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Brazza and the Affective Afterlives of Colonialism in Congo

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Abstract

In this article I suggest looking at memory as a symbolic field animated by the emotional tensions that emerge from popular interpretations of state hegemonic narratives. These affective engagements challenge the binary framings of memory as a contested project between the elite's script and the resistance from below. Using the iconography of the Brazza Mausoleum, I argue that colonial memory in Congo acts as a spectral force through which the grievances from the colonial past convey meaning to the frustrations experienced through the postcolonial state. Colonial history returns as a phantom haunting the unfulfilled promises of the independent state.

Resumo

Neste artigo, proponho pensar sobre a memória como campo simbólico, sujeito às tensões emocionais suscitadas pelas interpretações que as populações fazem das narrativas hegemônicas do Estado. Estas ligações afetivas desafiam as perspectivas binárias que concebem a memória como objeto de contestação entre o discurso das elites e a resistência popular. Recorrendo à iconografia do Mausoléu de Brazza, defendo que, no Congo, a memória colonial atua como uma força espectral através da qual os ressentimentos face ao passado colonial conferem significado às frustrações vividas no Estado pós-colonial. A história colonial regressa como um fantasma que assombra as promessas do Estado independente, ainda por cumprir.

Résumé

Dans le présent article, je suggère d'examiner la mémoire comme un domaine symbolique influencé par les tensions émotionnelles issues des interprétations populaires des récits hégémoniques de l'État. Ces engagements affectifs interrogent les structures binaires qui

présentent la mémoire comme un enjeu en conflit entre le discours des élites et les formes de résistance émanant des couches populaires. En m'appuyant sur l'iconographie du mausolée de Brazza, je soutiens que la mémoire coloniale au Congo se manifeste comme une force spectrale, par laquelle les ressentiments liés au passé colonial confèrent une signification aux frustrations éprouvées dans l'État postcolonial. L'histoire coloniale réapparaît donc telle un spectre, rappelant les promesses non tenues de l'État souverain.

Keywords: Savorgnan de Brazza; collective memory; French colonialism; oral history; Congo

Introduction

In October 1880, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, the Italian-born French colonizer and his companions, moored in the village of Mfoa, on the bank of the Congo River. A month earlier, on September 10, 1880, Brazza had signed a colonial treaty with Makoko Iloi 1st, the local king (Brunschwig et al. 1972). The treaty allowed him to take possession of the lands on behalf of France. In 1883, the French Geographical Society renamed the village of Mfoa to Brazzaville, in honor of the colonizer, and it has since become the capital of the Republic of Congo. Since 2006, a giant marble and glass mausoleum, also in honor of Brazza, stands in the heart of Brazzaville. During its inauguration, both Congolese and French elite praised the monument as a peaceful reading of the colonial past and the proud symbol of a transnational friendship. However, for many Congolese citizens, the monument is associated with political disillusionment and neocolonial dependency (Daga 2025a).

Building on this dissonance between the elite's narrative and its reception from below, the article explores the psychic entanglement and the affective ambivalence of colonial memory in francophone Africa. I use the monument to understand how Congolese citizens experience nostalgia in the long shadows of colonialism and postcolonial power. To that extent, I move beyond documenting contestation and resistance from below to examine the affective work that such oppositional narratives perform. I explore how these engagements with the figure of Brazza elicit feelings of historical dispossession and unresolved colonial injury.

Indeed, how communities create a shared meaning of their present and future is often predicated on the cultural and political representations of history, rather than objective history. Narratives constructed and emerging from historical events form an essential part of how people think about themselves and their communities (Wertsch 2002). While framing historical events into narrative eases the ways in which people understand their societies, such constructions of the past can never be assumed to be an objective and accurate reflection of past events. In other words, the political interpretation of history is always selective, implying that collective memory is never a neutral and objective record of historical events (Halbwachs 1992).

The literature on memory and heritage in Africa emphasizes that the ways in which communities remember the past are determined by the postcolonial elite and their political and cultural sensitivities. More often, the construction of collective memory is closely aligned with the ideology of the dominant groups

who seek to consolidate political legitimacy (Rassool 2000; Coombes 2003; Silverman et al. 2015). Contributing to this scholarship, my study foregrounds the role of affective entanglement and oral tradition to read memory as a site of nostalgia and fantasy projections resulting from the disillusionments of the postcolonial state. In so doing, this study moves away from institutional practices and elite narratives to read memory from below, recentring oral traditions and lived experiences. Moreover, this article extends the conversations from two previous publications resulting from the same fieldwork project in Brazzaville between 2014 and 2015.

For three months, I conducted focus group discussions across the city of Brazzaville and at the site of the monument with nonelite Congolese. By nonelite, I mean the diverse social backgrounds of people found outside of state institutions and political power. The research participants comprised categories such as students, unemployed graduates, street vendors, musicians, and so on. These people were drawn from diverse social and professional backgrounds, and they have in common a position outside elite political power. These profiles are typical of people you would meet randomly in a day out in the city. However, I approached most of them through gatekeepers, community networks, youth associations, and local organizations. Most of the participants have lived in Brazzaville long enough to see the monument emerge and their narratives reveal how memory is negotiated in everyday urban contexts. I conducted twenty-two focus group discussions during which I asked the participants to reflect on the Savorgnan de Brazza mausoleum and the legacies of French colonialism. Around 120 people, aged between 22 and 35 years, took part in this project, divided into groups ranging from 4 to 8 people. The discussions took place in French, and they ranged from forty-five to ninety minutes in length. While I use the term “elite” throughout the article, it is not intended to imply a monolithic bloc. Rather, it broadly refers to people who shape national memory scripts through official discourse, heritage programming, and state-sponsored commemorations. In this category, we find various political actors such as senior bureaucrats, ruling-party officials, diplomats, or cultural administrators. Heuristically, the dissonance between the narratives produced by the two categories is central to understanding memory as a symbolic field of affective entanglement.

