

**Written submission from Robert Lemkin, Old Street Films/LemKino Pictures, producer of film
'African Apocalypse' (UK/Niger, 2020) on the colonisation of Niger**

**to the Thematic Report of the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice,
reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence**

**concerning Transitional justice measures to address the legacy of serious violations of human
rights and humanitarian law committed in colonial contexts**

to be submitted to the 76th session of the UN General Assembly in October 2021

My submission relates to the work I did in producing a 90-minute documentary film, *African Apocalypse*¹, about the French colonial invasion of what is now Niger in 1899. This expedition was called the Mission Afrique Centrale (MAC) and it was led by Captain Paul Voulet and Lieutenant Julien Chanoine. Its aim was to take control of Lake Chad. In Niger it is commonly known as the Mission Voulet-Chanoine.

The film is based on research and filming my team and I undertook in Niger in 2015², 2018 and 2019³. This was supplemented by extensive archive research in Britain and at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM) in Aix-en-Provence, France.

I have helped to co-ordinate several other submissions in relation to this thematic report, namely those by the communities of Dioundiou, May Jirgui and Lougou; and by two individuals: Hosseini Tahirou Amadou, formerly of Dioundiou; and Professor Ibro Abdou of Birnin Konni.

The actions of the MAC in 1899 are among the most violent in the history of Europe's colonial conquest of Africa, Asia and America. Tens of thousands of Hausa and Zerma people were killed, brutalised, put to flight (in many cases permanently) from their homes. In part this was a result of strong resistance by Hausa communities, who fought without the support of firepower⁴. Hearing of the atrocities, the French government sent an officer, Colonel Klobb, to relieve Voulet of his command – principally to ensure the conquest of Lake Chad was achieved as quickly as possible.

Voulet encountered Klobb and killed him. He planned to turn MAC henceforth into his own freelance expedition. African tirailleurs serving in MAC mutinied and killed Voulet. MAC was then resumed and completed by junior French officers. Lake Chad was claimed for France later that year.

Voulet and the MAC have been the subject of several books of non-fiction and fiction and some films⁵. Despite this the MAC remains a little-known story in France and elsewhere.

¹ <https://africanapocalypsefilm.com/> Film premiered at the BFI London Film Festival, October 2020 and is due for first broadcast on BBC Television in May 2021.

² Team 2015: Robert Lemkin, Assan Ag Midal, Sani Magori, Jolijn Geels, Siradji Bakabé, Hamza Gaoh.

³ Team 2018/9: Robert Lemkin, Femi Nylander, Sani Magori, Assan Ag Midal, Amina Weira, Jolijn Geels, Abdoulaye Mato Adamou, Claude Garnier.

⁴ Fuglestad, Finn. "A propos de travaux récents sur la mission Voulet-Chanoine." *Outre-Mers. Revue d'histoire* 67, no. 246 (1980): 73-87.

⁵ Yahaya, Ibrahim. *L'expédition coloniale Voulet-Chanoine dans les livres et à l'écran*. Editions L'Harmattan, 2013.

In our film, *African Apocalypse*, we discover that the historical memory of the MAC is still extraordinarily strong in Niger among communities that live along the route of the mission's murderous trail. It should be noted that Niger's principal highway, Route Nationale 1, follows the MAC route almost exactly.

1 Accountability

There were small informal investigations of MAC's early massacres which prompted the dispatch of Klobb. After the killing of Voulet, a military inquiry in Zinder in August 1899 was conducted by Captain Marc Pallier and Lieutenant Octave Meynier.

Some papers from this inquiry were held for many years by the military archives at Vincennes but are now held in ANOM. Others were sent to the regional Governor-General in Dakar. When the celebrated French historian Jean Suret-Canale tried to investigate the affair in the 1950s he found files held in France 'considerably purged' with many files empty. He had to rely on a colleague in Dakar where the weeding process had been less extensive⁶.

The MAC's quartermaster Georges Tourot reports in his memoir that Pallier exhumed the bodies of Voulet and Chanoine in May Jirgui (where their grave still lies) in order to recover their personal papers⁷. These papers have not survived.

Furthermore, two French military officers on the MAC (Meynier and Paul Joalland) wrote memoirs that were only allowed to be published decades later and with censorship by the French authorities⁸.

