

# The Historical formation of "Pieds-Noirs" : Collective identity of repatriates from Algeria to France

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# **The Historical Formation of "Pieds-Noirs"**

## **Collective identity of repatriates from Algeria to France**

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### **Introduction**

Every country which has once possessed colonies and has given them up later must have experienced repatriation in some way or another. The theme of colonization is important, not only because it is the historical background for the present society, but also because it remains a current issue. History (particularly contemporary history) sometimes becomes the source for social problems. It is probably too simplistic to conceptualize of time advancing linearly with the past passing at the back of the present. In fact, the past sometimes continues to exist in the present and may haunt us. This idea can lead us to a discussion of the possibility for the `sociology of the past (memory, history).

Repatriation or decolonization in general is, of course, a concept that has been studied by contemporary historians, but it seems to be rarely studied sociologically, i.e., as a contemporary issue. Also repatriation has rarely been studied from a comparative point of view. Today, both France and Japan are countries haunted by the history of colonization. But it is still unclear to what extent and in what way events and experiences related to colonization/decolonization are similar or different in these two countries. Comparative study on various issues regarding repatriation, such as the processes of repatriation, social integration of repatriates and the impacts which repatriation brought on the society, will help scholars to widen their perspective and to shake off dogmatic views of our own history.

In this essay I will discuss the repatriation from Algeria to France, as a steppingstone for comparative study between France and Japan. The aim of this study is not to judge which colonization is morally unjustified or which repatriation is more painful. Rather, the point is to share knowledge about the process of decolonization and its impacts on the present society and to explore the possibilities of solving social conflicts deriving from the history of colonialism.

### **1. Colonization/decolonization**

#### **1.1. Algeria : an integral part of France**

In order to understand repatriation, it is necessary to have at the very least knowledge about lives of settlers in Algeria. Among ex-French colonies Algeria occupied an important place. We can note three fundamental points to explain this importance. First,

the length of domination. Until Algeria attained independence in 1962, French domination lasted more than 130 years. As a historian once said, the history of French colonialism had begun and ended with Algeria (Betts 1991=2004 : 141). Many families had lived there from over four to six generations.

Secondly, we can point out the close connection between France and Algeria. Since 1848, the territory of Algeria was administratively incorporated into metropole France. Thereafter, Algeria had become an integral part of France.

Thirdly, there were a large number of French settlers in Algeria. When independence was decided in 1962, there were about 1 million settlers there.

The independence war, which had occurred in 1954 continued for 8 years. It brought heavy mortality, a shift of public opinion in France, and the dissolution of the fourth Republic. Eventually the Evian accord was concluded in 1962 and the independence of Algeria was recognized. It was only after this accord that the story of repatriation of the Algerian French truly began.

## **1.2. Lives of settlers**

After the colonization in 1830, the French government promoted migrations to Algeria. It was mainly for the purpose of finding a vent for social discontents which had sprung from people unable to adjust to the sweeping wave of industrialization, such as workers, unemployed and craftsmen. Several political events, such as the Revolution of February in 1848 and the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, furthered the migrations.

In spite of the positive attitude of the French government, in the beginning, few people had succeeded in settlement. From 1842 to 1846, 188,000 people came to Algeria, while 118,000 exited the colony (Stora 2005 : 230). This was partly because of resistance by Arab people, and partly because of the difficulty of managing agricultural production in an unfamiliar land. Most settlers who migrated at the time of the Revolution of February were industrial workers in Paris who were not used to agricultural work. As far as we know, 5,000 French settlers died and 7,000 others went back to France (Hirano 2002 : 126-127). Most of the rest had given up agriculture and moved to urban areas along the coast.

One important characteristic of repatriates from Algeria is the fact that settlers to this land had come not only from France, but also from other countries such as Spain, Italy, Malta, Germany, and Switzerland, to name a few. This fact makes Algerian-French identity quite unique. In 1866, non-French Europeans accounted for 40 % of the total population of Europeans in Algeria. In 1889, the French government changed its citizenship law from *jus sanguinis* to *jus soli* and this new law was applied in Algeria.

Accordingly, non-French Europeans easily gained French citizenship.

The Algerian economy has developed rapidly since the 1880s, when viticulture began to get on track and the settler population has also increased rapidly (See Table 1). However, this increase depended mainly on a new inflow of settlers from outside, and the natural increase in the settler population was rare. Therefore, after economic conditions of metropole France, Spain and Italy improved for the better, the inflow of new settlers decreased sharply and the European population leveled off to around 1 million thereafter.