Two initial publications emerged from this research. The first one explored the methodological upheavals of engaging dissenting voices that seek to contest the hegemonic narratives of colonial memory. It highlights the challenge of identifying the repertoires of contestation in a political context where freedom of expression is suppressed (Daga and Djimet 2024). My second publication draws on the iconography of the Brazza mausoleum to elicit both the crystallization and the contestation of the historical connections between French and Congolese elite (Daga 2025a). The inquiry of this third article revolves around the affective entanglement resulting from people’s everyday engagement with the monument. I ask how people draw on diverse oral traditions to reconstitute the colonial past and articulate its affective residues. How do these affective tensions shape the ways in which people remember the colonial past in Congo?

The research results show an ambivalent response from the participants to the state’s narrative of the colonial past, curated through the iconography of the

Brazza Mausoleum (Figure 1). On one hand, people depict the French explorer as a liar who used trickery to deprive Africans of their sovereignty. On the other hand, he is also remembered as a man of diplomacy. People convey fond memories of childhood around the gardens of the mausoleum, while yearning for forms of paternal protection and lost sovereignty. They reveal the entanglements of the past into the present, mediated by the historical figure of Brazza who gives meaning to the everyday struggles imposed by the postcolonial state.

I therefore suggest looking at memory as a symbolic field animated by the emotional tensions that emerge from the popular interpretations of the state hegemonic narratives of the past. These affective engagements call into question the binary framings of memory as a contested project between the elite's hegemonic script and the resistance from below. Drawing on the work of Gilroy (2005) and Stoler (2013), I argue that colonial memory in Congo acts as a spectral force through which the grievances from the colonial past convey meaning to the frustrations experienced through the postcolonial state. The Brazza Mausoleum, therefore, becomes a symbolic portal into the afterlives of the French colonial empire in Congo. Through the iconography of the monument, the colonial history returns as a phantom that haunts the unfulfilled promises of the postcolonial state.

This last point also serves as an entry into debates about the postcolonial state and its affective force. As Mbembe (2001) has argued, the postcolonial state is an apparatus of domination that operates through a theatrical performance of violence. In Congo, the state achieves control essentially through violence and oppression (Daga 2025b). Yet, the elite have used the monument to project the image of a pacified state. This ambivalence is revealed in how the participants mock the mausoleum as the embodiment of foreign influence, yet they recall their first school trip to the site with pride. While the state narrative is perceived as coercive, it is nonetheless experienced as intimate and familiar. These affective complexities speak of a political order that resorts to violence to subjugate while at the same time the oppressed feel seduced by such violence.

The article unfolds in five sections. The first section lays out the theoretical framework through which I analyze the entanglement of the past into present lives. In the second section, I reinterpret Brazza as a symbolic operator, which reveals how the national ambivalence of postcolonial power is projected into the colonial past as a fantasy. The third section examines how participants narrate the colonial treaty as a mythic wound and lingering betrayal. The fourth section considers the everyday uses and meanings of the mausoleum. Here I emphasize the ambiguous intimacy of the postcolonial state through the affective entanglement of historical artifacts into people's everyday lives. The fifth section explores the genres of oral literacies. I analyze how affect, metaphor, and rumor structure popular attempts at history-making.

Theoretical Framework

My approach is concerned with how people affectively engage the ideological script mobilized by the political elite to narrate the colonial past in Congo. First,

following Trouillot (1995), I distinguish between history, memory, and heritage. History refers to empirically documented events, the accounts of which can be contested. Memory, in contrast, is about the practices of how a community reinterprets the historical past. I use heritage to mention the state attempts to create political coherence by mobilizing historical events through monuments and ceremonial rituals. In Congo, the erection of the Brazza mausoleum stands out as an example of official attempts to create a narrative of the official past. The state's script of the colonial past attracted criticism for misrepresenting the reality. However, my own approach is concerned with how people affectively engage the ideological script mobilized by the political elite to narrate the colonial past in Congo.

While Halbwachs (1992) and Nora (1989) offer foundational insights, scholars of African politics of memory (Rassool 2000; Coombes 2003) stress that collective memory in postcolonial contexts is inseparable from ongoing struggles over citizenship, state violence, and historical silences. This article aligns with that literature by foregrounding the affective and symbolic negotiations through which Congolese publics remake colonial history.

Gilroy (2005), in the context of the British lost empire, examines memory as a scene of desire and a site of wounding resulting from the unprocessed grief attached to the decline of colonial empire. His concept of postcolonial melancholia gives meaning to how the figure of Brazza can simultaneously be presented as a "humanist," but also as a "trickster" whose name triggers the failure to mourn the loss of sovereignty or the ongoing humiliation of dependency. Similarly, Stoler's (2013) colonial aphasia contends that failure to remember does not result from the fact that people are unaware of history. Instead, it is a deliberate act to protect the political order from the destabilizing forces of the untold history. The question is therefore less about the memorialization of Brazza than it is about the omissions made through the memorial proudly standing in the capital of Congo in honor of the colonizer. Could the mausoleum tell the untold history of Congo without jeopardizing the symbolic coherence that the state seeks to reclaim through the Brazza? This question is further complicated by the concept of imperialist nostalgia (Rosaldo 1989). While postcolonial melancholia represents the longing for a past grandeur, imperial nostalgia is a selective process that creates a phantasmatic memory in which the imperial past is whitened from the foundational violence of colonialism. When the Congolese state, sponsored by France, reimagines Brazza as a "humanist colonizer," it is arguably projecting such nostalgia by rewriting the violent foundations of colonization into a story of peaceful civilizing.

As this study shows, however, popular memory and counter-memories often resist such romantic script of the colonial past through irony and the grotesque. Such contestation is itself informed by oral history that presents Brazza as a trickster or a deceiver with no moral boundaries. In these oral accounts, the historical and objective figure of Brazza is reworked into a symbolic operator of the colonial empire. The symbolic operator serves to negotiate and to project the contradictions of the postcolonial experience in Congo.

