

Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (Africa)

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Summary

Commemoration in the form of ceremonies and monuments was for the most part alien to African cultures and was largely a part of the European colonial project. As such, its main aim was to glorify colonialism. This article focuses on the commemoration of World War I in both French West Africa and major portions of British Africa. The war laid bare the tensions and contradictions of colonialism and racial subjugation in some parts of Africa, evident since commemoration and memorialisation functioned as a process of both inclusion and exclusion. And in both French and British African possessions, the frequent and widespread participation of African soldiers in the war led to projects of commemoration which in various ways demonstrated conflicts between the perspectives of civil and military authorities.

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Introduction

Even though by August 1914 European colonial powers no longer aspired to enlarge their territories in Africa through the use of war, World War I soon expanded to the continent. Most colonies were directly involved in the war effort, and all were indirectly affected. White settlers in Africa were not particularly enthusiastic about the war, certainly less so than their European counterparts. In 1914 most of the African continent was “pacified” and settlers had no wish to rekindle ostensible African warrior traditions. Nevertheless, colonial governments were faced with the need to recruit Africans to fight a war that had originated in Europe. Over 2 million Africans served in World War I as [soldiers](#) or [labourers](#) (mainly as porters). About 200,000 of them [perished](#), many from diseases.¹ Compared to the horrifying numbers of European [soldiers killed](#) in World War I and their percentage within the general population, this number does not seem large. Nevertheless, World War I changed the lives of many

Africans. Despite the colonial myth of Africa as a continent riven by war, never before did African societies experience [warfare](#) on such a scale. The war thus left a deep impression on African societies.

It is important to remember that commemoration is basically a western notion. [Commemoration](#) as we know it – official ceremonies, graveyard headstones festooned with wreaths, and engraved stone memorials – was not part of African pre-colonial culture. According to anthropological studies, most pre-colonial African societies saw death as a phenomenon that introduces forces of physical, spiritual and social rupture. In order to heal these ruptures it was essential to transfer the deceased from a state of impurity to a state of ritual purity and harmony with the spirit world. Therefore, funerary and mourning rituals had to involve a body.² In many cases, however, Africans who perished in the war were buried where they fell, far from home. Therefore, it was frequently impossible to perform traditional ceremonies, although African forms of mourning and commemoration were certainly present, if localised. This article will therefore focus on colonial forms of commemoration of World War I in Africa. It is impossible to refer to all commemorative actions in all African colonies. We will concentrate thus on several areas of French and British Africa that were deeply affected by the war and in which commemoration was especially significant.³

French West Africa

Africans were recruited as soldiers in French colonies well before World War I. At the beginning of the French conquest around mid-19th century they were employed to expand French territory and maintain order in it. In 1910 Colonel (later General) [Charles Mangin \(1866-1925\)](#) published a book titled *La Force Noire* in which he encouraged the [French government](#) to employ African soldiers in Europe.⁴ Based on the pseudo-scientific racial theories of his time, Mangin claimed that several so-called natural attributes of the Africans made them excellent soldiers, such as their ability to live in harsher climates. He argued that those ostensible qualities made African soldiers valuable for deployment as “shock troops” (*troupes de choc*), and that their appearance on the battlefields of Europe would have a considerable effect on the enemy’s morale.⁵

After a heated debate among military and political circles in [France](#) it was finally decided to support Mangin’s scheme. African soldiers were recruited and sent to Europe from the beginning of the war, but mostly after 1916, when French casualties were becoming heavy and mutiny in the ranks was on the rise. Massive recruitment of Africans was facilitated by the first African representative in the French parliament, elected in 1914, [Blaise Diagne](#)

(1872-1934).⁶ Over the five years of the war, French West Africa (hereafter FWA) supplied 170,891 men. While all territories with the exception of Mauritania and Niger contributed significantly to the recruitment, Senegal bore the heaviest burden.⁷ According to various estimations, the percentage of losses among African soldiers was between 17.4 percent and 21 percent (24,938 and 30,196).⁸

