

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Camp de Thiaroye/Camp Thiaroye (1988)

Sembène Ousmane

OVERVIEW

Auteur Senegalese Writer, producer, and director Sembène Ousmane was born on January 1, 1923 in Ziguinchor, Senegal. He died on June 9, 2007, in Dakar, Senegal. Sembène attended both a quranic school and a French school until age thirteen. He then worked with his father, a fisherman, before moving to Dakar in 1938, where he did a number of odd jobs. In 1944, he was drafted into the corps of Senegalese *Soldiers* (sharpshooters) and sent to France to fight in the Free French Forces. In 1944 and 1947, Sembène was involved in union strikes, respectively, in Senegal as a railroad worker, and in France as a dock worker and member of the Communist Party. Having dropped out of school early, Sembène had to teach himself to read and write properly. He went on to write several novels, some of which he adapted into films. Sembène's only film training was one year spent at the Moscow Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography, at the age of forty, under Soviet director Mark Donskoy. Sembène, who liked to refer himself as a griot, an African storyteller and historian, produced nine features: *Black Girl* (1966), *Mandabi* (1968), *Emitaï* (1971), *Xala* (1975), *Ceddo* (1977), *Camp Thiaroye* (1988), *Guelewar* (1992), *Faat Kiné* (2001), *Molaadé* (2003).

Film During a trip to Dakar, French President François Hollande described the massacre that took place at Camp Thiaroye [Sengeal? France?] on December 1, 1944, as "a bloody repression." Indeed, Sembène's film is based on a historical fact, which saw the execution of almost 300 African soldiers/*soldiers* (only 35 according to the French government) by the French colonial army. *Camp Thiaroye* is the story of how France turned its guns on the black troops who had just contributed to its rescue from Nazi annihilation. The film deals with such themes as injustice, racism, the abuse of power and monetary imperialism. At the 1988 Venice Film Festival, *Camp Thiaroye* won several awards, among which were the Golden Lion, the Grand Special Jury prize, the UNICEF Award, the New Cinema Award, the Sergio Tresatti Award, and the Special Golden Ciak.

Background *Camp Thiaroye* was shot in Senegal with a number of well-known international actors, including Ivorians Sidiki Bakaba and Gabriel Zahon, Cameroonian Casimir Zoba, and French Jean-Daniel Simon. The film's topic was a sensitive one, and so, the government of Senegal censored it for ten years. Although not censored in France, *Camp Thiaroye* was not shown in France until 1998, ten years after it came out. It was simply not distributed there. The controversy surrounding *Camp Thiaroye* was not limited to its content. In fact, as the manager of a government fund intended to help budding filmmakers in Senegal, Sembène diverted this money to make his own film. But he did worse, according to Boris Diop, who claims to have lost all respect for Sembène. Diop accused Sembène of having stolen his own manuscript, entitled "Thiaroye 44," which he had submitted to Sembène for his editorial advice, and used it as the film script for the *Camp Thiaroye*. Sembène advised his critics to focus less on his human shortcomings than on the quality of his films.

CHARACTERS

SERGEANT DIATTA (Ibrahima Sané): A black sergeant, who commands the soldiers

CAPTAIN LABROUSSE (Pierre Orma): A French captain, who thinks that Africans are big children

CAPTAIN RAYMOND (Jean-Daniel Simon): A French captain, who fought with the soldiers in France, and who sympathizes to their cause

The General (Pierre Londiche): A French general, who is taken hostage by the soldiers, and who later orders their massacre

SYNOPSIS

Upon their demobilization and repatriation to Africa, African troops, who fought in World War II to free France from Nazi occupation, are kept at a temporary site, Camp Thiaroye, on the outskirts of Dakar, Senegal, until they receive their pay and demobilization allowances and go back to their villages. However, the soldiers' stay at the camp drags on, with no sign of their grievances being resolved. In the meantime, they suffer discrimination and racism, on the one hand from their white officers inside the camp, and, on the other hand, from European expatriates outside the camp. Exasperated at seeing no resolution to their grievances and outraged at being constantly humiliated and cheated, the soldiers kidnap a French general, whom they only agreed to free on the promise of fair treatment and payment of all arrears owed to them by France. The promise is made to them, but only insincerely. France cannot tolerate the dishonor of having one of its white officers taken hostage by black soldiers, even those who helped France fight the Germans. That very evening, as the soldiers celebrate their victory and withdraw for the night, they are massacred by the colonial army. This film is based on a real event.

SCENES

Homecoming Repatriated Senegalese soldiers who fought for France in World War 2 are greeted by their families at the Dakar harbor. The families of white officers, too, are there to greet their returning relatives. The soldiers' white commanding officer, Captain Raymond, is met by French officers at the harbor. One of them notices that the soldiers look great in their uniforms, and add that these uniforms are not from the French army. Captain Raymond tells him that they were lucky to get these uniforms from the American army.