African oral tradition has received significant praise as a site of epistemic decolonization, especially because it reveals an alternative truth to written

colonial archives (Vansina 1985; Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Thiong'o 1986). However, there is also the risk of romanticizing orality into a space of truth seemingly untouched by ideology and the postcolonial imaginary. To prevent this, I view oral tradition as a narrative form that encodes affect, metaphor, and allegory (White et al. 1994; Barber 2007; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). I therefore imply that people's emotions can distort or alter the historical truth, albeit unintentionally. As revealed through excerpts from the interviews in the following sections, people's recollection of the historical does not always match the recorded factual versions. My approach, therefore, emphasizes the performative aspects of oral tradition and situates the narrative within its specific cultural context and localized political lexicon. This means that the importance of oral tradition is not just about what is said, but also how it is said.

For example, one participant claimed that France still "takes a percentage" of Congolese minerals due to the 1880 colonial treaty. That statement is juridically hard to prove but it is neither a factual error. Instead, I read it as a phantasmatic truth in which the postcolonial experience of underdevelopment and economic exploitation are projected onto the symbolic image of Brazza. In that sense, the treaty becomes a fetish object. People remember the treaty because of its phantasmatic significance rather than its judicial clauses.

The postcolonial engagement with colonial memory in Congo is intimately tied with questions of power and control. When the Congolese elite invoke the historical figure of Brazza, they do so with the intent to stabilize a fractured and fragile national imaginary. Although this enterprise is resisted from below, Congolese people nevertheless remain entangled with the state's ideology of the past (Daga 2025a). As much as the Congolese state's historical narrative is tied to French interests (Yengo 2007), it also shapes how people symbolically engage with the past and the postcolonial institutions.

I argue that people endure the control of the state through the melancholic attachment to a pure historical past. In the imagination of many people, pre-colonial Congo represents an idealistic and pure form of social organization. Even if these societies lack the power and resources of the modern state, people represent them as coherent and free from the hardship faced by many Congolese citizens through their everyday encounter with the state. The appearance of Brazza only serves to disrupt such imagination of a immaculate Congolese past. The monument dedicated to the French explorer represents the historical violation of a mythical past that continues in present day. For that reason, people may ridicule the mausoleum and reject the myth of Brazza. Yet they continue to visit its grounds for private and intimate ceremonies. Ultimately, the figure of Brazza, and the monument that represents him, help people make sense of the dysfunctional governance of the postcolonial state. Memory in this case entangles the dominant ideology that seeks to legitimize institutional power and the popular resistance that it faces. This deep entanglement between the state's recovery of colonial memory and its critiques are built on dense layers of affective attachments. To highlight these dynamics, the next section reinterprets the figure of Brazza as a polyvalent symbol whose meaning shifts across fantasy, fetish, and haunting. These three modalities illuminate different ways Congolese publics negotiate the unresolved legacies of colonialism.

Brazza as Fantasy, Fetish, and Ghost

This section examines how the figure of Brazza functions in both popular and elite discourses as a phantasmatic construct and the symbolic operator of colonial memory in Congo. Both the elite and ordinary people project onto him the desire for political coherence. For the people, he represents the unresolved mourning of national sovereignty. For the elite, he is the moral legitimacy of the past whitened from the violence of colonialism. Brazza exemplifies how the colonial past still haunts present lives through three distinct registers of the postcolonial affect: he is transformed into a fantasy, a fetish, and a ghost.

The fantasy of Brazza is found in elite discourse which seeks to portray an ethical narrative of French colonization. Brazza's approach to diplomatic collaboration with local kings, through colonial treaties, earned him the title of the "peaceful apostle," the "father of the slaves" or the "humanist colonizer." For his Western biographers, Brazza was no less than a superhero. Presumably so in the words of Maran (2009, 224) who wrote one of the early biographies of Brazza: "He was unfortunately only too good a prophet." While the French celebration of Brazza is not surprising, it is more questionable when Congolese officials started alluding to him as a "humanist colonizer." Henri Lopes, an acclaimed novelist, who was Congolese ambassador in France, made the following remarks: "Brazza was not a colonizer as any other, he was a humanist" (Hofnung 2014). For many reasons, these comments are certainly distressing, especially because they were made by an official speaking on behalf of a postcolonial government. Much so too because such narrative was uncritically repeated by the Congolese government to justify the erection of a multimillion dollar mausoleum in memory of the colonial figure. This framing is evident in speeches at the mausoleum's inauguration in 2006, where both President Denis Sassou Nguesso and the representative of French President Jacques Chirac celebrated Brazza as a bridge between civilizations and a symbol of Franco-Congolese friendship.

This narrative serves several purposes. First, it cleanses the moral stain of colonial violence by isolating Brazza as an exceptional figure (Bazenguissa-Ganga 2011; Tonda 2010). The French colonizer is depicted as compassionate and moderate, distinct from his more brutal contemporary colonial actors like Stanley or Faidherbe (Dunn 2003). Second, it offers a usable past for the Congolese state to project a foundational myth that legitimizes current power through association with dignity and diplomacy. For France, the construction of Brazza as a fantasy provides soft diplomatic cover (Bernault 2010) that suggests continuity with humanitarian values rather than imperial domination.

It is also worth mentioning how this elite instrumentalization of Brazza reflects different attempts at creating political coherence through different stages of Congo's political transformation. Under the socialist regime from 1963, the elite mobilized an anti-imperial narrative to cohere the national imaginary of the state. This narrative shifted to the single party as they consolidated power during the reshuffle of military coups from 1968. After two consecutive civil wars—which saw the return and consolidation of President Sassou Nguesso to power, thanks to France's military and diplomatic support (Le Floch-Prigent 2001)—Brazza was mobilized as a "humanist colonizer" to

symbolize Franco-Congolese historic friendship. This political transformation shows how different regimes in Congo have selectively engaged with history in their attempt to create legitimacy.

