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***Settling the colonial past?
The mobilization of colonial memory in
postcolonial African societies***

**University of Dschang
November 17-18, 2026**

DATES

Submission no later than
August 15, 2026
Notification to authors on
August 30, 2026

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ARGUMENT

In sub-Saharan Africa, the decolonization processes in former colonies did not lead to the formation of a liberal society with political institutions born from the general will. After independence, most African countries ended up forming autocratic regimes with different justifications. In countries like Ghana, Guinea, and Angola, elites justified the formation of autocracies by the desire to build a strong power capable of opposing the imperialist ambitions of the West. In other cases, notably in Cameroon, Gabon, and Ivory Coast, it was necessary to consolidate independence through the promotion of national unity and economic development[1]. The collective mobilizations aimed at contesting the colonial order and demanding the establishment of an imagined community based on the common aspiration to freedom did not allow an exit from the long night that colonization was[2]. The transfer of power to elites selected[3] by the colonial administration fostered the perpetuation of a legacy bearing the imprint of the colonized peoples' suffering. In the literature, the postcolonial state is presented as an entity modeled on the colonial management system[4]. In other words, the postcolonial state is governed by the permanence of an authoritarian principle[5] that was the basis of the colonial administration system. The state in Africa was formed on the basis of an institution that was far removed from the aspirations to freedom of African populations. Originally, the colonial state was forged from a lie, that of the civilizing mission which imposed on African societies distinct ways of seeing the world[6]. Through violence, it forced local societies to accommodate a situation different from the ways of life to which their populations were attached. At the foundation of the postcolonial state, there also resides a lie, woven from the promise of national unity and economic development. Propagated as the ideal to achieve, the slogan of building a unitary state guaranteeing economic development and prosperity was used by certain heirs of the colonial administration to manufacture authoritarian regimes and turn common aspirations to freedom into subversive ideas[7].

The forms of narratives that emerge from these states make colonization a mere parenthesis in the historical trajectory of African societies. In the logic of these postcolonial regimes, colonization is an episode that must be quickly forgotten in order to build strong and prosperous independent states. If in countries like Guinea, Ghana, Chad, and Zaire, the mobilization of colonial memory helped fuel their anti-imperialist struggles, the politics of return to sources was structured on the basis of glorifying precolonial Africa. Carried by the slogans cited above, these political regimes make precolonial Africa the framework par excellence for valorizing African identity and power. On this basis, they assume the attributes of the historian-state to invest in historical writing and shape a new collective memory, one that presents the heirs of the colonial administration as the "founding fathers of the nation." Tzvetan Todorov thus speaks of the systematization of authoritarian regimes' grip on memory in order to control it in its most secret recesses: "the traces of what existed are either erased or disguised and transformed; lies and inventions take the place of reality; it is forbidden to seek and disseminate the truth: all means are good to achieve one's goal[8]." By creating a memorial void, postcolonial authoritarian powers undertook new projects of reshaping collective memory. Yet, it is not enough to reconstruct piece by piece the image of a past event to obtain a memory[9].

In this case, distorting the impact of colonization on the historical trajectory of societies to be rebuilt was an act of concealment in the service of legitimization of which, knowingly or not, there were limits such as the formation of new elites. The common memories of a group are constructed from the expression of individual memories that foster the composition of singular experiences around a historical fact. Postcolonial political regimes control memory through the mechanism of censorship and violence. In these authoritarian regimes, political propaganda aims to create conditions for accepting a worldview that consolidates and perpetuates power. However, the wind from the East that swept across sub-Saharan Africa in the 1990s did not only favor democratic opening. It also freed buried memories, those carrying the ideal of freedom theatricalized and claimed during decolonization movements.

In collective mobilizations for democracy, the question of colonial heritage in Africa arises with a certain acuity. The idea was then to denounce the relationships between former colonial powers and authoritarian regimes in Africa. In this context of upheaval, in February 1990, on the occasion of a meeting of the International Association of Francophone Mayors (AIMF) in Abidjan, Jacques Chirac, Mayor of Paris and President of the Rally for the Republic (RPR), stated that: "Multi-party systems are not linked to democracy. There are perfectly democratic African countries, like Ivory Coast, which are single-party countries where democracy is exercised within this single party. Multi-party systems are a sort of luxury that these developing countries cannot afford"[10]. While this speech marks Jacques Chirac's support for Felix Houphouet Boigny's single-party regime, it also echoes the discourses of French settlers who, in the aftermath of World War II, considered that African populations were not yet fit to engage in politics and therefore to create unions and campaign in political parties. The denunciation of this speech deemed paternalistic recalls the meaning of colonization in social imaginaries in Africa. Its ideology, norms, and practices were conveyed by a prose that did not disappear after independence. The constant presence of this traumatic past exacerbates tensions in an African political space where the legacy of colonization is still visible. In his 2007 speech in Dakar, Nicolas Sarkozy considered that: "the tragedy of Africa is that the African man has not yet sufficiently entered into history"[11]." Similar to the ethnological discourse of the 19th century that qualified African societies as backward, President Sarkozy's speech reignites the debate on colonization in Africa in a context where the French parliament had just rejected a law on the benefits of colonization. In light of this situation, civil societies and African intellectuals denounce an "empire that does not want to die"[12]."

