Contributions in Black Studies
A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies

Volume 4 Article 4

8-25-2008

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Recommended Citation
Smith, Alice J. (1980) "RENE MARAN'S *BATOUALA* AND THE *PRIX-GONCOURT*," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 4, Article 4.
Available at: http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol4/iss1/4

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Alice J. Smith

RENÉ MARAN'S *BATOUALA* AND THE *PRIX-GONCOURT*

> *Civilization, civilization, pride of the Europeans and charnel-house of innocents, Rabindranath Tagore, the Hindu poet, once, at Tokio, told what you were!*
>
> *You have built your kingdom on corpses. Whatever you wish, whatever you do, you move in lies. At the sight of you, gushing tears, shrieks of agony. You are might prevailing over right. You are not a torch, you are a conflagration. You devour whatever you touch. . . .*[1]

RENÉ MARAN is the foremost black writer in the generation of DuBois outside the United States. This renown was triggered because his first novel, *Batouala,* published in 1921, received the Prix-Goncourt, the most prestigious literary award at that time in Paris. A black writer had never received the award—Maran made history. When he received the news in Africa, his initial reaction was one of surprise and disbelief while West Indians and Afro-Americans found in the novel and the award a source of pride. As for the French, some felt that the award was justified, but most were angry and outraged.

The novel immediately gained attention because of its preface which was direct, provocative, accusatory, and political. Maran felt that the preface would unveil the social and economic conditions of the inhabitants of French Equatorial Africa which could no longer be ignored by French officials. In essence, this preface criticizes the poor living conditions which caused starvation and decimation of the inhabitants of French Equatorial Africa; it questions the seriousness and capability of colonial officials representing France in Africa whom he refers to as slave drivers and France's intent to assist the area in development. Further, it makes an appeal to French writers to speak out against abuses of the native population.

Maran's reasons for writing *Batouala,* his receiving the Prix-Goncourt, as well as the implications of the success of the novel cannot be understood until they are put in the perspective of the creation of the federation of French Equatorial Africa and of Maran's relationship to that federation. After the Berlin Conference in 1884, France, through military occupation, gained sovereignty

over Gabon, Moyen-Congo, Oubangui-Chari and Tchad, which were federated in 1910 under the name of French Equatorial Africa. Maran served for thirteen years as a French Colonial Official in this federation.

The immediate consequences of this take-over in Africa was that European countries could cheaply supply the needs of the industrial revolution. Economic gain for Europe was their primary consideration. European occupation in Africa meant free land and cheap labor that could be arbitrarily exploited. France profited on a large scale from her colonies in French West Africa, and though not as much, made a substantial profit from French Equatorial Africa. She assumed that the region would be rich in easily obtainable resources but was later disappointed to find that it was extremely poor in comparison to French West Africa and to parts of Africa colonized by other European countries. Since the area was expected to support itself financially, France refused to subsidize French Equatorial Africa for the purpose of establishing suitable means of communication or for industrial advancement. As a result, the Governor of French Equatorial Africa had to rely on whatever raw materials were available for the continued functioning of the government.

The most accessible raw materials to be exploited were rubber and ivory. Since the Africans saw no value in the presence of the Europeans, they saw no reason to go out searching for rubber and ivory, neither of which had anything to do with their lives. The Governor, at that point, had to devise a method which would force them to do the work that would provide revenue necessary for the government. Officials were issued an order that they should charge the Africans a tax to be paid to the local governments. The only way these taxes could be paid was by working for the concessionary companies that had the monopolies over rubber and ivory. This created a system of forced labor which continued throughout the period of Maran's stay in Oubangui-Chari.

The companies were set up in the interior of the country which meant that good transportation was nonexistent. This lack of transportation resulted in the origin of the portage system under which natives were forced to carry large amounts of rubber long distances for little—often no—compensation. Observing these conditions, Maran shortly realized that the people of Oubangui-Chari were living under the most deplorable conditions—subject to inhuman treatment. He observed that the natives were forced to penetrate deeper and deeper into the brush to collect rubber and ivory, that they were most often guarded and compelled to work at gunpoint. This forced labor caused many natives to die either in some unhealthy region or simply from exhaustion. Because others died of starvation, the forced labor which earned them little profit resulted in the neglect of small crops that normally provided their food.[2] Maran

felt these conditions and the behavior of the colonizers were not in keeping with France's colonial policy or at least with his idea of France's colonial stand.

