutinizing the uneven and inconsistent development of a particular political language that is both historically grounded and strategically deployed in contemporary politics and in popular histories. While this study is first and foremost a work of African history, it queries that category. Even as I insist on the importance of local factors such as idioms of servitude and obligation, I recognize that the boundedness of “African” history is far too narrow to encompass the mobility and the creativity of Mali’s veterans or the politics they generate.<sup>7</sup> This is not only African history; nor could it be only French history. It is a story told in a particular context, but one that could make sense in many places—perhaps too many.

I argue that in twentieth-century West Africa, 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. Shared by both civilians who identified with the principles of the Republic and officers most skeptical of its claims, those ideas were especially pronounced within the colonial military, which generated its own distinct culture. Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate that both Sahelian and imperial ideals and practices were recast in the twentieth century as relationships predicated on slavery lost any legal status, while the nation’s debt was written into law and extended to the empire. The unfinished product of the intersection of these contentious French and West African ideals is a political language of sacrifice and obligation that continues to inflect contemporary debates, notably about African immigration to France and the idea of a “blood debt” owed by France to its former colonies.

By “political language,” I mean the words, images, ideas, and expressions of sentiment that compose a common rhetoric animating uneven and inconsistent relations of power that exist between various parties—whether these parties are former soldiers, colonial bureaucrats, con-

temporary newspaper columnists, or political activists.<sup>8</sup> While the claims made and the arguments advanced may differ widely, they are mutually comprehensible. Collectively they form a repertoire of argument that is both in constant flux and reliant on a series of important precedents in order to generate meaning. The language is always open not only to new combinations of known elements, but also to the possibility of neologisms, which expand the field but are part of it.<sup>9</sup>

I use the metaphor of language but do not mean to imply that those who speak it do so fluently, or that they agree on its past usage or present meanings. In fact, the language of mutual obligation and interdependence is and has always been fraught with misunderstandings, malentendus, and moments of false confidence in which one group or another believes that it is finally being heard and understood.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, although I trace the immediate roots of this new language to the First World War and its aftermath, I follow it across a series of ruptures, lapses, and moments of confusion and reconfiguration. Writing on “peasant discourse” in twentieth-century Tanzania, Steven Feierman argued that “long-term continuities in political language are the outcome of radical social change and of struggle *within* peasant society.”<sup>11</sup> The political language developed by West African veterans and French officers and administrators was a product of radical change, but it was not so contained. The shared meanings dormant within it extended across an uneven terrain marked by violence, mutiny, rejection, and the bitter struggles of the 1940s, ’50s, and ’60s. The language itself burst out of a particular military culture and was only ever awkwardly domesticated into civilian political discourse. West African anticolonialists, for example, failed to master this variety of political speech.

Those who do speak the language frame their debates in similar terms while generating contradictory meanings. Much like the relationship itself, the language continues to evolve, always marked by failures, misunderstandings, and twists of fate. A case in point: On Armistice Day, 11 November 1998, the French government planned to offer the Legion of Honor and a gratuity to Abdoulaye Ndiaye, the last known surviving Senegalese veteran of the First World War, who was at least one hundred years old. Ndiaye died at home in Senegal on the eve of the ceremony honoring him.<sup>12</sup> With great fanfare, the French government then helped to pave the road to his village, contributing a mere 20 percent of the total cost but scoring a publicity

coup.<sup>13</sup> During the same period, Senegalese veterans, backed by their African comrades and some retired officers in France, were battling in the courts to establish their rights to pensions equal to those paid to their French peers.<sup>14</sup> In 2001, France's Council of State (*Conseil d'État*) recognized the legal bases of their struggle—based partly in the European Convention on Human Rights—and rejected the counterarguments of the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Defense.<sup>15</sup> Veterans, their allies, and many Africans were ecstatic; the government immediately appealed.

Thus, even in the very recent past the relationship has been at once cooperative and adversarial.<sup>16</sup> However, disputes over pensions—like the immigration controversy mentioned earlier—reveal new ways to debate postcolonial questions, as different political languages, ranging from “blood debt” to human rights, become naturalized, invoked, and reinvented. In the postcolonial scenario, political possibilities multiply. The ironic result is that a political language composed primarily of claims, demands, and contestation becomes the most comfortable of various shared political languages insofar as it continues to acknowledge a particular history and a common set of references that others do not. In contrast, a human-rights claim—or, indeed, a claim of racial discrimination—bursts the question out of its box and raises the stakes for both parties to a dispute by casting it onto the abstract and potentially arid field of universalisms.

This language of struggle, recognition, and obligation developed within a particular context: that of post-slavery. My argument rests on the premise that Mali is as much a post-slavery society as it is a postcolonial one. By this I mean simply that the aftereffects of widespread and long-term slavery are crucial to the complexity of Malian and other West African societies; colonial rule did not erase that fact.<sup>17</sup> While historians of Africa have paid a great deal of attention to the “end of slavery,” they have too frequently expended their efforts in rolling back the dates at which slavery may have ended (or emancipation became effective) and too rarely considered the aftermath of slavery across generations.<sup>18</sup> Let me be clear. My point is not that “slavery” continues to exist in Mali, or that various forms of unfree labor are commonly found in West Africa and elsewhere. Rather, I argue that forms of long-term mutual obligation and reciprocity—indeed, some of the very implications of the kinship idiom—that were elaborated around the institution of slavery and the figure of the

woloso marked colonial and postcolonial Malian society in ways both subtle and profound.<sup>19</sup> Such ideals extend far beyond forms of slavery and post-slavery. As Amadou Hampaté Bâ wrote, “In the traditional society of the savannah, every relation was based on the notion of exchange.”<sup>20</sup>

