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'A SYMBOL OF FRENCH COLONIALISM': THE BRAZZA MEMORIAL AND CONTESTED COLONIAL MEMORY IN CONGO

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Abstract

In 2006, the government of Congo built a $10 million glass and marble mausoleum to house the remains and to celebrate the legacies of the French colonizer, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza. This extravagant commemoration sits uncomfortably alongside global calls for the removal of memorials celebrating colonial figures. This article analyses how ordinary people construct their own narratives to contest colonial commemorations through a study of citizens' perceptions of the Savorgnan de Brazza Memorial in the Republic of Congo. The article interrogates the meanings of colonial commemoration in a postcolonial Francophone state with the intent to challenge the Western-centric tropes associated with the meanings of colonial memories. While in the West, the image of Savorgnan de Brazza remains associated with the tropes of the 'White Savior' and the 'Good prophet', for Congolese citizens, the colonial monument instead symbolizes French colonialism and its continued consequences. By recentring Congolese people and their perceptions of the mausoleum, this research uncovers an original account of Françafrique, or the acquaintances between French and African elites that render possible the continued influence of France in the state affairs of its previous colonies.

IN 2006, THE CONGOLESE GOVERNMENT BUILT a $10 million glass and marble mausoleum to honorifically house the remains and celebrate the legacies of the French colonizer, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, in the capital city, Brazzaville, which is also named after him. Outside the mausoleum, a giant statue, also made of marble, depicts the Frenchman standing barefoot on a

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plinth, around 8 m high (see Memorial Brazza). He holds a marching cane in his right hand, while his left hand clenches a small messenger bag to his waist (see statue Brazza). With his back turned to the Congo River, from where he docked to take possession of the African lands for France, his head, covered in a scarf, looks straight into the horizon as if contemplating the bustling life of the city that bears his name. The mausoleum and the statue are surrounded by neat pavements and a green garden. Giant palm trees circle the postcard-worthy mausoleum, which proudly dominates its surroundings.

The exact origins of the initiative to build the *Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza Memorial* are disputed. By one account, it began in the early 2000s, when Detalmo Pirzio-Biroli, the Italian descendant of the explorer, visited Congo at the invitation of the Brazza Foundation. He met President Denis Sassou Nguesso to express his family's wish for Brazza's remains to be transferred to the bank of the Congo River 'where he could finally rest in peace.'[1] The reasons and ethics behind the government's decision to erect a mausoleum to celebrate a colonial figure have since been questioned.[2] According to Florence Bernault, the government used the Memorial to extract diplomatic and material resources from France at the same time as it helped improve President Nguesso's image.[3] She further argues that France supported the project because it provided the opportunity 'to fight against its declining influence in central Africa.' Such a perspective certainly accounts for the generous funding provided for the construction of the Memorial by both French and Italian oil companies operating in Congo and vying for diplomatic leverage. However, her focus on the present ignores the colonial ideology that sustained the continuous historical efforts to bring the monument to fruition.

Indeed, President Nguesso embraced the idea of the Memorial by claiming a 'peaceful reading of the past' and mentioning Brazza as a 'humanist', in reference to his methods of building trust with the local communities and his despisal of violence during the colonial conquest.[4] Belinda Ayessa, the Director of the Memorial, constantly refers to Brazza as a humanist, presenting him as the 'liberator' of slaves and an 'agent of development.'[5]

1. Thomas Hofnung, 'Brazza, le feu sous les cendres', *Libération*, 21 April 2014, <https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2014/04/21/brazza-le-feu-sous-les-cendres_1001775/> (16 September 2024).
2. Max Jones, Berny Sèbe, Bertrand Taithe, and Peter Yeandle, *Decolonising imperial heroes: Cultural legacies of the British and French empires* (Routledge, London, 2006).
3. Florence Bernault, 'Colonial bones: The 2006 burial of Savorgnan de Brazza in the Congo', *African Affairs* 109, 436 (2010), p. 375.
4. Visitor guide. Savorgnan de Brazza Memorial, 2013.
5. Bruno Okokana, 'Enam du Cameroun: La directrice générale du Mémorial Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza prononce une leçon inaugurale', *Agence d'Information d'Afrique Centrale*, 24 October 2013 <https://www.adiac-congo.com/content/enam-du-cameroun-la-directrice-generale-du-memorial-pierre-savorgnan-de-brazza-prononce-une> (14 December 2024).

Figure 1: Brazza Memorial, Brazzaville, August 2024. Photograph by Pavel Mbouaka.

'Brazza was not a colonizer as any other, he was a humanist' claimed the well-known novelist Henri Lopes, who was Congolese ambassador in France.[6] This reference to Brazza as a 'humanist' is not only made by Congolese officials. During the inauguration of the Memorial, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, a descendant of Makoko Ilo I, the king with whom Brazza signed the colonial treaties, and Brazza's great-grandniece,

6. Hofnung, 'Brazza, le feu sous les cendres'.

all characterized the explorer as a 'humanist'.[7] During a visit to the mausoleum in 2014, then-Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi also made a reference to Brazza as a 'humanist'.