The massive participation of Africans in World War I and the heavy casualties they suffered put commemoration on the French colonial agenda. The colonial authorities in FWA published a decree as early as 15 November 1919 regarding the implementation of the metropolitan October 25 law about the commemoration of soldiers who perished in the war.⁹ Following the publication of this decree the colonial administrations of the federation began to observe an annual ceremony on 11 November, which occupied an important place within the official remembrance in the colonies. Unlike 14 July, this day allowed the participation of religious institutions in the official ceremonies. The day was celebrated with veterans' parades, ceremonies, laying of wreaths before monuments, and dancing and tam-tams until late at night.¹⁰

In addition to official ceremonies, several monuments commemorating African soldiers who perished in the war were constructed in FWA and in France. These monuments often created links between the colonies and the *metropole*, as well as between various parts of the French Empire.¹¹ The method of constructing monuments was the creation of a special committee that was supposed to collect the necessary funds for the project. In September 1927, such a committee headed by the hero of Verdun (and later the collaborator of Vichy), Philippe Pétain (1856-1951), collected contributions in order to construct a monument for soldiers from FWA in Douamont, in the Meuse department in Lorraine. Other committees, such as the one headed by General Louis Archinard (1850-1932), were charged with constructing monuments in the colonies of FWA.¹²

There was often disagreement over the commemoration of African soldiers between military figures such as Archinard and colonial administrators. While the military saw commemoration as an excellent tool of colonial propaganda in the colonies, in France and even internationally, administrators saw this as a waste of public funds that would not impress Africans at all. Also, the problems they encountered in dealing with rebellious and undisciplined veterans dissuaded them from glorifying African soldiers in the colonies. Eventually three major monuments were constructed in FWA – one in Bamako, the capital of French Sudan, which was identical to a monument constructed in the city of Reims in

France;¹³ one in Dakar, Senegal, the capital of the federation; and one in Saint Louis, the capital of Senegal. All of these monuments are distinctively “colonial” as they emphasize, through the posture of the figures, the inequality between white and black soldiers.¹⁴

The monument in Dakar, known as the “Demba and Dupont” monument, has been moved twice since its construction. The monument depicts two soldiers, a Frenchman and an African, raising their [rifles](#) together, the words “*Vers la victoire*” inscribed at their feet. For sixty years it was a part of the architectonic space of central Dakar, but in 1983 “Demba and Dupont” were suddenly exiled to a Catholic cemetery on the city’s outskirts. In a country with a predominantly Muslim population, this was indeed a marginal and obscure location for such a monument. The decision to remove the statue came after a political crisis during which many Senegalese protested against the government’s encouragement of French neo-colonialism. The Senegalese president at the time, Abdou Diouf, attempted to appease public opinion by deeming the monument colonial and removing it from Tascher Square facing the National Assembly; the square itself was soon after renamed “Place Soweto”. “Demba and Dupont” remained “in exile” until the summer of 2004. Following a ceremony in Provence on 15 August 2004, in which for the first time in many years the French government paid special tribute to the African soldiers who fought in World War II, the then Senegalese President Abdoulaye Wade led legislation to establish 23 August 2004 (the day of the liberation of Toulon in World War II) as a memorial day for African soldiers who perished in both world wars. This legislation opened the way for Demba and Dupont’s great comeback. They were moved to Place de la Gare to become a distinguished part of the grand memorial project. Since 2004 commemoration of African soldiers who perished in the two world wars has become a project endorsed by the Senegalese governments. The official discourse presents the soldiers’ contribution to the war effort in France as an example of Africans’ sacrifices for France, for which the country should be grateful.

British Africa

Africans had long been recruited as soldiers in British colonies as well. The start of World War I brought renewed demands, not only for fighting men but also for military [labour](#). In some territories, primarily those with the greatest European settler population, there initially was some resistance to the local recruitment of African soldiers.¹⁵ And in [Britain](#) itself there was steadfast resistance to employing black soldiers in Europe, but much less concern about employing them in the [Middle East](#) and especially in Africa itself. Starting early in the conflict African troops were considered essential to efforts at containing and then conquering German colonies in Africa, and particularly for the lengthy [East African campaign](#). In that campaign alone perhaps as many as 100,000 Africans died in wartime service.¹⁶ Such

casualty numbers created a similar demand for commemoration as that felt by French colonial authorities.

