

The Commemoration of Slavery in France and the Emergence of a Black Political Consciousness

~ JEAN-YVES CAMUS ~

ABSTRACT *The abolition of slavery after the Revolution of 1789 has always been hailed by the French secular State as proof of the progressivist nature of the Republic. Nevertheless, there has never been any attempt to seriously confront the French involvement in the trade of slaves, which lasted for two centuries. France, a colonial power until the 1960s, which still retains several overseas possessions with an Afro-Caribbean population, has a large resident black population in the mainland which feels it has been deprived of its memory and history and seeks official recognition of the role of the State in the trade of slaves. This article tries to show how a black collective identity and consciousness emerged around the fight for the recognition of slavery as a crime against humanity and the claim for financial compensation. This black collective identity competes with the Jewish community, which was granted financial compensation for the Shoah and which successfully lobbied the State to recognize that it was partly responsible for the genocide in World War II. While some radical black activists seek an alliance with part of the Islamic movement, they are also competing over the recognition of their collective identity by the State with the growing Muslim community whose memory is that of colonization and second-class citizenship.*

FORMER COLONIES AND OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

As a former colonial power in Africa and the West Antilles, France was involved in the global slave trade from the middle of the seventeenth century when it first established trading posts in Senegal, the Reunion Island, Guadeloupe and Martinique. In fact, several major French cities, such as Nantes and Bordeaux, owe their economic growth at the time to slave trading. France retained its colonies in West Africa until the beginning of the 1960s, and maintains its presence to this day in several so-called *départements d'outre-mer* (overseas territories). As a consequence, a small black population settled in mainland France from the first half of the twentieth century, their number increasing considerably after African countries became independent.

Today, a debate rages in France over the issues of multiculturalism and the public commemoration and recognition of slavery. Yet before turning to these issues, it is



Associate Researcher, IRIS (Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques), Paris, France. Email: jean-yves.camus@paris.fr

necessary to begin with a few figures. According to the 1999 general census, there were 400,000 people of African origin living in France; 1,809,000 were living in the overseas territories in the Antilles and the Indian Ocean, and half a million natives of those overseas territories live in the *métropole*, that is, mainland France. Out of a population of 60 million, 3.2 million are foreigners (most of them of North African origin), and 4.3 million were born abroad. While immigration in general has remained steady since the 1980s, there has been a 43% increase in immigration from Africa between 1989 and 1999, which figures reflect legal immigration only.

The question of slavery is somewhat of a stain on the history of the French Republic. When the *Estates-General* convened in 1789 to set out the rules for a constitutional monarchy, based on the ideas of the Enlightenment, only one member of Parliament agreed to grant equal citizen's rights to the slaves from the colonies. Ironically, this member, the Duke of la Rochefoucauld, was a member of the nobility. Later, after many heated debates, the Convention, known as the "Revolutionary Assembly," abolished slavery by decree on 4 February 1794. But this was a short-lived measure, for Napoleon Bonaparte soon withdrew the decree on 20 May 1802, under pressure of his wife, who belonged to a wealthy Antilles slave-owning family.

Slavery was finally abolished by the French Second Republic on 27 April 1848, well after the United Kingdom had done so in 1833, and not long before the 13th Amendment to the United States Constitution was passed in 1865. Despite the fact that the French Republic was based on the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," the 1789 Revolution provided neither freedom for black people nor their full recognition as human beings.

Moreover, it is now firmly established that Napoleon, the symbol of French *grandeur*, who exported progressive French civil law along with his conquests all over Europe, was indeed a staunch racist who savagely repressed the uprising of the black people in the Antilles (including Saint Domingue, which later became Haiti).

BLACK MEMORY: FROM OBLIVION TO THE RECOGNITION OF SLAVERY AS A CRIME AGAINST HUMANITY

Until the left-wing coalition led by the Socialist Party came into power, following the election of President François Mitterrand in May 1981, there were no movements campaigning for the recognition of slavery as a "crime against humanity." Only the Nazi genocide of European Jews was recognized as a "crime against humanity," following the rulings of the Nuremberg court in 1945. In 1990 Holocaust denial became a criminal offence punishable by law. The first step towards recognizing the slave trade as a crime was made in 1983, when overseas territories in the Antilles, Guyana and the Indian Ocean (Reunion and Mayotte) set up an official commemoration day for the abolition of slavery, when the 1848 decree became effective in their respective territory.