Although links between some families ran deep, the post-slavery phenomenon was most apparent—and most important—in composing a repertoire of social patterns and relations. Like the idea of the French Republic’s debt toward veterans, the woloso relationship existed as much in the breach as in practice. In Bamako and elsewhere, some households continue to harbor families whose histories were intertwined by slavery. The descendants of masters may offer shelter and sustenance, at a minimum, to the descendants of slaves who carry out household chores and other kinds of labor ranging from symbolic to wage earning. More commonly, the links between families are acknowledged only at certain ritual moments, such as naming ceremonies or marriages. Other households are atomized, and links from the past are entirely severed. Regional variations are crucial, and post-slavery relations in the societies of the desert edge, or even among certain immigrant communities in France, may still be charged with power and even coercion in ways that those in southern Mali simply are not.<sup>21</sup> In fact, both woloso ties and the colonial relationship, as represented by the veterans, are frequently “broken” or only partly observed. Yet for my argument, ruptures within these relationships are as important as continuities, and chapter 1 traces one family’s gradual transfer of its allegiances and clientage from the family of a *chef de canton* (canton or district chief) whose fortunes were declining to the far richer and more powerful colonial administration.

If such forms of affinity remained multiple and complex throughout the twentieth century, so too did the varieties of political belonging engendered by sequential imperial conquests (both African and French) and a venerable but ever-evolving repertoire of local concepts of authority.<sup>22</sup> From the late nineteenth century through the present, West African veterans and their peers would inhabit a wide variety of statuses relative to the states of France and, later, of Mali. They were at times subjects, citizens, nationals, or simply members of a series of political entities extending from the colony of Soudan Français (French Sudan) to the Fourth French Republic and its Union; the Soudanese Republic within a French Community; and, finally, the

Republic of Mali.<sup>23</sup> I use the term “political belonging” to refer to that spectrum of individual and collective statuses, and I mean “belonging” in both an active and a passive sense. Little more than a handful of Soudanese “belonged” to the French state as citizens, but the vast majority “belonged” to France in that they were claimed by it. They were subjects and nationals, but until the establishment of the French Union in 1946 they lacked citizenship of any kind. Nonetheless, France deemed young African men subject to conscription, and, conversely, West African pilgrims and wanderers stranded as far away as Somalia and Jerusalem used their status as French nationals to persuade the colonial state to assume the costs of their repatriation, as chapter 4 recounts.

The concept of political belonging allows one to consider such successful claims-making as evidence of participation in a national and imperial community without expanding the notion of “citizenship” to encompass such a wide variety of legal and social positions that it risks losing any exact meaning.<sup>24</sup> Two valuable analyses of nineteenth-century Africa refer to precolonial citizenships, but in the context of the Western Sudan, such usage would assume too much about the nature of political membership at work, whether before or after the imposition of colonial rule.<sup>25</sup> By referring to political belonging and membership, I underscore the continuities among the identities of “subject,” “citizen,” and “national” while allowing the differences between them to emerge.<sup>26</sup> Although at times clear lines distinguished those statuses, colonial policies themselves occasionally blurred them. For instance, after the First World War, veterans were exempted from the legal code applied to subjects, even as they maintained that status.<sup>27</sup>

Much of the work of creating, defining, and sorting out these categories so essential to the practice of empire was equally vital to the creation of post-imperial France and postcolonial nations like Mali.<sup>28</sup> In fact, it may well be in this sense more than in any other that colonialism “made” these two modern nations. Yet the imperial cultures analyzed in such detail by historians committed to rethinking modern European history via its colonial roots did not succeed in containing or defining postcolonial means of political belonging or making claims.<sup>29</sup> Beyond the bounds implied by some of this work, which is often regarded as constituting a historiographic “Imperial Turn,” a claims-making (and claims-receiving) public sustained partly

by media-savvy activists lies somewhere between the shapeless “multitude” identified by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri and the sharply drawn boundaries of a contemporary citizenry.<sup>30</sup> Chapter 5 returns to the implications of transnational activism over the issues of veterans’ pensions and West African migrations for larger questions of political community and (rather smaller) questions of contemporary historiography.

Finally, I am not arguing for a generous colonialism. In fact, I consistently throw light on the parsimony and brutality that characterized the administration, its agents, and its practices. Nonetheless, my work demonstrates that ideology—and the uses to which it was put—made a difference. Wading through reams of crumbling colonial documents that collectively assumed that a debt had been contracted with West African veterans, and working with what was admittedly a straw-man view of “the colonizer,” I originally felt that the sometimes maudlin sentiments of honor and obligation expressed in many documents should be rejected out of hand. Reading against the grain of the colonial archive was more than a research strategy; it was a mission. However, I gradually came to feel that some of the sentiments expressed were genuine, or at least often enough, and that some colonial military officers and civilian administrators did indeed feel that France would sully its honor—and implicitly their own—by neglecting its obligations to the least of its soldiers and veterans.

Ann Laura Stoler and Emmanuelle Saada have recently argued that colonial sentiment, including ideas of honor and prestige, had a powerful material impact on daily life and the evolution of colonial politics in settings as distant as Indonesia and Indochina.<sup>31</sup> Sentiment remained a potent catalyst in the development of postcolonial political languages. When military officers referred to *tirailleurs*, they called them “*our tirailleurs*,” just as in the early years of the twentieth century, their civilian counterparts often referred to colonial subjects as “*our Natives*” or even “*our children*.” Such paternalism went hand in hand with a strong commitment to the “honor” of France and its colonial military. To argue that these sentiments were real is not to claim that they were benevolent. No one who has listened to ex-soldiers or survivors of forced labor recount their sufferings would suggest as much. Nevertheless, they must be taken seriously, and they would later become resources on which a post-imperial public composed of veterans, former officers, and civilians would thrive.