Maran felt that the natives were indeed in need of France's aid, and the abusive methods he observed were not beneficial to them and presented them with only examples of civilization at its worst. It was, therefore, this conflict in what France's colonial policy represented in France and to the world and what was actually taking place in French Equatorial Africa that prompted Maran to write so critical a preface to *Batouala.*

It must be remembered that Maran's position gave him no authority to change any of the rules governing the lives of the native people. As a colonial official, carrying out many of the rules and regulations of the administration, it was difficult for him to openly criticize France for fear of the repercussions. He too had to collect taxes, to impose rules with which he did not agree and must have felt trapped between the demands of French colonialism and the needs of the Africans. Although Maran believed that the presence of France in French Equatorial Africa could mean advancement for the people, he did not believe in exploitation, brutality, and destruction. As a colonial official, the authority Maran had over the lives of the people was contained within the limits of the colonial system—he had no authority to change the system or the laws. But, the sure way of attracting attention to the problems in Africa he thought was through literature.

Maran was quite aware of the implications for France on an international level of raising the question about the treatment of Blacks:

> My book is not a polemic. It comes, by chance, when its hour strikes. The Negro question is of the present. Who made it so? Why, the Americans. Why, the press campaigns on the other side of the Rhine. . . . And wasn't it you, *Eve,* you curious little one, who, at the beginning of the year while you were still a daily, carried on an investigation to find our whether a white woman might properly marry a Negro?
>
> Since then, Jean Finot published articles in the *Revue* on the employment of black troops. Since then, Dr. Huot devoted to the Negroes a study in the *Mercure de France.* Since then, *Les Lettres* have told of their martyrization in the United States.[3]

Maran's preface to *Batouala* was his way of speaking out against what he saw as unfair treatment of Africans in French Equatorial Africa. The fact that forced labor is criticized decisively in the preface of *Batouala* as well as in the novel itself and that the theme reoccurs in Maran's other novels indicate that protest must have been one of his motives for writing *Batouala.* Referring to the region about which he writes, he says:

> Seven years have been enough to work complete ruin. Villages have grown fewer and farther between, the plantations have disappeared, the goats and poultry have been exterminated. As for the natives, they were broken down by incessant toil, for which they were not paid, and were robbed of even the time to sow their crops. They saw disease come and take up its abode with them, saw famine stalk their land, saw their numbers grow less and less.[4]

Because of Maran's early life and cultural background, he did not arrive in Africa immediately taking up the cause of Africans or regarding them as his black brothers. Maran was a Frenchman who believed that France's policy of humanism was not being carried out. He was a black man born on November 5, 1887, at Fort-de-France, Martinique. His parents were natives of French Guiana who were living in Martinique where his father held a minor position in the French Governmental system. A few years later, his father was transferred to French Equatorial Africa where he took his family. Maran was placed in a lycée in France.

Upon completing the baccalaureate, he joined the colonial service in 1909 and at the age of 22 arrived in Oubangui-Chari. He began his book in 1912, and after six years of writing and rewriting the story of a Banda chief of Oubangui-Chari, Maran sent it to Henri de Régnier in January of 1920. De Régnier was so impressed that he immediately set out to find a publisher for the manuscript. On March 17, 1921, Maran sent a letter to a friend in Paris, Manuel Gahisto, announcing that his novel had been accepted by an important publishing company in France, Albin Michel. This acceptance was to mark the beginning of a new era from both a literary and political point of view. But the publication of *Batouala* in 1921 was only the beginning of the big controversy that would shake France politically and upset the literary world. The real criticism and disbelief occurred when the novel on December 15, 1921, was awarded the Prix-Goncourt.

Many people, especially French critics, disagreed with the Goncourt committee feeling Maran did not deserve the award. The fact that this coveted prize had gone to a black writer, hardly known at that time in literary circles, triggered many initial responses of disbelief. These criticisms of the committee's choice fell into two categories. The first of these was that the novel lacked literary value, therefore, was unworthy of the Goncourt Prize. The second was that the award should not be given for a book the preface of which bitterly denounced France's colonial policy in Africa.

One critic, Edmond Jaloux, wrote in 1922 in very strong opposition to Maran's receiving the Goncourt prize. He considered *Batouala* mediocre, and expressed the belief that other prominent writers who had never received the

prize had been treated unjustly, among them André Gide, Jean Giraudoux, André Salmon and François Mauriac. He further expressed the opinion that the book was accidental and because of its lack of literary merit would soon be forgotten:

> Je regrette profondément que l'Académie Goncourt ait donné son prix à Batouala de M. René Maran. Elle a montré par son choix, une fois de plus, la difficulté qu'elle éprouve à guider l'opinion et elle l'a montré fâcheusement au moment même où ses édits sont de plus en plus écoutés et où elle attire sur son élu un succès d'autant plu formidable qu'il est le plus souvent sans lendemain car c'est une de ses manies que de couronner un livre le plus souvent bizarre et accidentel, et non un homme dont le passé puisse déjà engager l'avenir.[5]