1840	28,000
1848	110,000
1856	189,000
1901	580,000
1911	715,000
1921	794,700
1926	833,000
1936	946,000
1954	984,031
1959	1,025,000

Table 1 : European population in Algeria, 1840-1959

The percentage of farmers was less than 20% of the whole population of Algerian French. The rest worked in the public sector, service sector, and factories. Settlers are often understood through an image of the `colon` who ran plantations and exploited indigenous people. Actually most European settlers lived in urban areas. In major cities in Algeria like Alger, Oran, Constantine more than half of population were European.

Among them only 3 % gained more income than that of the average of people in the metropole. About 25 % got the same level of income and the remaining 72 % received 15~20 % lower than the average in the metropole (Stora 2005 : 231). Considering the fact that the prices were pretty much the same, we can conclude that the standard of living of settlers was poorer than that of people in the metropole and that the image of `colon` was for the most part a myth. The gap between the image which metropole people had and the real lives of settlers has become a remote cause to create social and psychological alienation for repatriates, although it has also to be noted that lives of settlers generally tend to be richer than that of Arab people in Algeria.

The writer Albert Camus is a typical case of an Algerian French. His great grandfather

emigrated from Bordeaux to Algeria. His father Lucien, a poor laborer who worked at a wine exporting company, was called to military service in the First World War and died in 1914, at the battle of Marne. His mother Catherine was Spanish-French, and almost deaf. Albert experienced quite a poor childhood with his mother, grandmother, uncle, and brother. His last novel, *Le premier Homme*, in spite of its incompleteness, describes quite vividly this period of his life. Camus died in 1960, without seeing what happened to the settlers after the independence of Algeria. However, dark stories of his late novel, *Éxil et Royaume* (1956) give the readers an impression that he had somehow anticipated the destiny of Algerian French (Matsuura 2006).

### **1.3. Repatriation**

After the Evian agreement was concluded on March in 1962, the French government anticipated repatriation of 200,000-300,000 people to the utmost, but actually most people chose to leave this land. 960,000 people have moved to metropole within a few years. There was a few persons who chose to remain in Algeria by the reason of age, but they were exceptional. It is assumed that there are several thousand people who got separated from their family in confusion of repatriation and became missing, but it has not been announced formally.

The people who chose repatriation rushed at the port where a ship for Marseilles left. Marseilles, which had accepted repatriates from various French colonies since 1953, was at first cooperative about acceptance of repatriates from Algeria, but as a large number of repatriates came in a short term and lack of house and work became a social problem, their attitude has become negative toward repatriation.

In metropole cities the repatriates were exposed to hostility, contempt and indifference. As they were discriminated against with labels like "racist", "the extreme right", "dirty Pieds-Noirs", "the colonialist who exploited Arabs", they gradually came to feel psychologically alienated (Roche 1990 : 535, Jordi 1993 : 188).

However, as there was high economic growth in the 1960s, the repatriates were integrated into French society relatively smoothly. In spite of the arrival of a large numbers of repatriates, the unemployment rate has actually fallen since 1964.

### **1.4. Associations of repatriates**

From around the 1960's to the present, the repatriates created various associations to improve their conditions of life and social positions. However, the various associations which have been created over the past 40 years have had different aims. Judging from the purposes, activities and dates of existence, we can divide them into three models as

outlined below.

#### [1] support type

First, since around 1960, many associations were formed, aiming for solutions to economic and social problems which repatriates faced, such as their compensation demand to the government for properties lost during repatriation, investigations of missing persons, and support of senior or retired repatriates.

The compensation was not realized until the death of de Gaulle in 1970. After his death, several laws were enacted. In addition, because of economic growth, the economic conditions of repatriates have improved. Therefore, it seems natural that the influence of associations of this type gradually declined.

A typical example of associations of this type is "National Association of French of North Africa and Foreign Countries and their friends"(ANFANOMA). This was the first repatriate association established by the people who left Morocco and Tunisia in 1956. It rallied repatriates from Algeria after 1962 and helped promote their compensation demand related to lost properties. It had been active as a representative support group, but has lost its influence after the 1970's, and many similar groups sprang up as a result.