My acknowledgment of the role of ideology in colonial policy building is far from new, and this line of argument has recently been reinvigorated.<sup>32</sup> However, I hope to have read the colonial archive with enough cynicism and critical acumen not to get swept away by its language, even as I admit that in some places, at certain times, colonial administrators meant what they said and that they could imagine themselves as benevolent dictators, whether or not they were experienced as such by their subjects. The military variant of such sentiments, the idea of a “brotherhood of arms,” was a key element in the rhetoric of both the metropolitan military and its colonial counterpart. In the latter, stark inequalities marked the “brotherhood” when it extended across a racist divide between Europeans and Africans. Nevertheless, the idea resonated with the very officers and administrators who generated the policies and programs that would play an important role in molding West African veterans into a distinct social group.

## Questions

Who are these veterans? Many are junior sons, and before 1950, most were sons of soldiers, slaves, and strangers. No less importantly, the African veterans of France’s twentieth-century wars are living examples of the significant links between the independent nations of Francophone West Africa and France’s Fifth Republic, and they form a distinct community of interest within many West African countries, including Mali. I ask how and why veterans became such a privileged group. How did veterans’ experiences and political engagements affect the evolution of an emerging French African political community defined not by governing elites, but by the soldiers, migrants, activists, and others who created and re-create it? The answers to those questions reveal some of the colonial-era origins of the contemporary African–French relationship. This work is not a political history, narrowly defined, yet it does not shy away from politics. Historians concerned with contemporary imbalances of power can profit from examining the uneven terrain of colonial and postcolonial relationships. That terrain is endowed with “footholds,” points at which the idiosyncrasies of post-imperial cultures allow certain people from the former colonies to gain the rhetorical high ground in their search for recognition, restitution, or vindication. The issue of veterans’ privi-

leges—or their rights, depending on one’s perspective—is just such a point.

I argue that in the case of Mali, its West African neighbors, and France, shared military experience lay near the heart of the colonial relationship, and it remains very near the core of its postcolonial counterpart. The military service of colonial subjects opened a breach in the barriers between citizens and subjects. African politicians, from the Senegalese Parliamentarian Blaise Diagne in the 1910s to Burkinabe (Voltaïque) Representative Ouezzin Coulibaly in the 1950s, used that breach to make broader demands on the French state. Certain veterans did the same. They met with only partial success, but in the context of political independence, when it was far from clear what would become of a language that had ceased to be politically acceptable, the practice of making claims evolved and survived. Military connections were the ties that bound, however awkwardly.

In exploring the development of that particular aspect of the French–African relationship, I address a more fundamental set of questions: What happened to the hundreds of thousands of West African men who served as *tirailleurs Sénégalais* when they left the army? What did they do? How did men who had been absent from home for years on end reintegrate civilian life? Because they were most likely to receive pensions, because their claims often had the most resonance, and because their identities as soldiers were deeply engrained, I am most interested in men who were career soldiers rather than men who served only two to three years in the colonial military. The French distinction between the *ancien combattant*, or combat veteran, and the *ancien militaire*, or career soldier, is more than simply heuristic. It underscores an important distinction between combat veterans, who may well have been short-term conscripts, and career men, who were commonly combat veterans in addition to being long-serving, professional soldiers. The latter category is the true subject of my study.

## Voice, Evidence, and Argument

From where would such a history emerge? *Native Sons* is built on a series of long-running conversations, a broad set of oral histories, and a deep fund of archival and published material, as well as some private papers and broadcast media. Drawing on these sources in combina-

tion, some of my arguments are hard and fast, while others are deductive, are rooted in gossip and innuendo, or rest on hints and suggestions. I read the clues implied in the adoption of aliases, histories of absence, particular migrations, or local rumors. In the same vein, I regard local historical interpretations as more than sources. I see them as composing a historiography in their own right, and I engage with them at key moments, such as around the “end” of slavery or postwar political battles. When veterans claim, as they often do, that they won independence through their military contributions and political activism, I take their statements seriously, not so much as evidence, but as argument.<sup>33</sup>

This study is not an oral history, yet many of the most crucial parts of the argument rely on what I learned from veterans, their families, political militants, religious figures, and others in and around San, Koutiala, and Bamako. Luise White has argued that many Africanists are too pious in their search for an “authentic African voice,” too sanctimonious about their methods of oral history, and, conversely, not sufficiently critical in their interpretations of what people actually say.<sup>34</sup> “Oral history has been turned into a higher art form than perhaps it needs to be,” she claims.<sup>35</sup> I couldn’t agree more. Going further, in 1990, White counseled historians to argue with “informants” in order to find out what they valued enough to defend.<sup>36</sup>

At a conference in 1997, at which White, David Cohen, and Stephan Miescher set out to shake up a relationship between “authenticity” and evidence that had grown too comfortable in Africanist historiography, Mamadou Diawara spoke about the interviewer as an imperious inquisitor, like a policeman with a notebook.<sup>37</sup> The interview had long been considered a performance in which its “subject” played the leading role. Diawara, however, argued forcefully that the performance of the researcher required greater scrutiny. From a different perspective, Abdullahi Ibrahim analyzed the interview as more than an ethnographic technique and looked to its historical roots to find a deeply flawed “data-generation technology” that often became “a breeding place of lies.”<sup>38</sup> At issue was not only the performance of the interview, but the ways in which such extraction was conceived. Diawara later argued that the interview has two ancestors: the natural sciences, which so often work with “inert and manipulable” subjects, and criminal justice. As Diawara wrote, “The vocabulary of our discipline is astonishingly close to that of the police and the legal system.

The ‘problematic of the confession’ is close at hand [in terms such as] inquiries, investigations, research, verification, documentation, [and] witnessing, competing versions of the facts. . . . All these terms evoke the suspect, prosecuted for a crime, facing his judges.”<sup>39</sup> With such techniques, testimony becomes the raw material of history that must be drawn out of those who possess it.