Jaloux insinuated that *Batouala* was substandard because it was a mere imitation of naturalism, an outmoded style. He felt that the *Académie Goncourt* had selected *Batouala* because it was a novelty resulting from the kinds of people it portrayed and their manners and customs; but, in his opinion, there was nothing new in the way in which they were portrayed. Concerning the lack of literary value, Jaloux stated:

> Disons d'abord que c'est un roman médiocre, profondément médiocre, pareil à cent livres qui paraissent chaque année; sa seule originalité vient des choses qu'il peint et non de la peinture assez banale qu'il en fait. A vrai dire, il n'y a même pas roman, c'est -à-dire sujet, développement, progression, mais une série de peintures de moeurs que termine un accident. Certains de ses tableaux sont vifs et prestement enlevés, certaines de ses scènes biens traitées, mais ce ne sont pas là de ces qualités qui mettent un livre hors de pair.[6]

Another critic, Henri Bidou, felt that Maran had been much too general in his attack on colonial officials, unjustly attributing the attitudes of some officials to all. For him, the price of civilization is sometimes costly but most often has its positive side which Maran refused to mention. Bidou felt the novel received recognition more because it fell in the tradition of the *roman colonial* than its literary value:

> Si j'ai insisté sur ces idées fondamentales du livre, c'est qu'elles coïncident, dans ce qu'elles ont de plus médiocrement littéraire, avec les tendances qui étaient celles de l'école réaliste aux environs de 1880, et qui sont encore en partie celles de l'académie Goncourt. On jouait au massacre, et les poupées étaient le magistrat, le bourgeois, le militaire, le colon. De cette littérature coloniale, la première manifestation a été, je crois, *Une Blanche,* et la dernière *Les Sauterelles,* de M. Fabre. Le livre de M. Maran est dans cette tradition, et c'est là, sans doute, une des raisons qui l'ont fait choisir. Je distingue mal les autres. Car les autres éléments du livre sont médiocres. La description des moeurs est souvent amusante, mais ne dépasse pas en mérite

> celle qu'on rencontre dans tant de récits de voyageurs qui n'ont jamais prétendu à l'honneur des lettres. Et quant à la forme, elle est sans valeur.[7]

Many other critics condemned Maran's *Batouala* as a book of hatred and expressed the belief that a black man was being rewarded for indicting civilization. The refusal to accept the fact that *Batouala* had earned the award stemmed from these critics' belief that Maran had no right to upset the status quo. The novel had started something big by opening up new avenues for debates, for research and investigation on what was going on in Oubangui-Chari. French colonial methods, as a result of the publicity, were equally threatened in other French possessions. This type of publicity would cause France's policy of humanism to be questioned and could cause considerable embarrassment on an international level. Therefore, the aim of this criticism was more to thwart any negative impact on the French colonial image than to convince the public of the novel's lack of literary value.

The response to *Batouala,* which critics had hoped to negate, proves that Maran deserves much credit for having brought to world attention the living conditions of the Africans in French Equatorial Africa, and for arousing the interest and concern of other French writers in revealing these conditions. André Gide was one of the writers whose interest was aroused. In 1925 he travelled in French Equatorial Africa and published a book, *Voyage au Congo* (1927), in which he verified Maran's earlier accusations of maltreatment of Africans. Gide also published articles in the *Revue de Paris* concerning the poor conditions under which the Africans were forced to live.[8] The *Revue de Paris* was not the only journal that became interested in the situation in French Equatorial Africa. *Le Petit Parisien* sent Albert Londres, one of its reporters, to investigate and, as a result, he published a book entitled *Terre d'ébène* in which he was far more critical than even Gide had been. Londres' report caused a similar scandal as Maran's earlier publication of *Batouala.* He blamed the local governments' practices of forced labor for the high mortality rates of the indigenous population. According to him, thousands of natives lost their lives as a result of a lack of modern machinery. Many others, he charged, escaped death by running to neighboring regions.

Gide had gone to Africa and verified Maran's accusations, Londres was sent to verify Gide's and later in 1929, *Le Temps* and *Le Matin* sent reporters who were to verify Londres' reports. Maran wanted to arouse public interest in France's overseas colonies by writing *Batouala* and it is evident that he was successful.