It is precisely that evocation of Brazza as a 'humanist colonizer' that has been challenged by Congolese scholars who criticized the construction of the monument. A first critique sees the monument as an initiative to whitewash colonial history. Lecas Atondi-Monmondjo argues that the curation of the Memorial represents an attempt to 'rewrite colonial history.'[8] He blames the government for using the monument to deliver a eulogy to colonialism. Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga makes a similar argument that the government is effectively legitimizing the figure of Brazza by ignoring the colonial violence inflicted on Congolese societies.[9] A second critique contends that the monument pays no heed to the pre-colonial history of Congo. Joseph Tonda takes contention with the mausoleum because he believes that the narrative of the postcolonial Congo it is supposed to represent contributes to erasing the Africanity of the pre-colonial.[10] Indeed, the Makoko is only mentioned through a picture of him on the wall at the Memorial, while a plinth outside holds a description of the colonial treaties he signed. No other major reference is made to pre-colonial history.

I adhere to both tenets of the critique: The monument serves as a tribute to colonialism while neglecting pre-colonial history. However, the critique's focus on official discourse overlooks the non-hegemonic construction of memory. This approach reinforces the now-criticized tendency to discuss colonial commemoration in terms of binary and antagonistic narratives between the colonial and postcolonial periods.[11] While some writers argue that colonial heroes are evident in Francophone Africa due to 'propagandistic forms of history writing',[12] I will demonstrate that this perspective is better understood by considering how ordinary people interpret, contest, and challenge colonial signifiers to create new identity narratives based on their own postcolonial and political imaginations.

7. Simonet Pauline, 'France-Congo: Un mausolée pour Brazza', *RFI*, 4 October 2006, <www1.rfi.fr/actufr/articles/082/article_46581.asp. (24 September 2024).
8. Lecas Atondi-Monmondjo, *Pouvoir congolais et revisionnisme postcolonial: Le cas Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza*, 2006 <https://www.congopage.com/IMG/Revisionnisme_P_nial_Atondi.pdf> (14 January 2024).
9. Remy Bazenguissa-Ganga, 'The bones of the body politic: Thoughts on the Savorgnan de Brazza Mausoleum', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35, 2 (2011), pp. 445–452.
10. Joseph Tonda, 'Le mausolée brazza, corps mystique de l'Etat congolais ou corps du "négatif "', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 50, 198–199–200 (2010), pp. 799–821.
11. Laragh Larsen, 'Re-placing imperial landscapes: Colonial monuments and the transition to independence in Kenya', *Journal of Historical Geography* 38, 1 (2012), pp. 45–56.
12. Jones, Sèbe, Taithe, and Yeandle, *Decolonising imperial heroes*.

After all, memory is a social construction of the past that serves a contemporary meaning.[13] This article, therefore, approaches the construction of memory 'as an attempted agency of legitimisation of authority and social cohesion' implying a sustained and continued process of meaning-making between the elites and ordinary people.[14] In my investigation of the meanings of 'heritage from below',[15] I ask the following questions: How do Congolese citizens perceive the politics of memory in the commemoration of Brazza? How does their imagination of racial and postcolonial identities, sparked by the state's evocation of colonial legacies, challenge the Congolese elite's celebration?

Using people's attitudes towards iconography and the built environment as a window into larger questions about colonialism, postcolonial identity, and collective memory, the article makes explicit the emergence of a popular narrative that castigates the official celebration of a colonial figure. While the enduring political and economic links with France, particularly between the elites, account for continuity rather than rupture with the colonial dispensation,[16] I argue that these elite linkages fail to suppress counternarratives of France's colonial and postcolonial presence in Congo. This article, therefore, foregrounds the assumption that cultural heritage is inherently contested[17] and subject to constant reinterpretations.[18]

First, my investigation reveals that people's image of Brazza is intimately linked with French colonization as a historical project designed for resource extraction and cultural subjugation, therefore contradicting the image of the 'humanist colonizer'. Second, the association of the image of Brazza with France colonialism allows Congolese to see the Memorial as the continuation of French domination, through a narrative of Françafrique, or France's neocolonialism in Africa, ultimately erasing the frontier between the colonial and the postcolonial. This discussion of cultural heritage at the intersection of memory, identity, and colonialism allows me to highlight the importance of lived experiences and cultural practices in understanding the collective past.[19]

13. Maurice Halbwachs, *On collective memory* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, 1992).
14. Brian S. Osborne, 'Constructing landscapes of power: The George Etienne Cartier monument, Montreal', *Journal of Historical Geography* 24, 4 (1998), p. 432.
15. Iain J. M. Robertson, *Heritage from below: Heritage, culture and identity* (Routledge, London, 2016).
16. Roland Marchal, 'France and Africa: The emergence of essential reforms?', *International Affairs* 74, 2 (1998), pp. 355–372.
17. Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical approaches* (Routledge, London, 2013).
18. Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting our heritage*, 4th ed. (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, NC, 2008).
19. Laurajane Smith, *Uses of heritage* (Routledge, London, 2006).

I begin, in the first section, with a note on methodology before moving to explore the efforts to erect a monument to Brazza under the colonial administration and the ideology that drove the initiative. The third section shows how people create an image of Brazza, based on their understanding of his role in the exploration and subsequent colonization of Congo. In the final sections, I examine how people use the mausoleum to discuss the ongoing influence of France, the Françafrique, and its consequences on the economic development of Congo.

Methodology

My analysis relies on a set of focus group discussions and ethnography.[20] Over two rounds of fieldwork in Brazzaville spanning over 3 months between August 2023 and October 2024, data were gathered through 31 focus group discussions. The groups included between four and eight people each, and approximately 180 participants took part in the research, around half of which were women. Three gatekeepers (a church leader, a student union leader, and a scholar) facilitated access to participants who were selected based on their interactions with the mausoleum.