Early in my research—in 1996 and 1997—I pursued a more or less fixed set of questions regarding veterans’ experiences of military service and reintegration. I soon gave up such inquiry in favor of a range of tactics, from bantering with veterans and occasionally debating with former activists to making repeated social visits with elders in which no questions were asked, yet stories rolled out. After 1997, haunted by the twin image Diawara had presented—of the note-taking policeman and the self-important researcher flummoxed by the peasant’s question, “You already know everything, why do you ask us?”<sup>40</sup>—I began to jettison the apparatus of the oral historian. First the tape recorder, then the notebook, and finally even the questions themselves were left behind, depending on the depth of my relationship with my interlocutor and on the kinds of insights and information I was seeking.

This “low-impact” tactic developed over time. Some interviews were taped and transcribed by Gomba Coulibaly. Others were not taped, either because my interlocutor did not want to be recorded or because I did not want to convert a conversation or friendly visit into a formal encounter.<sup>41</sup> In those cases, I made notes either at the time, or occasionally later, recording all that I could recall.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps this was a mistake. In the last month of an extended stay in Mali, and at the end of a very valuable conversation, a professional research assistant and language teacher who spoke with me about his father, a well-known organic intellectual, told me I was not conducting interviews properly. Where was the tape recorder? Where were the insistent questions? Hadn’t anyone taught me how to do this correctly?<sup>43</sup> Perhaps he was right. Surely I lost something, be it a name or a lead I couldn’t then recognize. But did I gain anything? A sense of talk and how it flows? Stories that wouldn’t emerge in answering questions that I determined?

The assumption of much of the social history that has dominated American Africanist historiography over the past decade or more has been that the speaking subject owns her story, and that the historian need only tap the root of memory to draw out its meaning. The

“African voice” has often been represented as unmediated and authentic, the ultimate source of historical authority. Along with White and others, Miescher has argued strongly against this trend. He regards oral histories as “evidence of self-representations, moments of subjective reflection about the past.”<sup>44</sup> Miescher seeks to historicize subjectivities. My concern lies elsewhere. My work illustrates not only the generation of interpretations of the past, but their appropriation—the process by which “ownership” and “authenticity” become active fictions. I demonstrate that veterans’ collective narrative of sacrifice and betrayal has come to be deployed by non-veterans, produced and reproduced by activists for divergent causes, and argued in both African and French media. Once generated, these stories have themselves become generative. The political language developed by veterans, soldiers, officers, and administrators has evolved beyond its original concerns over pensions and privileges, and it is no longer the unique tool of a set of “authorized” speakers.

Some stories are different. They still belong to those who first told them. Most of my interviews with veterans were self-presentations rehearsed for an audience of which I was almost certainly the least significant member. Far more important were families, friends, and rivals; Madame Dembele, the functionary in San who managed their paperwork; and Gomba Coulibaly, my research assistant, a local man with whom many were acquainted. Other veterans were pre-eminent. Also present, in spite of my efforts to dispel the notion, was the possibility that speaking with me might cause pension rates to be raised across the board, or help someone win a pension (which to the best of my knowledge never happened). In the presence of their peers, old soldiers sometimes repeated stories that had clearly been performed in the past—either as broad arguments that veterans had won independence or as personal histories of injury and its aftermath, such as the story Bougoutigni Mallé told me one morning at Koutiala’s Maison du Combattant, or veterans’ lodge, at the urging of his comrade Massa Koné.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike other histories of African soldiers and veterans, my work does *not* privilege their “voices” over those of other members of their communities, and I did not set out to recover their lost history. In fact, I argue that if that history is lost, it is lost in plain sight.<sup>46</sup> Although veterans themselves often feel that their contributions and concerns have been forgotten, many Malian men and women have strong opin-

ions about them, their sacrifices, and the recognition they merit from the French state. Others, particularly their male peers, often have much less charitable views.

To break away from the stories that veterans told about themselves, I sought out local people who had something to say about former soldiers, about colonialism, about the turbulence of the 1940s and '50s, and about the dramas, scandals, religious disputes, and local conflicts that marked those years. I found, as Luise White would write, that listening to “people talking about others . . . is at least as reliable as [listening to] people talking about themselves.”<sup>47</sup> Indeed, the very quality that made men into veterans—their military service—also limited their ability to speak to the local history vital to my project. Most had spent years away from their communities, and they often were natives not of the town of San but of the larger region of which it is a part. Other people—political activists, local religious leaders, and so on—often knew much more and had more to say about the history that veterans and others made. Many of them could speak to the questions that now suggest themselves: Who were these soldiers and veterans, and where did they come from?

### The Tirailleurs Sénégalais in the Twentieth Century

Without a history of soldiers, a history of veterans is incomplete.<sup>48</sup> Although World War I produced the first large group of West African veterans of the colonial militaries, the history of the tirailleurs Sénégalais extends into the mid-nineteenth century. From the creation of the corps in 1857, most of the soldiers were of low social status, and many were slaves or ex-slaves. A lucky few rose to the rank of sergeant, and a handful of African men, generally from the families of former rulers, became officers.<sup>49</sup> The tirailleurs played a crucial role in conquering the territories that would become the colonial federations of l’Afrique Occidentale Française (French West Africa, AOF) and l’Afrique Équatoriale Française (French Equatorial Africa, AEF), as well as Madagascar and Morocco.<sup>50</sup> Soldiers would eventually be drawn from each of France’s sub-Saharan possessions. While Soudan Français and Haute-Volta (Upper Volta) consistently provided the most conscripts and recruits, all were called Sénégalais.<sup>51</sup>

The tirailleurs remained a small and lightly equipped force until just before the First World War.<sup>52</sup> However, from the late 1890s