Batouala, therefore, marks an era in that, before its publication, no one had dared reveal, the desolate social conditions of the Africans resulting from the

methods of colonialism. *Batouala* revealed it to the world. The novel, translated into other languages, became a best seller in Russia and Japan and important to the black peoples of the Americas. Because of a manifestation of a spirit of awakening, and the beginning of a new consciousness and awareness among black people, the response to *Batouala* by Black-American writers was the opposite of that expressed by French critics. The black philosopher and critic, Alain L. Locke believed that *Batouala* was a literary success and had made a significant break in the manner in which blacks were treated in French literature:

> Before Maran, it was either landscape with the native incidentally thrown in as a conventionalized figure, or the life of the white colonial with the native as an artistic foil. Even more so than in the American school of fiction was the native in colonial literature merely a dark note by which the false highlights of the painting were keyed up; or as General Anglovant aptly puts it—"In most of the novels, the Negro plays but a secondary part—appearing only to enhance the interest of the story by acting as a foil to European characters described in the romance or drama." But a revolutionary change has occurred—there is a strong interest in human portraiture of native life in and of itself, and without the bold realism of *Batouala* this never would have been.[9]

Locke emphasized the revolutionary change that *Batouala* represented in comparison to other colonial novels and saw Maran portraying life from the African perspective. In comparison to other colonial literature, Locke felt that Maran's novel had broken new ground. The stereotyped black was being replaced by a more human character faced with more human situations.

Because of the respect that *Batouala* had earned for him, Maran was able to publish articles in two of the most prestigious Black-American journals of the time, *Crisis* edited by W. E. B. DuBois, and *Opportunity* edited by Charles S. Johnson. In addition, the *Crisis* ran several articles praising *Batouala* and it's receiving the Goncourt Prize. Black-American intellectuals praised Maran for his denunciation of French colonialization which they felt would be effective in eliminating colonial abuses while drawing additional attention, in general, to the many social problems facing black people in this country. While Black-Americans felt that *Batouala* represented a very important break from the traditional manner in which blacks had been portrayed in colonial literature, they were more interested in the political implications of the novel as were the French critics and the Goncourt committee. Black-Americans saw *Batouala* as a supporter of their cause while French critics and the Goncourt committee were concerned with France's image.

The awarding of the Goncourt prize to *Batouala* must be seen in the context

of contemporary developments that were bringing black people more than ever to the attention of the world—developments that also justified a special relationship between France and the Africans. For a clearer comprehension of these contemporary developments, it is necessary that two important political events involving Africa and the Africans be considered. First, it is important that one understand the implications of the participants of black Africa in World War I and second, the consequences of the French role in the first Pan-African Congress. The importance of African participation in World War I and the emergence of the ideas that led to the concept of Pan-Africanism has a direct bearing on Maran's novel receiving the *Prix-Goncourt* in 1921. It should be remembered that I am in no way underestimating the literary value of this novel but simply re-emphasizing the fact that there were political reasons why the *Académie Goncourt* awarded the prize to Maran.

Batouala made its appearance just at the moment when blackness was not only in vogue but in high demand. Although France had profited from her possessions in Africa, the outbreak of the war (1914–18) necessitated a different kind of relationship between France and Africa. France needed Africa for the troops available to participate in the fighting. Black troops had been used by France in European imperialist wars since the middle of the nineteenth century with the formation of the Senegalese infantry. But during this period, these troops were used, for the most part, for the conquest of territory in Black Africa and on occasion in other wars such as those taking place in Northern Africa. As time passed, more and more African troops were recruited since it was soon realized that these tactics would allow many Frenchmen to be exempted from war.

Jean-Suret Canale states in his book, *French Colonialism in Tropical Africa, 1900–1945:*

> A decree of 1912 facilitated the creation of this "black army"; natives between twenty and twenty-eight years of age could be recruited by conscription for a period of four years, in case of a shortage of volunteers. Recruitment in the years preceding the war reached between 8,000 and 10,000 men per year.[10]

From the fall of 1914, troops from French West Africa, Morocco and Algeria were not only sent to Europe but were immediately put into battle. The following year an even larger number of troops were especially recruited for the Senegalese infantry to serve outside of French West Africa largely because the terms of the recruitment were made much more enticing:

> The period of engagement was to be deducted from the time of compulsory service and those taken on were to receive a call-up premium of 200 francs.

> By this time another 51,000 men were recruited in 1916, half of them from the traditional recruiting regions, Senegal and Sudan. In 1917, seventeen Senegalese batallions were engaged in the battle of the Somme. The total number of infantrymen recruited had been 120,000. Much was said about the terror they would cause the Germans and this disregard for danger which made it possible to use them largely as "sacrificial" troops in places where the French were beginning to refuse to march.[11]

Possession of part of Africa was becoming extremely beneficial to France's position in the World War since it was a source of immediately available men to be slaughtered in Europe. For a brief period in 1917 recruitment ceased; but at the beginning of 1918, as the need arose, it was resumed, and of course, the conditions were made more enticing than ever. Men who joined the military services were exempted from taxes, certain allowances were made for their families, under certain conditions one could be granted French citizenship and an ex-soldier was guaranteed employment upon returning to his native country. The year 1918 also brought another important change. Whereas up to 1917 soldiers had been recruited from French West Africa, in January 1918, troops were also recruited from French Equatorial Africa.