Between 1981 and 2001, when left-wing parties and a conservative-liberal coalition alternated in power, three interest groups competed for state recognition of their respective historical tragedies: the Jewish community, the Armenian community, and the "black" community (the term is used for lack of a more suitable word, as there is no French equivalent of the "Afro-American" ethnic category).

In several respects, the campaign for the “black cause,” for public recognition of the role France played in the slave trade, was modelled on the Jewish community’s campaign for the state’s responsibility for the Holocaust of the Jews. Responding to the requests of the Jewish community, the French government first passed the Gayssot Law in July 1990, which made it an offence to deny the Holocaust. In a landmark July 1995 speech, President Chirac formally recognized the French responsibility in both the enactment of anti-Jewish legislation by the Vichy regime in 1940, and in the deportation and subsequent gassing of 76,000 Jews. Then, in July 2000, France complied with the demands of Jewish organizations for financial compensation to Holocaust survivors and their offspring by passing a compensation and restitution law.

For many black activists, this form of lobbying set an example for what needed to be done. There was also widespread resentment within their ranks that what had been granted to one minority, the Jews, was denied to another, the black community. This was reinforced by the fact that the Armenian community had in the meantime succeeded in making the French Parliament recognize the mass murders of 1915–17 as genocide, which, despite strong opposition from Turkey, became a reality with a law passed on 29 January 2001.

By contrast, in the same period, the black community only succeeded in bringing about the first commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, held in 1998, both in Paris and in the overseas territories. And, although for the first time in history, President Chirac and his cabinet members (a conservative President with a socialist–communist–green party coalition cabinet) agreed to an official ceremony, it was criticized. Many felt that the choice of date—27 April, the day when the Second Republic abolished slavery at the initiative of Victor Schoelcher—emphasized only the positive aspects of *Républicain* historiography. Nevertheless, many black activists now recognize that 1998 was the turning point in the history of the movement, for it showed that France was ready to confront its past, albeit reluctantly.

This turned out to be true. Shortly afterwards, the representative from French Guyana, Christiane Taubira, a member of the centre-left Radical Party, introduced a bill which was to become law on 10 May 2001, recognizing slavery as a crime against humanity. However, no financial compensation was granted to the organizations representing the interests of the black community. These organizations also demanded the creation of a national commemoration day for the victims of slavery, as had long been done for the Jewish Holocaust victims.

A “Committee for the Remembrance of Slavery” was appointed by President Chirac, under the chairmanship of the well-known novelist, Maryse Condé, who proposed 10 May as the commemoration day. After ruling in favour of this, President Chirac presided over the first national commemoration of victims of slavery on 10 May 2006.

However, the choice of this date is in itself a matter of debate within the black community, as each of the proposed dates holds a distinct ideological meaning. A minority of the black community, and some politicians, chose 27 April, but this was seen by most as a paternalistic approach to the problem, as the abolition of slavery in 1848 was “granted” by the white members of the National Assembly. On the opposite side, the more radical militants of the black cause favoured 23 May,¹ the anniversary of a march initiated by 300 black organizations in 1998, after the so-called Taubira Law was passed,

on the ground that this was a spontaneous event, called for and organized by black activists. Others considered 10 May to be the best choice and a kind of compromise, as the law was introduced by a black MP.² The controversy clearly shows that commemorating slavery is also a matter of how black citizens relate to the State, the Republic, and the country's history.

FRANCE CONFRONTS ITS COLONIAL PAST AND ITS CURRENT MULTICULTURAL REALITY

The controversy over the commemoration of slavery has its roots in both France's attempt to come to terms with its history as a colonial power and in its identity crisis, its evolution into a multicultural and "multireligious" country. Had France been built on an Anglo-Saxon model of immigration, where ethnic groups are recognized as such and are not seen as an obstacle to sharing a common culture and national identity, the rediscovery of a dark and long-hidden past would perhaps not be a problem.

But the French republican and integrationist model is built upon the prerequisite that foreigners and minorities should assimilate, erasing the possibility for an individual to have a dual identity. The model dictates that a black citizen from the Antilles or from Africa should become "French," all ties to his native culture must be severed and any feeling of belonging to his former group erased. Equally, this immigrant can make no claims on behalf of his slave ancestors and has no right whatsoever of having his particular history recognized by the State.