The demographics of the participants reflect the social, political, and economic diversity of Brazzaville, and they are non-elites, including students, local artists, taxi drivers, street sellers, carpenters, and jobless people. While I held many of the discussions at the Memorial, I also met participants in places like churches, cafe terraces, playgrounds, and people's homes. However, I do not imply that these people belong to a homogeneous category. Brazzaville is geographically divided along ethnic lines, which reflects the political fractures in Congo.[21] I did not approach participants based on their ethnicity, but my sample includes residents of the southern districts (Bacongo, Makelekele, and Mfilou) as well as the northern neighbourhoods (Talangai, Ouenze, and Mpila). Most of the participants are Brazzaville natives, and others migrated from cities like Pointe-Noire and Dolisie. Most of them are aged between the early 20s and mid-40s, but I also had conversations with groups of older individuals. Some of them had stable jobs, while others were unemployed. Similarly, I do not hold a monolithic view of the elite. Participants mostly referred to elites as the people in government, and chief among them was President Nguesso.

20. Moudwe Daga and Issa Djimet, 'Photographs, emotions and protest at a colonial memorial in Brazzaville (Congo)', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 23, (2024).
21. People living in the southern districts are in majority from the Bakongo ethnic group, from which members of the Ninja militias were drawn during the civil wars from 1993 and 1997. They fought mainly against the Mbochi, the Makoua, and the Kouyou who live in the northern districts and who are supporters of the regime.

To facilitate the discussions, groups were typically homogeneous in terms of the participant's age, education, and occupation, and each conversation lasted between 45 and 90 min. I usually started the discussions with only oral prompts, asking participants to tell their personal stories, their interactions with the memorial, and their own understanding of Congolese history. I refrained from interrupting, only prompting people to clarify their thoughts when necessary. In the middle of the conversation, I would then show the participants images of the Memorial and other historical landmarks of the city taken by a professional photographer.[22] This photo-elicitation method substantially enriched the quality of data, as I was also able to capture the participants' feelings and emotions, especially as they expressed anger and frustration when comparing the aesthetics of the Memorial to the derelict statues of Congolese historical figures scattered around the city.

Participants clearly perceived me as an outsider because of my physical traits and my French accent, therefore making them reluctant to engage initially. However, the involvement of the gatekeepers helped build trust. The trust was generally bolstered when we discussed current political unrest against French influence in the Sahel. In this case, my positionality would shift towards an insider as participants assumed a shared position with me, as a national of another French-speaking African nation. The analysis is further informed by data collected at the National Archives of Congo and through informal discussions with Congolese scholars and locals.

A celebration of colonialism through the omission of African history

Monuments are representations of historical sequences; to that effect, they are portrayed as 'symbolic vehicles' used by a community to engage with its past.[23] However, such engagements are rarely neutral, and most often, they reflect the 'political bias' of the elites.[24] Scholars working on collective memory recognize that the curation of monuments serves to legitimize the ideology of dominant groups.[25] Alderman, for example, highlights how elites intentionally use symbols to foster community identification with

22. Notably, the statue of Fulbert Youlou, in front of the City Hall, and pictures of historical figures around the offices of the Prime Minister.
23. Johannes Schulz, 'Must Rhodes fall? The significance of commemoration in the struggle for relations of respect', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 27, 2 (2019), p. 167.
24. Owen J. Dwyer and Derek H. Alderman, 'Memorial landscapes: Analytic questions and metaphors', *GeoJournal* 73, 3 (2008), p. 168; Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the memory of politics* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003).
25. Arianne Shahvisi, 'Colonial monuments as slurring speech acts', *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 55, 3 (2021), p. 457.

dominant historical ideologies.[26] Similarly, monuments and statues were an integral part of world making in the colonies.[27] Colonial administrations used them to project power and domination.[28] It is therefore not surprising that the idea of a monument, to celebrate the achievements of Brazza and his companions, while turning a blind eye to the Africanity of the pre-colonial, first emerged during colonial times.

In 1930, Raphaël Antonetti, the Governor General of French Equatorial Africa, wished to mark France's recognition on the fiftieth anniversary of the 1880 treaties that allowed Brazza to take possession of M'Foa, the village that ultimately became Brazzaville. Antonetti thought France owed recognition to Brazza, Emile Gentil, and their companions who made it possible to 'liberate the black races' and to 'bring their countries to France.'[29] In September 1931, the French public discovered a model of the proposed colonial memorial in the French Equatorial Africa pavilion of the colonial exhibition. Central to this model was a stele that celebrated all the Frenchmen who contributed to the conquest of Congo, but no mention was made of the Africans whom they met, not even Makoko, who signed the colonial treaties.

However, Antonetti's ambition was thwarted by objections from Brazza's widow. She opposed the idea of commemorating her husband and Gentil at the same memorial, as Brazza and Gentil had significant disagreements over the expansion and administration of the equatorial colonies. The hostilities between the two men survived their lifetime and went down through their heirs, thus compromising the first initiative of a colonial memorial in Brazzaville.[30]

A second initiative was undertaken in June 1941 by General Adolphe Sice, the High Commissioner of Free French Africa. Designed as a pyramidal lighthouse, the construction of a monument called 'Le Phare de Brazza' was stalled for 2 years because of issues with the initial design. The project was hastily completed to allow for its inauguration by General de Gaulle at the Brazzaville Conference in 1944, during which France redefined its post-war colonial ideology. The dedication on the monument reads 'to Savorgnan de Brazza and his companions.' Once again, no mention was made of the Africans, even though the widow of the Makoko was invited to attend the inauguration ceremony alongside Brazza's daughter. While that

