

# Primary Sources:

## *French West Africa*

### Introduction

Between September 1982 and July 1983, historian Joe Lunn conducted tape recorded interviews with over 80 African veterans and witnesses to World War I. Lunn worked with a local man, William Ndiaye, to help with simultaneous translation. The interviews excerpted here were conducted in a mix of English, French, and one of Senegal's local languages, Wolof.

The first two interviews are with Senegalese men who fought for the French in World War I: Momar Cisse and Ndiaga Niang. The format of the transcripts captures the spoken words on the taped recording of the conversations. The questions were posed to each informant by Joe Lunn, and the answers mostly appear in third person, as Ndiaye reported what "he" (the informant) said in reply. There are also several additional excerpts from Lunn's interviews with other individuals about the war and their return home.

As you read, consider the following questions. Find quotes to go with at least three of the questions listed below:

- What reasons does Momar Cisse offer for why he joined the army?
- What are the family dynamics involved with Cisse's recruitment - how does his decision affect his father, his mother, and his grandfather? What do you learn about his relationship with his father, in particular?
- How does Cisse's account give glimpses into pre-colonial Senegalese history and his religious beliefs?
- What kind of conditions did Ndiaga Niang encounter at the front in Greece - at Salonique (Salonika)?
- What can you infer about casualty rates at Salonika, especially for Senegalese?
- How did Niang end up working in a bakery in the north of France during the war?
- What new questions do you have about Africans who fought for the French side and their experience of the war in Europe?



### PRIMARY SOURCES

#### INTRODUCTION

#### INTERVIEW WITH MOMAR CISSE

#### INTERVIEW WITH NDIAGA NIANG

#### ADDITIONAL SENEGALESE ACCOUNTS OF WAR AND COMING HOME

# Primary Source 1: *Interview with Momar Cisse*

In this interview, Joe Lunn and William Ndiaye spoke with Senegalese WWI veteran, Momar Cisse.

One of the challenges of reading interview transcripts includes local variations on the spelling of names, of both places and people. Some places mentioned in this interview include localities in western Senegal near today's Dakar (the capital city): Thies, Rufisque, "Sebecoton" [Sebikotane], and "Borgney" - the latter of which likely refers to a small town today called Bargny Gouddau, about 65 km east of Dakar, which was a recruitment center for the Senegalese Riflemen. In the transcript, Wolof is rendered as "Wolouf." When the transcript indicates "Int" - this refers to William Ndiaye, as "interviewer" (translator) interjecting clarifications.

Cisse tells of his reasons for choosing to go to the war. He goes on to describe how he signed up for the army in Thies, and returned to Dakar to join fellow recruits on the boat to France. German submarines were circling the ship, attempting to torpedo it, but their ship arrived safely in France. Upon arrival in France they were given training for a few weeks before being sent to the battle site at Verdun. The interview ends before the interviewers can ask Cisse more about his battle experience or his return to Senegal.\*

Q: You have any choice about entering Army?

A: No, I was a volunteer... he say that his father had to give one of his sons to go and enter the Army. And he said to his father that he wanted to go.

Q: Were you - how many sons in family of military age?

A: He say that there were about five. Because his father had his nephew here too. And he could send one of his nephews if he wanted [to]. So he said to him that it was not necessary to choose one of them; he was a volunteer to enter the Army.

Q: Why want to volunteer?

A: ... He entered the Army voluntarily because he wanted to show his father that his son was not someone who was afraid. So he wanted to show his father that his son was courageous. That's why he preferred to enter the Army.

William Ndiaye reads out loud from Cisse's *liver militaire*\*\*:

...He was a volunteer for the duration of the war in front of the commission of Recruitment of [Thies]. He was in the Battalion 9, and it was the 3rd of April of 1918. After he passed on the 108th Battalion on May 1918. After to the 10th Battalion on the 22 of December of 1918. And he was - he left the Army on April 2, 1921.



**Blaise Diagne arriving on recruitment campaign in Dakar, 1918**

\* The interviews excerpted here are used by permission of Joe Lunn, who authorized release of the original handwritten transcripts for use in the H21 module. We extend heartfelt thanks to Professor Lunn for this generous sharing of these materials, and for the archival staff at the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music and Folklore, where these materials are housed.