#### [2] local communication type

After 1970's, associations for the purpose of friendship among repatriates sharing areas, occupations, and schools were formed replacing the former groups. But in these days associations of this type were just for communication among close friends. As for the activities, annual meetings, dances, and friendship parties were held. In addition, a bulletin was made, and information exchange was done about marriages, births, missing people and the present condition of local areas and villages.

Through such interchanges, they reaffirmed their own cultures which they brought with them from Algeria such as, cuisine, customs and language. This helped them to find a release for their sense of alienation which increased in their daily lives as they were faced with the indifference of the metropole. Anciens de Bab-el-Oued and L'Amicale des Oraniens are some examples of association of this type. These are groups based on territorial connections.

#### [3] identity type

In the latter half of the 1980's, associations appeared which, through performing various kinds of activities, sought to enhance the collective memory and collective identity of repatriates and to acquire recognition of French society for their community.

A pioneering example of this type is Le Cercle Algerianiste. Established in 1973, this group has about 5,000 members and as of 2006, it owns 38 branch offices throughout the country. Since 1975, it has published a bulletin called "L'algerianiste", with a current circulation of 12,000. The contents are varied, such as history, novels, poetries, and arts. In addition, it performs various cultural activities like symposiums, publication, drama, and screening of cinematography.

These three associations are ideal types, in M Weber's sense. As will be shown later, it is the third one ("identity type") that is concerned most closely with the main argument of this essay, the formation of collective identity of Pieds-Noirs.

## **2. "Pieds-Noirs" : another name for repatriates**

### **2.1. Pejorative name**

Till now, I have used the word "repatriate" without any explanation. But it lacks in adequacy, in fact, to label the Algerian French with this word. They rarely use it to refer to themselves. The most common name for them is "pied-noir", literally meaning "a black foot" in English.

What kind of people does this term indicate? First, it isn't applied to repatriates from other French colonies like Indochina. Secondly, opinion is divided about whether it includes repatriates from Morocco and Tunisia, which are located next to Algeria. Repatriates from Algeria think they are the only Pieds-Noirs, whereas those from Morocco and Tunisia tend to insist that they are also Pieds-Noirs. Thirdly, there have been French in Algeria since 1830, but it is rare that this term is applied to them.

Considering all of these points, we can identify whom the word "pied noir" indicates. It is the label applied only to people sharing historic experiences of repatriation from Algeria (or North Africa). But how come a word which means "a black foot" has become a name to describe repatriates from Algeria?

As is often the case with labeling groups, the word "pied noir" was originally applied by others. There are many unknown parts about its origin, although some anonymous explanations have been diffused. Here let me show only the most famous one.

When Algerian rule by France began, most of the settlers wore a white hat, a white jacket, white pants and black shoes on the body, like an African explorer. The local people who had never seen shoes of this sort called them "the people who had a black foot".

However, there is no positive evidence to confirm this. It is still unknown who used

this word first and when. In addition, there is much room for doubt about accepting this explanation as something concerning the real historical event, because the word "pied noir" came to be known during the Algerian independence war. During the war, this word was often used by the media and in this way it has come to be known among citizens. When this word was used by metropole French people, it indicated some sort of contempt. It was the pejorative word to identify Algerian French with "colons" and to add negative nuances such as "the colonialist who exploited Arabs" or "reactionary power against independence". So, it seems to be possible to regard the above explanation not as a story related to historical facts, but as the imaginary representation which metropole people had about Algerian French during the war.

But now, repatriates from Algeria proudly define themselves as "pied noir". I pointed out above that groups formed by the repatriates have changed their characters from support type to local communication type, and then to identity type. When groups of the third types came to appear in the 1980s, groups whose name contained the term "pied noir" had begun to appear.

How was it possible that the label given from others to signal contempt came to be accepted by the very labeled people as the label which expresses their own identity? This is a key question to understand the historical formation of collective identity of pied noir.

## 2.2. Accepting the pejorative name

The word `rapatriement` (= `repatriation`), literally means returning to "patrie", mother country. However, most Algerian French were born and raised in Algeria going back several generations. Although they had French nationality, it was difficult for them to regard the metropole, where they had never lived nor even visited, as the "patrie".