26. Derek H. Alderman, 'Creating a new geography of memory in the South: (Re)naming of streets in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr.', *Southeastern Geographer* 36, 1 (1996), pp. 51–69.
27. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London, Penguin, 2001).
28. Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2019).
29. Antonetti Raphael, Letter No. 406 to the Minister of Colonies, 1930, Box GG119, Monuments aux Morts, Archives Nationales du Congo, Brazzaville.
30. *Les Annales Coloniales*, 'A la Memoire de Brazza et de Gentil', 32(132), 24 September 1931. Box GG119, Monuments aux Morts, Archives Nationales du Congo, Brazzaville.

monument now stands in a busy Brazzaville roundabout, few local people with whom I talked knew its name or purpose. Many people referred to it as '*la case de Gaulle*', which is, in fact, the name of the building opposite the monument and the official residence of the French ambassador.

Figure 2: Phare de Brazza, Brazzaville, August 2024. Photograph by Pavel Mbouaka.

It is important to acknowledge the ideology of colonial celebration behind the curation of historical monuments for three main reasons. First, the suppression of the pre-colonial is tangible evidence of the persisting effects of colonialism on contemporary societies, cultures, and power structures, as advocated by decolonial scholars.[31] Second, the elite predication can reinforce the 'subordination and invisibility' of the social groups found outside the spheres of power, as we can see in both colonial initiatives.[32] Third, a growing scholarship suggests that Black communities are likely to perceive monuments celebrating historical figures involved in the slave trade and colonialism as 'degrading'[33] and 'derogatory'.[34]

31. Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality of power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America', *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, 3 (2000), pp. 533–580.
Walter D. Mignolo, *The darker side of Western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options* (Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2011).
32. Dwyer and Alderman, 'Memorial landscapes', p. 169.
33. Schulz, 'Must Rhodes Fall?', p. 167.
34. Shahvisi, 'Colonial monuments as slurring speech acts', p. 456.

Perceptions of marginalization within collective memories form an integral part of the emergence of counter-memory, which can be described as a protest or resistance to the dominant narrative.[35] As a challenge to the dominant order, counter-memory offers an opportunity to reinterpret the past, providing alternative ways of reading history in cross-purpose to the official predication.[36] The Congolese attitudes towards the Memorial provide another empirical case through which the hegemonic and non-hegemonic ideologies of the past are imbricated and dependent on each other. Such an approach is central to a more nuanced understanding of collective memory, away from the dichotomy between the elites and grassroots actors.

'He is not a hero'

The characterization of Brazza as a 'humanist' is not only found in official discourse but also in his biographies. Martin-Granel, for example, identifies at least three biographies making a panegyric of Brazza while assuming respect from Africans.[37] Some of these biographies present him as the 'good prophet' or the 'pacific apostle'.[38] Above all, they assume a desire for his image by the people of Brazzaville[39] and proclaim him to be 'revered by the Africans.'[40]

However, participants in this study fundamentally perceive the mausoleum as 'the symbol of French colonialism.'[41] When people evoke the figure of Brazza, they do so to mention the consequences of several decades of colonization on Congolese society. Brazza is perceived and pictured as the epitome of French colonization in Congo. Therefore, the mausoleum is as much a celebration of French colonialism as it is an homage to Brazza. One Congolese participant summed up the relationship between the monument, Brazza, and French colonization in the following words: 'It is because of him [Brazza] that we were colonised … No one is proud to have been colonised. We cannot be proud to have this mausoleum.'[42]

However, this rejection builds on a more complex image than it first appears. Indeed, people will usually give credit to Brazza for founding the city named after him, for creating the modern state of Congo, and for introducing the first public services such as education and health. 'We had the

35. Reuben Rose-Redwood, Derek Alderman, and Maoz Azaryahu, 'Collective memory and the politics of urban space: An introduction', *GeoJournal* 73 (2008), pp. 161–164.
36. Stephen Legg, 'Sites of counter-memory: The refusal to forget and the nationalist struggle in colonial Delhi', *Historical Geography* 33 (2005), pp. 180–201.
37. Nicolas Martin-Granel, '"Abracadabrazza" ou le roman du mémorial Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 50, 197 (2010), pp. 293–307.
38. Maria de Crisenoy, *Le héros du Congo, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza* (Spe, Paris, 1941).
39. Patrick Deville, *Equatoria* (Points, Paris, 2009).
40. Maria Petringa, *Brazzà, a Life for Africa* (AuthorHouse, Milton Keynes, 2006).
41. Focus group with students, Brazzaville, 9 August 2023.
42. Focus group with public sector workers, Brazzaville, 14 August 2023.

