The Land Beneath My Feet

On the quintessentially French terrain of a *boulodrome* (a pitch for playing boules or *pétanque*), four men meet to play a game. As the game progresses, the conversation turns to the past, and to memories of the Algerian War of Independence. Each of the men has a different experience of that event, reflecting the different sides caught up in the war. Their exchanges – sometimes revelatory, often light-hearted – reveal the traces of the past that shape what it means to be French today.

France and Algeria: 1830 to today

The colonial relationship between France and Algeria began in 1830, when French forces crossed the Mediterranean and invaded Algeria near the capital of Algiers. Despite fierce resistance from Algerian leaders such as the Emir Abdelkader, the French eventually took control of the whole territory. Soon after the conquest, France began to offer land taken from the native Arab and Berber population to Europeans who would farm it. People from across Europe – France, Spain, Italy, Malta, Germany and Switzerland – came to settle in Algeria. It became a settler colony like Australia, Canada and South African in which the colonising Europeans were treated as superior to the native Muslim population and enjoyed much greater rights. Algeria quickly became France's most important colony and in 1848 legally it became part of France. From then on, Algeria *was* France ('Algeria is France', as François Mitterrand famously declared). Yet there were important differences: while there were a million French settlers in Algeria by 1960, they were hugely outnumbered by the 9 million Arab and Berber natives. This imbalance caused the settlers to be fearful and determined to hold on to power in the colony.

Algeria was considered to be an integral part of France, but the status of those living there varied according to their ethnicity. Muslims did not have the same rights and were much poorer than the Europeans, who in turn were poorer than those in mainland France.

As in other colonies, when Algerian demands for better political representation were ignored, support for Algerian nationalism grew. It spilled into violence with a co-ordinated series of uprisings in November 1954 led by the Algerian National Liberation Front (Front de Libération Nationale, or FLN). This was the start of the Algerian War of Independence, a conflict which lasted for almost eight years and which saw atrocities committed by all sides. As the violence spread, conscription was introduced. Around 1.5 million young Frenchmen were sent to fight in Algeria and around 25,000 were killed. Many of those who returned remained traumatised and never spoke of their experiences. The violence spread from the countryside to the cities, with civilians caught in the fighting between the French and Algerian forces. It is estimated that 250,000 Algerians and 10,000 settlers were killed. Despite this, the conflict was considered as civil disturbances within the nation, with army operations aimed at 'pacification', rather than as a war.

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The Algerian War (1954-62) was a major conflict that lasted almost 8 years and directly affected millions of French and Algerians.

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In 1958 General Charles de Gaulle, who had led the Free French forces during World War Two, returned to power as President. The hope was that he would save France once again by bringing an end to the violence. In the settlers' view, this should ensure that Algeria remained French definitively. But de Gaulle concluded that it was impossible to permanently subdue 9 million Algerians, and he began a process of self-determination which allowed the Algerians to vote for independence. On 19 March 1962 a ceasefire came into effect between the French army and the FLN, and on 5 June 1962 Algeria became independent.

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The threat of an army uprising led to the collapse of the French government in 1958. French army generals, supported by the settlers, threatened a *coup d'état* if Charles de Gaulle was not brought back to power. They believed that de Gaulle would resolve the war in favour of keeping Algeria French but de Gaulle negotiated a settlement which allowed Algerians to choose independence.

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Globally, the move from colonisation to independence has often led to huge population movements, and the case of Algeria was no exception. As independence became certain, the settler population began to flee to France to escape the violence of the war and the prospect of life under Arab rule. Almost all of the million-strong settler community left Algeria in only a few months, leaving behind homes and businesses to start again in an unfamiliar country. But the settlers were not alone. Independence brought huge economic disruption to Algeria, forcing large numbers of Algerian men to cross the Mediterranean in search of work. France was undergoing a post-war economic boom and actively encouraged the new migrant labour that would build its new housing estates and motorways. Initially the expectation was that workers would be temporary residents, but increasingly their families came to join them, settling permanently in France, often in estates around the periphery of the major cities. The community of Algerian origin in France now numbers several million.

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Decolonisation led to mass migration from Algeria's different communities. Most of those leaving Algeria moved to France, where an economic boom meant that jobs were plentiful. But many of those moving saw themselves as being different to those living in the French mainland, leading to social tensions.

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Memories of the Algerian War

The Algerian War was experienced as a huge trauma by people living in France. Like Great Britain, France had a global empire and saw itself as a Great Power. The idea that France, with all of its military might, could be defeated by a small group of Algerian fighters was hard to accept. It was all the more galling because the army, having experienced defeats during the First and Second World Wars and then in the colonial war in Indochina, had been determined to win. But, as France's new president, de Gaulle had determined that the age of empire was drawing to a close: France's future lay in Europe. With this change in direction, attention turned elsewhere and quickly the empire came to belong to history. The loss of prestige and doubts about France's place in the world were put to one side: there was no time for reflection.

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After independence the war and France's defeat was quickly forgotten in what has been called a kind of 'collective amnesia'.