No public inquiry has even been undertaken either in Niger or France into the alleged abuses and serious violations of international humanitarian law committed by the MAC.

In 1904 territory seized violently by the MAC was ceded *inter alia* by Britain to France in return for fishing rights off the coast of Newfoundland in the north Atlantic⁹. In other words, far from there being any accountability for the MAC's alleged crimes, the French state acquired land seized through such crimes. The border thus created obtained throughout the colonial period; and still forms today's border between Niger and Nigeria.

In a filmed statement included in *African Apocalypse*, the Sultan of Birnin Konni says that Voulet's actions in his town (where he says that between 7,000 and 15,000 inhabitants were massacred) were a "Crime Against Humanity, which remains unpunished to this day, and which today would be referred to the International Criminal Court (ICC) at the Hague".

⁶ Suret-Canale, Jean. *Afrique noire occidentale et centrale: Crise du système colonial et capitalisme monopoliste d'Etat*. Vol. 3. Éditions sociales, 1972

⁷ Tourot, Georges. *La griffe du destin*. FeniXX, 1993.

⁸ Suret-Canale, Jean. *Op. cit.* Meynier, Octave. *Les conquérants du Tchad: avec six gravures hors texte et carte*. E. Flammarion, 1923. Meynier Octave. *La Mission Joalland-Meynier*. Editions de l'Empire français, Paris, 1947. Joalland, Paul. *Le drame de Dankori : Mission Voulet-Chanoine. Mission Joalland-Meynier*. Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1930.

⁹ Hertslet, Sir E. *The map of Africa by treaty*. Routledge, 2019; Nylander, F and Lemkin, R *Will Macron's new commission face up to all of France's colonial atrocities?* Guardian 16.2.2021

2 Establishment of Truth

No official inquiry into the truth of the alleged gross violations of human rights and serious violations of humanitarian law has ever been undertaken by either the colonial power France or the Republic of Niger.

However, the Nigerien communities that were brutalised have over generations undertaken their own informal inquiries at a community level.

Some of these are documented in other submissions (referred to above) for this thematic report.

Others that are not so included, but that were documented in course of our film production process include:

Koran Kalgo: a remote hamlet north of Tessaoua where the MAC executed 150 women and children after a battle in July 1899.

Two villagers, Naino Maraya and Moussa Ali, found several bullet cartridges in their fields in the 1980s. We sent a picture of one cartridge (Fig. 1) to military expert Curtis Steinhauer of Cartridge Corner¹⁰



Fig 1.



Fig 2.



Fig 3.

He wrote: The numbers on the bottom are the date...4-85, meaning April, 1885.

Art is the model of cartridge, made for artillery division.

D is the manufacturer. Societe Electromecanique of Dives, France (see Fig 2)

EG is the company that supplied metal for the casing: Eschger, Ghesquière & Cie, Four Biache St Vaast, France. (see Fig 3)

Moussa Ali told us that some time after they found these bullets, he travelled to France looking for work. He made it to Lyon but was quickly deported.

I would like to note the contrast in the migrations of Paul Voulet and Moussa Ali. The relationship between colonialism and immigration should be factored into any reparative solution (see below).

Dagarka - a village to the west of Birnin Konni inhabited by Azna animist believers. In interviews, 3 elderly Azna men - Haruna, Ali and Sanoussi – spoke of their parents' and grandparents' extreme brutalisation by the MAC. One man, Haruna, aged 93 in 2015, was old enough to remember taking part in La Corvée, the forced labour by which the French colonial authorities co-erced survivors of the the MAC massacres to build the road across southern Niger that still exists as the Route Nationale 1 today. Corvée labour remained legal in Niger and all French colonies until 1946.

¹⁰ <http://www.cartridge-corner.com/welcome.htm>

At Dankori where Voulet shot dead Klobb, villagers noted with bitter irony that French outrage at the killing of one European was in stark contrast to their apparent indifference to the massacre of tens of thousands of Africans¹¹. As one man sarcastically observed: "it was only here that the first human being was killed".

All participants in the 11 towns and villages where we worked attested to the immense refugee crisis throughout Hausaland that was caused by the violence of the MAC. In one village near Guidam Boulou (in the department of Maradi) we met many women with face markings that were not locally traditional but belonged to a region several hundred kilometres to the west. This community had researched and discovered this was because these women's great-grandmothers had been kidnapped by the MAC and subsequently left there in 1899 when the mission began to disintegrate. The tradition had been handed down through generations but forgotten until the community's recent research.¹²

3 - Reparation

I wholeheartedly support calls by the communities of Dioundiou and Hosseini Tahirou Amadou for the establishment of a new International Tribunal for Colonial Crimes.