French West Africa and Togo (light gray shaded area)

military officers had put forth increasingly ambitious ideas about the potential role of West Africans in an enlarged colonial army. In 1910, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Mangin, a veteran of the conquest of West Africa, published an influential book that argued for an expansion of the *tirailleurs*' role. His deeply racial reasoning led him to conclude that many West Africans were natural soldiers. He also held that the AOF was densely populated and could provide a large number of troops. Mangin and his allies argued that by drawing on African manpower and military potential, France would receive something in return for the many services the colonial state rendered. Thus, he proposed that North African garrisons be manned by *tirailleurs Sénégalais*, who could be called on in case of a European war. The military hierarchy and members of the colonial lobby lent him a sympathetic ear, but others objected that the recruitment and use of African soldiers was likely to be expensive, ineffective, and detrimental to both metropolitan democracy and the colonial economy.<sup>53</sup> Both sides of the debate shared racial ideas about the relative physical strength and warlike tendencies of sub-Saharan Africans. Those ideas would influence the ways in which the *tirailleurs* were deployed when war did break out.<sup>54</sup> More importantly for our purposes, Mangin based his direct appeals to African men to enlist on the kinds of benefits they would receive on their retirement.

Men across West Africa would soon have the unfortunate opportunity to put his words to the test, as some 200,000 West Africans

served in the French ranks during the First World War, 192,000 of them as *tirailleurs Sénégalais*.<sup>55</sup> Very few of them were volunteers. While the *tirailleurs* made major contributions on the Western Front, where the war would be decided, they also fought in Togo, Cameroon, and Turkey. Not every conscript actually saw combat, but West Africans were considered particularly apt for use as assault troops, and their deployment allowed the High Command to reduce the number of Europeans serving on the front lines. The *tirailleurs*' European war began on the Yser in 1914, and they went on to fight at Verdun, on the Somme, and along the Chemin des Dames, where they suffered heavy casualties in 1917. Finally, in 1918 they distinguished themselves in defending Reims.<sup>56</sup>

Many men were killed or injured in combat, but frostbite, tuberculosis, and other illnesses also took a heavy toll on the West African contingent. After 1914, such problems led the army to withdraw the *tirailleurs* from the Western Front for the winter, sending them to the more hospitable climate of the South of France, where they were quartered around Fréjus. This became standard practice, known as the *hivernage*, and the fact that West Africans spent several months each year out of combat only underscores the severe casualty rates they endured while serving at the front.<sup>57</sup> By war's end, approximately 30,000–31,000 of those who had served on the Western Front, in Africa, and in Turkey were dead, and many others had been sent home permanently disabled.<sup>58</sup> After the Allied victory, a small number of West African troops formed part of the occupation forces in the Rhineland, and their presence stirred a large amount of resentment and racist propaganda in Germany and elsewhere—notably, in the United States.<sup>59</sup>

During the war, French demands for recruits sparked revolts in the areas of Bélédougou (northeast of Bamako), Dédougou (southeast of San), and northern Dahomey.<sup>60</sup> *Tirailleurs*, auxiliaries, and European officers quickly put down the revolt in Bélédougou, but the other two insurrections proved more difficult to suppress. The French were also forced to devote precious resources to fighting Tuareg groups in Niger. In spite of the revolts, conscription intensified in 1918, and after the war the *tirailleurs* would remain an important element in the defense of both the colonies and France itself.

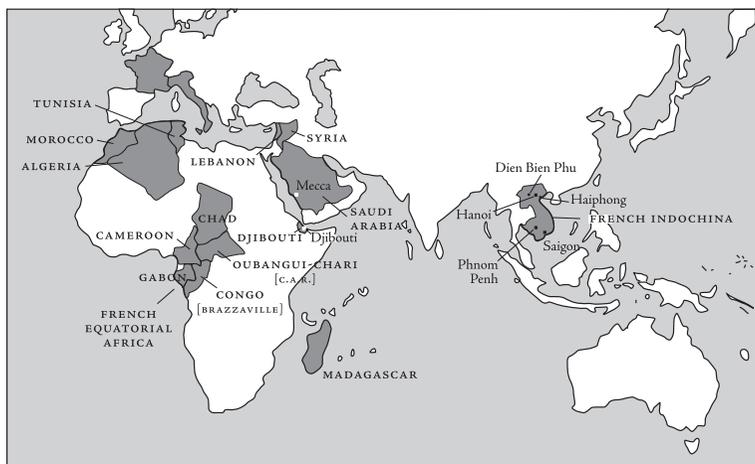
Recruitment for military service and forced labor continued after the war. In annual recruitment drives, medical doctors and army of-

ficers toured the federation, examining potential conscripts presented to them by the chefs de canton, whom the administration required to procure men for inspection. Many of these men were found to be unfit for service, and those who were physically suitable often tried to escape recruitment by hiding, dissimulating, or fleeing to neighboring colonies. Nevertheless, in the interwar period the AOF as a whole managed to produce an annual average of approximately 12,000 men, most of whom were slaves, outcasts, or sons of the poor and disenfranchised.<sup>61</sup>

During the 1920s and '30s, tirailleurs were garrisoned in the metropole and the North African possessions as well as in the two French African federations. They fought Abdel Karim in Morocco in the 1920s and helped to police the French possessions in the Levant in the 1920s and '30s.<sup>62</sup> Combat in Morocco was intense, and many career soldiers served several years there. Just as French socialists had long feared, the tirailleurs were also employed against workers. In 1938, they were used as strikebreakers on the docks of Marseille,<sup>63</sup> and in Thiès they shot and killed six workers while policing a strike on the Dakar–Niger railway.<sup>64</sup> After the war, they broke a strike in Nice.<sup>65</sup>