Marching to Camp Thiaroye The uniforms of the repatriated troops are a stark contrast from those of the native soldiers. Sergeant Diatta proudly marches his troops to the transit camp, where they will wait until their discharge. Captain Raymond is not impressed with the transit camp. He tells the commander of the transit camp that the repatriated troops deserve better for the service they rendered to France. The transit camp commander quips that the accommodations in the transit camp are better than the best the black troops can expect in their villages. The local troops look enviously at the repatriated troops in their beautiful uniforms.



The soldiers settle at Camp Thiaroye The camp commander congratulates the troops for their bravery on the battlefields of France. He tells them that thanks to their courage and loyalty to the fatherland, France is standing up again. He tells them that they will soon be going to their villages. In the meantime, he leaves them under the command of Lieutenant Pierre.



The troubling resemblance The soldiers settle in their temporary homes, some with gifts they brought from France for the families, such as radios and sewing machines. One of the soldiers, Pays ('Country'), is particularly shocked to note the resemblance between the transit camp and the German concentration camps. The camp is enclosed with barbed wire and armed guards watch over them from towers.



Pays is distressed Pays passes his hands over the barbed wire, visibly distressed. A soldier comes to Pays, grabs some dirt and makes him feel it. The soldier tells Pays that he is now at home and no longer in a concentration camp. The soldier reassures Pays that the concentration camp at Buchenwald is over. Another soldier notes that the war has really destroyed Pays' head. Pays is haunted by images of Buchenwald.



Diatta has visitors at the camp Sergeant-Major Diatta is visited at the camp by his aunt and his niece Bintou, whom his aunt wants him to marry. His aunt tells him that while he was away, their village was attacked by French colonial troops and many people, including his parents, were killed.



Diatta has a wife in France Bintou notices the picture of a white woman with her interracial daughter on Diatta's shelf and asks him who they are. Diatta tells her that it is his wife, a French woman, with his daughter. Diatta's aunt is angry to see that Diatta married a woman from the country of the people who killed his parents. She asks her daughter to get up and leave.



Bad food The soldiers complain about the bad quality of the food they are served. They tell the cook that this is the kind of food served in Nazi concentration camps. The cook tells them to take their complaints to the lieutenant, and that he can only cook with the ingredients he is given. The soldiers confront the lieutenant. They ask him if he would eat the kind of food that is served to them. The lieutenant tells them that this is the ordinary food for the soldiers. They can eat it or starve. The soldiers shout their discontent. Sergeant-major Diatta tries to calm down the soldiers by offering them a bottle of palm wine he received from his aunt. Some of the soldiers decide to leave the camp and go find food in the villages. The lieutenant calls his captain for counsel. The camp commander and Captain Raymond arrive at the camp. Captain Raymond asks why there is no meat in the soldiers' food. The cook replies that he was not given meat for them. Captain Raymond tastes the food and realises that it is inedible. The camp commander pulls Captain Raymond aside and explains that these people are not used to eating meat. He adds that in their villages they only eat rice and millet. Raymond replies that it is not a good excuse, and that these men come from the war and deserve to be treated well.



Diatta listens to classical music The camp commander, Captain Labrousse, hears some classical music coming from Sergeant Diatta's room. He asks Diatta if he has a penchant for great music. He asks Diatta if he does not like the sound of bush tom-toms any longer. Captain Raymond borrows a book from Diatta and sarcastically asks him if he can pass it to Captain Larousse when he is done reading it. Captain Labrousse does not seem amused at Raymond's suggestion that Diatta is more cultivated than him.

Diatta goes to town Sergeant Diatta goes to town with permission. Some Senegalese men in the street mistake him for an American soldier and beg him to give them some American dollars or chewing gum. They also propose to bring him some young girls for sex. Diatta pushes them away and moves on.

Diatta comes across a French patrol Diatta sees a French patrol coming. He quickly removes the French insignia from his uniform and passes for an American soldier. The French soldiers salute him and think that he is looking for a brothel as he feigns not to speak French, and they do not understand English. They give him the directions to a brothel. They salute him, and he moves on to the brothel.



Diatta at the brothel Sergeant Diatta enters the brothel. The women flock around him and speak English to him. Speaking French, Diatta orders a Pernod (a typical French drink). The women are astonished as they realize that he is not an American soldier. The women call the brothel's owner to come quick because there is a "Nigger" in the house. The brothel owner grabs Diatta's arm and pushes him out. She tells him that all the nice women he sees there are for Toubabs (white people), not for people like him. Diatta protests that it is people like him who kicked the Germans out of France. He tells her that he did not come for sex but for a drink. The brothel owner replies that she cares less, and that she just wants him out of her establishment. Diatta leaves.



Beaten by American MPs In the street, Sergeant Diatta is stopped by some American MPs, who want to know why his uniform does not have a badge and a number on it. Diatta explains that he is a soldier returning from the war. The fact that he speaks French angers the American soldiers even more, who tell him that they hate French. The American soldiers rough him up. Diatta is taken away. One of Diatta's men witnesses the scene. He runs to alert the other soldiers. The soldiers vow not to let their sergeant's humiliation go unpunished. They decide to take action and show the American soldiers why they were feared on the battlefields of Europe.