Figure 3: Brazza Statue, Brazzaville, August 2024. Photograph by Pavel Mbouaka.

first university in Central Africa',[43] boasts a Congolese man in recognition of the status Brazza conferred on Brazzaville as the capital of French

43. *Ibid.*

Equatorial Africa, resulting in major colonial investments.[44] In addition, Brazza is also perceived to be the person who helped unify the pre-colonial Congolese populations within a single political entity. For example, a participant claimed: 'Before, we belonged to different kingdoms such as the Teke, the Loango, and the Kongo. But today we all belong to Congo.'[45] Another person built on these comments by adding: 'It is thanks to Brazza that Congo has become a land of hospitality. Foreigners are comfortable living among us. Chadians, Senegalese, Malians, and Cameroonians are at home with us. There are many foreigners who chose to become Congolese citizens.'[46]

However, people credit Brazza only to subsequently challenge his colonial endeavour. 'But with what intentions had he come?' a young woman asked ironically.[47] Indeed, people highlight the explorer's achievements only to criticize his leading role in implementing the French colonial project in Congo and to point the finger at his responsibility for the ensuing decrepitude of Congolese values and traditions. A woman was saddened that 'today, Congolese children no longer speak Lingala, they all speak French.'[48] Another woman describes Brazza as 'a narcissistic monster' because she was told that he slept with Congolese women regardless of their marital status.[49] This, in her opinion, would have contributed to the degradation of the image of women in Congolese society. Brazza was also seen by one man as someone who 'plundered our wealth' and as a 'tyrant'.[50] He was a 'tyrant' because 'he didn't walk'; he was carried by porters and placed himself above the Congolese kings. In addition, this man believed Brazza walked around with a 'stick in his hand to whip' the Congolese natives.

Despite the difference across the demographics of the research participants, especially in terms of education, most Congolese knew the story of Brazza, including his role in the colonial exploration of the Congo and the founding of the capital. This knowledge is linked to the teaching of colonial history and the character of Brazza in the school curriculum, while local historical figures are overlooked, demonstrating how the colonial ideology continues to shape the production and dissemination of knowledge.[51] One participant confided: 'We are taught the history of Pierre Savorgnan

44. The history of the Marien Ngouabi University in Brazzaville dates back to 1958 with the creation of the Institute for Advanced Studies, followed on 3 December 1959 with the establishment of the Centre d'Etudes Administratif et Techniques Supérieures, the mission of which was to train native officers from the French colonies of Central African Republic, Chad, Gabon, and Congo.
45. Focus group with church choristers, Brazzaville, 19 August 2023.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*
48. Focus group with women, Brazzaville, 11 August 2023.
49. *Ibid.*
50. Focus group with elders, Brazzaville, 25 August 2023.
51. Aníbal Quijano, 'Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America'.

de Brazza from primary school to university.'[52] Those who did not attend school nevertheless learnt the story through oral tradition. At the same time, the Brazza Report, which followed an administrative enquiry led by retired Brazza in 1905, showed that the explorer despised colonial brutality.[53] Isabelle Dion also cites Brazza's opposition to the concessionary companies, over the violent exploitation of the colonized Africans, as a reason for his premature dismissal.[54]

But as Benedict Anderson reminds us, stories at the origins of an 'imagined community' need not be genuine.[55] Instead, the most important factor in creating political communities through storytelling is how people associate meaning with the historical origins of these communities and how these meanings change over time. The importance of storytelling is grounded in the ability of people to convey their communities' values and principles to make sense of the world through a consistent chronology of events affecting their lives and communities. The facts do not need to be accurate to make a credible story; they only need to be articulated in a comprehensible and authentic way.[56] To that extent, what matters to the *imagined* Brazza is less the accuracy of the facts related to him than the stories created by Congolese around his character.

According to these stories, a participant made the accusation that Brazza is 'a man who contributed to the death of thousands of Congolese.'[57] He argued that Brazza was a key architect of the Congo Ocean Railway by advocating for the construction of the large-scale infrastructure running over more than 1000 km, linking inland Brazzaville to coastal Pointe Noire. During construction, several thousands of colonized people from all parts of French Equatorial Africa were enrolled in forced labour, and tens of thousands died.[58] There is no evidence to suggest that Brazza endorsed forced labour and the resulting deaths during the construction of the railway. But, for the participant, there was no doubt Brazza should be held accountable. This once again reveals political imagination 'as historically

52. Focus group with public sector workers, Brazzaville, 14 August 2023.
53. Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, Dominique Bellec, and Patrick Farbiaz, *Le rapport Brazza mission d'enquête du Congo: Rapport et documents (1905–1907)*. Transparents, Neuvy-en-Champagne: Le Passager clandestin, 2014.
54. Isabelle Dion, *Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza: Au cœur du Congo* (Images en Manœuvres Éditions, Paris, 2007).
55. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, 3rd ed. (Verso, London, 2006).
56. Charlotte Linde, *Life stories: The creation of coherence* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993); Horsdal Marianne, *Telling lives: Exploring dimensions of narratives* (Routledge, London, 2011).
57. Focus group with entrepreneurs, Brazzaville, 18 August 2023.
58. James P. Daughton, *The violence of empire: The tragedy of the Congo-Océan Railroad* (The History Press, Cheltenham, 2021).
Mario J. Azevedo, 'The human price of development: The Brazzaville railroad and the Sara of Chad', *African Studies Review* 24, 1 (1981), pp. 1–19.

configured and reconfigured; it is susceptible to falsehood, illusion and fantasy, [but] nonetheless contributes to the making of social and political reality.'[59]

Whether these stories are true or false, people believe that French colonization is the real cause of the disastrous situation in which Africa in general, and Congo in particular, has been plunged for decades. And to many Congolese, 'Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza represents France in Congo. He was here to guarantee the interests of France.'[60] For many people during the discussions, 'Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza does not inspire anything good', and, as such, 'he is not a hero' because of his colonial enterprise.[61] So, they believe that the mausoleum is built in recognition of Brazza's role for promoting Western civilization in Congo, but his actions eventually contributed to the destruction of Congolese cultures. People therefore conclude that there is no justification for building such a gigantic mausoleum in honour of the man who has been the precursor of colonization and its misdeeds in Congo and Central Africa.