With the reopening of the recruitment in 1918, other methods were devised for the purpose of intensifying the already alluring and positive aspects of enlistment. In addition to the improved conditions for enlistees, Blaise Diagne, a black deputy from Senegal, born on the Island of Gorée, was appointed cabinet minister by Clemenceau to increase these enlistments. Diagne's appointment was not without psychological effect, his high position inspiring Africans with the possibility of their own advancement within the French state. Diagne's mission was most successful:

> With the help of the Diagne mission, 63,000 supplementary soldiers were recruited in 1918. Of the 211,000 recruited in all, of whom 163,952 took part in the battle in European theaters of war, an official announcement listed 24,762 who had "died for France," not taking into account the innumerable "missing," whose deaths could not be registered.[12]

Diagne himself saw no contradiction in his recruiting Africans to fight in a European war because he himself was a black Frenchman and felt that enlistment was a means by which Africans could rise within the colonial structure. It is also possible that Diagne recognized that Africans would inevitably be recruited or compelled to fight and that it was better that he, a black man, was in charge of their recruitment, thus in a position to demand certain rights for them.

The figures on the number of black troops participating in the war symbolize the magnitude of France's indebtedness to her colonies. At the beginning of the war, Africans were rather enthusiastic about the possibility of war, but after

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letters from friends who were to die and the return of mutilated bodies, they no longer held the illusion that this European war was similar to wars in Africa which they had fought. Further, this recruitment intensified an already difficult situation at home. Its taking the youngest and most able men away left the people at home to continue paying taxes and cultivating the lands. Largely because of this, revolts broke out as early as 1914 and many people escaped the recruiters by running countries outside French jurisdiction. All Africans, however, were not critical of France for some felt it their duty to fight for France, the "mother country," just as Diagne, as Cabinet Minister, felt that as subjects of France, these people had not merely a right but an obligation to participate in her defense.

As for France, she realized her need for blacks was more than that for laborers. This need for extra troops and for people like Diagne who could appeal to the sentiment of black troops was a deciding factor in changing France's relationship with Africa. The war, through recruitment, had created an African elite, that is, a group of people who considered themselves different and more advanced than people who had not participated in the war. They were in fact different since after their return home they were guaranteed minor positions in the French Governmental system. These soldiers had done France a great service and, in turn, as compensation, France gave them a greater opportunity to participate in the French way of life. It was to France's advantage to grant a few rights (through French citizenship) to a few people in exchange for the economic gains she made in Africa and for the participation of thousands of black troops in the war.

After the war, Black Africa's position in the world underwent serious change and the publication of *Batouala* helped to bring about this change to the extent that it was instrumental in directing attention towards Black Africa. France knew that her debt to Africans was great, that she had used every possible scheme to recruit African troops with the knowledge that many would be employed sacrificially. Often these troops were not properly trained: one French officer told an Englishman travelling in French Equatorial Africa that it took only twenty-eight days to train an African to be a soldier. Even one who has just been caught "wild" could be taught to carry a rifle and to obey commands within a month because that was all they were expected to know. *Batouala* and the awarding of the *Prix Goncourt* related to the black troops in two different ways. The novel itself criticized the recruitment of Africans to fight in a European war which did not concern them and of which they knew little. Maran is said, further, to have criticized Blaise Diagne for the part he played in the recruiting and as a result ended up in court.[13] Secondly, the awarding of the prize

to a black man was France's way of furthering the cause of assimilation and of compensating black troops.

The awarding of the Prix Goncourt and *Batouala* related to Blacks in still another important way. The novel raised the question of the mistreatment of Blacks under the colonial system. This mistreatment was not just taking place in Africa because many Afro-Americans were also suffering from various forms of oppression in other parts of the world. Just as Africans participating in the war found that they were discriminated against by the French, Black-Americans, returning home from war, found themselves in an even worse situation than the Africans.

The Black-American soldier realized upon his return that he remained a victim of racism. And, apart from the black veteran, Blacks in general had to endure many unfair conditions. As a result, black leaders sought measures to eliminate these acts of discrimination through the collective efforts of peoples of African descent, feeling that, though time and history had made them different, they remain one by the common denominator of heritage and by their relationship to whites. While Africans were faced with the problems of recruitment and colonialism, black people in the United States had to face an even greater problem which they felt could be partially resolved through conferences where public complaints and demands could be made.