The punitive action Four soldiers go on a punitive mission. They capture an American officer and take him to their camp and lock him up. Lieutenant Pierre tells the soldiers that this is an American soldier, a white American soldier, and he orders the soldiers to free him immediately. The soldiers tell the lieutenant that whether he is black or white, the American soldier will not be released until their sergeant is free.



Lieutenant Pierre is afraid Lieutenant Pierre calls the camp commander, Labrousse, to report the event. He is afraid for his own life and keeps watch with a gun in his hand. Labrousse asks him to be calm and not exacerbate the situation by upsetting the soldiers.



This is no civilized army Captain Labrousse informs Captain Raymond of what has happened. He tells him that their superiors are furious about the savage and undisciplined behavior of "his" soldiers, who belong to no civilized army. Captain Raymond retorts that he is sure that his soldiers have a good reason to detain the American sergeant. One of the French officers is shocked that a white would be detained in a black soldier's room. Raymond reminds him that in Europe, Blacks and Whites were treated the same in the German concentration camps. Raymond gets up and leaves, upset.

Diatta is back with a broken arm Sergeant Diatta is back at the camp. He is escorted by French and American officers. He has a broken arm. The American soldier is freed. Before leaving, the American officer quips that the French have completely lost control of their empire. Captain Labrousse admonishes the soldiers. He tells them that the camp is in lockdown. He tells them that soon they will be outfitted with their ordinary African soldier uniforms and will have their American uniforms taken away from them. He tells them that their French money will be converted into local currency (colonial African franc).



Diatta misses his wife and daughter Diatta writes to his wife and daughter. He tells them that he misses them and wishes he were in France with them. He tells his wife that he will send her some coffee through Captain Raymond and some money as soon as he receives his pay.



The apology The black American soldier that beat up Sergeant Diatta comes to see him. He brings him a gift and apologizes. They talk about Black American music and literature.



Africans are just big children The soldiers are being stripped of their American uniforms and given the traditional *tirailleur* uniforms. Sergeant Diatta is not happy to receive an ordinary soldier's hat for his rank. Lieutenant Pierre is surprised that the soldiers comply so easily. Captain Labrousse retorts that he knows Africans, they are just big children.



Like a concentration camps The scene of the soldiers being forced to pile up their old clothes and shoes and being forced to put on new uniforms conjures up images Nazi concentration camp to Pains. Images of torture in concentration camps flash before his eyes.



Whites are all the same In their barracks, the soldiers are dejected. They say that white Americans gave them some uniforms, and white French took them away. They conclude that Whites are all the same. One by one, the soldiers stand up to give testimony of their courage, their strengths, and their resilience on the battlefields of Europe and to infuse pride in one another and comfort one another. To cheer up, the soldiers decide to go to town meet some women. Pays is visibly disquiet. He does not share his comrades' sudden exuberance.



Bintou is betrothed to Diatta Diatta's uncle visits him at the camp. Diatta asks him if he can purchase some coffee for his wife in France. Diatta's uncle tells him that his late mother and he had agreed that Diatta must marry his daughter Bintou, Diatta's cousin. Diatta tells his uncle that he is already married and he is a Catholic. Diatta's uncle tells him that people in the village are practicing Catholics, but they have two or three wives. Diatta remains silent. Diatta gives his uncle a package of chocolate and milk for the village children. The uncle takes it and tells him that he will give it to Diatta's "younger wife," that is, Bintou, meaning that Bintou is already seen as his second wife, his French wife being his "older wife."

Diatta rejects Bintou Bintou visits Diatta at the camp. They walk in a field of baobab trees outside the camp. She sits invitingly under a tree. Diatta understands that she is offering herself to him. He turns around and leaves. She returns to the village, disappointed.



Diatta's original village is no more Diatta explains to Raymond that he would have liked to invite him to his village, but the village is no more. He explains that two years ago, a detachment of the French army killed most of the villagers and burned down the village when some women protested to oppose France's seizure of the village's rice harvest (an historical fact dramatised in another Sembene film.) He tells Raymond that both his parents were killed in that event. Diatta tells Raymond that he sees a parallel between the French treatment of his people and the Nazi's treatment of the French. Raymond tells him that the comparison is not justified. Diatta replies that the logic is the same, that the officers who served under Vichy and killed many Senegalese are the same officers who make decisions today in the Free France army.



Cheating the soldiers The soldiers receive their pay, and the colonial officers have come to change the soldiers' French money into colonial African francs. The officers want to cheat the soldiers and exchange their money at a lower rate than the ordinary rate. Diatta and the soldiers protest the injustice. The French colonel retorts that he is following the orders from above. Then he suggests that the soldiers got all this money by robbing dead French people. The colonel's words infuriate the soldiers. Diatta asks the officers where they were when these soldiers were fighting to free France and being held in concentration camps.