\*\* A military booklet.

Q: Was father indeed pleased that you volunteered?

A: He say that his father was very pleased by his decision to enter in the Army. And he say that his father was from Borgney [possibly: Bargny] and his mother Rufisque. And his relatives from Rufisque went to Borgney and told him not to enter the Army cause they learned very bad news from the war. And they thought that he would die if ever went to the war. And they took him in front of his father and told his father not to let him go. And he say that his father was not very happy with that decision of his relatives... After the relatives left, he came back and told his father, "tomorrow morning I'll go to Thies to take my examination to enter the Army." And he said his father was very very glad to hear him say that. And he say that he next day he went to the railroad station - it was in Sebecoton [Sebikotane], because there was no railroad here in Borgney. And he took the train and went to Thies. He went into the camp and he found the recruitment. So he didn't speak French and he wanted to explain [to] the officers that he wanted to take the examination to become a soldier. And he said he came to the officer and gave him a -- told him by making the gesture [salute] but they didn't understood [understand] what he was saying. And then the officer asked to another soldier who was speaking French to translate. You mean he speaking Wolouf? (Int: Wolouf, Wolouf, yes.) And he say that this one explained that he wanted to take the examination to become a soldier. And he passed the examination and he was apt.<sup>†</sup> And he entered the Army like that.

Q: What did your mother think about your decision?

A: She was not happy to see me entering the Army, but my father who had agreed with me to leave [let] me enter the Army. So she had no choice to say no.

Q: Did you take gris-gris<sup>‡</sup> with you into Army?

A: Yes, he say that they gave him some protective charms before he entered the Army.

Q: Who gave them?

A: He got his protective charm from his ancestors. And he say that, that's his ancestors who founded Borgney.

Q: When you say you received this from Ancestors, does this mean your father, your grandfather, your great-grandfather - you know how long it was passed down.

Int: No he say that it's come from the father of his father.

A: So from grandfather. You know how this charm was prepared by your grandfather, or who gave it to your grandfather?

Q: You know what the properties of the charm were?

A: He say that when you wore - when you wear this kind of protective charm, you can't receive a bullet. The bullet misses you and goes around you... He say that it - the bullet pass.... The bullets never reach you. They come near your body and they pass on the side. (Momar chuckles)

Q: Why did your grandfather have need of a charm like this?

A: He say that in those times there were many fights between the traditional kings. And that's why his people needed these kinds of protective charms. Cause you never know when there was a fight... He say that the Dahmel's of Cayor went to Borgney to fight w/them.

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<sup>†</sup>The army found him fit to serve in the military.

<sup>‡</sup>An amulet that protects the wearer from harm.

## Primary Source 2: *Interview with Ndiaga Niang*

Ndiaga Niang was one of five brothers who were recruited into the army in 1916. The brothers were on the same boat to France, but not in the same regiments. The boat accompanying their boat, also full of Tirailleurs (2500), was sunk by the Germans on the way to Bordeaux, France. Ndiaga and his brother Mbaye both ended up on the front in Greece at the city of Salonika (referred to in the interview in French as Salonique). Mbaye died, but Ndiaga survived, in spite of getting trapped in battle. The barbed wire was supposed to have been cut, allowing free passage, but it had not been cut, apparently due to directives of French General Sarrail. When asked why he thought he survived, he said it was due to the grace of Allah. Ndiaga was allowed to go on home leave to Dakar for two months in 1918, then returned to France. But, before his slated deployment to the Western Front in the north of France, he went to work for a baker named Hartman. On the eve of the armistice, Hartman offered to Ndiaga to stay, marry his daughter, and inherit the bakery business. But Ndiaga declined, and returned to Senegal.

In Excerpt 1, Niang remembers his time in Greece, Salonika in 1917, where his Battalion was deployed when he first arrived in France. In Excerpt 2, he describes the time in late 1918 that he was on leave in the south of France, in Faviere, and about to be sent to the Western Front in the north of France when he was diverted to work in a bakery in Faviere.



