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Photographs, Emotions and Protest at a Colonial Memorial in Brazzaville (Congo)

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Abstract

This article explores the insights of photo-elicitation interviews as a methodological genre for understanding how people construct narratives of a memorial associated with colonialism. We argue that the interaction with photographs made the research participants feel more comfortable and at ease sharing their perspectives on the Savorgnan de Brazza Memorial, and the most salient benefit of the method derived from how people express their feelings and emotions. As our empirical data show, using photographs allows to capture people's deep resentment against the Memorial and how they protest the contrast between the lavish Memorial on the hand, and the derelict statues honouring local historical figures on the other hand. Unlike words-only interviews, the photo-elicitation interviews offered the opportunity for the participants to visually explore the aesthetic, the magnitude and the footprint of the Memorial and to compare it to similar artefacts in the city of Brazzaville. Such contrast, and the emotions that they triggered, would not have been possible to capture if the participants were not exposed to the photographs.

Keywords

photography, photo-elicitation interview, Congo, savorgnan de brazza, colonial statues, colonialism

Introduction

This article explores photo-elicitation interviews as a method to understand political protest, through participants' expressions of their emotions and affects, especially in a political context where traditional forms of public protest are difficult to undertake (Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2015). Photo-elicitation interview is a methodological genre which is defined as 'the integration of photographs into research discussions' (Dockett et al., 2017). It emerged as an alternative to the challenges faced by researchers to establish communication with participants in the more traditional word-only interviews (Harper, 2002, p. 20). A pioneer in the use of the method, Collier (1957: 849) believes that the 'photographic interview got considerably more concrete information' from the research participants. Certainly so because photography has the 'ability to emblematically synthesize' while 'magnifying and emphasizing "pieces" of reality' (Secondulfo, 1997, p. 33), therefore providing the research participants with tangible artefacts to describe their lived experiences. Photographs, and visual methods more broadly, offer both the researcher and the participants a singular mean for understanding reality and for expressing themselves (Prosser & Loxley, 2007, p. 63). This is because 'researcher-photographers may capture taken-for-granted aspects of the participants' community or life that prompt discussion' (Clark-IbáÑez, 2004, p. 1509).

Photo-elicitation method is also contrasted and privileged to word-only interviews because photographs can convey feelings and emotions such as shame or anger, etc. Hence, our choice of the method was justified by the possibility to record 'emotionally grounded descriptions' of the reality by the participants (Samuels, 2004, p. 1535). Our understanding of emotions and affects builds on a conceptual framework laid

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out by Gould (2009) who sees emotions as the concrete cultural expressions of affects. To that extent, feelings encompass both emotions and affects. We share her definition of affects as the nonconscious, noncognitive, nonlinguistic, noncoherent, nonrational, and unpredetermined bodily sensations resulting from the selves interactions with the world (Gould, 20). While these bodily sensations are not always aligned with our rationality, they nonetheless play the important role as drivers to political (in)action (Gould, 22). The noncognitive motivation to political action is therefore a central focus of our methodology for understanding political protest, as we record participants' feelings and emotions through photo-elicitation interviews, while they expressed dissent.

We use a loose definition of protest to refer broadly to the expressions of dissent against government policies. 'Protest means speaking out' (Cantrell, 2021, p. 84) and it has multiple expressions among which the marches on the streets are certainly the most popular and visible (Reiss, 2007). However, marches are not the only expressions of protests which encompass a 'much larger repertoire of tactics often comprising much less visible acts of individual and organised resistance' (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 15). As much as protests refer to the challenge against state authority by social groups, they are also borne out by ideas and driven by people's feelings and emotions (Gould, 2010). This article is interested in how people express their dissent, through their emotions and affects, to the official narrative of colonialism conveyed through the Memorial, and our research captures this through photo-elicitation interviews.

However, less has been discussed regarding the methodological challenges of conducting photo-elicitation interviews with the intent to apprehend participants' emotions. The article contributes to existing literature by reinforcing the merit of photo-elicitation interview as a method for capturing the participants' emotions (Bleiker & Hutchison, 2008; Clément and Sangar, 2018). We further provide methodological insights for engaging with participants' emotions, therefore addressing the challenges of researching protests (Saleh, 2020), especially in social contexts where the repertoires of social mobilisations are limited (Davenport et al., 2005).