Communists! While Diatta is speaking, Labrousse writes down the word "Communist," which he passes to the colonel. Thus, Diatta and his troops are stigmatized by the French officers as communists against the Republic, whom France must get eliminate. He tells the white officers that if they want to talk about robbing people, then, he has stories to tell them about French soldiers removing dead people's gold teeth and cutting dead people's fingers to steal their rings. Captain Labrousse has enough of Sergeant Diatta's diatribe, and he orders the soldiers to get the soldiers out of his face. Diatta and the soldiers meet to decide whether to accept to be robbed by the white officers or to fight to get the right exchange rate for their French money. The soldiers decide that they will not be cheated.



Paying them will ruin France The white officers meet to discuss the matter. Over Captain Raymond's objections, they agree that it will be too costly to them to fairly remunerate the soldiers and exchange their money at the correct rate. Captain Labrousse, particularly, insists that African soldiers do not need to be treated as white soldiers. Raymond insists that France need not build its economy on cheating Africans. Labrousse proffers that Africans have a primitive soul, and that they would not be acting as they are unless they were bought or manipulated by communists to destabilize the French empire. Otherwise, he adds, how could they have come back from the Nazi concentration camps where they were held?



Captain Raymond is shocked Captain Raymond is shocked by such a vile language towards people who, as he puts it, went to fight in the place of all these officers around the table. He tells the officers that people who do not keep their words are not worthy of wearing the French military uniforms. At the officers' quarter, Captain Raymond is isolated by his peers, who call him a communist and a traitor.

Searching the soldiers' rooms The soldiers are gathered in the torrid sun for long hours while their rooms are being searched by French soldiers. The French soldiers come upon the soldiers' money. They conclude that the Germans paid the soldiers to destabilize France. They come upon Diatta's books, and they conclude that he is a communist, like all the intellectuals.



Pays gets his helmet back The soldiers take away Pays' German helmet, which Pays likes to wear around the camp. Pays charges them, screaming.

No contestation will be tolerated The French general tells the soldiers that they have been undisciplined, but that he will not take any sanctions against them because of their loyal service to France. However, he says, they will be returning to their villages soon, and their French money will be replaced with colonial francs at half the ordinary rate. He tells them that no contestation will be tolerated. A clamor of disapproval rises from the soldiers.

The general is taken hostage The soldiers tell the general that his proposition is dishonest. They tell him that they will not leave the camp until they get their money exchanged at the correct rate. The general threatens to court-marshal the soldiers. The soldiers surround the general and take him hostage.



Calling for backup The soldiers keep the general under the watch of Pays, wearing his German helmet. Captain Labrousse asks Sergeant Diatta to order the soldiers to free the general. Diatta refuses. The captain asks his white lieutenant to get the native soldiers on the watchtowers ready to shoot. Lieutenant Pierre tells the captain that there is no ammunition in the camp. The captain calls for backup.

Raymond to the rescue Captain Raymond's help is sought. Captain Labrousse begs him to speak to the soldiers. Raymond tells Labrousse that the solution is simple: pay the soldiers and stop lying to them. Raymond tries to convince Diatta to have the soldiers free the general. Diatta tells him that there is not one set of rules for white soldiers and another set of rules for black soldiers. He tells Raymond that their rights are not negotiable. Labrousse is upset that Raymond was not able to get the general freed.



The general's threat Diatta brings the general his hat, which fell during the scuffle. The general puts his hat on, facing Pays wearing his German trophy helmet. The soldiers gather in small ethnic groups to fully explain the situation in the various African native languages. They all commit to hold the general until they are fairly paid. The general threatens the soldiers that the camp will be attacked to free him. The soldiers tell him that they saw many deaths on the battlefields of Europe, and that they are not afraid. They suggest that he worry instead about what might happen to him if they are attacked. The general agrees that he will apply the correct exchange rate. The soldiers insist that before leaving Thiaroye their wages and allowances must be paid to them, too. The general tells



them that these are actions he can take only in Dakar, and he needs to go there. Pays gestures to his comrades that he does not trust the general.

The general is freed Diatta asks the general to repeat, in front of all the soldiers, that they will get justice. The general is let out and tells the soldiers that they will all be paid. The soldiers cheer. Raymond bids farewell to the soldiers.

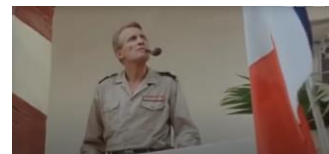


The ambush At night, while the soldiers celebrate and go to bed, Pays positions himself on one of the watchtowers. He dozes off. He is awakened by the sounds of tanks advancing in the dark. He runs to warn his comrades, but they do not understand him. They return to bed.

The massacre The tanks open fire on the sleeping soldiers. The camp is levelled. In the wee hours, the surviving soldiers bury their comrades in mass graves while crying.



We have the support of the French authorities Captain Labrousse informs the general that his orders have been carried out. The general replies that they have the support of the Minister of the Colonies and the Governor General of the AOF (French West Africa). The general orders Labrousse to recruit a new contingent of soldiers.