Even before the beginning of the First World War, steps had been taken to better the social conditions of black people in the United States through the formation of such organizations as the American Negro Academy (1897), the Niagara Movement (1906) and the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (1909). W. E. B. DuBois, along with other Blacks, believed that the plight of those in America would be improved with the aid of American white liberals.

Later observing that the living conditions of Blacks had not improved nor were there any significant social or political changes to advance such improvement, DuBois realized that the idea of Blacks being saved by American Whites was something of an illusion and that Blacks themselves would have to initiate the instruments of their own advancement. DuBois began to focus his attention on Africa and on the colonial situation. He felt that Black-Americans should speak out in defense of Africa and against the continued abuse of Africans by the Western World. His plan was a Pan-African Conference to be held at the same time as the peace conference after World War I. DuBois's intention was to present a petition to the peace conference concerning the rights of Blacks not only in Africa but in the Americas as well.

One of the major problems to be solved was the location for such a confer-

ence. Realizing that such a meeting would prove extremely embarrassing before other major world powers, the United States Government was opposed to the conference. Black troops who fought in the war had been carefully segregated from the white troops, and the United States encouraged the French to adopt the same policy toward the African troops. It was important to America that black troops not get any notion of equality with their white counterparts. Given these conditions and attitudes, it is clear that the United States would not host such a conference. Germany certainly would not agree to hold a Pan-African conference given her position toward black troops and the fact that her African colonies had been lost through the Treaty of Versailles for excessive exploitation and inhuman atrocities.

France saw an opportunity to seize upon the bad posture of other countries by allowing the Pan-African Conference to be held in Paris, on February 19–21, 1919. She wanted to guarantee her good will by granting this permission and at the same time to control the general attitude expressed about her colonial relationships. Clemenceau not only urged Blaise Diagne to attend the conference but to sing loud praises of the advantages of French colonization. Was not Diagne himself an example of France's idea of "égalité"? He was a black man with a seat in the chamber of deputies. Diagne was made president of the conference and the actual concerns presented at the conference appear to have been rather moderate. There were demands that the German colonies be turned over to some international body. The conference also demanded certain specific rights for Africans: the right to education and to land ownership. It also expressed opposition to slavery and forced labor demanding they be abolished. While the conference also expressed a concern for the condition of Black-Americans, no specific complaints were lodged against the rule of the French colonies probably because of Blaise Diagne's presence and involvement.

It was not by chance that Diagne was made president of the conference since France was the host country. He appears to have participated expressly to praise French colonial rule. An article in the *Crisis* on "The Pan-African Congress" indicates how the French made use of Diagne's presence:

> The chairman of foreign affairs for France emphasized the fact that the sentiment of France on equality and liberty, irrespective of color, was shown by the fact that she had six colored representatives in the French Chamber, one of whom was the distinguished Chairman of the Congress, M. Diagne, who served on his committee. Even before the revolution, France had pursued the same policy.[14]

Even if France's position in Africa was not ideal, she could still be praised especially when compared with the United States and its treatment of Blacks. To the

great surprise of the Black Americans who were present at the second conference meeting in London, Brussels and Paris, Diagne again serving as president continued to praise France. Jessie Fausset wrote in the *Crisis* in 1921 about the meeting in Brussels:

> For three days we listened to pleasant generalities without a word of criticism of colonial governments, without a murmur of complaint of Black Africa, with a suggestion that this was an international congress called to define and make intelligible the greatest set of wrongs against human beings that the modern world has known. We realize of course how delicate the Belgian situation was and how sensitive a conscience the nation had because of the atrocities of the Léopold régime. We knew the tremendous power of capital organized to exploit the Congo; but despite this we proposed before the congress was over to voice the wrongs of Negroes temperately but clearly. We assumed of course that this was what Belgium expected, but we reckoned without our hosts in a very literal sense. Indeed, as we afterward found, we were reckoning without our own presiding officer, for without doubt, Diagne, on account of his high position in the French Government, had undoubtedly felt called on to assure the Belgian Government that no "radical" step would be taken by the congress.[15]

Again, Diagne's main purpose was to smooth over the colonial situation thus thwarting its real purpose. Later when the conference moved to Paris, there was no real change in the speeches presented by the French officials:

> The situation in Paris was less tense, one felt the difference between monarchy and republic. But again the American was temporarily puzzled. Even allowing for natural differences of training and tradition, it seemed absurd to have the floor given repeatedly to speakers who dwelt on the glories of France and the honor of being a Frenchman, when what we and most of those humble delegates wanted to learn was about us.[16]

This difficulty on the part of the Black-American to understand the position taken by the Black Frenchmen was due to the differences in the social and political pressures undergone by each group. These Frenchmen present at the conference, such as Blaise Diagne and Candace, the French Deputy from Guadeloupe, were indeed proud to be Frenchmen because, through assimilation, they had become part of a system that had not expressed as much hatred toward Blacks as had the American system. In their minds, France had honored them by accepting them as Frenchmen whereas Black-Americans were not allowed to enter into the mainstream of American life. Even in the United States, black French troops could enter hotels and restaurants that were forbidden to Black-Americans.