Driven by logics of deconstructing colonial schemes that permeate the daily lives of African societies and by the desire to weave their "own mat"[13]," they mobilize to develop various demands. Among them are demands for the restitution of art objects looted during colonization in Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, as well as the return of human remains such as those of Patrice Lumumba. Furthermore, in popular uprisings in Mali, Guinea, CAR, and Niger for example, groups of young people denounce French colonization and France's involvement in perpetuating authoritarian regimes in Africa. Against those who participate in producing a historical narrative that presents colonization as a mere stage in African history, younger generations call for the denunciation of a past that will not pass. In diasporas as within African countries, the memory of colonization is a source of tension that shakes sociopolitical and diplomatic balances.

In a context where European universalism is being challenged in favor of a plural universalism that should foster the construction of a shared future among diverse peoples, former colonial powers are reinvesting in the colonial past and confronting it in different ways. For example, following multiple requests, Germany has undertaken a vast project of restituting objects looted during colonization. It also recognized, in 2021, the qualification of genocide against the Hereros and Namas in Namibia. This memorial policy oriented toward confronting the colonial past consists, for these former colonial powers, of settling a historical dispute that weighs on diplomatic relations with African

countries. This is also the case with the restitution of Patrice Lumumba's tooth by the Belgian government, which considers that it offers the opportunity to turn a page on the Belgian-Congolese dispute[14]. Moreover, in his project to restructure Franco-African relations, Emmanuel Macron has undertaken since 2017, the year of his first election to power in France, to organize an "open dialogue" with African youth. Considering that he is not of the generation born during colonization and decolonization, he proposes to settle the colonial past so as to no longer bear its stigmas and above all to co-construct a shared future[15]. According to him, this desire for refoundation requires confronting the common past with Africa, however painful it may be. In his logic, Franco-African relations must no longer bear the weight of a past that must be recognized and assumed but which is quite far from his generation as from that of African youth. The French President then wishes to bring a new vision of Franco-African relations by defining a memorial policy that gives it new energy, a fresh ambition that grounds common interests between Africans and French. However, can the colonial past be settled? How can one refound a past that continues to construct the present in Africa and that is intertwined with the articulation of African peoples' ways of life?

The memories of colonization are part of the lived experience of populations in Africa. Sites of memory recalling this oppressive regime still dot both rural and urban spaces. In the former colonies of sub-Saharan Africa, the question of the memory of colonization concerns the individual, the family, the community, and the nation-state. It is a shared memory, but its expressions and uses depend on where one is located, the place one occupies in society, and political contexts. Colonial memory is a major social concern in Africa, because colonization embedded itself in the lives of African populations, it infiltrated their practices of power to the point of vile counterfeiting. It inhabits their daily behaviors and structures their ways of life. Its heritage, material and immaterial, still influences ways of acting and representing oneself in the world. In this sense, this phenomenon is "still present[16]" in the daily lives of populations in Africa. How does the memory of colonization structure daily life in postcolonial African societies?

The objective of this multidisciplinary conference is to show how, since independence, the memory of colonization is expressed in postcolonial African societies. It also aims to analyze the tensions that these expressions generate and that polarize constant debates on the usefulness of History in Africa. To this end, we have identified five research axes to fuel the scientific discussion:

I. The construction of colonial memory in Africa

How, since independence in sub-Saharan Africa, has colonial memory been constructed? The aim is to analyze the modes of production of official memories by highlighting their justifications and contents that give meaning to a worldview driven by postcolonial political regimes. Furthermore, it also involves examining the unprecedented strategies of expression of dissident memories, those that are no longer allowed to be expressed in authoritarian spaces. Using the analytical framework of popular modes of political action, the idea is to appreciate the mobilization of subalterns who resist the weight of violence to invent original mechanisms for producing colonial memory.

II. The transmission of colonial memory in Africa

In Africa, each individual, family, community, and state has a singular history with colonization that is transmitted from generation to generation. From the individual to the state, how is colonial memory transmitted? By questioning the modes of this diffusion with its instruments, this axis allows for the analysis of the intimacies and sensibilities of Africans in their relationship with colonization. The particular experiences of family transmission or the mechanisms of propagation and imposition of official memory at the state level will help understand that the development of colonial memory is dynamic. Furthermore, this axis also focuses specifically on the work of memorial transmission driven by documentary film producers in Africa.

III. The uses of colonial memory in Africa

This axis examines colonial memory as a resource in political spaces in Africa. The aim is to analyze the different foundations of the mobilization of colonial memory by state and non-state actors as well as individuals.