The paper first starts which a brief overview of photo-elicitation interviews as a research method. We discuss the ethical and practical challenges of using photographs with our research participants and how we proceeded with data collection and analysis. Next, we analyse how photographs changed the dynamics of our discussions with the research participants. We then show how the participants perceived our positionality. We later move to provide the background to the study, especially the challenges of recruiting the research participants and how we navigated different approaches of getting access to them. We round up the paper with a data analysis that shows how the use of photographs resulted in the participants' genuine expressions of emotions and feelings that account for alternative forms of political protest.

Issues to consider

Photo-elicitation interviews have their own analytical and ethical challenges. 'Whose photographs?' Askes Harper (2002) to stress the differences between photographs taken by the researchers and photographs generated by the research participants themselves. These differences can be significant, especially when the researchers and the participants come from culturally distinct backgrounds. While photographs can lead to 'enriched terms' (Wagner, 2002, p. 167) of the discussion between the researcher and the participants, they are not neutral. To that extent, when engaging with photo-elicitation interviews, the researcher must remain aware that 'the photographs do not necessarily represent empirical truths or "reality" (Clark-IbáÑez, 2004, p. 1512). As Secondulfo (1997: 36) describes it, 'the photographer always characterises his/her own image, thus building something that is more than a bare reproduction of reality. It is something that is emotionally coloured and thus becomes a meta-message that goes beyond the nude reality.' The meanings of photographs are constructed, indicating the role of human consciousness and bias both in their production and interpretation (Harrison, 2002, p. 858). This further implies issues of interpretation and representation. First, the ethical issue of interpretation means that researchers are encouraged to avoid associating their own meanings to the photographs used to explore the social reality. Miller (2015: 10) captures this in the following terms: 'since images require the audience and researcher to interpret the image, there are dangers in its use, as one's culture and experiences in life may shift its original intent'. Therefore, it is important to recentre the interpretation of photographs around the lived experiences of the research participants themselves, meaning that the researchers 'need to investigate their meaning for different people in different social contexts' (Wagner, 2002, p. 170). Second, the ethical issue of representation is concerned with how the research can benefit from the perspective of people who are not considered mainstream. This is because visual methodology, in general, and photography, in specific, 'give voice and visibility to marginalised individuals who otherwise might remain unheard and unseen' (Oliffe et al., 2008, p. 530). These considerations were central to our choice to utilise the method.

Contrasting Methods: Photographs Versus Words

The data for this paper were collected during a three-week fieldwork conducted from 3 to 22 August 2023 in Brazzaville, in the Republic of Congo. The fieldwork itself was designed as part of a project about understanding the appropriation and contestation of the Savorgnan de Brazza Memorial. The project was animated by curiosity over the government decision to build a 10 million USD glass and marble mausoleum to house the remains of the French coloniser, his wife and their four children, all of whom were initially buried in Algeria.

This singular path of public commemoration in Congo sits at cross purposes to de-commemoration movements around the world (Prescott & Lahti, 2022). Especially so in the wake of turbulent protests around colonial memorials sparked by the fallism movement, or the attempt to make a fair and de-colonised society (Drayton, 2019). The project looked at how the evocation of colonial history through the Savorgnan de Brazza Memorialin the Congo shapes the popular attachment of Congolese citizens to their state.

Research participants were drawn from various economic and social backgrounds, which reflect both the diversity and the unique lifestyle of Brazzaville (Gondola, 1999). Many Congolese trade in little things. They sell foods, clothes, or drive taxis, etc. The participants were ordinary people like students, civil servants, entrepreneurs, and jobless people. We organised the group discussions at different places such as churches, bars, homes, university campus and at the Memorial site. We carried out twenty-three focus group discussions, with a size usually ranging from 4 to 8 participants. We talked to roughly 130 people, approximately half men and half women. The interviews would usually last between 45 to 90 minutes. We conducted the discussions in French, a language in which the researchers and the participants are fluent, therefore requiring no assistance from a translator.

We hired a professional photographer who took photographs of Savorgnan de Brazza's memorial; of Congolese great political figures' statues such as the statue of the late first President Fulbert Youlou and the Prime Minister Bernard Kolelas; of great musicians, writers and other notable Congolese public figures who fought against colonialism. The photographs were taken with professional cameras and lenses under conditions that provided the optimum quality to enhance the aesthetics and magnitude of the statues. They were printed in high resolution and distributed to the participants.