It must be recognized that France's attitude toward Blacks had been more liberal, more understanding than that of other countries involved in the war

during which subjects and citizens from overseas territories fought side by side with the French of France and considered themselves children of France. In Guadeloupe today, there is a monument that has the inscription: "La Guadeloupe a ses enfants morts pour la France." Similar monuments can be found in Martinique and French Guiana. The fact that by 1918 France had a black African Cabinet Minister demonstrates that there was a difference in the laws and policies of France concerning Blacks from the laws of other countries. For instance, in the United States it would have been impossible for a black person to hold a position in Wilson's administration at the same level as that held by Blaise Diagne.

The basic difference between France and the United States is that in the United States Blacks had to organize, demonstrate and vote for certain legislation that would give them certain rights whereas in France every citizen was by law granted certain rights. Perhaps one can say, in retrospect, that France's treatment of her subjects and citizens in the colonies left a lot to be desired, but the fact remains that each time a black man was named governor, deputy or cabinet minister, Blacks saw this promotion as proof that France was not racist and that a black man had the same opportunity as Whites. Because these Blacks regarded themselves as French, with all the rights and opportunities of the French, it was very easy for them to praise French colonial rule to the great astonishment of Black-Americans.

The colonial exposition at Marseilles, held in 1922, was another example of France's attempt to praise her colonies and to show them respect. France was proud of the vastness of her possessions and was admired by the world. Many phases of colonial life were covered as it was important to France that the world know how the country had positively affected her colonies. She was grateful to her colonies for having come to her aid during the time of war and expressed that gratitude:

> A room is devoted to the Great War and the part played therein by the colonies. Above the entrance is written: "Our colonials, from the depths of the thickets, warmed the hearts of the French during peace with that flame of heroism, the rays of which during the war shone upon the world." On one side of the room, a monument to "the dead, the wounded, the mutilated, the mobilized." On the other side, the painting of a cemetery where cross on cross marks the resting place of native Frenchmen, and French colonials sleeping side by side; in the room ahead, a panorama representing the Senegalese taking Douamont, the 24th of October, 1916; everywhere, paintings, photographs, standards, all paying tribute to the service rendered to France by her colonies during the war.[17]

It was through this kind of exposition, the awarding of prizes such as the Gon-

court to Maran and the awarding of high positions to black Frenchmen, that colonials felt that they were truly a part of France, honored and accepted by her.

Despite France's showing a certain degree of devotion to her colonies and recognizing that the overseas citizens had rights, the Pan-African Conferences still served as a catalyst and as an effective element influencing the manner in which she regarded her overseas citizens after World War I. I believe, for instance, that Maran's receiving the Prix-Goncourt was, in large part, due to the general mood and atmosphere created by the Pan-African Conference of 1919. Maran's novel, published after the first Pan-African Conference, received the award more because of its political thrust than because of any particular literary merit the novelpossesses. The Goncourt committee hoped that such an award would diminish the negative criticism present in Maran's preface and that implied in the novel itself.

If the conference had accomplished no other goal, it at least brought to the attention of the world the disapproval by peoples of African descent, of the humiliation, the degradation and the oppression of Blacks everywhere. It was a symbol of the collective determination of Blacks coming from all parts of the globe. It was a sign of strength and of the emergence of a unified black protest—meaning that Blacks had made a positive step towards a rejection of oppression that had to be recognized by Whites. Albert Darnal in *Hommage à René Maran* speaks of a dinner he attended at the home of Mme. Alphonse Daudet where Gustave Geffroy, president of the Académie Goncourt, was present. At this gathering in 1923, Geffroy stated: "Nous avons voulu, en décernant le prix-Goncourt à un nègre, honorer une race devouée à la France." [18] Pierre Paraf also spoke of the connection between Africans who had died in the war and Maran's receiving the Goncourt prize:

> Dans la France de 1921, celle de la victoire où sur les tombes des cimetières du front ed de l'arrière les stèles africaines se mêlaient aux croix des soldats de la métropole, dans la république impériale où les meilleurs ne voyaient alors de solution à la grande injustice coloniale que dans l'égalité assimilatrice, l'auteur de Batouala a fait passer un souffle nouveau.[19]