IV. Figures, places, and symbols of colonial memory

This axis focuses on processes of symbolic crystallization. It involves identifying the characters, events, places, and objects that concentrate memorial stakes and become supports for remembrance, debate, or conflict. Drawing on the history of representations and the notion of sites of memory, this axis highlights the plural and competitive character of memories at work in the postcolonial public space.

V. History commissions and restitution of art objects to settle the colonial past?

With a view to settling the historical dispute with African countries, former colonial powers are establishing projects and commissions for the restitution of objects and history commissions to confront the painful past and move toward the co-construction of a shared future. This axis questions the effects of these public memorial policies in postcolonial African societies.

*Interested researchers may send proposals of a maximum length of 300 words, in French or English, preceded by a short biographical summary (title, name, specialty, institutional affiliation, email address, etc.) no later than **August 15, 2026** to the following email address: gercohistoirepolitique@gmail.com.*

The proposed papers should, as far as possible, be based on dense documentation and original sources. Authors of selected proposals will be notified on August 30, 2026. They will then be invited to submit a preliminary version of their paper as well as a PowerPoint presentation no later than October 30, 2026.

The conference accepts a maximum of two (2) papers per participant.

Registration for the conference is governed by the following terms:

- *Doctoral students: 15,000 FCFA*
- *GERCO members: 25,000 FCFA*
- *National researchers non-members of GERCO: 30,000 FCFA*
- *Foreign researchers: 50,000 FCFA.*

These registration fees include: participant kit and coffee breaks.

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INDICATIVE REFERENCES

[1] See Ngoune P. J., «Processus de décolonisation et transmission du pouvoir en Afrique centrale française : Importance des forces antirévolutionnaires et administratives (1944-1975)», PhD Thesis in History, University of Dschang, 2023.

[2] In this sense, decolonization is experienced and perceived as a yet-to-come experience. See Fanon F., *Les damnés de la terre*, Paris, La Decouverte, 2002, p.301.

[3] Nicolas Bancel speaks of selected elites to define political actors who share the same political ideas as the colonial administration and who take the reins of power after independence. See Bancel, N., «La voie étroite : la sélection des dirigeants africains lors de la transition vers la décolonisation», *Mouvements*, vol 3, n° 21-22, 28-40. <https://doi.org/10.3917/mouv.021.0028>.

[4] Young, C., *The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*, Yale, Yale University Press, 1997. In this work, Crawford Young explains that by metamorphosing (independence), the caterpillar (colonial state) became a butterfly (postcolonial state) without losing its essence. In this way, Young continues, even if independent African entities are described as "new states," they are the products of the colonial regime from which they inherited structures, routines and daily practices, as well as unofficial norms of governance.

[5] According to Achille Mbembe, the authoritarian principle is the set of legends, symbolics, knowledge, and practices invented by the colonial state and re-assumed by the postcolonial state. See Mbembe, A., *Afriques indociles, Christianisme, Pouvoirs et Etat en société postcoloniale*, Paris, Karthala, 1988, p.13.

[6] Césaire A., *Discours sur le colonialisme*, Paris, Présence Africaine, 1955, p.55.

[7] The example of countries colonized by France in Central Africa is quite illustrative.

[8] Todorov, T., *Les abus de la mémoire*, Paris, Arlea, 2004, pp.9-10.

[9] Halbwachs M., *The Collective Memory*, Paris, PUF, 1967, p.12.

[10] Collombat, B., "Jacques Chirac, l'Africain," in Borrel T., et al, *L'empire qui ne veut pas mourrir : Une histoire de la Françafrique*, Paris, Seuil, 2021, p.493.

[11] « Discours de Dakar de Nicolas Sarkozy, 26 juillet 2007 », [Youtube] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7yeBLPfxp8>, accessed May 15, 2026.

[12] Title of a recently published book by Seuil editions. See Borrel T., et al, *L'empire qui ne veut pas mourrir : Une histoire de la Françafrique*, Paris, Seuil, 2021.

[13] Joseph Ki-Zerbo speaks of "others' mat" to denounce a development modeled on external patterns. Yet, according to him, to envision endogenous development, it is necessary to weave one's own mats. See Ki-Zerbo J., *La natte des autres : pour un développement endogène en Afrique*, Dakar, Codesria, 1992.

- [14] Delescluse A. and Murhula A. Nashi E., « Note sur le retour de la dent de Patrice Lumumba : restitution, politique et médias », *Cahiers d'études africaines*, no. 251-252, 2023, p.859.
- [15] « Discours d'Emmanuel Macron à l'Université de Ouagadougou », [Youtube], <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2017/11/28/discours-demmanuel-macron-a-luniversite-de-ouagadougou>, accessed May 15, 2026.
- [16] Kipre, P., « L'historiographie de l'Afrique des XIX^e-XX^e siècles : la contribution des historiens africains », *Culture du Sud*, no. 165, Retour sur la question coloniale, June 2007, p.57.