The mobilization of West African troops had been slow and somewhat hesitant in 1914, but this was not the case in 1939–40.<sup>66</sup> At the outbreak of war, military recruitment had already intensified in the AOF, and tirailleurs stationed in North Africa were quickly sent to France. By the Fall of France, at least 100,000 West Africans would be mobilized, and some 75,000 of them were either in France or on their way there.<sup>67</sup> Bakari Kamian reports that over 24,000 tirailleurs Sénégalais were killed in 1939–40, and 15,000–16,000 were captured (nearly 4,300 of the latter were Sudanese).<sup>68</sup> Most of those who survived the chaos of May and June 1940 were rounded up in camps in the Vichy zone; many were shipped back to West Africa. Other soldiers had yet to leave African ports and barracks when the armistice was declared on 25 June. Some of them were demobilized, while others were sent home on furlough, to be recalled later. However, military recruiters never stopped providing soldiers and workers (the *deuxième portion*), and many soldiers were kept on active duty as a hedge against invasion from British West Africa.<sup>69</sup>

While Lieutenant-Colonel Charles de Gaulle's radio appeal of 18 June and his subsequent calls for resistance fell on deaf ears in many places, Félix Eboué, governor of Chad, quickly offered his support. He



The world of the tirailleurs Sénégalais (excluding French West Africa, Cayenne, and Togo)

soon brought the AEF with him. The AOF, however, had been the arena of bitter political struggles within the French colonial administration for years, and the federation's government backed the Vichy regime.<sup>70</sup> In September, an ill-considered attempted landing at Dakar by Free French troops with heavy English support turned much of the capital's European population further against de Gaulle and his cause.<sup>71</sup> It was not until much later in the war that the AOF would come over to the Free French camp. That slow change began after the successful Allied landing in North Africa in November 1942 and the subsequent collapse of the collaborationist Vichy state.<sup>72</sup> Once again, the AOF mobilized in earnest, and thousands of new recruits joined West African troops serving in the Free French forces.<sup>73</sup> The tirailleurs Sénégalais would play an important role in the campaigns in North Africa and Italy, and they represented 20 percent of General Jean de Lattre's invasion force in southern France.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, beginning in 1940, "more than 5,000" men from sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar fought within France in the underground forces, or *maquis*.<sup>75</sup>

The history of the tirailleurs in World War II is capped with bitterness rather than victory. In spite of their contributions, most tirailleurs would watch the closing months of the war from the sidelines after having been removed from the front for logistical and political reasons. In the fall of 1944, de Gaulle's army faced acute shortages of equipment and war material of all sorts. At that point, the



In 1944, tirailleurs Sénégalais gather on deck as they approach the southern coast of France, where they will land. © ECPAD/France.

United States supplied almost all his equipment and began to insist that he limit the size of his forces.<sup>76</sup> The Americans were intransigent, and de Gaulle was reluctant to rely on West African troops through another winter. He also considered it a political necessity that elements of the Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur (FFI), which included many communists, be incorporated into units under his control. Finally, European officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) were having trouble maintaining discipline among West African troops. As a result of this combination of factors, West Africans were gradually stripped of their American-issued uniforms and removed from the front. By the Liberation of Paris, this *blanchissement*, or whitening, of the French army was effectively complete.<sup>77</sup> For some former prisoners of war, the end of the war was even more bitter. When a group of them mutinied at Thiaroye (Senegal) in December 1944, French and West African troops killed thirty-five of them.<sup>78</sup>

After the Second World War, the tirailleurs repeatedly found themselves combating anticolonial movements across the French empire. In 1947 in Madagascar, the French used West African troops to crush an uprising with great brutality. The major French campaign of the immediate postwar years took place in Indochina, where Africans played a minor role from 1947 but became increasingly important after 1950. By the end of the war in 1954, the tirailleurs Sénégalais



An NCO and a nurse take a break. Indochina, June 1952. © ECPAD/France/Gahéry.

composed more than 16 percent of the French expeditionary force, and about 60,000 men from West and Equatorial Africa had served there.<sup>79</sup> African soldiers in Indochina were quite well paid, and many of them reenlisted for that reason. After a change in French recruiting policy removed regional caps on enlistment, Guinea provided the plurality of the West Africans engaged in the campaign.

The Indochina experience differed markedly from earlier uses of the *tirailleurs*. The era of shorts, sandals, and the scarlet cap known as the *chéchia* had ended, and African soldiers wore pants and boots like their European counterparts. They were no longer referred to as “*tirailleurs*” but as “soldiers,” since the former term was then considered pejorative. No less importantly, and for the first time, the men serving in Indochina were in principle all volunteers, since as citizens of the Fourth Republic they could technically refuse to be assigned to the combat zone.<sup>80</sup> Also, in the 1950s West African soldiers acquired much more advanced technical skills than had their fathers’ and grandfathers’ generations. They were increasingly allowed to serve as mechanics, drivers, and photographers. Each of these activities gave them skills that were valuable in civilian life.<sup>81</sup>

Because the Vietnamese nationalists ran a very effective propa-

ganda campaign that sought to win over North African and sub-Saharan African troops, particularly prisoners of war, the French military kept a close eye on soldiers' morale. While some soldiers and former prisoners of war from the Maghreb were swayed by the anti-colonial positions of the Vietnamese, the same messages seem to have had much less effect among the Sénégalais. Most West Africans were more interested in the problems of daily life, and many sought to be assigned to active combat duty in order to profit from bonuses and higher pay.<sup>82</sup>

During the Algerian war, as the French empire shrank and metropolitan opposition to conscription grew, the army came to rely increasingly on pro-French Algerians and on soldiers from sub-Saharan Africa. Some 25,000 of the latter were serving in Algeria in 1956, but as the sub-Saharan colonies moved toward independence, commanders of West African soldiers began to mistrust them.<sup>83</sup> Their need for manpower was amply demonstrated by the fact that, although they withdrew thousands of African men from the ranks, thousands more remained in Algeria, and others continued to be sent, even as commanders feared that newly independent African states would attempt to pull their citizens out of the French army.<sup>84</sup> Their fears were well grounded. Shortly after Soudan Français became independent Mali, the country's president, Modibo Keita, called on all soldiers from Mali to return home to build the new nation's army. Many of them did, but others quit the military altogether, and a few hung on in the French army until their terms of service had ended. Most of the veterans I interviewed figure in that last generation of tirailleurs Sénégalais that fought in Indochina and Algeria. Some of them also served as Malians under the leadership of Colonel Sékou Traore, the chief of staff and a native of San, whose family history is given in chapter 1.