A new contingent of soldiers Captain Raymond agrees to take some coffee to France for Diatta's wife. Diatta is not at the harbor. Instead, Bintou and Diatta's uncle bring the coffee and an African doll to Raymond to take to Diatta's French family. The boat leaves the dock with a loud blast as the new contingent of soldiers happily wave goodbye to their families.



CHARACTER ANALYSIS

SERGEANT DIATTA Diatta is an intelligent and loyal soldier. He has an education that impresses or makes the French officers jealous. The soldiers under his command admire and respect him. Diatta remained loyal to his soldiers, whose demands he supported despite attempts by French officers to co-opt him.

Intelligent Sergeant Diatta is a man of great intelligence. He has some college education and intends to continue his studies in France after the war. He is a cultivated man, who has read a lot. In fact, Captain Raymond comes to see him to borrow some books, which surprises and enrages Captain Labrousse, who would have liked Diatta to fit in with his image of Africans as uneducated and backward people. Diatta also has a very clear understanding of the prejudices of the French administration towards blacks, and he has no illusions about writing a letter of protest to the French authorities, as Captain Raymond suggests to him.

Loyal Sergeant Diatta is a loyal man. When the soldiers take a French general hostage to protest the injustice they suffer, they ask him if he supports their action or if he is on the side of the white officers. Diatta tells the soldiers that he stands by their actions. The white officers, including Raymond, try to co-opt Diatta to persuade the soldiers to abandon their demands. Diatta refuses and supports his troops to the bitter end, until the French army's tanks kill them all.

Transitional Diatta is the symbol of an evolving Senegal. He does what his aunt in Senegal considers unthinkable: he marries a French wife and has a biracial daughter with her. Upon his return to Senegal, he is told by his uncle that his cousin, Bintou, is betrothed to him. Diatta replies that he is a Catholic and already married, therefore, he does not intend to marry two wives as is the custom among Muslims. His uncle insists that many Catholics in the village have several wives. Nevertheless, Diatta rejects Bintou when she comes to offer herself to him. One can see in Diatta the symbol of a Senegal that wants to move away from the tradition of polygamy, but also a Senegal that is ready to cross racial and national boundaries and build lasting partnerships.

CAPTAIN RAYMOND Captain Raymond is an empathetic and sincere man. His perception of the soldiers, with whom he fought in France, differs from that of his French colleagues serving in Africa. He endorses the soldiers' fight for respect and equality. However, his support for the soldiers remains superficial, and he fails to save them from massacre.

Empathetic Captain Raymond is sympathetic to the soldiers' cause. He thinks they should be given the same treatment as the French soldiers. When the soldiers show him the vile food they are served, Raymond tells the French officers that the soldiers have just come back from war and need to be treated better. He reminds the officers who want to cheat the soldiers that these are men who fought for France's freedom. And he tells them that France should not be built on ripping off the soldiers.

Sincere Captain Raymond tries to establish a sincere friendship with Diatta. He talks to him as if he were one of his equals despite the military ranks that separate them. He tries to understand Diatta's intellectual interests and wants to learn about his family. However, Diatta has had so many setbacks with French officers that he refuses to be seduced by Raymond's sincerity.

Naive Captain Raymond is a naïve man. Captain Raymond has heard his fellow French officers openly express their disdain for the soldiers. He has heard them explicitly tell him that the soldiers must not be put on equal footing as the French soldiers. He has heard them say that paying the soldiers' wages would ruin France. Yet, he left and blindly trusted his fellow French officers to do the right thing by the soldiers. Perhaps his sticking around for a while to ensure that the officers kept the word would have saved the soldiers' lives. In fact, Captain Raymond had asked Diatta to write to the Ministry of Defense in France and make his case, and Diatta had told Captain Raymond that was naive to think that the French administration would give any consideration to his letter.

CAPTAIN LABROUSSE Captain Labrousse is an obtuse racist. He finds it hard that blacks, whom he calls "overgrown children", wear elegant uniforms, eat the same food as whites, listen to the same music as whites, and dare to ask for the same treatment as whites. He goes to great lengths to show that the differences between the races are qualitative differences. Labrousse pushes his disdain for blacks to the point of supporting and rejoicing in their massacre by his colonial army.

Racist Captain Labrousse is a racist man. He was upset to see the soldiers well-dressed in American uniforms from the very day he saw them disembarking from the ship. He could not wait to get them into the degrading uniforms that black soldiers usually wore, and he used an irrelevant pretext (the soldiers' taking an American soldier hostage) to ask that they switch uniforms. Furthermore, he would not admit that the soldiers would capture a white soldier, and he kept insisting that the soldier "is white." Yet, to save France from German occupation, these same soldiers had fought against Germans and taken German prisoners.