However, the romantic narratives about Brazza mask deeper anxieties. The idealization of Brazza is better understood through imperialist nostalgia (Rosaldo 1989). It reflects the desire to mourn a colonized world while simultaneously sanitizing the means by which it was conquered. It is a fantasy of ethical domination that translates a wish that colonization might have been not only necessary but noble. The mourning of a colonial world is therefore less a longing for empire than a strategic recoding of history that naturalizes contemporary forms of dependency. Brazza, therefore, becomes the symbolic operator of the elite's ambition for power and control in postcolonial Congo. An ambition that is, however, contested from below.

Beyond fantasy, Brazza also functions as a fetish-object that both reveals and conceals the structural violences of empire. A fetish mediates the contradictions between material domination and symbolic desire (Bernault 2010). While a fetish is an object of misplaced belief, it also translates an affective attachment by concealing structural violence. Treating Brazza as a fetish object therefore captures how the elite displace political ambivalence onto a figure that both reveals and obscures colonial power. As a fetish, Brazza's image allows Congolese officials to simultaneously acknowledge colonial domination while holding onto a figure that makes that domination appear acceptable, as long as they can use it to reclaim political coherence and legitimacy in a fractured community (Stoler 2013).

This is particularly evident in the architectural aesthetics of the mausoleum. The Brazza mausoleum is sleek, modern, and pacified. It contains no trace of blood, violence, or conflict. Instead, it presents Brazza as a statesman, a father figure, reclining in marble, untouched by the brutality associated with other colonial agents. The crypt-like design and the reverent displays of artifacts further evoke sacred space. The monument operationalizes the transformation of Brazza into a secular saint of the postcolony. However, the elite's celebration of Brazza as a "humanist" fails to conceal the violence of French colonial conquest in Congo. This is exemplified by the brutal competition over ivory trade and the violent subjugation of local resistance (Berenson 2010; Daughton 2021). In this context, the reference to Brazza as a "peaceful colonizer" is itself part of the French fantasy and attempts to sanitize empire (Atondi-Monmondjo 2006).

The fetish logic extends beyond elite settings. In focus groups, participants often oscillated between critique and identification. Some questioned the monument's utility and its expensive cost in a state that still lacks essential services. Yet, they recalled their childhood visits with warmth or awe. Others referred to Brazza as a figure that unified Congo from its divided multitudes of tribes. Yet, they acknowledge his role in France's exploitation of Congo. I read these apparent contradictions as affective ambivalence rather than logical inconsistencies. They reflect popular efforts to navigate a legacy that is both shaming and intimate, injurious and foundational. Therefore, as a fetish, Brazza symbolically absorbs the complex postcolonial feelings of shame, nostalgia, and longing. Above all, it allows the Congolese society to endure contradictions that it cannot easily resolve.

The third and final level of the postcolonial affect from which I explore the figure of Brazza is his representation as a ghost who continues to haunt the national imaginary. The specter of Brazza animates everyday conversations about Congo's underdevelopment as the result of French dependency. For many Congolese who participated in this research, Congo is simply not independent. I borrow from Gordon (2008) the concept of "ghost" memory to reflect how the symbolic figure of Brazza mediates a collective memory based on the unresolved injustices that linger beneath the surface of the colonial and postcolonial experience in Congo.

Seeing Brazza as a ghost makes sense of how popular narratives surrounding his figure are less about the historical truth than the unfinished business of the colonial past. His memorialization reopens the wounds of lost sovereignty and the dispossession of colonialism. However, Gordon's (2008) concept of "haunting" is also about the erasure and marginalization of certain histories. While Brazza is entombed in marble, Congolese anti-colonial leaders—or even the Africans with whom he signed the colonial treaties—are nowhere to be seen. The presence of Brazza thus marks an absence. His memorialization displaces memory away from local resistance through a reanimation of his ghostly figure. However, this reenactment only reminds Congolese that history is a lie and repetition of French exploitation. "The fact that they don't talk about the Makoko is proof that history is a lie," claims a man.¹ Looking at the statue, another man added: "The stick he holds in his hand symbolizes power. This is to whip us."² Brazza may be dead, but his ghost continues to explain the injuries suffered by Congolese at the hands of the postcolonial elite.

The three registers of fantasy, fetish, and ghost are analytically distinct yet mutually reinforcing. Fantasy sanitizes the colonial past; fetish stabilizes political contradiction; haunting reactivates unresolved injury. Together, these three registers of postcolonial affect, fantasy, fetish, and ghost, help us rethink Brazza's place in Congolese collective memory. As a symbolic operator, Brazza crystallizes the unresolved desire for legitimacy that opposes the state's claim to moral coherence and the people's grief over lost livelihoods. He condenses desire, disavowal, and grievance into a single symbolic figure whose meaning is never fixed. Brazza therefore functions as a vessel for contradictory feeling. In the following section, I explain how his presence reveals what remains unburied in the national psyche.

The Colonial Treaty as Phantom Limb

The 1880 colonial treaty between Brazza and the Makoko Iloi 1st is one of the themes frequently referenced by the research participants. However, people's interpretations of the treaty are significantly at odds from the state narrative. For the elite, the treaty is portrayed as the symbol of diplomacy and peaceful negotiation between the colonial administration and the native Africans. But this is a view contested in popular discourse as a narrative of lost sovereignty and material dispossession. Participants often describe the treaty as a lingering wound that still affects negatively the national interest of Congo in its diplomatic

relationship with France. When people talk about the treaty, it is to express a feeling of historical injustice that was given a legal and permanent binding. In popular allegory, the treaty emerges as a phantom limb. I use “phantom limb” metaphorically to describe the sensation of a historical injury that remains felt even when its original object is no longer visible. In that sense, the treaty represents a historical injury that helps make sense of the violence of colonization and the perceived French economic exploitation. In this section, I discuss how participants use the treaty to explain everyday injustice and the political and economic disempowerment that still shapes the postcolonial present.