Throughout the British Empire in Africa, including its colonies, protectorates, as well as the [Union of South Africa](#), the primary custodian of World War I commemorations was the Imperial War Graves Commission, created by royal charter in 1917. The Commission's efforts were for many years directed by Sir [Fabian Ware \(1869-1949\)](#), who was an unceasing advocate for the Commission's basic principles, adopted in 1918, including "that, in death, all, from General to Private, of whatever race or creed, should receive equal honor under a memorial which should be the common symbol of their comradeship and of the cause for which they died."¹⁷ That egalitarian approach was affirmed by the [British Parliament](#) in 1920 when authorizing public funds for the Commission's work. Yet in practice the ideal was far from uniformly applied throughout the continent.

The Commission did work diligently to find the burials of British officers and enlisted men, even when they had been first interned in mass graves along with African troops. In fact Commission records clearly indicate that in Africa a stark distinction was made between "white graves" and those of African "natives," going so far as to search mass graves that had been hastily improvised on battlefields in order to identify European remains by the presence of false teeth or gold dental implants, for example. The intent was to ensure that as many as possible might have individual graves, as was being done in Europe, even if their identities were unknown. Those so identified were exhumed and buried separately in cemeteries frequently set aside primarily for European war dead with little regard for the expense. But for the African remains, there was even some concern expressed by colonial officials that their final resting places be "allowed to revert to nature as speedily as possible."¹⁸ For the most part that is what happened.

The Commission itself did plan separate memorials for the African soldiers and labourers who died in war service, erecting three such memorials commemorating their East African campaign, in Dar es Salaam, in Nairobi, and the most elaborate in Mombasa, which has three statues of [askari](#) (African soldiers) of the [King's African Rifles](#) and another of a transport [carrier](#). No individual names appeared on any of the monuments, only a uniform inscription authored by Commission member [Rudyard Kipling \(1865-1936\)](#):

This is to the memory of the Arab and Native African troops who fought, to the Carrier Corps who were the feet and hands of the army, and to all other men who served and died for their king and country in eastern Africa in the Great War

1914-1918.¹⁹

These, however, were not the only memorials erected in British Africa.

As a settler dominion, memorialisation of World War I in South Africa primarily focused on two events – the Battle of Delville Wood and the sinking of the *SS Mendi* – and also reflected the tensions and ambiguities of a newly formed country divided by racial and class conflict. South African troops suffered their largest number of casualties in Delville Wood as part of the allied [offensive on the Somme](#) in July 1916. The all-white First South African Brigade consisting of 3,153 white combatants came under heavy fire in their attempts to retain Delville Wood, with 766 killed,²⁰ and a further 2,200 injured in the fighting. In commemoration, the South African government erected a memorial on the site in France, on a plot purchased from the French. It became the South African National War Memorial and was devised by Sir [Herbert Baker \(1862-1946\)](#) before opening in 1926. The Delville Wood Commemorative Museum – erected through the efforts of the South African Military Veterans Administration – was officially opened by South African Prime Minister [Pieter Willem Botha \(1916-2006\)](#) at the site on Armistice Day in 1986. Botha headed a delegation consisting of veterans from previous South African conflicts, members of the South African Defence Force, and officials from the Bantustans to pay tribute to the fallen at Delville Wood and, as a symbol of national unity, to black and white South Africans killed while serving overseas.²¹

The high casualties at Delville Wood, along with many African demands that they too be allowed to serve, had helped encourage creation of the South African Native Labour Contingent (SANLC) starting in September 1916. The last group of SANLC recruits set sail on the *SS Mendi* from Britain en route to France, but on 21 February 1917, amidst poor visibility, the *Mendi* collided with the British steamship *SS Darro* and sank quickly. The death toll was 616 SANLC volunteers. In an unprecedented act, the all-white South African House of Assembly paid tribute to those killed. As news of the tragedy circulated in South Africa, many memorial services were held, one of the earliest an open-air event due to the large numbers of people attending. It was the first of many.