We would start the conversations by asking people to describe the things they know about Brazzaville and the memorial; to reflect on the meaning of the memorial and its importance in their daily lives; and to tell us how the memorial impacts their attitudes as citizens of Congo, among other questions. We first started the conversations with word-only interviews, we later showed the photographs to participants asking them what they thought about the representations. We refrained from interrupting the discussions, only prompting the participants to clarify their thoughts.

During the word-only interviews, we noticed that the more people had professional experience or had reached some living standard the less they were inclined to share their opinion. They were all the more hesitant as they knew that the debates were recorded, albeit with their consent. This is because when we asked people questions about the memorial and its symbolic meaning, they related this to politics and became very suspicious of us. This does not mean that they were not interested or cannot elaborate on these questions related to their nation, but they seemed to be constrained in their freedom to express themselves publicly on these matters, as we will show this later. However, individuals tended to be open and honest about their opinions insofar as they felt reassured about the confidential nature of the interview.

We noticed that when people in a group were around the same age, the debates were stormier and franker. This was especially so with young people between 20 to 35 years old who were more engaging and contradicted each other easily. Besides their age, we also organised the participants in groups according to their educational background and professional activities. The approach to setting up homogeneous groups facilitated the debates, akin to dynamics observed in similar research settings (Duchesne, 2015). While we also have few non-homogeneous groups, we noticed that the oldest and the more educated tended to monopolise the talk, revealing the broad dynamics of social power within the society (Ayrton, 2019).

However, the segments of the group discussions with the photographs were among the richest and deepest. The introduction of the photographs in the conversations aroused more vivid discussions and reactions. The photographs provoked genuine expressions of emotions and feelings among the participants, unlike the word-only discussions which hardly induced these expressions (Wagner, 2002). The dynamics of the discussion changed dramatically with the photographs as some participants got angry and quit the conversations over what they saw.

The change in attitude happened mainly because when people saw the photographs, they started arguing about the difference in terms of size, aesthetiattentions on some aspects of the Memorial that could not be revealed through simple words discussions. Sometimes, people even changed their opinions, arguing a position that contradicted what they said before viewing the photographs. Furthermore, before we showed the pictures, they were very laconic, but the pictures changed their attitude, and they became more loquacious, therefore confirming similar findings about enriched discussions through photographs (Frith & Harcourt, 2007).

Reflexivity and Situated Positionality

It was the first time for both of us to visit Congo and to conduct a fieldwork in Brazzaville, hence we anticipated that the participants would perceive us as outsiders. Especially so as we do not share any national/ethnic backgrounds with them and know little about the city. However, it was an intriguing journey to navigate our positionality shifting from outsiders to insiders. While the participants would initially categorise us as outsiders, their perceptions of a shared colonial experience were important factors to consider us as insiders, therefore creating a sense of 'fluid' positionalities (Flores, 2018) reflecting the 'multi-layered identities of researchers and participants' (Ryan, 2015).

There was no doubt to our research participants that we were outsiders and they treated us as such when we approached them for the first time. One evening we went to our

hotel's bar where residents of the city also come to relax. The bar was not busy and we decided to approach a group for a discussion. We introduced ourselves and explained the aim of the research. 'We are not interested in your research', one man shouted angrily. 'How do we know that you are a researcher? You are not Congolese; you are a spy' he continued. They further asked proof of our qualifications as researchers. We did so but they violently refused to answer our questions, arguing that they were not interested in talking about Savorgnan de Brazza or any other issue related to politics.

Indeed, both being from Chad, the reactions that we encountered were very odd for us. Being part of the same regional organisation with Congo, we understand the political struggles that our nations are facing on their path to democratic rule. Nonetheless, the Congolese perspective on the struggle for freedom of expression brought new insights to our own experience. Unlike our previous research experience in Chad, people in Congo seem so much afraid to express themselves publicly; to denounce what is not going on well; to criticise the government. Before the fieldwork, we did not comprehend how decades of political violence in Congo still constrain people's ability to speak and to protest freely. In our first attempts to recruit the participants, the difference in the cultural background of the researchers were therefore obvious, as we struggled to grasp the attitudes of the potential participants.