One of the most striking statements across multiple groups is the claim that the treaty is still relevant today. Its provisions, therefore, would continue to govern the relations between independent Congo and France. This idea is expressed in the following terms:

This treaty has a negative impact in the sense that we continue to receive orders. We don't know what was signed. They [Congolese leaders] are forced to give percentages to White people while we are an independent country. In everything we operate, they must have a slice of the pie. It is based on what has been signed.³

At first glance, this may appear as a historical error. After all, the treaty did not legally grant France perpetual access to Congo's natural resources. Albeit legally fallacious, this statement has a strong symbolic charge. This claim reveals the affective conviction that colonial extraction never ended. If sovereignty was compromised at the origin, the postcolonial state also remains entangled in the continuity of foreign domination. In this sense, the treaty functions as a kind of phantasmatic object. It reveals unhealed rupture between postcolonial Congo and France, the former colonizer. Participants did not cite its clauses and many could not even remember the date when it was signed. Nonetheless, they spoke of it as a historical curse and a contract of submission enacted through deceit. The Makoko certainly did not foresee the cunning of Brazza and his desire to establish the French colonial administration on his lands. In fact, the African monarch did not imagine that by signing the treaty, he would lose his kingdom. For many Congolese, France established this treaty with the sole purpose of exploiting the natural wealth of Congo; the protection sought by the Makoko was not among the colonizer's priorities. It was indeed a plan meticulously designed in advance and the Makoko was the victim of the predatory ambitions of French colonization. At least that's what one woman conveys as she expresses herself in the following terms:

He [the Makoko] agreed to sign the treaty, but the Whites already knew that our country is rich in natural resources. We were naïve and Savorgnan de Brazza took advantage of that. Without having read the treaty, Makoko signed it. Knowing the French, they could also have translated to him something different [than what was actually contained in the treaty]. It was only afterwards that he understood that he had sold his country.⁴

These readings are evidence of an affective reasoning that once again reveals Brazza as the symbolic conduit through which political grievances and historical injuries are projected. The treaty stands for something larger than Brazza initiated and which is the beginning of a historical loop of repeated betrayal and continued extraction. As a symbolic injury, the treaty “haunts” (Gordon 2008) Congolese political life because it also marks the founding of a relationship structured by deception, asymmetry, and dispossession. The act of remembering the treaty is therefore about naming a historical injustice and injury that have yet to be repaired.

The Treaty and the Myth of Origin

The recurring emphasis on the Makoko’s ignorance, especially his inability to read French, his trusting disposition, and his symbolic rather than contractual intent, suggests that participants view the treaty not as a legitimate agreement but as a trap. In this framing, the act of signing is less legal than theatrical, less consensual than coerced. People question the conditions under which this agreement was obtained. “The history of the treaty signed between the Makoko and Brazza is murky. The story is not clear,”⁵ says a young man in an expression of his disagreement with the signing of the treaty. It is murky because for this Congolese young man, the story behind the signing of the treaty is a story of deceit committed by the French explorer against the Makoko and his people. It reflects the cunning of the French, who cleverly took advantage of the good faith of the Congolese.

Another man goes on to explain why the treaty exposes the bad faith of the French. And for him, the Frenchmen’s ruse and manipulation are obvious because “Makoko only spoke Teke,”⁶ how could he have understood the content of the treaty he was made to sign? Because Makoko did not speak French, he lacked the essential means of communication to understand the content of the treaty that he was made to sign, therefore the King’s consent was ill-informed. Brazza “had lied to the Makoko. There was no truth”⁷ in his words, a young woman acquiesces. In a separate discussion, a Congolese man goes further and questions the skills of the Senegalese interpreter who accompanied Brazza in his exploration of Congo. He asks rhetorically: “Sergeant Malamine was his interpreter, but Sergeant Malamine was a Senegalese, and he did not speak Teke. How was he able to interpret the Teke?”⁸ If the two parties to the treaty could not even speak the same language, then inevitably the treaty, drafted and signed in French, was a form of trickery by the explorer against the Makoko and his people. Historians have since questioned whether the two parties had a “mutual understanding” of the dispositions of the treaty (Daughton 2021). Convinced of the contrary, the man simply concludes that “the story is biased. The French lied to us.”

The insistence on linguistic misunderstanding between Makoko, Brazza, and Sergeant Malamine reveals more than suspicion of the treaty’s historical legitimacy. It indexes the deep linguistic inequalities of the present, in which French remains the privileged language of bureaucracy, law, and schooling, while local languages are marginalized. The recurrent emphasis on translation failure thus

becomes an allegory of contemporary exclusion. An exclusion that produces a sense that decisions affecting Congolese lives continue to be made in a linguistic register inaccessible to many citizens.

But the treaty is also perceived as “something sleazy” in the attitude of the French towards the Makoko who “was duped.”⁹ People believe that the African king did not measure what he was made to surrender by signing the treaty. Only the French knew what they were binding the Congolese to cede through the signature of their king. This notion of trickery draws from both colonial histories and regional oral tropes. Across Central African oral traditions, the trickster is a smiling figure who uses language, gifts, or illusions to obtain power. Brazza, in this imagination, becomes a diplomatic trickster who brought a treaty in one hand and conquest in the other. Whether or not Brazza consciously deceived the Makoko is beside the point. Congolese people remember him as someone who embodied duplicity, at odds from the state narrative presenting him as a humanist. And the treaty he made the Makoko sign represents an act of symbolic inversion. The Frenchmen met the Africans with the promise of friendship. But what they inaugurated instead was an era of lost sovereignty and dispossession. The colonial treaty, therefore, marks the origin of underdevelopment in Congo (Rodney 1972).