The award to Maran was France's way of saying that all Frenchmen are the same and that if peoples of the colonies raise themselves to the same educational and cultural level as the French of France, they were given the consideration. Gustave Geffroy, also wrote in *La Dépeche de Toulouse* in 1921 that Maran would have the opportunity to take *Batouala* to the next Pan-African Conference:

> Tel est ce livre si rare, dont il Faut scruter la contexture, la manière profonde et forte avec laquelle tous les récits, les explications, les descriptions

> sont maintenus dans le cercles noir avec la vérité de l'horizon, des détails de vie, des sentiments de personnages, tout juste expimés en mots et en tournures qui ne dépassent pas l'entendement et la poésie des Noirs. Au prochain congrès Pan-Noir ce chef-d'oeuvre de roman, ce document ethnique, pourront être apportés par M. René Maran, et reçus comme le tribut d'un artiste offert à l'enquête sur une humanité inconnue.[20]

That the Prix-Goncourt had been awarded to a black man for a novel the preface of which criticized France's colonial methods would, the French thought, show the advocates of Pan-Africanism that France dealt fairly with all of its citizens. In seventeen years of existence, the prize had never been awarded to a black writer. Maran's receiving it was meant to serve as a symbol of change and of the recognition that Blacks received in France.

Maran's presence at the next Pan-African Conference, as the black author who received the Prix-Goncourt for *Batouala,* would serve the same purpose as Blaise Diagne's and that of other Black Frenchmen at the Pan-African Congresses. From France's perspective, the emphasis would shift from the preface of the novel and from colonial abuses to Maran, the black writer who received one of France's most coveted literary honors. Clearly, even though *Batouala* received a literary award and definitely made an important literary contribution, the Goncourt committee was more concerned with its political than literary value.

NOTES

[1] René Maran, *Batouala* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1921), p. 10.

[2] This treatment of the Africans is first documented by Maran in the preface of *Batouala,* later by André Gide in his *Voyage au Congo* (1927) and also in other articles published by Gide with the assistance of Léon Blum. See also two studies on French Equatorial Africa: Virginia Thompson and Richard Adloff, *The Emerging State of French Equatorial Africa* (California: Stanford University Press, 1960); Pierre Kalck, *Histoires de la république centrafricaine* (Paris: Éditions Bergen-Levrault, 1974).

[3] *Batouala,* p. 10.

[4] *Batouala,* p. 17.

[5] Edmond Jaloux, "Le Prix Goncourt," *La Revue Hebdomadaire,* 1 (Jan. 1922), 106.

[6] Jaloux, 107.

[7] Henri Bidou, "Parmi les livres," *La Revue de Paris,* 7 (January–February, 1922), 400.

[8] Thompson and Adloff in their book, *The Emerging States of French Equatorial Africa* wrote about an article in which Gide denounces colonial abuses:

> In an article reminiscent of Zola *J'accuse,* published in the *Revue de Paris* of October 15, 1927, Gide lashed out against the concessionary regime in general and the Compagnie Forestière du Sangha-Oubangui in particular. In this and other writings, Gide told and retold the ghastly events that had transpired in the Boda region when he

was there and of which he had sent a detailed account to the then governor-general of the federation. Gide described a local prison, half of whose inmates had been killed by physical punishment and poor food, the forcing of women and children to work under grim conditions to maintain a road used only for the company manager's and administrator's weekly trips to market, and the evils of portage, which was hopelessly underpaid and which—along with the forced gathering of rubber—led to the neglect of food crops and the displacement of whole villages. Specifically he denounced the administration of Boda, who had condemned defaulting rubber gatherers to run round and round the market place under a molten sky until they fell to the ground, where they were beaten by guards so that "the dance could go on."

[9] Alain Locke, "The Colonial Literature of Greater France," *Opportunity* (November, 1923), p. 331.

[10] Jean-Suret Canale, *French Colonialism in Tropical Africa 1900–1945* (London: C. Hurst and Company, 1971).

[11] Canale, p. 136..

[12] Canale, p. 138.

[13] See DuBois's article, "World of Color." pp. 428–29.

[14] DuBois, "The Pan-African Congress," *The Crisis,* 17–18 (1919), 271.

[15] Jessie Fausset, "Impressions of the Second Pan-African Congress," *The Crisis,* 22–23, (1921–22), 14.

[16] Fausset, p. 16.

[17] William S. Nelson, "The French Colonial Exposition at Marseilles," *The Crisis,* 24–25 (1922–23), 17.

[18] *Hommage à René Maran* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1965), p. 77.

[19] *Hommage,* p. 223.

[20] *Hommage,* p. 202.

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