This idea of a *Jacobin* (centralized) state, where a dominant culture takes priority over minorities, has declined as a consequence of the major changes in French identity since the 1960s. These include France's two post-1945 colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria, the failure to implement France's vaunted republican value of equality as a colonial power in the Maghreb and West Africa and, finally, more than 40 years after the Algerian war in 1962 the fact that immigrants from North Africa and their children are still treated as second class citizens—especially after 9/11, which gave way to a strong wave of Islamophobia.

The true history of the colonial era—especially that of the Algerian war, fought by more than two million French soldiers—began to be properly recorded in the 1990s and 2000s. Although a Socialist government in 1982 passed an amnesty law, reintegrating into the army the authors of the failed coup d'état in Algiers in April 1961, the events in Algeria were recognized as a war only in 1999, before which they were considered as merely "law and order operations in North Africa." The first academic study about the use of torture by the French army in Algeria was published in 2001,³ while the admission of the former French General Paul Aussaresses that he had used torture against civilians in Algeria stirred up considerable controversy. Finally, in January 2002, the French Parliament passed a law making 19 March, the date of the cease-fire agreement in Algeria, the official commemoration day of the war. This constituted France's recognition of its defeat against the Algerian liberation movement.

Once this had been done, the recognition of France's responsibility in the trade of slaves remained the last taboo regarding France's history. Black activists at the time had good reasons to believe that their claims would be understood and supported

by the population at large. Another factor, which undoubtedly contributed to legitimizing those claims, was a considerable change in the visibility of minorities in the country.

France was witnessing the rise in public awareness of Islam, Islamic associations and institutions. This “political brand” of Islam was best exemplified by the intense controversy which surrounded the emergence of Tariq Ramadan as a public figure. While religion in France is traditionally restricted to the private sphere and not allowed to be shown in public, practising Muslims became more vocal with their demands in the 1990s. The increasing donning of the *hijab* and construction of mosques showed that the strict secularism of the French population was losing ground.

However unrelated to our main theme this issue may seem to be, they are closely related, and this for two reasons. First, the new visibility of Islam is not a purely religious phenomenon: second- and third-generation French citizens of North African, Muslim origin, or foreigners from the same background, all want French society to accept their culture. Many of them share with black people the intense feeling that their situation, especially the racial discrimination they suffer from, is a direct outcome of colonial history.

Second, if colonial history is the problem which blinds French society to the claims of minorities, then Islam, seen by some as an intrinsically anti-imperialist and anti-colonial movement, can be an ally in the fight against the *Jacobin* state, the implicit racist ideology which underlies society, and the amnesia suffered by the French state when it comes to admitting its past crimes in the colonies, from slavery to the war in Algeria.

This explains why we are now witnessing two separate, distinct movements, which nevertheless tend to interact. The first, an emerging civil rights movement, such as the *Indigènes de la République*,⁴ among second- and third-generation immigrants, allied to the more progressive forces within political Islam; and secondly, a politically conscious black community which aims at gaining public recognition of the part France played in the slavery process, which also has a strong anti-racist content.

Another example is that of COFFAD, the *Collectif des Filles et Fils d’Africains Déportés* (Movement of the Sons and Daughters of Deported African People). This organization is at the forefront of the fight to obtain financial compensation from the state for the victims of slavery. Although it is non-denominational, it is led by Benin-born Assani Fassassi, a political scientist who taught for a long time in Libya, and is a board member of the *Conseil Français du Culte Musulman* (CFCM), the umbrella organization of French Islam, where he represents his *Fédération française des associations islamiques d’Afrique, des Comores et des Antilles* (FFAIACA), which strives to unite the Muslims from West Africa, the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean.

The change from a monolithic to a multicultural society is so drastic that the most reactionary wing of the French conservative right is trying to mount a counter-strike, supported by a significant part of the population. It did so by voting on 23 February 2005, on a controversial law which stipulates that “the history textbooks [should] particularly take into consideration the positive contribution of the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa.” This apology for colonialism has become a major subject of public debate, for it is an open insult to both the French Muslim population and the blacks from Africa and the Caribbean who consider it as a glossing over of France’s actions before the abolition of slavery.

THE EMERGENCE OF A BLACK POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

As mentioned before, the Jewish community and the commemoration of the Holocaust are points of reference for black activists. It is also on these issues that the same activists split into a radical and a more moderate wing, in and around 2000.