Close-minded Captain Labrousse is a narrowminded soldier. He is surprised to see that Sergeant Diatta, an African, could enjoy some classical music, which he calls great music, as opposed to inferior music from Africa. He approaches Diatta and asks him if he has abandoned his ancestral drums for classical music. In Labrousse's mind, one is either African and can only enjoy African drums or European and can only enjoy European classical music. He is so backward in his thinking that he cannot understand that music can touch people across cultures. Even worse, Labrousse is so narrowminded that he cannot comprehend that the same person can be moved by various kinds of music.

THEMES

Tradition

Diet Camp Thiaroye hints at some elements of African tradition, such as meat consumption, walking long distances, and beauty. Indeed, African literature is replete with indications that the continent is a land of plenty, with a tradition of hunting and husbandry, including cattle and poultry raising. Africans are, therefore, big consumers of animal protein. Yet, this is not what Captain Labrousse, who claims to know the Africans, thinks. When the soldiers complain of the bad quality of the meal they are served, and Captain Raymond asks why the soldiers have no meat in their food, Captain Labrousse pulls Captain Raymond aside and tells him that Africans do not eat meat in their villages, and that they only eat plain rice and millet. Sembène's cinematic gesture to prove Labrousse wrong is to send the soldiers on a mission of finding meat for themselves in neighboring villages. The soldiers return loaded with all sorts of meat, proof that the

villages are great reserves of animal protein and that the Africans have an enduring dietary tradition of meat consumption.

Nature Africa is a continent of open spaces, and the Africans are natural hikers. Sembène contrasts the enclosed space of Camp Thiaroye, which keeps the *soldiers* in a kind of prison comparable to concentration camps, to the wide ranges of baobab groves. When the soldiers take a trip to the villages to console themselves for the loss of their American uniforms, it is by foot that they travel the long distances, and in a mood of joy, relaxation, laughter and relief. When Bintou, her mother, or her father come to visit Diatta in Thiaroye, it is also by foot that they travel. And Captain Raymond, who finds the distance lengthy, offers to take Bintou home in his car. Africans, Sembène seems to be saying, are great hikers, who find their fullness in the open spaces of nature, and the closed, compartmentalized space kills them, as did their confinement in the Thiaroye camp.

Beauty Each year, the Ivorians elect the most beautiful women of the country in two different events: an election of Miss Cote d'Ivoire, which follows Western standards of beauty, and an election of Miss *Awoulaba*, which follows typical traditional African standards of beauty. In the first event, the qualities sought in the contestants are, among others, thinness and height. In the second event, the qualities sought are plumpness and curviness. Thus, in *Camp Thiaroye*, an Ivorian soldier decides to have a dress sewn for his sweetheart by a Nigerian soldier, who has bought a machine and taught himself tailoring. The client asks the tailor to sew him two dresses, the first for a slim woman and the second for a plump woman. The customer tells his tailor that his wife, who has been thinning since he left for France, will regain her curves when she sees him again. Here, thinness is the figure of depression and sorrow, and plumpness is the figure of happiness. So, the African beauty celebrated is that of the full-figured woman. This African standard of beauty, which the Ivorian soldier yearns to find in his village, is certainly different from what he had the opportunity to discover during his European stay.

Marriage Sergeant Diatta married a French woman while in France. He has a daughter with her. However, on his arrival in Senegal, his uncle tells him that young Bintou, his cousin, has been reserved for him as his wife, and that this decision was taken by his late mother, in concert with him, his uncle. Diatta tells his uncle that he is already married to a Frenchwoman, and that he is a Catholic, which restricts him to one wife. His uncle replies that many Catholic men in the village have married and live with more than one wife. This answer silences Diatta. When Diatta gives his uncle some sweets brought back from France for the village children, the uncle tells him that he will give them to his "young wife", considering Bintou's marriage to Diatta a *fait accompli*. Two things are worth noting here: the tradition of arranged marriage and Senegal's approach to religion. Firstly, it is not uncommon for marriages to be arranged by parents without the opinion of the future husband and wife. In fact, sometimes the bride and groom only meet for the first time on the day of the wedding ceremony. In the case of Diatta and Bintou, the decision to marry was taken without Diatta being consulted, even though he was on the battlefields of Europe. Secondly, as Diatta's uncle says, the Catholic religion in Africa does not prevent men from taking several wives. This is due to the fact that in Senegal, and in many other African countries, religious syncretism is prevalent, allowing practices from different denominations, such as Muslim and Christian, to coexist within the same person. Polygamy, an animist and Muslim practice, does not stop at the doors of Christianity.