**Example of World War I era Croix de Guerre**

### EXCERPT 1:

A: ... We arrived in Salonique and we went to the front called Douala [?] .... And whenever ... we arrived near the front, we heard the Artillery shooting the cannons and we were not used to [it], and so everybody was very afraid and everybody wanted to go and hide somewhere. But the Capt. say that we had to go on. And it was very far and there was no danger. And we arrive at the front at 11 in the night. And there we made a - we called it *coup de main* [sudden attack] - it's a kind of attack. He say that he received his decoration during this attack. [Int: And I told him to tell how was the attack.] It was a lake in Douaran [?] but it was not a very big one. And the Germans [were] on the other side. And at night the General asked for some volunteers because he wanted to make an attack. So [Niang] was a volunteer and they made an attack during the night and they caught many, many Germans. and Bulgarian prisoners. And he received a decoration for that.

Q: Which decoration was it?

A: Croix de Guerre [...]



### **French trenches around Salonika**

Q: Want to say something else?

A: He say that it was a pleasure for him to go and fight for the French, cause they needed help. And he had done his duty... He say that they spent a very hard time in Salonique - in the front. Because he say that one night, after an attack they were getting back - the Captain had ordered to get back from the front. And when they were getting back, the Germans were still shooting on them and he ordered some

in trenches to hide in till the next day. So they hide in - they dig some trenches and hide into them. But the next morning, the shells and the cannon balls were falling near the trenches, had buried us. And it was very, very cold. And when we get out of the trenches we were walking to get back. I was walking but my hands began to get paralyzed [sic] cause of the cold. And I had my rifle - my rifle in my hand - but I could not leave my rifle cause my fingers were completely bent. And I was still walking. After a while my toes began to be paralyzed too. And I realized that I have frostbite. And I fell down.

And one of my friends told me that "come on, come on, we have - you have to go to the toubab\* to the camp. He say that I wanted to come, but I could not no more walk. And some officers come and told me "who is this, who is this guy? Get up and walk as everyone [else]" He said that to the officers "I can no more walk - I got my - my feet are frostbite, frozen." And he come [saw] my feet and he asked five soldiers to take me on their rifles as a stretcher. And I was taken to the infirmary to get healed. And the next day I was taken to the hospital in Salonique where all of the wounded had their feet frozen. And the next day, when the sun was hot enough, we - our feet, were hurting so badly that everybody was shouting and crying in the hospital. And the doctor told me that he had to cut my feet. So the day he fixed to cut my feet, when he arrived he found that I was sitting, so he told me "you are lucky. And he say "you are going better, so I have no need to cut your feet." But I can heal them. And the hospital gave a big party after they healed. He say that most of the Senegalese has - are dead... He say that he is going to pray.

A: He say most of the Senegalese soldiers are dead, because of the cold. Because in each of the fronts, they used to take back the Senegalese soldiers back to Marseilles or the towns where the weather was warmer. But in Salonique the General Serrail had said to us to stay til December. That's why most of the soldiers were dead - because of the cold.



**Salonika Army Christmas Card showing soldiers of the Allies, with Senegalese soldier standing third from right**

\*"Toubab" is a Wolof word meaning a white person.



*Senegalese tirailleurs at a hivernage camp at Fréjus, March 1916*

## EXCERPT 2:

A: ...We were about to leave for the [western] front, and there was a baker in the town who needed someone to work for him. So the General asked... He say that meanwhile the bombs and the shells were exploding everywhere and he say that the General ask who of the soldiers was able to be a baker. So he say that, he say that he wanted to go to help the baker so the soldiers told him "you just want to escape from the front." But he say that [before he was in the] militaire his profession was baker and tailor. So when the General saw that, he say that "you can go and work at the bakery." So, Niang say that, that why he didn't went to the front. He stayed in the town and in the baker[y]... The next day when the Moroccan Regiment - the Moroccan Division was ready to go [to the front], we didn't have no shells, no bombs, nothing. Everything was completely quiet. And they asked, "why's that, why's that?" And some one told them that the war was ended. They signed the Armistice in the night.... He say that [laughter] the morning he was talking about - he was going to the fountain to have some water And he found a woman there and the woman told him, "H[?] Senegalese Soldier. You've heard nothing about the war?" He said, "no." "nothing?" He say "no" and the woman told him that "you don't know that the war is ended?" He say, "no, no, no. You are joking." So the woman replied "Mai oui. The war is ended - Mai oui."\*\* [Int: he say that with a very specific accent of Meurthe et Mosselle - mai oui, the war is ended. [all laughed] And he said, give me your hand he shake it, shook her hand... He say that a few hours later - it seemed that all the bells in France were ringing together. And he say that all the shop owners, all the restaurant owners, all the hotel owners, were told to open their door<sup>†</sup> and to leave [let] the soldiers eat whatever they want. So he say that all was open and they began to eat and to drink and to sing... After that we were released from the Army. We went to Toulon<sup>‡</sup> to take the boat to come back... He say that after that we went back to Senegal and everybody went home. ...