Both wings share a core demand: that the French state repair the damage done by the slave trade. The “moderates” seek official recognition of this damage by creating institutions that would represent the fragmented black community. Meanwhile, the more radical groups, although still marginal in numbers, see slavery as a starting point to develop the French brand of the Black Power movement.

That a degree of rivalry with the Jewish community exists, although it is never expressed as such, is evident from the fact that some black groups have coined a new word to describe the slave trade: *Yovodah*.⁵ Why this neologism? Simply, because there is a single word, “Shoah,” to describe the Jewish Holocaust. COFFAD is also an acronym which was chosen to recall the *Association des Fils et Filles des Déportés Juifs de France*, the Jewish association led by famous Nazi-hunters, Beate and Serge Klarsfeld, the driving force behind the claims for compensation for genocide victims. Two books, both published in 2005, sparked the controversy in the mainstream media about the history of the Black and Jewish communities: *Noirs dans les camps nazis*, by the journalist Serge Bilé, aimed at showing that Nazi Germany deported black people to concentration camps just as it deported the Jews; and Claude Ribbe’s *Le crime de Napoléon*,⁶ which drew a parallel between the attitude of the emperor towards black people and that of Hitler towards the Jews. Finally, the recently-created *Conseil Représentatif des Associations Noires* (CRAN, the Representative Council of Black Associations), which aims at being an umbrella organization working with the authorities to foster the black cause, was modelled on the *Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France* (CRIF), the representative organization for French Jewry on secular affairs.

The relationship between the Black and Jewish communities is ambivalent, with the major subject of controversy being the legal status of the Nazi genocide, on the one hand, and of the slave trade, on the other. Some black activists strongly resent the exclusive demand of the Jewish community to recognize the Holocaust as the only case of genocide and crime against humanity. Such ideas are promoted by a French comedian of Cameroonian origin, Dieudonné M’Bala M’Bala, who has used his fame to build a network of black-cause associations promoting a distinctive brand of leftist ideology coupled with a strong anti-Zionist element, which Jewish organizations describe as an anti-Semitic prejudice.

The “Dieudonné case,” as it is now known, came to nationwide attention on 1 December 2003, when he appeared on state television network France 3. Dressed as an ultra-Orthodox Jew, the comedian gave a Nazi salute and shouted “Isra-Heil,” thus implicitly comparing the Jewish State to the Nazi regime.⁷ Dieudonné, who used to be known as an anti-racist and pro-Palestinian activist, seems to have become radicalized when he was denied public funding for a movie he intended to make about the *Code Noir*, the compendium of laws enacted in 1685 by King Louis XIV in order to regulate the slave trade. He now regularly denounces the so-called “Zionist lobby” and the prominent part Jews played, according to his theories, in the slave trade.

However, the question of slavery and the problems arising from racism and the situation of illegal immigrants in France have paved the way for groups that are even more extreme, modelled on a mix between the Black Panther Party and Farrakhan's Nation of Islam. Since 2003, two black supremacist movements have appeared: the *Tribu Ka* and the *Parti Kémite*, both of which try to spread an esoteric philosophy calling for the total separation of black people living in France from their white compatriots. Kemi Séba, leader of the *Tribu Ka*, explains that he became a racially-conscious activist while watching Alex Haley's popular series, *Roots*, on French television. His group took part in demonstrations for the commemoration of slavery, such as on 22 May 2005 in Paris, when they clashed with other demonstrators following Kemi Séba's strongly anti-Muslim speech. After following the Nation of Islam for several years, Séba rejected Islam once he became aware that Muslims too had been involved in the slave trade.⁸

On the other hand, the overwhelming majority of black people do not adhere to such extreme views. Rather, they seek to use slavery as a starting point for organizing their community as a political lobby, which could then deal with the government on legal, social and economic issues affecting their communities both in the overseas territories and in mainland France. This, for example, is the goal of CRAN, launched on 26 November 2005, chaired by Patrick Lozès, a member of the centre-right party, *Union pour la Démocratie Française*. Significantly, in his speech at the movement's founding assembly, Lozès spoke about "the need for more official recognition and greater remembrance of slavery," but also stressed his will to fight against "ethnic and racial discrimination."⁹ The prospects of this organization are still unclear, but it may well benefit from the conservative government's intention to court the black vote in the 2007 presidential elections.