But this research was about colonialism, especially the legacies of French colonialism in Central Africa. So most often when people narrated their own perspective on French colonialism and France's continued influence in Congo, they did so by pointing to examples of other francophone African nations. The participants consistently drew upon the popular unrest in the Sahelian nations against France's influence (Chatelot, 2023). They also talked extensively about the FCFA, the common currency shared across francophone Africa (Pérez, 2022). The discussion will eventually cover France's military bases in Africa and how the participants will point to this as the proof of ongoing France's involvement in the domestic affairs of its former colonies. In these cases, the participants would rather see us as the insiders with whom they assume talking about things that we already know, therefore shifting our positionality from the initial outsiders to insiders.

While the participants would perceive us as insiders because of our shared history of French colonialism, visiting Brazzaville, the capital of the French Equatorial Africa, remains nonetheless an eye-opening trip. The history of colonisation is still pregnant in the city, usually displayed through monuments and streets names across the city. An exploration of the culture and everyday discussions with locals reveal a complex relationship with the colonial past. The sight of the memorial sent us back to the beginning of colonisation, bringing back memories of what was taught at school about European domination in Africa. The first thing we remarked when we visited the memorialwas its proportion and size which can be equated to how important and enormous was the colonial enterprise. The mausoleum lets anyone imagined the big territory with colossal human and natural resources, that was part of the French colony, starting from Congo at the border of the Atlantic Ocean up to Chad at the centre of the continent. For us, the size of the monument was a powerful reminder of French domination and colonialism; perceptions that we share with the participants.

A Picture of the Research Site

The Memorial is located at the centre of the city which can be described as a posh area where wealthy people live. It is the part of the neighbourhood where the presidential palace, the United States embassy, and other top administration officials are located. It is built in very expensive materials, surely in marble, and it stands at a tall and huge size. There is not such a gigantic monument in the city except that of Savorgnan de Brazza, and it dominates the centre of Brazzaville. The mausoleum is an integral part of the city, and it blends into the everyday lives of the residents. It has many compartments dedicated to different activities, serving multiple purposes such as a leisure centre or a meeting premises. People organise celebrations such as weddings, with musicians creating a vibrant atmosphere. The mausoleum was therefore generally very busy, especially in the evenings and during the weekends when people will go there for a walk or for a party in the nearby restaurants and bars.

But what would also attract the attention of the first-time visitor is the cleanness and the aesthetic of the Memorial. Besides being all built in glass and marble, the place is really well looked after, especially the garden and the surrounding. In addition, there are many employees in charge of the security of the place. It pretty much seems like no visitor can enter any place at the Memorial without the permission of the security agents. People are prevented from getting in the exact place where Savorgnan de Brazza and his family's graves are located, unless through advanced arrangements with the administration. The presence of security agents not only contributes to ensure order but it also demonstrates the symbolic importance of the mausoleum.

We also went to visit the statues of Congolese and African historical figures such as Bernard Kolelas, Fulbert Youlou, etc. The difference was flagrant when comparing them with the mausoleum. The place where the statues of African leaders were built was trite and not well looked after. There were many statues at the same place, in an ordinary and dirty road of the city. In terms of size, the statues of African historical figures are very small; they are represented by their heads only rather than their whole body, which the research participants interpreted as a sign of disrespect or negligence for African iconography. Moreover, there is no keen interest in these statues. We did not see people coming to visit the statues, asking questions about them or filming them. Some of them were deteriorated, broken and very old. They were not well-

maintained. This gives the impression that the statues have no special value. The heritage site of African leaders was not properly cared.

The Pitfalls of Recruiting Participant through Random Access

Access to research participants remains one of the challenging steps in the preparation of fieldwork (Cunliffe & Alcadipani, 2016). We tried many approaches before being successful at recruiting our participants. First, we tried to randomly access people as we walked up to them and asked them to join the project. This approach did not work well; we then sought the contribution of gatekeepers to get access to the participants.

Earlier we mentioned how a man shouted at us: 'You are not Congolese; you are a spy'. The interaction just proves the pitfall of recruiting participants through random access. Another time, we went to a barbershop where we met few people waiting, while passionately discussing football. We introduced ourselves and our research topic. Their reaction was very negative. They did not only refuse to participate in the research, they also asked proof of our professional status. They were angry and threatening and telling us they are not interested in politics because we mentioned Savorgnan de Brazza. In these attempts to randomly access the participants, there were so much anger and so many suspicions and threats against us that we started thinking of the reasons why people acted towards us the way they did. We could not fathom why the evocation of Savorgnan de Brazza made people think that this is a discussion about politics, and because these discussions are about politics they would not like to get involved and push back the researchers so angrily.