This reinterpretation also reflects the ambivalence of national origins in many postcolonial states. For Congo, the colonial treaty is one such site of anxiety. It names a beginning that is both necessary and shameful. It marks a deal that established the modern state, but did so by surrendering its sovereignty. By invoking the Makoko’s unwitting consent, participants effectively displace blame, allowing for the continued affirmation of national identity without fully confronting the contradiction of its colonial genesis. The treaty becomes a sacrificial myth in which an ancestor’s mistake must be justified and mourned but not interrogated too closely.

The Treaty as a Symbolic Curse

Crucially, participants offered different views on what the treaty actually represents. Some described it as a curse that continues to plague the present and future of the Congolese society. Other people believe it is a fictional story invented by their political leaders to get away with the present failures of the postcolonial state. This ambiguity reveals how the treaty has survived history beyond its legal dispositions. It is reanimated as a floating signifier through which people articulate contradictory explanations. Essentially, the colonial treaty has morphed into a cultural myth that binds the past and the present into an unresolved narrative of dependency between the French and the Congolese elite.

This interpretive flexibility echoes what anthropologists have noted about rumor and memory in contexts of political repression (White 2000; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Rumor, like allegory, is not distortion but a mode of truth-telling where official discourse fails. In the case of the treaty, popular accounts compensate for the absence of transparent institutional memory. It fills the absence that minimizes colonial violence and treats Brazza as a benevolent founder. In

this vacuum, counternarratives emerge to fill the gap with voice that remains unspoken. It speaks of the feeling that Congo was stolen at its birth and that history was rigged from the beginning.

Indeed, for many participants, the treaty opened the door for the conquest of Congolese lands and the exploitation of its natural resources for the benefit of France. Many Congolese are therefore convinced that by signing the treaty, the Makoko “opened the door to the colonizers to come and strip us of all our wealth.”¹⁰ In popular allegory, French colonization in the Congo is therefore a story of cunning and deceit pulled off by the French to abuse the “good intentions, ... hospitality”¹¹ of the Congolese. Because the only thing that matters to colonialism is not friendship but the exploitation of natural resources for the benefit of France. In this allegory of deceit, Makoko and the Congolese people he represented are presented as the victims of cunning whose main architect was Brazza with the intent to take possession of natural resources. To highlight Brazza’s malicious intention, people even believe that he bragged about the deal once he got Makoko to sign the treaty. That is indeed what a young woman tells me while looking at a picture of the explorer: “his bag must have allowed him to carry everywhere the treaty he boasted of having signed with the Makoko.”¹²

In popular imagination, the treaty also functions as a moral placeholder that justifies the multiple dysfunctions of the postcolonial state. Rightly so in an authoritarian context where political accountability remains elusive. In this sense, the treaty acts as a symbol that concentrates a diffuse sense of injury, both historical and contemporary. It anchors popular understandings of injustice because it allows people to identify a common origin of the everyday struggles resulting from people’s encounter with the postcolonial state. To treat the treaty as a phantom limb is therefore to acknowledge its significance to how Congolese express their daily frustrations with state failure, economic exploitation, and the continuing perception of foreign domination. It has become a scar which remains after the colonial wound. Its narrative is reimagined and reembodyed across generations. And like all powerful myths, it survives because it continues to speak to the conditions of the present. Once reinterpreted as an act of rendition, the treaty gives meaning to the economic dispossession and the persistence of foreign control masked as partnership. Whether or not the Makoko knew what he signed, the treaty has become a symbol of everything that was signed away without the people’s consent. It embodies everything that was taken away from them by the colonial and the postcolonial states.

Postcolonial Memory and the Affective Entanglements with the State

One afternoon during fieldwork, a group of musicians invited for a performance at the Brazza mausoleum sat under a colonnade to escape the harsh sun. When I approached them and asked about the monument, they scoffed: “It’s a waste of money,” one man says. “I hurt when I think of how much money it took to build,” adds another. “I must confess that the monument is very beautiful. The flowers are well kept,” says a woman quietly. “It’s a waste of money but it contributes to the beauty of the city.”¹³ This moment encapsulates the recurring entanglement of critique and attachment, of irony and identification as people engage with



Figure 1. The Savorngnan de Brazza statue in front of the mausoleum in Brazzaville. Source: Pavel Mbouaka.

state memory. The Brazza mausoleum is a constant object of scorn as people describe it as a symbol of colonial nostalgia. But it is also a usable space that makes people proud of their city. People walk past it daily, invoking its presence with both disdain and intimacy. The monument is rejected as it is embraced. It becomes a theatrical scene where the state's projection of a moral fantasy of coherence becomes an affective space for citizens to engage with its contradictions (Mbembe 2001).

Officially, the Brazza mausoleum represents a symbol of diplomatic friendship between France and Congo. But entirely built in marble and glass, the monument is also a statement of national prestige. It evokes the state's aspirations of modernity. Indeed, located in the posh neighborhood of Le Plateau, next to the Congo River, the beautiful edifice stands out from other public buildings. Surrounded by a well-maintained garden, the large monument instantly captivates the attention of the visitor. The monument's sleek design reflects the generous funding invested in the project's development (Daga 2025a). And it presents a visual narrative in which the state appears as the custodian of colonial memory and civility. But the monument is also a site where Congolese officials

perform state power. Motorcades and red carpets are a common sight as the monument also hosts flag-raising ceremonies. For example, during a day of fieldwork, I came in close proximity with the prime minister's delegation that came to inaugurate an international exhibition. However, such narratives are only partially received. Many participants in this study viewed the mausoleum as a symbol of misplaced priorities. The elite built "a monument to a foreigner," as one man claims, in a country where hospitals remain underfunded. For these critics, the state appears to invest in symbols while neglecting substantive issues such as overcrowded schools and crumbling basic infrastructures.