Appearance/insincerity The Senegalese soldiers are the victims of lies. After they took the French general hostage, they were promised that their dues would be paid. This was nothing more than a ploy designed to make them let down their guards. During the night, as the soldiers slept, they were simply murdered by the French army. The French officers were proud of the fact that their deed had been approved at the highest level of the French administration, which makes their crime a state crime. Diatta denounces this deception on the part of France, which has been playing them for fools from the very start of their demobilization until their arrival in Africa. Why this state dishonesty? The French officers explain it in no uncertain terms: France would be ruined if it honored its commitments to the Africans. So, to lie, to conceal one's true intentions, is the hallmark of France in its determination to maintain its position on the world stage as a strong nation. From this distorted perspective, it is Africa that needs France, not the other way around. Thus, the soldiers are told that it is an honor to invite them to fight for France. They are told that France is their motherland and that the sacrifices they make to defend it are those of a son for his mother. In the field, however, the reality is quite different. The *tirailleur* is the symptom of France's malaise, its whipping boy, its

punching bag, the one on whom France vented its anxieties. For France, the *tirailleur* is not French. He is the inferior other who allows France to live out its dream of superiority. Jules Ferry was already expressing this reality in 1882, when he declared at the French national assembly that Africans were an inferior race, who needed the intervention of the superior race to save them, a superior race of which the French are a part.

Injustice What happened to the soldiers at *Camp Thiaroye* in 1944 was a grave injustice and violation of their human rights. At Camp Thiaroye, the French administration repeated the exact wrong it accused the Nazi regime of committing and against which nations all over the world mobilized. The soldiers were not asking for favors. They fought shoulder to shoulder with French soldiers in the trenches. Some of them were gravely wounded, captured by the enemy and sent to concentration camps, and some of them were not that lucky and simply died at war. Those of the soldiers who survived were asking for their rightful pay, the same pay that their French counterparts received for performing the same duty as they. The French administration just could not fathom that Africans would get the same treatment as white French, let alone fight for their rights. So, France murdered the soldiers to silence them but also to make an example of them in case their act of defiance might inspire others. For the second time, the Great War being the first, Africans on the battlefields of Europe had shaken the myth of white superiority. Whites, Africans came to understand, were not invulnerable demigods. This idea started to fuel discourses of independence in the African colonies. This could be deleterious and had to be stopped before it solidified into full-blown demand for autonomy. Killing the soldiers of Camp Thiaroye found its justification in France's feverish attempt at squashing rebellions. This crime against humanity was commanded by the *raison d'état*. And for decades the French buried the Thiaroye massacre in sealed military archives. Almost 70 years later, in October 2012, on a visit to Senegal, French president Francois Hollande promised to hand over the military archives of the Thiaroye massacre to Senegal. This promise has yet to materialize.

Racism Sembène criticizes colonial racism. The extent of colonial racism is all the greater because the French people and French soldiers cannot see the soldiers who defended them against German aggression as equal human beings. In fact, it is as if the French felt diminished by having been liberated by blacks, and that acting callously towards blacks would mark the French's supposed superiority. Already during the landing of the soldiers, Captain Labrousse expressed his displeasure at seeing them so well dressed in American uniforms. And gleefully, he later orders the soldiers' American uniforms to be exchanged for the more degrading outfits of the African soldiers. From the racist whites' perspective, the soldiers must not be allowed to believe that they are on an equal footing with the whites, that they can be entitled to the same privileges as the whites. Therefore, Diatta is chased out of a brothel as soon as it is discovered that he is not American but African. An African-American soldier would have been tolerated. Diatta is a mere African. In the European imagination, Africa is the continent of primitiveness, and it must remain so. However, Sembène detests facile generalizations. Captain Raymond is a defender of the soldiers' rights. Diatta has a white wife and an interracial daughter. This is Sembène's way of telling us that not all French people or not all Europeans are racist, and that the judgment on European racism must be nuanced.

War War causes death and disability of all kinds. It also causes visible material devastation, plunging entire populations into precariousness and destitution. War does, however, leave after-effects that are not visible to the naked eye, but whose psychological impacts on those who suffer are devastating. Such is the case of the character named Pays. Captured by Nazi troops while defending France from German occupation, Pays was held in a concentration camp, from which he emerged only after liberation, scarred, deaf and mute. Pays is haunted by images of Buchenwald. The barbed wire around the camp, the sentries on the guard towers, the soldiers throwing away their uniforms in a heap under the watchful eye of the French soldiers to put on degrading uniform, all remind Pays of his captivity by the Nazis. And it makes him fearful, restless, nervous and suspicious. Pays' distrust allows him to be less gullible and more discerning than his fellow soldiers. He never lets his guard down and remains apprehensive of the colonial administration's real intentions; and his intuition proves true. While his comrades celebrate the promises just made by the captain they were holding hostage, Pays fights sleep and stands guard. And it is Pays who sees the murderous tanks coming and runs to warn his comrades, but, unfortunately, Pays (deaf and mute) cannot make himself understood in his agitation. The physical and psychological scars left on Pays by the war prevent him from communicating effectively with his comrades to save his comrades and himself from death.