One Congolese man looked at the mausoleum and noted: 'It is still colonization that continues.'[62] It is as if the mausoleum is there to remind the millions of Congolese who live and go around it that colonization did not end when their nation became independent in August 1960. As this discussion highlights, even though elites attempted to produce a romantic account of colonial history, such efforts are countered by grassroots engagement with the monument. This effectively shows how people can resist the official ideologies of the past, unacknowledged by previous academic critiques of the Memorial due to their neglect of bottom-up perspectives. My account suggests that popular culture and everyday experiences play a significant role in how people create meaning around cultural heritage, potentially disrupting the official discourse.[63]

A narrative of Françafrique: French influence and the agency of Congolese elites

While people essentially perceive the mausoleum as a 'symbol of French colonialism', they do so through a narrative that conflates stories about colonization with France's present-day influence in Africa and the perceived 'extraversion' of the Congolese elites.[64] When people evoke the history of French colonization through the mausoleum, they do not simply talk

59. John T. Friedman, *Imagining the post-apartheid state: An ethnographic account of Namibia* (Berghahn Books, New York, NY, 2011), p. 8.
60. Focus group with public sector workers, Brazzaville, 14 August 2023.
61. Focus group with entrepreneurs, Brazzaville, 18 August 2023.
62. Focus group with private sector workers, Brazzaville, 14 August 2023.
63. Smith, *Uses of heritage*.
64. Jean-François Bayart, 'Africa in the world: A history of extraversion', *African Affairs* 99, 395 (2000), pp. 217–267.

of the past; they link that past to the present. Here, the neo-colonialism of Françafrique, which defines France's ongoing political, military, and economic influence in its previous African colonies[65] and based on the acquaintances with the national elites, erases the boundaries between the colonial and the postcolonial.[66] This account is similar to recent arguments that hint at colonial memorialization as a practice that sustains the 'preservation of white and foreign privileges', usually in the context of African governments' vulnerability to foreign aid.[67]

My argumentation proceeds in two steps. First, I demonstrate the reasons that people read the monument as a vehicle of France's continued influence in Congo. Second, I argue that the perceived French influence denies the agency of the national elites in the practice of memorialization,[68] ultimately making them vulnerable to foreign aid and the cronies of white privilege.[69]

Starting with the first point, the Memorial not only reverberates colonization but also erases the boundaries between the colonial and the postcolonial to give meaning to the present. This conflation of time and history was expressed by many Congolese who think their country is still not independent vis-à-vis France. During one of the discussions, a man referred to diplomatic relations between France and independent Congo in the following words: 'they control us.'[70] This idea of France's control of Congolese politics was systematically mentioned in conversations, often with embarrassment and a sense of powerlessness. Three main factors sustain a belief in Congolese dependence.

The first is the CFA franc, the currency that Congo shares with five other Central African states and eight more in West Africa, all former French colonies. The currency has been consistently cited as a major reason for perceived French influence in its former colonies and current unrest against France in the Sahel.[71] Many have called for African nations to scrap it. In Congo, below is what a man thinks of the dependence:

65. Tony Chafer, 'French African policy in historical perspective', *Journal of Contemporary African Studies* 19, 2 (2021), pp. 165–182.
66. Moudwe Daga and Julia Gallagher, '"Speaking proper French": Citizen bids for state recognition in Chad and Côte d'Ivoire', *Global Discourse* 14, 1 (2024), pp. 79–95.
67. Sophia Labadi, 'Colonial statues in postcolonial Africa: A multidimensional heritage', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 30, 3 (2024), p 326; Ken J. Lipenga, 'Tales of political monuments in Malawi: Re-storying national history', *Eastern African Literary and Cultural Studies* 5, 2 (2019), pp. 109–127.
68. Atondi-Monmondjo, 'Pouvoir congolais et revisionnisme postcolonial'.
69. Labadi, 'colonial statues in postcolonial Africa';
Lipenga, 'Tales of political monuments in Malawi'.
70. Focus group with football team, Brazzaville, 16 August 2023.
71. Fanny Pigeaud and Ndongo Samba Sylla, *Africa's last colonial currency: The CFA Franc story* (Pluto Press, London, 2021).

> It is France that produces our currency. They [the French] are the ones who manage the CFA franc. The bank is not in Africa but in France. The machine that makes the CFA Franc is in France. If we were free, we would have been making our own currency ….[72]

The second indicator of Congo's political and economic dependence on France is the use of the French language. A man expresses this dependence in the following terms: 'one of the elements that prevents us from developing is also the French language. The problem is that the Frenchman does not want to let us do things that are contrary to his interests. He won't let us.'[73] Earlier, I mentioned how some Congolese believe that the introduction of Western civilization happened to the detriment of national languages and contributed to the destruction of the traditional foundations of Congolese societies. However, the idea expressed here is more about the lack of openness to the world. Congolese are described as prisoners of the French language, unable to project themselves to the rest of the world except through France and the French language. People believe that, through language, French authorities keep Congo in their sphere of influence, thus leaving very little chance for the Congolese to contemplate the opportunities for cooperation and development with other advanced economies. This belief feeds into the established argument about how language allows France to retain control and influence on its former African colonies, therefore blurring the boundaries between the colonial and the postcolonial.[74]