I agree that this new Tribunal should have the power to impose sanctions, devise reparations and restitutions.

I believe this new Tribunal should include a structural emphasis on gender-based violence.

In our film, it is made clear that the extraction of uranium has been a principal asset and source of France's independent energy strategy since the 1970s¹³. However, this has historically been extracted with little regard for the well-being of Nigerien workers, nearby communities or land. I have no direct knowledge to speak of the current situation. But I note that the requirement for the Republic of Niger to make itself available for any type of resource extraction that would support France's national security interests was made a condition of independence and enshrined in a defence treaty between the two countries in 1961¹⁴.

I propose that any form of reparations that is formulated must take this latter point fully into account. To express the matter in the starkest terms, this extraction could be said to be part of what is known in the criminal justice lexicon as 'the proceeds of crime'.

I also noted above that the relationship between colonialism and immigration should be factored into any reparative solution.

¹¹ The title of Paul Joalland's memoir - *Le Drame de Dankori* – is a phrase that signifies French contempt for Nigeriens amongst all the groups that participated in our film. Joalland, Paul. *Le drame de Dankori: Mission Voulet-Chanoine. Mission Joalland-Meynier*. Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1930.

¹² *African Apocalypse* features a remarkable interview made in 1970 with a 97-year-old woman who had been kidnapped and abused by Voulet for several months through 1899. This interview was discovered at the Institut de recherche en sciences humaines (IRSH Niamey). The translation was made by its late director of research Boubé Gado. <https://africanapocalypsefilm.com/the-recorded-historical-testimony-of-a-woman-abducted-by-voulet-in-1899/>

¹³ <https://africanapocalypsefilm.com/finding-a-way-from-french-uranium-mines-to-harnessing-the-power-of-the-sun/>

¹⁴ Hecht, Gabrielle. "The power of nuclear things." *Technology and Culture* 51, no. 1 (2010): 1-30

In general, any reparative process can only begin with the abuser acknowledging the wrongs they have done. This, I suggest, is a *sine qua non* in this case. It involves France acknowledging the wrongs it did to the people of Niger from 1899 onwards.

4 - Memorialisation

I wholeheartedly support the calls by the community of Dioundiou for a national day to mark the February 24 massacre. I think the same should be replicated in other locations where the date of the massacre is known¹⁵.

I also support calls at Birnin Konni, May Jirgui and Lougou for internationally funded history centres.

I would urge the UN to use the good offices of UNESCO to support and assist in establishing these centres.

I support the calls by all communities to commission and build appropriate memorials to those who died or were brutalised at the hands of the MAC. I note that while there is a memorial stone to Colonel Klobb at Tessaoua and the graves of Voulet & Chanoine are preserved in the town square at May Jirgui, there is not a single memorial to the tens of thousands of the MAC's victims, nor of any other abuse from the colonial era.

These memorials should be internationally funded.

I also recommend two related initiatives, also to be internationally funded:

Firstly, the establishment of a Research Institute that acts as an official archive resource of the colonial period in Niger.

Secondly, a linking relationship between this organisation and the ANOM in Aix-en-Provence with scope for arranging exchanges and multi-disciplinary events with participants from Niger and France, including researchers, historians, artists, scientists and community activists.

Conclusion

My submission concerns only Niger because I have recently done investigative work here. However, I would propose that similar initiatives be undertaken elsewhere in all continents where colonial violence wreaked a havoc that continues to distort human development for peoples from both formerly colonised and formerly colonising states¹⁶.

¹⁵ These include, but are not limited to, Sansane Haoussa 13/1; Libore 17/1; Dounga 27/1; Kirtachi 1/2 ; Matankari 27/3 ; Lougou 16/4 ; Birnin Konni 9/5 ; Koran Kalgo 3/7; Guidam Boulou 9/7; Dankori 10/7 – see Mathieu, Muriel. *La mission Afrique centrale*. Editions L'Harmattan, 1995.

¹⁶ Piketty, Thomas. *Capital and ideology*. Harvard University Press, 2020, see Ch. 7 and *passim*.