Power abuse From time immemorial, the French army has been the armed wing of an abusive French administration towards its colonies. When the white officers sit around a table to decide whether or not to pay the soldiers their wages and demobilization money, and exchange the soldiers' French banknotes at the right rate, one of them argues that this would ruin France, which is currently experiencing post-war austerity. To which, captain Raymond replies that France must not build itself up by swindling a thousand Africans. Here, Sembène's criticism is very clear. It is not just a condemnation of the injustice done to the Senegalese soldiers, but it is also a criticism of the entire French engineered economic apparatus built on power abuse, which helps France maintain its hegemony in Africa. During the colonial period, France mandated free entry of French goods in the French African colonies and imposed tariffs on colonial goods entering France. This decision had the obvious consequence of impoverishing the colonies while enriching the metropolis. France also forbade its colonies to export certain products to foreign markets, thus forcing those foreign countries to purchase only from France products that would otherwise be available in the colonies. In addition, France placed duties on some foreign imports competing with colonial goods entering France. These abusive limitations on the colonies were enforced by France's military in a clear case of abuse of military power.

Mutiny/rebellion When Captain Labrousse passes his fellow French soldiers a note about Sergeant Diatta being a "communist", as the latter complains about the soldiers' mistreatment, he enacts a specific attitude. To make way for its hegemonic ambition, France stigmatizes African dissenters as mutineers and rioters paid by, or manipulated by, forces hostile to France's capitalistic ambition. Then, France uses this pretext to crush peaceful dissents as dangerous armed rebellions. For imperialist France, Diatta and his soldiers are "troublemakers". The fate of Diatta and his soldiers was replayed countless times in Africa. For instance, in the early 1990s, French oil extraction company, Shell, contaminated the Ogoni people's fishing areas, farmlands, and drinking water in the Niger Delta. A native of the region, Ken Saro-Wiwa, who organized his people under the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (MOSOP), to force Shell to be more environmentally conscious, was arrested, tried in a kangaroo court and executed by his government on Shell's demands. In Cote d'Ivoire, in 2004 and then in 2011, the French army shot and killed hundreds of unarmed demonstrators protesting France's injustice and stranglehold in their country. And the man who, according to France's determination, was at the source of the protests, former Ivorian President Laurent Gbagbo, was arrested, deported to the International Criminal Court, and after ten years of a kangaroo trial, cleared of all charges. By then, France had already installed a malleable president to carry on its exploitation of Cote d'Ivoire. In Africa, questioning France's unjust practices is almost always viewed in Paris as an armed rebellion to be crushed in blood. And it is the victims who pay for the crime of the victimizers.

Monetary imperialism. The event that led to the massacre of the soldiers was their refusal to be swindled by the colonial administration, which, not content with denying them their war indemnities and pay, also wanted to exchange their French money at half the prevailing rate. What then is the colonial French franc? Indeed, when in 1945, French finance minister René Pleven announced the creation of the CFA franc as the new currency in the French African colonies, he had this to say: "In a show of her generosity and selflessness, metropolitan France, wishing not to impose on her far-away daughters the consequences of her own poverty, is setting different exchange rates for their currency." It would seem, from Pleven's words that France was doing Africa a great favor with the institution of the CFA franc. In fact, the contrary was true: France was in economic difficulty. Joining the Bretton Woods institution in 1945 had devalued the French currency and weakened its economy. The creation of the CFA was France's strategy for pulling herself out of trouble by using Africa as her safety line. With the CFA franc, stronger than the French franc, Africa became a great market for French export goods, while it became difficult for Africa to export its goods to France. Since 1945, the CFA franc has remained a tool for France to establish its hegemony in French Africa through monetary imperialism. The monetary policy of the 14 countries that use the CFA is formulated by the French Treasury, and each of these 14 countries is obliged to deposit at least 65% of its foreign exchange reserves in an "operational account" with the French treasury, plus 20% to cover any liabilities. Thus, 85% of the foreign exchange reserves of these African countries are controlled by the French Treasury. African banks do not formulate monetary policy. Profits from the investment of African reserves, which should theoretically be returned to the countries of the CFA franc zone countries, are in fact France's property. The officials of the French treasury are bound to secrecy about these African funds. Any African head of state who ventures to understand the system or to call for the repatriation of African reserves or

the introduction of an African currency independent of the French treasury in the French-speaking sub-region suffers the fate of the Senegalese soldiers. In the best-case scenario, he is simply deposed, and in the worst-case scenario, accused of crimes against humanity and taken to the International Criminal Court (in the case of Ivorian president Laurent Gbagbo) or simply eliminated (in the case of Burkina Faso president Thomas Sankara). The fate of the Senegalese soldiers hangs over the heads of African monetary sovereigntists like a sword of Damocles. Presently, the nations of Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, and Niger are meeting to see how to get out of the CFA zone. It will be interesting to see how France reacts to this “defiance.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Sembène likes to call himself a *griot* (a traditional storyteller and historian). To which extent does he fulfil this role with *Camp Thiaroye*?
2. Why are the French women in the Dakar brothel more accepting of black Americans than they are of black Africans?
3. What treatment of the African soldiers by the French army in *Camp Thiaroye* can be likened to the Nazis' treatment of their prisoners in the concentration camps?
4. What symbolism do you see in the scene where the character named Pays, wearing a German SS helmet, is watching over the French general who had been taken hostage?
5. What symbolism do you see in the African doll that Bintou brings to the harbor for Captain Raymond to take to Diatta's daughter in France?