The third driver of Congo's postcolonial dependence on France is the perceived acquaintance between Congolese and French elites. The Congolese ruling elite is perceived as docile and servile and only motivated to act in the interest of France to protect their own power and material wealth. Indeed, current President Nguesso has been in power for 40 years, uninterrupted for the last 27 years. Congolese believe that he has been able to cling on to power with the assistance of France and rightly so. The involvement of French oil companies in the Congolese civil wars from 1993 on is now well documented.[75] During the Second Civil War in 1997, French President Jacques Chirac sided with Nguesso against President Pascal Lissouba, who won the first democratic elections in the history of the nation. Indeed, Congolese scholar Yengo argues that friendship and personal acquaintances are more important than diplomacy in the relationship between the two countries.[76] Therefore, the Congolese President and the ruling elite are

72. Focus group with football team, Brazzaville, 16 August 2023.
73. Focus group with elders, Brazzaville, 25 August 2023.
74. Daga and Gallagher, '"Speaking proper French"'.
75. Loik Le Floch-Prigent, *Affaire Elf, affaire d'État* (Le Cherche Midi, Paris, 2001).
76. Patrice Yengo, 'Affinités électives et délégation des compétences: La politique congolaise de Jacques Chirac', *Politique africaine* 105, 1 (2007), pp. 105–125.

seen as aligning themselves with France to preserve personal interests in exchange for favours from the French.[77] A young woman sums up what many Congolese in my discussions thought about the ruling elites: 'They love France, and they like the interest they gain from France. Those who are being duped are the people. They say we defend you, but they defend themselves.' It is with a mixture of embarrassment and regret that Congolese participants mentioned this attitude of the ruling elite, which was described as completely detached and disinterested in the economic plights of the population.

When French influence explains everyday hardship

The perception of the mausoleum as a 'symbol of French colonialism' is related to the claim that France exploits the continent's natural resources. It was a common refrain across the group discussions that colonization not only led to the extortion of Congo's natural resources to the benefit of France, but also that such extortion has continued after decolonization. 'The French have been exploiting our wood and oil for a very long time, but they have left nothing here' claims a young female graduate.[78] In another discussion, a man also expressed that France exploits Congo's resources without compensation. He concluded that 'they [the French] have not been able to create real development. We're not fully advanced.'[79] In other words, despite the official celebration of independence, the French not only got their hands on Congo's resources, but they also left no opportunity for development. Congo's economic hardship is thus intimately blamed on the colonial and postcolonial relationship with France. 'It is because of France that we are lagging behind', the young female graduate and many people who participated in this research expressed.[80] Colonization is said to have dragged Congo into a spiral of poverty, the end of which is difficult for many to envisage.

The extraversion of the ruling elite further explains the level of economic hardship in Congo. Congolese are convinced that because 'the French impose things on us, the country is not well managed.'[81] As a man mentions: 'Congolese don't eat well. There is corruption that is increasing, and this is worsening inflation. There is a very high unemployment rate.'[82] The problem of unemployment, especially among young people, was constantly

77. Francisco J. Pérez, 'An enduring neocolonial alliance: A history of the CFA Franc', *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 81, 5 (2022), pp. 851–887.
78. Focus group with young graduates, Brazzaville, 13 August 2023.
79. Focus group with football team, Brazzaville, 16 August 2023.
80. Focus group with young graduates, Brazzaville, 13 August 2023.
81. Focus group with students, Brazzaville, 10 August 2024.
82. *Ibid.*

highlighted in many discussions. He even challenged me to check its incidence for myself: 'Look in this big city, try to walk through it, you will see that in a plot where you will find twenty people, only three or two have a job. The others are hustling. There is no work. We want to work.' The high rate of unemployment and the lack of social infrastructure thus contribute to the precarious living conditions: 'Congolese do not eat well, they are poorly cared for. The hospital became a morgue. We go there to aggravate our illness. … There is a very high unemployment rate in this country. You can't take care of your family.'[83]

More interesting is how poverty, the elite's extraversion, and France's influence are all tied back to the story of Brazza and colonization. A man told me: 'You can't have your beer or simply feed your family. Savorgnan de Brazza did us a disservice.'[84] In this complex understanding of time, the monument itself is considered part of the plot to maintain the status quo, as one young lady explained:

> The French have done nothing to change this situation [the precarious living conditions in Congo]. If the French wanted our good, they should encourage our leaders to create jobs. There are no factories to hire people. However, we invested in building a mausoleum.[85]

Her quote suggests that the national elites, in complicity with the French, deplete public resources to promote the image of France in Congo, and divert the efforts away from addressing issues of poverty. The mausoleum stands as a symbol of the strong relationship between the elites and the shared interest in the preservation of France's image in Congo, and at the expense of improvising living conditions. After all, the Congolese elites have no say because 'it's the White man who decides.'[86] The very idea of building a mausoleum in the heart of the Congolese capital would therefore be the result of 'a decision from above', in reference to the French authorities.[87] The mausoleum is thus associated with the desire of the French, in connivance with President Sassou and the national elites, to leave 'traces to perpetuate colonization.'[88] The presence of the mausoleum in the heart of the Congolese capital is proof that 'we are not independent', concludes one of the participants.[89] People believe that President Sassou and national authorities agreed to build the monument because the decision supports 'their own interest' through prevarication and monopolization of public

83. Focus group with taxi drivers, Brazzaville, 13 August 2023.
84. Focus group with students, Brazzaville, 9 August 2023.
85. Focus group with students, Brazzaville, 10 August 2024.
86. Focus group with students, Brazzaville, 10 August 2023.
87. *Ibid.*
88. Focus group with entrepreneurs, Brazzaville, 18 August 2023.
89. *Ibid.*

resources for personal enrichment. The objective of the monument is therefore to freeze colonial time in a way that benefits French and Congolese elites, while the population remains in poverty.