He say that the same night when the Armistice<sup>§</sup> was signed, his boss - the bakery owner - was proposing [to] him to marry his daughter, so that he would become the boss of the bakery and he would stay in France because he had a farm and he wanted to care about the farm and he would leave [let] him and his daughter carry on the bakery. So he was telling Niang to go to Paris to buy a ring - a alliance [wedding] ring - ... His name was Hartman.

\*\* "but yes."

<sup>†</sup> It is not clear who told the business owners to open their doors.

<sup>‡</sup> A city in southern France.

<sup>§</sup> On November 11, 1918 the fighting on the Western Front came to an end. This day is known as the Armistice.

# Primary Source 3: *Additional Senegalese Accounts of War and Coming Home*

During his interviews, Joe Lunn spoke with over 80 veterans of the First World War. Below are some additional excerpts from those interviews, that help to shed light on the experiences of Senegalese soldiers.

All excerpts in this section are from the following source: Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of the Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1999.

In this excerpt, Masserigne Soumare discusses the *reprise de Douaumont*, the recapture of Fort Douaumont in France. The fort was the largest and highest fort on a network that protected the city of Verdun. On October 25, 1916, French troops recaptured the fort, which had been under the German army since the previous February:

A: We felt very proud after the attack because the French had tried many times to retake the fort, but finally, we [were the ones] that took it .... And when we were leaving the fort, our officers told us not to wash our uniforms even though they were very dirty and covered with mud. But we were told: "Don't wash your uniforms. Cross the country as you are so that everyone who meets you will know that you made the attack on Fort Douaumont." And we took the train [and traveled] for three days between Douaumont and St. Raphael. And in every town we crossed, the French were clapping their hands and shouting: "*Vive les tirailleurs sénégalais!*" ... And afterwards, whenever we were walking in the country-everywhere we used to go-if we told people that we made the attack on Fort Douaumont, the French were looking at us with much admiration.



**Pennant of the 43rd  
battalion of  
Senegalese riflemen,  
bearing the  
inscription  
Douaumont, 1916**

The excerpts below address what soldiers felt had changed as a result of the war. Broadly speaking, most recruited *tirailleurs sénégalais* were inclined to believe little had changed, or that that changes that had occurred were comparatively insignificant, compared to the scale of their sacrifices. Many expressed feelings of exploitation - that that they had been coerced into the army against their will, excluded from the French, and bore the brunt of casualties.



**Inspection of the Honour Guard, including Senegalese tirailleurs, April 1914**

Sera Ndiaye, who had been buried alive during the war by high explosives, angrily recalled:

A: 'I didn't feel many [personal] changes [as a result of the war]; I was a farmer before I left, and I was still a farmer after I came back.' We went to France, we fought for France, and the French took us by force to fight for them. [But] we learned nothing [there] - [not] even the French language. They only taught us some rudimentary [commands], [in order] to use us in the war. But they didn't care about teaching us the structure and the sound of their language. So [ although we] went to the war, [we] came back here without any real knowledge of the French language.

Nar Diouf, a former corporal recruited in 1915, reflected on the status of veterans after the war:

A: I received many lasting things from the war. I demonstrated my dignity and courage, and [I] won the respect of the people and the [ colonial] government. And whenever the people of the village had something to contest [with the French] - and they didn't dare do it [themselves] because they were afraid of them - I used to do it for them. And many times when people had problems with the government, I used to go with my decorations and arrange the situation for [them]. Because whenever the Tubabs saw your decorations, they knew that they [were dealing with] a very important person .... And I gained this ability of obtaining justice over a Tubab from the war.