It is also clear that the French are now more ready than ever to accept the multicultural reality of their country. There is a wide consensus among the inhabitants of the overseas territories on the positive aspects of the commemoration of the 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery, indicating the importance of the issue as a whole in the collective psyche.¹⁰

Finally, slavery has become a matter of consensus in the French Caribbean and Guyana, while the legal status of these territories is still in question. There is an ongoing harsh debate between the declining independence movement, the autonomist parties, and the integrationists (who want the territories to retain their current status of *départments*, subject to legislation on the mainland).¹¹ The issue of slavery is so much at the centre of black identity that in 2001, when Christiane Taubira was a candidate in the presidential elections, she polled 52.1% in Guyana, 37.24% in Guadeloupe, 27.79% in Martinique, and an overall total of 660,000 votes nationwide (2.32%); that is, more than the Socialist candidate Lionel Jospin needed in order to be on the second ballot, in place of the racist far-right candidate, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who came a surprising second.

CONCLUSION

Slavery is still a passionate issue in France, as recently demonstrated when a black association, the *Collectif DOM*, put the historian Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau on trial, after

he maintained that the slave trade was not a genocide, because the masters did not intend to exterminate their work force.¹²

However, the issue of slavery—unknown to most Frenchman until the 1990s—is now a matter of public debate. The government has taken significant steps to ensure that the abolition of slavery is appropriately commemorated and that it be given its due place in public school history textbooks. “Black consciousness” has emerged around the issues of slavery and cultural/racial domination, and today it plays an important role in the fundamental transformation of French society from an assimilationist into a multicultural society.

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NOTES

1. Such as the Comité marche du 23 mai.
2. Christiane Taubira’s popularity was evident in the 2002 presidential elections, in which she received more than 600,000 votes.
3. Raphaëlle Branche, *La torture et l’armée pendant la guerre d’Algérie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).
4. The “Indigènes de la République” (the Republic’s native people) is a loosely organized movement which brings together, since 2003, anti-globalization activists, radical left thinkers and Muslims close to the thinking of Tariq Ramadan. Launched in response to the law that banned the *hijab* in public schools, it evolved into a much broader movement which seeks to challenge the underlying racism, paternalism and anti-immigrant bias prevalent in French society.
5. According to COFFAD, which first used the word in its publications, *Yovodah* is a compound of *Yovo*, a European white man in the Fon dialect of Benin, and *dah*, which means evil.
6. Serge Bilé, *Noirs dans les camps Nazis* (Paris: Edition du Rocher, 2005); and Claude Ribbe, *Le crime de Napoléon* (Paris: Editions Privé, 2005).
7. So far, the French courts have cleared him of all charges of anti-Semitism. On the Dieudonné case, see Anne-Sophie Mercier, *La vérité sur Dieudonné* (Paris: Editions Plon, 2005). He was a candidate on the Euro–Palestine ticket in Paris, in the June 2004 election to the European Parliament.
8. For an interview with Kemi Séba, dated 24 November 2005, see http://www.africamaat.com/article.php?id_article=479.
9. Cf. *Libération*, 26 November 2005. One of the guests at this congress was the newly formed “Amitié Judéo–Noire,” an organization close to the CRIF, which promotes friendship between the black and Jewish communities.
10. According to a 1999 opinion poll by the IPSOS institute, 65% of the people in the overseas territories thought that this commemoration was “positive in that it told about a past hidden for too long a time.” See <http://www.ipsos.fr/CanalIpsos/poll/82.asp#07>.
11. In the 2004 regional election, the Mouvement Indépendantiste Martiniquais still polled 37.29% of the vote, but in 2001 it lost the city council of the capital, Fort de France, to the autonomist Parti du Peuple Martiniquais. In Guadeloupe, the movement for independence is almost nonexistent. In Guyana, the Mouvement de Décolonisation et d’émancipation sociale (MDES) polled 6.55% in the 2004 regional election. Both MIM and MEDES consider the memory of slavery as a major part of their people’s history and as a strong component

of their “national” identity. See <http://www.mdes.org/article76.html> and http://www.gens-delacaraibe.org/recherche/articles.php?id_story=45 for the position of MDES and MIM on the issue of commemoration, respectively.

12. Cf. Olivier Pétré-Grenouilleau, *Les traites négrières: Essai d'histoire globale* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004). The trial was held on 30 November 2005. He was found not guilty.