Yet even these critiques are rarely detached. People speak of the mausoleum with irony, but they also remember it as a civic landmark, a source of aesthetic and emotional resonance. "I am not an architect, but this couldn't be better designed,"¹⁴ says one participant. The aesthetics of the monument is often evoked in fantastical ways. For example, a participant boasts about its grandeur in the following terms: "The monument is beautiful, and the statue is well done. The building is really big with an immense yard. There are plenty of rooms inside and you can get lost. If you go inside, you need a guide or you will never get out."¹⁵ These affective investments complicate the critiques of the monument. In these entanglements, the state survives through fantasy and affective attachments. They reveal that the state is feared or rejected. It is also mimicked and internalized.

Beyond its symbolic function, the mausoleum also serves practical and social purposes. During focus groups, participants describe using the grounds to rest, meet friends, or take photographs. "I often come here to read and sometimes to wait for my mom who works on the other side,"¹⁶ one man says, pointing his finger towards the headquarters of the army which sits across the street. "It's very calm here. It helps relax and breath a fresh bowl of air. The place is very clean,"¹⁷ adds another. I have seen newlywed couples take photographs at the monument's garden after exchanging their vows at the city hall, next door. These uses are not incidental. They reflect the ways in which monumental space becomes reabsorbed into urban life and stripped of its intended meaning through everyday practices.

This reappropriation does not signal resistance in the traditional sense. It is not a protest. It is an instance of a quiet remaking of dominant structures from below, demonstrating people's "own view of history" (Osborne 1998, 452). People rest, flirt, and eat near a monument designed to tell a singular story. In doing so, they embed the dominant story in a thicker narrative of survival. Here, the state symbolism fails to impose fixed meanings, especially with audiences unfamiliar with Congolese history. For example, during one of my visits, the garden was more crowded than usual because the grounds were being used for the Congolese International Arts Exhibition. Participants from across Africa displayed their crafts on stands, sheltered from the sun under large gazebos. I went to three different stands displaying artifacts from Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, all of which were under the burden of French colonization. I pointed to the giant marble statue of Brazza standing a few feet away from the stands and asked the artists if they knew who he was. None of them had a clue and they did not even recognize the purpose of the mausoleum. Many of them had just traveled to

Brazzaville for the first time and were focused on the business of the art exhibition, and oblivious to the politics of memory behind the scenes they decorated.

The monument may be intended as a pedagogical device, but it functions as a space where memory is negotiated through bodily presence and emotion. These entanglements also extend to the emotional logic of popular memory. While many participants denounced the monument, they also expressed desire for the state to “not lie about history.” The anger toward Brazza is often a displaced anger toward a state that commemorates him while erasing others. “They should have also built a monument for the Makoko,” a student laments. He then continues: “They should have built a mausoleum for Marien Ngouabi, Massamba Debat and the Makoko. Our leaders are buried in the village, but they brought the remains of Brazza from abroad to Brazzaville.”¹⁸ There is a feeling that the state disrespected native Congolese historical figures and chose to celebrate a colonizer. As a man says of the elite: “They prefer to honor a foreigner than to honor our own.”¹⁹

This is not a rejection of monumental memory per se. It is a demand for inclusive recognition in how the state narrates history from above. In this sense, popular critique is melancholic. It registers the absence of a just state as a political failure and a loss that continues to be grieved. People’s rejection of the Brazza Mausoleum is at the same time the mourning of what is excluded. This helps explain the pervasive ambivalence in participant accounts. Some critique the monument’s colonial symbolism while praising its architecture. The Brazza Mausoleum is therefore a site of ambivalent attachment where postcolonial subjects negotiate the affective remains of empire and the enduring disappointments of the state. It fails in telling a coherent story. The monument absorbs contradictory feelings and to that extent, it contains more questions about the Congolese quest for national coherence than it answers. The following section highlights how oral forms function both as sources of historical knowledge and as genres of political commentary and affective interpretation.

Oral History as a Genre of Resistance

Throughout the fieldwork, I listened to participants draw upon oral histories and popular rumor as they made sense of the colonial history. As much as these stories clarified the past, they were also mobilized to explain the hardships of the postcolonial experience. Certainly, these narratives are not always coherent timelines compared to archival sources. Nonetheless, they are used to articulate indirect forms of resistance to the elite’s predication.

It is undeniable that oral history plays an important role in challenging the image of Brazza as the “pacifist apostle” or the “humanist colonizer” described in his Western biographies and accepted by the Congolese authorities. The tradition of orality in Africa is central to understanding how knowledge about values, norms, and historical events are transmitted and maintained across generations on the continent. In the historiography of Africa, oral history has long been valorized as a corrective to the Eurocentric colonial archives (Vansina 1985;

Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2013; Thiong'o 1986). But I do not treat orality as an innocent mode of truth-telling. As White et al. (1994) argue, oral histories are themselves constructed genres predicated on aesthetics, performance, and audience. They ease people's understanding of history often under conditions of ambiguity and repression. Some testimonies from the research participants aligned more with rumor as political allegory rather than historical fact. For example, one group discussed a popular claim that "the monument is a mystical place. It's the seat of satanic power. You know, politics in Central Africa is linked to fetishism."²⁰ Whether or not this was believed, it functioned as a symbolic shorthand for power and domination. Invocations of sorcery or satanic power reflect a broader Central African political semiotics in which occult idioms express suspicion of opaque authority (Tonda 2010). Labeling the mausoleum a "mystical" or "satanic" site is thus less a literal claim about magic than a way of dramatizing hidden power and the moral danger associated with state projects. The monument, in that sense, is assigned a symbolic weight that transcends the memorialization of Brazza.

These people's narratives also signal an understanding of history as a field of symbolic work where meaning is created through form and content. Orality here is a performance of cultural endurance in a context where official memory often erases. At first glance, such performance may appear contradictory—in particular, when people mock authority at the same time as they seek from it the recognition of forgotten history. People ridicule the cost of the monument at the same time as they take pride in how it embellishes their city. I read this ambivalence as a deep entanglement of critique and complicity emerging from the practices of remembering.