The sinking of the *Mendi* became a key event in the commemoration by black South Africans of World War I. In 1928 a resolution was taken at a gathering of the Interdenominational African Ministers Association to adopt 21 February as *Mendi* Day; this observance at first became widespread, taking on both religious and ceremonial aspects, but with the passage of time was less observed. A more concrete memorial was that at the Holybrook Memorial in Southampton, England, engraved with the names of the men lost on the *Mendi*. More than 250 men were buried or reinterred at a British military cemetery in France, which serves as an additional memorial. Memorialisation in southern Africa tended to be on a much smaller scale. A war memorial in Lesotho had engraved the names of the dead men who were

Basotho, and a similar commemoration occurred in the Transkei. In Pietersburg the women from that district planted trees with plaques engraved with the names of the men who had died from that area. At the behest of the Interdenominational African Ministers Association, a *Mendi* Memorial Scholarship Fund was set up in 1931. Not until 1986, however, were the sacrifices of the men lost on the *Mendi* acknowledged by the apartheid government when a bronze plaque was added to the South African National War Memorial in Delville Wood.²²

While the sacrifices of black participants in World War I in South Africa remained poorly acknowledged by the state for much of the 20th century, in the post-apartheid era *Mendi* commemoration was revitalized in the form of the Order of the Mendi for Bravery to honour “exceptional acts of bravery” by South Africans.²³ In addition, the government began in 2001 to build the Freedom Park in Pretoria, commemorating the sacrifice of all South Africans in each of the major conflicts in the nation’s history, including World War I.²⁴ The country also joins in the international observance of “Poppy Day” annually on 11 November, commemorating the fallen of World War I with a variety of remembrance celebrations led by the South African Legion of ex-servicemen.²⁵

Throughout the continent ex-servicemen similarly led efforts to commemorate military service during World War I. In Southern Rhodesia, however, colonial conflict between black and white Rhodesians – both before and after World War I – meant that war service was viewed in an ambivalent light, which was manifested in the way in which the war was memorialised there.²⁶ Nonetheless, the greatest impetus came at the behest of the Memorable Order of Tin Hats (commonly known as MOTH), an organization originally established in South Africa in 1927 to assist with the needs of World War I veterans. As it expanded its ambit to include other southern African territories, MOTH undertook the commemoration of both world wars by erecting monuments throughout the country. The MOTH Pork Pie Mountain Shrine in Chimanimani particularly highlighted the ambiguous legacy of war service in Southern Rhodesia. Consisting of a metal replica of a railway wagon and two soldiers, it was designed to emphasize the importance of the railway system for mobilizing troops during World War I. It was, however, ruined in the newly independent Zimbabwe as it was erroneously believed to be a commemoration of settler dominance.²⁷

The official, government-sponsored war memorial in Zimbabwe is the National Heroes Acre in Harare, which contains the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Its singular emphasis, however, is on those Zimbabweans who fought and died in the struggle against white settler domination.²⁸ There is also a Commonwealth War Graves Commission memorial in Harare

with the names of thirty-eight men from the British South Africa Police and twenty-nine soldiers of the Rhodesia Native Regiment who died in World War I.²⁹ The MOTH memorials, however, are especially important in continuing the tradition, in a non-official capacity, of honouring the fallen of the First and Second World Wars. MOTH also engages in the observation of [Poppy](#) and Remembrance Day on 11 November annually.³⁰ These different commemorative emphases by the Commonwealth, the Zimbabwean government, and MOTH symbolize the divisions of Zimbabwe's colonial past.

Similar patterns prevailed in commemorations of military service in other British colonies. In fact, since African recruits were most often organized into specific colonial regiments which frequently had an officer corps either from or tied to the specific colonies, the former officers and sometimes the territorial governments were often instrumental in extending the commemorations well beyond the norms advocated by the Imperial War Graves Commission staff. Sometimes the officers led public subscription efforts or advocated with the colonial authorities for support. More often than not, they also worked to include the names of their men who had died in wartime service on the monuments themselves.³¹