Indeed, many decades of wars have brought about serious divisions among the Congolese people. The Congolese society seems to be more united culturally than ideologically or politically. Congolese people love clothing, music and liveliness. In Congo, clothing is a major culture. It is a usual sight to see a pedestrian wearing very expensive jackets, shoes, watches, and other beauty accessories. Congolese people are generally very well dressed, and usually with expensive European fashion brands. This is an important characteristic of the Congolese lifestyle (Tamagni, 2009). However, there are more political divisions behind the facade of urban cultural homogeneity. For example, we found that people who belong to the ruling ethnic group live in majority in the northern part of Brazzaville whereas people from other ethnic groups live in the south, showing how ethnocentrism and tribalism is prevalent in the country (Sundberg, 1999). Congo has also witnessed forced disappearance on a major scale. In 1999, more than 353 people disappeared from Brazzaville's riverbank after docking on their return from the Democratic Republic of Congo where they took shelter as refugees (Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2011). They were accused of belonging to the Ninjas, the enemy faction of Bernard Kolelas who fought against Sassou Nguesso.

Beside the division brought by civil war, the Congolese society have also had a communist experience from 1969 until the adoption of a multiparty system in 1991 (Batota-Mpeho, 2014). Under the communist system political freedoms were limited, including the freedom of expression. However, despite the change in the political system, people are still suspicious about engaging in topic related to politics. This brief overview of Congolese history provides important information about understanding why people are so reluctant to engage in public conversation around issues that they believe are political. Many people refused to participate despite long and clear explanation about the objectives of the research because they relate it to politics. After all, the Memorial has connections with power and politics. Discussing about it means talking about politics and people were afraid to do so. The political history of Congo further informs the lack of public protest against the erection of a colonial statue, therefore setting the ground for the use of photography as a research method to uncover alternative forms of protests in authoritarian regimes, as this article argues.

Negotiating Access through Gatekeepers

Using gatekeepers to access research participants proved the most effective way forward. We would describe our relationships with the gatekeepers as ones of cooperation (Wanat, 2008) and we did not find that they exerted overreaching power against us or the participants (Sanghera & Thapar-Björkert, 2008).

Fortunately, we knew a Chadian pastor who has been living in Brazzaville for a decade. He is married to a Congolese woman and considers himself a Brazzavillian. When we exchanged about the research project, he took a great interest and was proud to help. We then discussed how, through his church connections, we could arrange the focus groups. The majority of the population of Congo are Christian and Christianity plays an important part in society (Demart & Tonda, 2016). Evangelisation campaigns, Christian concerts and other worship activities are organised every day and usually through loud sound systems. There are very big churches but also small ones on most streets of the city. With our pastor friend, we attended church activities and took advantage to organise discussions with congregants.

We also sought the help of a second gatekeeper who was a scholar himself. He has been living in Brazzaville for a decade and, as a scholar, he had previously carried out similar research in the city. Consequently, his pieces of advice were very invaluable and practical. He would arrange the groups beforehand by explaining the aim of the research and convincing people to participate. The discussions with these groups took place in public spaces like bars, or sports facilities. Finally, we also benefitted from the help of a third gatekeeper, a young Congolese student who worked at the university as a research assistant. He was very enthusiastic about the research, and he was an excellent asset given that he

wasused to doing such works as part of his normal assignments at university. He was of a great help accessing taxi drivers and street traders for our interviews.

Our presence in Church created bonds with our followers. Contrary to people in bars or streets recruited through the second gatekeeper, the people we met in churches were not distrustful. The discussions were more productive, because there was an atmosphere of trust and sincerity. Most of the participants at churches were also very concerned about Congolese and African politics and the discussions provided them with the opportunity to express themselves. These reflections are similar to previous research, which highlight the importance of location and space in interviews (Herzog, 2005). They further also reveal how existing acquaintance between participants, especially among the churchgoers, can yield rich, deep and thoughtful discussions (Duchesne, 2015). However, to build trust and rapport with the other groups, we subtly navigated our positionality from outsiders to insiders, as explained previously, by introducing jokes about the difference in our French accents and vocabulary (which are very much noticeable) and opportunistically taking the conversations to our shared colonial heritage. This technic also proved effective in preparing participants in the focus groups for engaging in the discussion.