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There were a number of reasons that made this possible. Because the violence took place on French soil between groups who were French, it was considered as merely 'civil disturbances' or 'events'. This made it easier to avoid confronting the reality of an eight-year war. And facing up to what had happened would have been painful: France had been humiliated once again. It was easier to follow de Gaulle's call to seek the 'grandeur' of France's destiny as a European power. Yet if the Algerian War was not recognised or commemorated officially, it was remembered by each of the millions of individuals whose lives had been touched by the conflict.

The first group to begin gathering individual memories of the war into a collective memory was the settler community, known after the war as the 'pieds-noirs' (literally, 'black feet', an expression whose origins are uncertain). Dispersed across France, for them the war marked the loss of their homeland and the beginning of exile. The pain of loss was mixed with anger and bitterness towards de Gaulle, whom they accused of betrayal. Their response was to attempt to preserve the memories and culture of French Algeria through the formation of cultural organisations dedicated to the *pied-noir* way of life. Many of the *pieds-noirs* settled in the south of France, around Marseille in the region of Provence, where the play is set. There they were near the sea and sun that had been such a feature of life in Algeria.

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In the 1960s and 1970s the *pied-noirs* campaigned, firstly for financial compensation from the government for their lost homes and business, and then for symbolic recognition of their French Algerian culture and the suffering that they had endured.

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Marseille was also the destination of many Algerian immigrants seeking work and a new life for their family. Algerians had little access to education under French colonial rule so often those who arrived were illiterate and took unskilled jobs in factories or on building sites. As

single men who worked in France only temporarily they were unnoticed by most French people, but as time went on their families came to join them, and the sight of Algerian women out shopping and Algerian children in schools became more common. In colonial Algeria the indigenous population had suffered discrimination and exploitation, and Algerian immigrants in France discovered that the same colonial attitudes persisted. Racism was common, with Algerians viewed as inferior because of their ethnic origins, and regarded with suspicion because of their part in the war. Since independence Algerian nationality has become synonymous with Islam which, with its emphasis on the veiling of women, is sometimes considered to be incompatible with the French Republic. This is because, since the French Revolution, the Republic has had a tradition that regards religion as a private matter which does not belong in the secular public sphere. According to French policies of assimilation, to become French meant that French values of secularism should take precedence over other cultures. This led to growing cultural tensions, with Algerian immigrants – and, more significantly, their French-born children – viewed as unwilling to integrate and therefore not 'properly French'. Colonial legacies of racism and discrimination towards people of Algerian origin continue today, to the point that the historian Benjamin Stora has argued that the Algerian War never ended; instead, the conflict simply crossed the Mediterranean to be conducted by other means within French society. Ongoing discrimination caused resentment in French-born children of immigrant origin who felt that they were not accepted as full citizens. Marginalised within French society, their memories of the Algerian War were not included as part of France's history. Instead their memories were closer to Algeria's national history, which focuses on how the Algerian people rose up and threw off the yoke of colonialism.

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As Arab and Berber Muslims, the Algerians were regarded by many French people as different and inferior because of their ethnicity and religion. The colonial period and the war left a legacy of hostility and racism from many French people towards Algerian immigrants.

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The Algerian community in France was not alone in lacking a narrative of the war. For several decades after independence the white majority of French society preferred not to speak about what had happened, in what scholars have referred to as a 'collective amnesia'. There were several factors that brought the war back to public attention in the late 1990s. Firstly, as the opening of the play highlights, a series of terrorist attacks took place on the Paris metro. Linked to the civil war taking place in Algeria in the 1990s, they were a reminder that the connection to Algeria had not gone away. They were followed by the criminal trial of a French official, Maurice Papon, for his part in the deportation of French Jews which inadvertently highlighted his role in killing hundreds of Algerian civilian demonstrators in Paris in 1961. Then came the admission by the French parliament in 1999 that the conflict had been a war, and, finally, France was rocked by the publication of a book by a French army general, Paul Aussaresses, in which he defended the French policy of torture during the war.

Aussaresses' book was notable because it made no attempt to hide the widespread use of torture by the army. This was with good reason: a year into the war, the French parliament

had passed a law giving 'special powers' to the army to do what it deemed necessary to achieve military objectives. The result was the systematic use of torture and summary execution against those suspected of enemy activities. The use of torture was known about at the time, with protests led by high-profile intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, but in the midst of war many people turned a blind eye. By 2000 opinions had changed: not only was public opinion against the use of torture, but one of the leading generals of the Algerian War, General Jacques Massu, who had defended the use of torture in his 1972 book, came forward to state publicly that it had not been necessary to use torture in Algeria. Consequently, Aussaresses' defence of the policy caused consternation in a country which considered itself to be the home of human rights. It also brought into focus another issue that had long been ignored: the fate of the Algerian soldiers who had fought in the French army. Known as *harkis*, many signed up to serve to escape grinding poverty but when the war ended, de Gaulle refused them entry to France and only a few were smuggled to safety. Along with their families, thousands were massacred as traitors in reprisals by the FLN in what is now seen as one of the most shameful episodes of France's history. The re-emergence of these long-ignored facts, along with the impact of the Algerian civil war, the growing social tensions between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in France, and the rise of the far-right National Front, meant that the open wound of Algeria could no longer be ignored.