Although colonial soldiers and veterans have long been a favored topic among Africanists, previous studies have regarded these men primarily as political actors while defining politics narrowly.<sup>85</sup> This bias grows from, and feeds into, the widely held but rarely substantiated belief that veterans of the Second World War were key players in the struggle for independence from colonial rule.<sup>86</sup> I reject that teleology. Political independence arose from the intersection of a variety of factors, most of which were beyond veterans' control. More to the point, veterans in Soudan Français were engaged in a complex struggle

to secure and maintain the privileges and material perks of their relationship with France. Thus, I am less interested in whether or not veterans won national independence than in their deeply paradoxical independence *from* and reliance *on* the nation. Chapter 5 elaborates this argument.

Those who have argued against the idea that veterans were nationalist militants have often portrayed them as quietists, suggesting that their contributions to social as well as political life were often minor and that they had little collective identity.<sup>87</sup> All of the scholars who make this argument studied former British possessions, and the comparison is instructive. The British administration did not foster veterans as a distinct group of any significant numbers within colonial society until after the Second World War.<sup>88</sup> Individual British colonial governments in Africa had much greater autonomy and fiscal responsibility than their French counterparts, and they had no desire to finance pensions for an army they could hardly afford. It could be argued that the French tendency toward centralization had a rare and surprising benefit, in that the principle of extending material and symbolic awards to veterans could be rather quickly and quietly adapted to the colonies in the interwar period (in theory, if not in practice). Even after 1945, when the veteran's pension had long been perceived as a right in the AOF, the very existence of such pensions remained a subject of controversy in British East Africa.<sup>89</sup> In the 1950s, when former tirailleurs were concerned about whether their pensions would continue to be paid after independence, in much of British Africa there was no presumption that pensions would be paid at all.<sup>90</sup> Particularly in Kenya, white settlers and administrators alike had long feared that the institution of a system of benefits for former members of the King's African Rifles (KAR) would create the kind of privileged social category that the French had long ago accepted as one of the constituent elements of the colonial order.

My argument diverges sharply from this debate and its two poles. First, I demonstrate that, unlike ex-servicemen in the British colonies, veterans in the AOF developed a strong collectivist tradition, and they became an important interest group in West African politics. The colonial administration and African political leaders fostered this process, which began in the interwar period and grew even more important in the postwar era. Although politically they were a force to be reckoned with, veterans were not necessarily nationalists. In fact,

many of them supported the more conservative political parties and sought to maintain their particular relationship with the French state.

Second, I illuminate some of the ways in which veterans remained immersed in their home communities. While the existing literature is attentive to the possibilities and the significance of veterans' formal political engagements, it elides whole realms of regional histories and social life, including slavery and religion.<sup>91</sup> The connections between slavery and soldiering in the early colonial period have been demonstrated,<sup>92</sup> but here I adopt a transgenerational perspective on the intertwined phenomena of slavery's aftermath and the existence of families in which several generations of men pursued military careers. (I call these "soldier families.") I offer a new look into the categories of slave and soldier through a close examination of two brothers, and a father and a son, who collectively embody many of the historical trends and traumas of twentieth-century Mali. Those men, who are the subject of chapter 1, hailed from the town of San and villages to the west, where their history has its roots.

## Place

Telling a story of mobility while remaining rooted in a particular place is no simple task. Our story begins in San, a town in central Mali. It comes and goes from there, just as soldiers and veterans did. Outsiders writing about Sahelian towns almost invariably describe them as dusty. If San is dry and dusty, it is covered with the dust of activity, not lassitude. For centuries, this modest town represented a crossroads and a place where merchants exchanged salt, kola nuts, gold, horses, and slaves. The town lies just south of the Bani River as it follows a northeasterly course toward the Niger, and it is part of a larger area long known as Bendougou, or "meeting place."<sup>93</sup> Despite that welcoming name, San is a contrary town. A key element in its past prosperity was its relative autonomy, the legacy of which is a kind of political recalcitrance that has not always served the community's material interests.

Although Bendougou was successively claimed in whole or in part by the empires of Mali, Songhay, Segou, and Kénédugu, as well as by the Damansa, San seems to have retained a modicum of independence, and it sometimes served as a place of asylum.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, autonomy had its limits, and when Mama Traore sought to test them



Mali

in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, Segou's armies sacked and burned the town in revenge.<sup>95</sup> In 1861, the passage of the jihadist al-Hajj Umar Tal was relatively peaceful, not least since San's resolutely non-Muslim ruling family, the Traores, preferred flight to subjugation. The Traores left San as Tal approached, while the Muslim scholar Almamy Lassana Théra and his family remained behind. According to Théra family tradition, al-Hajj Umar, or one of his representatives, summoned the Almamy to the banks of the Bani and entrusted the town to him.<sup>96</sup> Although the passage of the Umarians changed San's political structure, the region at large descended into turbulence and economic

decline, particularly in the west, where Segu had once preserved a loose order.<sup>97</sup> One generation later, the Almamy Théra guided the town to a peaceful submission to a French expedition led by Captain Parfait-Louis Monteil, who arrived in 1891. Monteil prized San as “a sort of free town where the caravans converge . . . [and where] transactions are made in total security: no duties are levied on entering or on departing, or even on purchases and sales.”<sup>98</sup> He sought to preserve this commercial freedom in a treaty that he signed with the Almamy’s representative. The agreement placed San under French protection and recognized the Théra family’s administration of the town.<sup>99</sup>