In Northern Rhodesia, a Great War Memorial was unveiled in August 1923 at Livingstone, near Victoria Falls, built on land obtained by the British South African Company. A stone structure, it recorded the names of all the white combatants who died in the conflict. The names of 102 *askari* of the Northern Rhodesia Police were recorded at the adjacent Police Memorial, which was erected by the regiment itself.³² Thirty years later the Northern Rhodesian government established the Chemeshi Memorial, near Abercorn (now Mbala) marking the spot where the German commander in East Africa was informed that the armistice had been signed in Europe three days earlier. Hence the site is also known as the Lettow-Vorbeck Memorial, as it also features a plaque in the Bemba language honouring all the soldiers who served in the war.³³ In nearby Malawi, many war graves were not well marked until years later, although a brick monument to *askari* casualties of the two Nyasaland battalions of the King's African Rifles was erected at Zomba by public subscription. It includes bronze plaques with the names of those who died during the conflict.³⁴ In 2007 the Malawi government erected a War Memorial Tower in the new capital, Lilongwe, in memory of both world wars, although without inscribing the names of soldiers who served or died.³⁵

Commemorations in British West Africa followed these same patterns, with a variety monuments erected primarily during the 1920s honouring the men of the West African Frontier Force who made the ultimate sacrifice during World War I. Most, supported by colonial governments and public subscriptions, had the individual names of the African

soldiers engraved, following a practice established for Sierra Leone where the insistence of the commanding officer of the Sierra Leone Regiment was begrudgingly agreed to by the Commission.³⁶ In Ghana, the more than 700 men of the Gold Coast Regiment were similarly commemorated by name on the Kumasi Memorial.³⁷ The more than 1,400 war dead of Nigerian regiments are commemorated, also by name, in memorials at Calabar, Ibaden, Lokoja, and Zaria; the Nigerian Memorial and Lagos Memorial commemorated an additional 2,000 soldiers. However, those memorials were dismantled and as late as 2014 are awaiting construction of a new memorial in the capital city, Abuja.³⁸ Even the small Gambia Company is commemorated in Banjul (formerly Bathurst) by a monument, erected by public subscription, listing the names of its thirty-seven casualties during World War I.³⁹

Although the Commonwealth War Graves Commission acceded to pressure from some colonial territories that names of African casualties be placed on some memorials, it did not do so everywhere. And while a small number of individual graves of Africans were maintained in some British territories, most were simply not maintained and instead allowed to be recorded as “missing.”⁴⁰ Despite these inconsistencies and deviations from its founding and long publically proclaimed egalitarian principles, the Commission has made consistent efforts to record World War I commemoration efforts in Africa. And it has made efforts to assure that even the smallest memorials and isolated graves on the continent are, as far as possible, properly maintained.

Conclusion

Commemoration of World War I in Africa was often dictated by political motives, as it was in Europe. In Africa, though, colonial commemoration was also a form of colonial propaganda – a means of glorifying the colonial project rather than the Africans who perished in the war. Africans were rarely involved in commemoration projects. In South Africa and Southern Rhodesia, especially, commemoration also reflected racial conflicts and hierarchies. On the whole the story of the commemoration of WWI in Africa mainly demonstrates that Africans found themselves involved in an alienating war due to colonial rule, linking their fate to that of another continent.

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<http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/47200/Kumasi%20Memorial> (retrieved: 10 September 2014). ↑
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Citation

Ruth Ginio, Suryakanthie Chetty: Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (Africa), in: 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer D. Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2015-06-17. DOI: [10.15463/ie1418.10666](https://doi.org/10.15463/ie1418.10666)

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Author Keywords

Demba and Dupont; Blaise Diagne; Askari; Mendi; MOTH

GND Subject Headings

[Afrika ; Weltkrieg \[1914-1918\]](#)

LC Subject Headings

[World War, 1914-1918 ; Africa](#)

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Key Person(s)

[Diagne, Blaise](#); [Kipling, Rudyard](#); [Ware, Fabian](#); [Baker, Herbert](#); [Archinard, Louis](#); [Botha, Pieter Willem](#); [Pétain, Philippe](#); [Mangin, Charles](#)

Key Location(s)

[Bamako](#); [Banjul\(Bathurst\)](#); [Abuja](#); [Abercorn \(Mbala\)](#); [Dar es Salaam](#); [Delville Wood Memorial](#); [Calabar](#); [Harare](#); [Basutoland \(Lesotho\)](#); [Livingstone](#); [Lilongwe](#); [Lokoja](#); [Lagos](#); [Ibaden](#); [Kumasi](#); [Nairobi](#); [Mombasa](#); [Pretoria](#); [Polokwane \(Polokwane\)](#); [Saint Louis](#); [Senegal](#); [Zaria](#)

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