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France has long considered itself to be the home of human rights. The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, published during the French Revolution in 1789, has influenced the development of thinking about the question of universal rights.

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The question was – and remains – how France's presence in Algeria should be remembered. Many groups in France were on different sides of the war and so have conflicting experiences. Among those living on the mainland there were

- the millions of soldiers sent to fight in Algeria who witnessed terrible atrocities;
- French civilians who supported Algeria's independence and protested against the war (some, known as 'suitcase carriers' or *porteurs de valise*, were actively involved in funnelling money to the Algerians);
- French civilians who simply wanted an end to a war that was draining finances and lives; and
- Algerian immigrants who were involved in supporting the Algerian rebels.

Meanwhile there were also divisions in Algeria between:

- the majority of France's colonial settlers who wanted Algeria to remain French, some of whom took up arms as paramilitaries in an attempt to stop the peace process;
- the majority of Algerians supported independence; and
- the *harkis*, Algerians who fought in the French army only to find themselves abandoned by the losing side.

For decades after independence France had a kind of amnesia about the war. Then, as it was gradually acknowledged as an event that had shaped contemporary

France in many ways, the demands of opposing groups for the acceptance of their version of the past have led to what historians have called an 'excess of memory'.

All of these groups had conflicting experiences of the war. Moreover, they were each anxious to have the truth of their experiences recognised and, through campaigning groups, lobbied for official acknowledgement by the French state of their suffering. Since World War Two there have been international moves to focus more on the human rights of the victims of war and oppression. Groups such as the former settlers emphasised their status as victims of decolonisation, downplaying their colonial privilege and linking their position to that of the *harkis* in an attempt to argue that both groups had been betrayed and abandoned by de Gaulle's government. This was despite the very different positions that they had occupied within colonial society, and it demonstrated the extent to which political objectives were shaping how the empire was remembered. National histories tend to centre on a single narrative of the past and, as a result, groups campaigned to have their version of the past accepted as the single official account of the war. In the process, other, conflicting accounts were crowded out in what historians have referred to as 'competitive memory' or 'victim one-upmanship'.

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'Competitive memory' suggests that there is only room for one version of the past, and that opposing groups compete to have their version accepted at the expense of others.

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Alternatives to competitive memory

Successive Presidents have struggled to reconcile the conflicting memories, walking a fine line by officially acknowledging historic injustices while avoiding angering groups on the opposing side. In 2021 President Emmanuel Macron published a major report by the eminent historian Benjamin Stora that aimed towards a common memory of France's colonisation of Algeria. The criticisms that it faced indicate that divisions continue. In the meantime, writers, artists and film-makers have taken up the challenge of representing the conflicting perspectives, to explore their relation to each other and to wider French society and culture. Through these texts artists demonstrate the ways in which the past shapes the present and ask questions about the idea of France, how this might have changed in the post-colonial period, and what it means to be French today. *The Land Beneath My Feet* is one such text.

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Is it possible to develop a collective memory of a divisive event?

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Pétanque

Pétanque is a traditional game, related to lawn bowls, in which players aim to throw, toss, or roll their metal balls as close to a small ball, or jack, as possible. Any balls that finish closer to the jack than the other players' balls gain points. The winning team is the first to reach 13 or 15 points. It may seem simple, but players use various tactics to win, such as 'shooting' which is throwing a ball hard enough to knock away the balls of the opposing player(s). It is usually played on hard ground in public spaces or on dedicated *boulodromes*.

Pétanque has long been a leisure activity in France and is widely played across France's former colonies and territories. As a game requiring only inexpensive equipment and using public space, it is popular and accessible to all. Due to this, people of varying ages, classes and backgrounds come together to play the sport. It is also played competitively at regional, national, and international levels. Whether socially or competitively, the game is most typically played by men: 70% of players in France are adult men. French *pétanque* Championships reflect this, having been held since 1946 for men's teams, but only since 1993 for mixed teams and 2003 for women-only teams. The play engages with these social realities of a sport that is typically played by men but is open to anyone from any background, including those who will have experienced the game outside of Provence where it remains a culturally important meeting point.

The rules of *pétanque* were codified early in the twentieth century in La Ciotat, a town in Provence near the play's location. Its name comes from *petanca* in the Provençal dialect, deriving from the expression *pè tancat* [ˈpɛ taŋˈkat], meaning 'foot fixed' or 'foot planted' (on the ground), and could be translated into French as *pieds tanqués*. The game is therefore played with the feet together and still, unlike other boules games where the player can move in order to gain momentum.

The play's original French title, *Les Pieds tanqués,* therefore refers not only to the game and its social connotations, but to the idea of feet planted like roots in the ground. The game, and the social relations that are developed through playing it, become the means by which players whose lives have been uprooted are able to put down new roots and a new sense of belonging begins to grow. The title appeals particularly to the *pieds-noirs*, whose name both calls to mind the 'feet' referenced by the origins of the term *pétanque*, and the sense of uprooting that for many characterises their lives in France.