(To the question "Which is your patrie, Algeria or France?") To tell the truth, I am at a loss about the question. Algeria is no more patrie, but it is not easy to call France the patrie. (P.D)<sup>1</sup>

France is not patrie, because my patrie is Algeria. As for my family, the father's side has lived there since 1832 and the mother's side since 1836, both for 5 generations. (J.J.J)

In addition, they had not freely chosen to move to the metropole. Rather, they were forced to leave the land where they were born and raised, abandoning almost all properties. So, they prefer to refer themselves as "exiles" or "refugees". For the Algerian



French, `la patrie` is not metropole France, but Algeria. Leaving for France after 1962 was not repatriation, but exile to an unknown land, forced by the political situation. It seems to them that the word "repatriate" totally misses this aspect of their suffering.

The word "repatriate" is not appropriate. A repatriate is a person coming back to one's own country. Because we were forced to leave our own country, it is totally contrary...(M.L)

There is another reason that the words "repatriation" and "repatriate" aren't favored. These two words are administrative terms since a legal prescription was given to repatriate by a law enacted in 1960. Since then, these words have become common among support groups which were created in the 1960's and compensation laws for repatriates which were established after 1970. On the contrary, the term "pieds-noirs" has been never used in laws and in administrative official documents. In sum, "repatriate" is a category recognized in the French official system, and the Algerian French must accept this category as their own in order to demand compensation and support from the government.

However, as generations changed, repatriates themselves came to have an impression that this word is an expression of the past. When repatriates came to desire speaking their historic experiences to wider audiences like next younger generations or society at large rather than clinging to the government support and demanding compensation, they came to feel that the word "repatriate" is too past-oriented. For example, the establishment declaration of Le Cercle Algerianiste states as follows:

If "pied-noir" is the most appropriate to indicate our whole community, and if it must continue to be a flag standing against the ominous direction of the wind of the history, the expression "Algerianiste" is an outcome of positiveness, will and autonomy of culture. The inappropriate word "repatriate" weakens all identities and we must refuse it determinedly. Somehow it is the word belonging to the past and is not deserved by the people who choose to pay more attention in the **future** (the emphasis original)<sup>2</sup>.

In sum, the word "repatriate" is refused because it implies to regard the metropole as la patrie, and it weakens their singular identity of Algerian French. In addition, it gives the impression that it is too past-oriented.

The word "pied-noir" is accepted not only as an alternative for "repatriate". There is a reason why it is viewed as a positive label. It is because of the emotional depth Algerian French associate with this word. One of the interviewees told the process the word "pied-noir" came to be used by the repatriates as follows:

"Pied-noir" was used as a pejorative term for an Algerian European. It took a long time for us to receive it, but finally it changed to the sign of belonging and singularity. It's the same thing with the case of "black" in America. I like the word "pied-noir" because of its emotional weight. (Lu.M)

The statement that the resonance of pied-noir is "the same thing with the case of "black" in America", of course implies that during the civil rights movement the word "black", which had been an expression of contempt from white people, changed its significance and gained a positive meaning under the slogan "black is beautiful".

Surely the word "pied-noir" was, at first, a pejorative term from others. However, even in its negative form, it loads strong emotions which have the potential of expressing "the passion" that repatriates from Algeria have experienced. It is not important here that it was once a pejorative term. The important thing is not its negative form, but the emotional intensity which is expressed by the negative form. Because of this emotional intensity, the term "pied-noir" was undertaken by the repatriates, and the negative connotation was gradually switched to an affirmative one.

## **Conclusion**

For the people who were forced to move from their native land to the metropole, none of the words such as "the French", "repatriate", or "the Algerian French" can express enough their true identity. After all, the word "pied-noir", which doesn't include any name of places related to this historic event (Algeria, France) nor action (repatriation) and which was originally the pejorative name, was chosen paradoxically as the name to express their singularity.

Now we can understand why it was only after identity type groups appeared in the 1980s that the word "pied-noir" was wholly accepted. As social and economic lives of repatriates became stable and generations changed, repatriate groups desired to speak to a wider audience and to gain social recognition toward themselves. Accordingly, the past experience of repatriation came to be reset within the wider context of the historical process of decolonization. At that point the term "pied-noir" was chosen as the sign of their singularity. This word was, so to speak, rediscovered as the mark to inscribe their

existence into French history.

Studying the process of collective identity formation of "pied-noir" will bring us an important point of reference for comparative study between France and Japan related to the historical process of decolonization and its impacts on contemporary society.

### Notes

- (1) The following remarks are derived from the interview that the writer conducted in Marseilles in 2005.
- (2) Quotation from the website of Le Cercle Algerianiste  
<http://www.cerclealgerianiste.asso.fr/default.htm> (2006.10.03)

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