These narratives may contain factual inaccuracies and lack internal coherence; they are nonetheless culturally homogeneous. Indeed, despite the difference in the level of formal education among the research participants, orality remains a significant tool crafting collective memory. Participants often grounded their critiques in community stories: "All of us go back to our community elders. Personally, I go to them, for example, when I feel that what I'm being told doesn't correspond to reality. I prefer to listen to what my elders tell me"²¹ says a street vendor. Such statements blend cultural pride with postcolonial grievance.

Younger participants, especially students and unemployed youth, were more likely to invoke school knowledge and digital satire. But their memory is also shaped by oral teachings. A young student tells me: "my grandparents who lived long enough have been able to tell me the story of what happened. I have the chance to live with them."²² Even if these oral teachings are less anchored in a coherent history, people mobilize them to express their skepticism of official narratives. A woman claims: "Colonial influence is in all areas here in Congo, especially in the education system that was bequeathed to us by the French.... I think this is deliberate so that we can continue to suffer this colonial influence."²³

Orality mediates people's fractured relationship to colonial memory marked by inherited suspicion of exclusion and marginality. This suspicion about the written history of colonization in Congo was expressed to me by a woman in the following words: "History favours the French much more than the Congolese.

They are privileged.”²⁴ The suspicion translates into the idea of the falsification of Congolese history as expressed by a woman: “Our history is written by France. So, whatever lie they’re going to put in there, you’re going to consume it and you’re going to tell yourself that this is really what happened. We must start by correcting things.”²⁵ Such statements reflect a recognition that the violence of colonial history persists through memory and its officialization.

Orality, therefore, foregrounds the resistance to official narratives, albeit through an intimate connection with the object of the critique itself. It functions as resistance in the form of allegory and rumor. These oral histories expose the limitations of official memory by dramatizing its violences and its affective gaps. They also reveal the imaginative ways in which postcolonial citizens make sense of histories that are imposed and unfinished, yet inescapable. Resistance to the elite’s narratives of colonial history may not be mobilized in protest or manifestos, especially in the authoritarian political context of Congo. Yet, through orality, memory endures through the everyday shapes of political allegory and rhythmic rumor.

Conclusion

This article traces how ordinary Congolese engage the memory of colonialism through rumor and affect. It shows how political critiques are shaped by the emotional ambivalence resulting from people’s everyday encounters with the monument. Beneath the contradictions of the state’s attempt to resurrect the memory of colonialism disguised as Franco-Congolese friendship, the article unveils a relationship to history that is haunted and unresolved. In this vein, memory in postcolonial Congo is best understood through a structure of feeling in which the past remains unassimilated and deferred into the present.

Drawing on the work of Gilroy (2005) and Stoler (2013), I explore how colonial memory in postcolonial Congo hardly provides ground for national coherence. It is experienced as a temporal suspension that reenacts itself through a loop of disillusionment and symbolic injury. The postcolonial here denotes a present rather than an aftermath. A present time that is saturated with the unresolved injuries of the past and the unfulfilled promises of independence.

The melancholic reactions, as Gilroy (2005) argues, refer to the condition in which both colonizer and colonized remain entangled in the unresolved legacies of colonialism. In Congo, one of the most striking features of the focus group discussions was the repetition of certain images and the idea that the colonizers were “still taking a percentage,” that “Makoko was tricked,” that “Congo is not independent.” These refrains appeared across different age groups, professions, and contexts. They point to a condition in which the injuries of colonization have yet to be mourned and repaired. They continue, therefore, to structure the present.

In the Congolese context, this melancholia takes the form of stories that cannot be silenced and images that cannot be forgotten. This is particularly so of the figure of Brazza and the colonial treaty he signed to take possession of the African lands. The sleek mausoleum in his honor serves as a temporal anchor through which history symbolically loops. For the state, the monument represents aspirations of

modernity and international cooperation. But for the ordinary people, it is a continual history of dispossession, underdevelopment, and foreign dependency. Colonial memory, in this context, is not only about what was done but about what endures in the present. Brazza and the colonial treaty still structure the Congolese present as the symbolic operators of this colonial grief that has yet to be resolved.

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Notes

1. Focus group with taxi drivers, Brazzaville, August 13, 2023.
2. Focus group with painters, Brazzaville, September 7, 2024.
3. Focus group with teachers, Brazzaville, August 22, 2023.
4. Focus group with teachers, Brazzaville, August 22, 2023.
5. Focus group with young musicians, Brazzaville, August 14, 2023.
6. Focus group with taxi drivers, Brazzaville, August 13, 2023.
7. Focus group with taxi drivers, Brazzaville, August 13, 2023.
8. Focus group with public sector workers, Brazzaville, August 14, 2023.
9. Focus group with taxi drivers, Brazzaville, August 13, 2023.
10. Focus group with young musicians, Brazzaville, August 14, 2023.
11. Focus group with young musicians, Brazzaville, August 14, 2023.
12. Focus group with women, Brazzaville, August 12, 2023.
13. Focus group with young musicians, Brazzaville, August 14, 2023.
14. Focus group with public sector workers, Brazzaville, August 14, 2023.
15. Focus group with taxi drivers, Brazzaville, August 18, 2023.
16. Focus group with slammers, Brazzaville, September 12, 2024.
17. Focus group with public sector workers, Brazzaville, August 14, 2023.
18. Focus group with painters, Brazzaville, September 7, 2024.
19. Focus group with slammers, Brazzaville, September 12, 2024.
20. Focus group with taxi drivers, Brazzaville, August 18, 2023.
21. Focus group with street traders, Brazzaville, August 22, 2023.
22. Focus group with students, Brazzaville, August 19, 2024.
23. Focus group with women, Brazzaville, September 12, 2024.
24. Focus group with dancers, Brazzaville, September 6, 2024.
25. Focus group with young musicians, Brazzaville, September 6, 2024.

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