Monteil reported that Théra was a man of great influence even in the non-Muslim communities south of town, but the reign of the Théra family was short-lived under the French protectorate. The Almamy himself passed away in 1892 and was buried in San’s central mosque, where his tomb remained a site of local pilgrimage at least into the 1970s.<sup>100</sup> His son Khalilou succeeded him in the leadership of the town, and he soon ran afoul of the French.<sup>101</sup> Local historical accounts disagree on the events that led him to be stripped of the chieftaincy after only five years, but after he failed in an attempt to regain power, he was hanged from a baobab tree near the central mosque on the Muslim holiday of Tabaski (eid-al-adha), which fell on 20 March 1902. Following Khalilou’s dismissal, the local French administrator had recognized Koro Traore as village chief (Bamanankan, *dugutigi*) and designated him chef de canton (Bamanankan, *jam-anatigi*).<sup>102</sup> While Koro’s ancestors had ruled San for many decades previously, it was clear to all concerned that the new power in town was the French administrator.<sup>103</sup> For the rest of the century, tensions between the Traore and Théra families remained an element of local politics in San, but it was under the Traore family that the community experienced the intensification of colonial rule.<sup>104</sup>

In the first decade of the twentieth century, San’s importance as an administrative center began to supplement its growing role in regional commerce. The colonial administration displaced the local market from Sienso (several kilometers to the south) to San, where it could be more easily controlled and taxed, and a few years later San was designated an autonomous administrative *cercle*.<sup>105</sup> In spite of the town’s prominence, its population shrank as many people fled the demands of the colonial state.<sup>106</sup> Under French rule, the area, as one of the most densely populated of the colony, experienced intense recruitment for

military service and forced labor.<sup>107</sup> Mangin himself played a role in this recruitment. On the day before Bastille Day in 1910, he came to town and gave a “long palaver” to “all the chefs de canton, many village chiefs, notables, reservists, and schoolboys,” in which he “explained to them with precision the significant advantages that would be offered in the future to recruits, and [he] illustrated how enviable the situation of a retired tirailleur would be when he returned home.”<sup>108</sup>

Neither young men nor their elders would be so easily persuaded. During the First World War, the demands of recruitment sparked a revolt in the southeastern areas of the cercle and in parts of present-day Burkina Faso.<sup>109</sup> Populated mostly by speakers of Bobo and Bwa languages, the communities in those areas rejected the exigencies of the colonial state and the authoritative rule of the chefs de canton. Their revolt, which began late in 1915 in what is now Burkina Faso, seriously challenged French control over an enormous swath of territory, and some 2,500 tirailleurs were called in to fight it.<sup>110</sup> The western part of the cercle, including the town of San itself, sided with the French or attempted neutrality. For reasons of their own, many of those villages provided fighters and other support to the colonial state, which eventually suppressed the revolt at the cost of many lives on both sides. While the revolt is commonly referred to as the “revolt of Dédougou” or the “Bobo rebellion,” it spread far beyond the boundaries of Dédougou cercle, and it had little to do with ethnicity *per se*.<sup>111</sup> Hundreds of villages participated in what was both an anti-colonial war and a revolt against local chefs de canton, and particularly against the region’s Marka chiefs. Villages organized retaliatory raids against one another well into the 1920s, and the scars of the conflict linger, albeit faintly.<sup>112</sup>

Through all of this political turbulence and economic change, San continued to occupy a kind of cultural border zone. Various ethnic and occupational groups lived in the town and its immediate hinterland. From the seventeenth century, Islam, and in the twentieth century, Christianity, assumed powerful if competing roles in the spiritual life of the town and the surrounding region. Islam remained largely a religion of the urban elite until the second half of the twentieth century, and local faiths and practices remained very strong, particularly in the surrounding villages. Meanwhile, beginning in the late nineteenth century, Catholic missionaries focused on the Bobo populations in the southeast. Protestant missionaries later established their

own competing missions. Both groups considered the southeastern region ripe for proselytization because the area was sheltered from the earlier jihads and because it was far from the centers of the colonial administration.<sup>113</sup> Catholicism remains relatively strong in the area, and Protestant missions have also had some success, including in the western part of the cercle. In sum, San was a crossroads town, and the cercle of which it was a part constitutes a node of linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity.<sup>114</sup>

Much of this diversity is circumstantial. San is not a place where people go; it is a place where people stop. As an administrative and economic hub under colonial rule, the town became a magnet repulsing those who fled French impositions and attracting those hungry for profit. In the second decade of the twentieth century, refugees from famine and war passed through the town. Between the wars, the cercle drew short-term labor migrants from the east and the south, particularly the poorer villages of the Dogon plateau. Meanwhile many people from the cercle of San left for better-paid work in Côte d'Ivoire. Migrants and local farmers produced the standard Sahelian cash crops of peanuts and cotton, as well as *karité*, or shea butter, but San's farmers also struggled with the colonial administration for the right to produce more of the area's specialty, pepper, for which there was a lucrative regional market.<sup>115</sup> After the Second World War, young men from the Minianka regions, toward Koutiala, came in substantial numbers to work as day laborers during the dry season and to contribute to the town's growing market-gardening sector. Some of these migrants settled permanently, and the town spread to the south and west, where new residential quarters have grown steadily since the 1950s. The size of the town increased accordingly. In 1951, the African population was estimated at 8,500.<sup>116</sup> It would double over the next twenty years, and it has grown irregularly since then.<sup>117</sup> Today San remains a busy market town, known across the country for its annual Sanké festival, and familiar internationally for its beautiful central mosque. It is a poor town, but it lies just north of the intersection of two important roads, one of which leads south toward Koutiala and Burkina Faso, while the other traverses Mali from east to west. It remains a meeting place, a stopping point, and a transit zone.

Like many veterans, our story has roots in San but returns there somewhat sporadically.<sup>118</sup> It begins in the fiefdom of the Traores with a pair of self-imposed exiles and an alias never discarded.