This interpretation of the mausoleum as a colonial strategy to maintain Congo in poverty while syphoning the national resources away uncovers two important arguments that were previously underappreciated. First, existing scholarship has opposed the mausoleum on the grounds that President Sassou intended to rewrite history to embellish France's colonial past. However, people's perceptions are somewhat at odds with elite projections. As a man pointed out: 'this mausoleum can also be seen as the symbol of French domination.'[90] Another one concludes: 'colonial symbols and remnants demonstrate that Africa is still under domination'. Breaking away from the official discourse, people condemned the ruling elite's choice to build a mausoleum because, through the mausoleum, 'they recognized colonization as a charitable work.' This also indicates that grassroots constructions of collective memory can operate at cross purpose to the ideology of the elites. Further to how local-level actors can disrupt and deconstruct hegemonic historiographies imposed by the elites, the perception of the mausoleum through the narrative of Françafrique provides an original critique that sees a continuity between France's colonial past and its continued influence in Africa. More importantly, the popular interpretation of the mausoleum as a symbol of French colonialism broadens the contestation of French influence, so far confined to military and economic cooperation, into the area of cultural heritage.

Second, the consistency of references to the mausoleum as 'a symbol of French colonialism' across discussion groups indicates that ethnic and political differences within Brazzaville do not significantly shape views of the mausoleum. Bernault suggested that during the transfer of Brazza's remains to the mausoleum, President Sassou unsuccessfully used the opportunity to ascertain his control over the Teke traditional authority.[91] While this claim hints at the mobilization of the differences between the Mbochi, Téké, and Lari for political control, I found no evidence of an ethnic fracture in the perceptions of the mausoleum.

This is unsurprising because people's evocation of French colonialism, through the mausoleum, resonates with recent challenges faced by France on the continent. In the past few years, demonstrations on African streets against the perceived French influence in the domestic affairs of its previous colonies brought together thousands of people irrespective of their ethnic belonging and political allegiance. People transcended the domestic ethnic

90. *Ibid.*
91. Florence Bernault, 'Something's rotten in the post-empire. Fetish, body and commodity in the memorial of Brazza in Congo', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 198–199–200, (2010), pp. 771–798.

and religious cleavages to demand the removal of French military bases and the end of the FCFA currency because they perceived them as symbols of French neo-colonial influence. Similarly, a Congolese man made the following point: 'Africans are aware of what has happened. In Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, there is an anti-French sentiment. It is a message that France must decode. It means that we Africans are fed up with everything that has happened.'[92] He then defiantly and proudly claimed: 'France must sit down to negotiate with us, even if it means asking forgiveness for the blunders committed in Africa.' As a symbol of French colonialism, the mausoleum not only speaks of the past, but it is also an iconography of French present influence and its popular contestation in the former African colonies.

Conclusion

This article is animated by curiosity over Francophone Africa's singular path of public commemoration, which sits at cross purposes to decommemoration movements around the world. Far from being unique, the recent memorialization of de Brazza reflects similar contexts in Francophone sub-Saharan Africa, where the presence of colonial memorials is still common, and many public spaces are named after colonial figures. The article adopted an approach to heritage from below to uncover the complex relationship between the Congolese and their colonial past. I used the Savorgnan de Brazza Mausoleum in Brazzaville to disentangle grassroots constructions of collective memories based on their lived experiences.

This narrative of 'counter memory' is predicated on the politics of France's ongoing influence in the state affairs of its formal African colonies, sustained by the acquaintances between African leaders and French elites. The counternarrative of French colonialism in Congo blurs the boundaries between the colonial and the postcolonial and offers a distinct account of the Congolese ruling elites' extraversion and the mechanisms of France's paternalistic policies towards its former African colonies. Furthermore, such discursive constructions effectively challenge both the orientalist narratives that present Savorgnan de Brazza as the 'good prophet' or the 'pacific Apostle' and the romanticism associated with French colonialism in Africa.

Surely, I do not generalize from this one case to make a larger argument about the distinction between Francophone sub-Saharan Africa's relationships with colonial memory and experiences found elsewhere on the continent. Nonetheless, I am convinced that the historical status of Brazzaville as the capital of French Equatorial Africa, the second major confederation of French colonies, makes the city an interesting case to

92. Focus group with taxi drivers, Brazzaville, 13 August 2023.

study the intricacies of French colonial representations of memory and their long-lasting effects on Congolese postcolonial imagination. Therefore, I hope my arguments can inform further debates in Francophone Africa.

This paper demonstrates the importance of cultural heritage in the contentious relationship between France and its former African colonies, alongside the more commonly studied realms of military bases, the FCFA, and the French oil and uranium companies. The junta in Mali, which is engaged in a fistfight with France, decided in December 2024 to rename all major streets and plazas in Bamako that referenced France. The same month, the Senegalese President set up a commission with a similar objective: To identify and rename cultural heritage sites that are named after French figures and events. The new regime in Dakar had previously signalled a 'reform' in the country's relationship with France, and the move came weeks after Dakar asked France to dismantle its military base in Senegal. In this context, the article demonstrates how cultural heritage can encapsulate meanings of French influence at the same time as it represents a site for grassroots contestations of the elite's narrative of the colonial past.

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