**Transport of Senegalese Rifleman, accompanied by wives in Khenifra July 1914**

Ibrahima Thiam was a 1918 recruit and devout Mouride (sufi muslim):

A: The war changed many, many things. At first, when we joined the army, when you had an argument or a problem with a "white" man, what happened? You were wrong; you were [always] wrong. But later, those things changed. [Then] they looked into the matter and determined who was wrong or right. [But] before that time, the "black" man didn't mean anything. So that [change] was something [very important]. [And] the respect we gained [from] the war [continued] increasing; it never [diminished]. [And this] respect [continued] increasing day to day-up until [it culminated in] the Independence Day.



## Image Citations:

### Page 1:

Map of the peoples of Senegal, David Boilat, 1853, Public Domain, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ethnies\\_S%C3%A9n%C3%A9gal.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ethnies_S%C3%A9n%C3%A9gal.jpg)

### Page 2:

"Lead recruiter for the French army, deputy Blaise Diagne arrives in Dakar," 1918, Le Pays de France, March 14, 1918, p. 12, Public Domain, [https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Blaise\\_Diagne-Dakar-1918.jpg](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Blaise_Diagne-Dakar-1918.jpg)

### Page 4:

A World War I era Croix de Guerre, awarded to Francis Browne, on display at the Cobh Heritage Centre in Cobh, Ireland, CC BY-SA 3.0, Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Croix-De-Guerre-Francis-Browne.jpg>

### Page 5:

"Entrenched camp in Salonika, French troops dig trenches to defend the city," February 10, 1916, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LP\\_DF\\_69\\_3\\_nos\\_chasseurs\\_au\\_travail\\_pour\\_les\\_tranch%C3%A9es.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:LP_DF_69_3_nos_chasseurs_au_travail_pour_les_tranch%C3%A9es.jpg)

"The Salonika Army Christmas Card 1916 displaying soldiers of all Allied nations taking part in the campaign. From left to right standing: Montenegrin, British, Serbian, Italian, French Colonial Zouave, Indian, Greek. Kneeling: French Colonial Cochin Chinese, Russian, French, French Colonial," 1916, Imperial War Museum, Public Domain, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Salonika\\_Army\\_Christmas\\_Card\\_1916\\_displaying\\_soldiers\\_of\\_all\\_Allied\\_nations.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Salonika_Army_Christmas_Card_1916_displaying_soldiers_of_all_Allied_nations.jpg)

### Page 6:

Senegalese tirailleurs at a hivernage camp at Fréjus, France, March 1916, CC BY-SA 4.0, Médiathèque de l'architecture et du patrimoine [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Camp\\_de\\_S%C3%A9n%C3%A9galais\\_-\\_Fr%C3%A9jus\\_-\\_M%C3%A9diath%C3%A8que\\_de\\_l%27architecture\\_et\\_du\\_patrimoine\\_-\\_APZ0001924.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Camp_de_S%C3%A9n%C3%A9galais_-_Fr%C3%A9jus_-_M%C3%A9diath%C3%A8que_de_l%27architecture_et_du_patrimoine_-_APZ0001924.jpg)

### Page 7:

"Scan of L'illustration No. 3906, The pennant of the 43rd battalion of Senegalese riflemen decorated with the fourragère," January 12, 1918, Public Domain, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le\\_fanion\\_du\\_43e\\_bataillon\\_de\\_tirailleurs\\_s%C3%A9n%C3%A9galais\\_d%C3%A9cor%C3%A9\\_de\\_ka\\_fourrag%C3%A8re.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Le_fanion_du_43e_bataillon_de_tirailleurs_s%C3%A9n%C3%A9galais_d%C3%A9cor%C3%A9_de_ka_fourrag%C3%A8re.jpg)

### Page 8:

"Madame Tirailleur," c. 1914, CC BY-SA 4.0, Jeanfrancois.mouragues, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maroc\\_1914.jpg?uselang=fr](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Maroc_1914.jpg?uselang=fr)  
Senegalese Tirailleurs amongst the Honour Guard being inspected by Paul Tirard and Jean Degoutte, L'illustration, April 1920, Public Domain, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Degoutte\\_and\\_Tirard\\_and\\_Sengalese\\_troops,\\_8\\_April\\_1920.png](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Degoutte_and_Tirard_and_Sengalese_troops,_8_April_1920.png)