People recruited through the second gatekeeper were also very demanding. They would request that we offer them incentives, such as paying drinks or giving money before they finally consent to take part in the discussions. Unlike churchgoers who did not demand money or any incentive before joining the discussions, people met in other places were generally more unwilling to respond or to accept participating if they did not get a material motivation. Fortunately, this was less of an obstacle for us because our research budget included the financial retribution of the participants. As we did offer the financial incentives, within the limits of the research ethics (Head, 2009), most people would accept getting involved in the discussions. A key factor in negotiating access with students while they made demands for compensation was the fluency of our gatekeeper in Lingala, the local language. While we speak French and can approach most of the research participants in that language, our second gatekeeper's ability to speak Lingala helped diffuse tensions as quick as they arouse, therefore reassuring the participants and securing their engagement. To that extent, the presence of the young Congolese made it easier to approach people and ask them questions about the mausoleum. He talked with them in Lingala about the topic of the discussion and introduced us to them. He also participated in the debate by clarifying certain points which were not clear for the participants either in Lingala or in French.

Overall, the group discussions were carried out in a friendly atmosphere. One participant even offered to drive us around the city to visit some important sites such as the biggest catholic church built by French colonisers and some other important memorials built after independence. This was an important experience which gave us the possibility to observe and take fieldnotes of the broader legacies of colonisation around the city of Brazzaville.

In summary, the combination of location, research positionality and existing acquaintance played a big role in the dynamics of the group discussions, while material incentives were an important factor for participation. However, we reckon that the fundamental difference in data collection happened when we introduced the photographs to the participants, as stated previously and illustrated below.

Experiencing Participants Emotions through Photographs

The aesthetic of the built environment has been a recurrent topic in the scholarship investigating statues, memorials and landscapes in Africa (Becker, 2018; Lipenga, 2019). Lipenga (2019) for example shows how the perceived discrepancies of a statue sparked ridicule and led to an elision of the history it was meant to commemorate. Gould (2009) claims that human body needs a stimulus before it can release feelings and emotions. In our case, we show how questions surrounding the aesthetic further provide the stimuli for the noncognitive and nonlinguistic expressions of dissent against the memorial. Through their feelings and emotions, participants articulate their protest based on perceived historical prejudice and demands for reparation. Therefore, we show that participants' emotions and feelings provide the researcher with the unique lens to comprehend the noncognitive and nonlinguistic perceptions of historical prejudice and reparation for historical harm, which are central to the arguments about removing colonial statues (Archer, 2024; Burch-Brown, 2017).

Aesthetics as Stimuli for Emotions and Feelings

When we showed photographs of statues taken around Brazzaville, the first reaction of the participants would be to point to the aesthetics of the mausoleum, and they would draw contrasts with other memorials. One participant, looking shocked and embarrassed, made the following comment: 'The Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza Memorial is clearly prettier, more beautiful and well maintained. On the opposite hand, the statue of Fulbert Youlou, our first president, is really ugly'.[1]

Indeed, the contrast between the mausoleum and the statues dedicated to Congolese historical figures in the city of Brazzaville is very striking. As we described it earlier, the giant marble statue erected in front of a large building, itself constructed of the same stone and assorted with glass, both give the Memorial a splendid luxury. The immaculate complex is surrounded by tall palm trees and a green garden which makes it stand out from other edifices in the area. In contrast, the statues dedicated to local historical figures look grim and derelict. They all represent busts placed on meter-high plinths with no further information than their names, professions and the years in which they lived. Unlike the eye-catching

mausoleum, the statues of local heroes are located on a dusty street. The place where the statues dedicated to Congolese leaders are located is interpreted as a lack of consideration, a contempt for anything Black or African.

Looking at a photograph of the postcard-worthy mausoleum, Mabanou becomes agitated and breathes heavily. His tone changed and he tells us:

> Colour makes the difference. Brazza's Memorial is white precisely because he was a White man. The size of Brazza's Memorial is massive. It shows the importance our leaders are giving him. Fulbert Youlou represents the gold days. But Fulbert Youlou is overlooked. He does not appear as someone who was important in this country. The statue of Brazza is well maintained, unlike those of the Congolese. The statues of the Congolese are hidden in a little-known corner of the city while Brazza's is in the city centre.[2]

While the contrasts between the mausoleum and the local statues are hard to miss through photographs, most important are the emotions and feelings triggered by the discrepancies amplified by photographs. In our case, the utility of photographs is captured through the intensity that they trigger in the participants' responses. The aesthetic serves as a 'stimulus impinging on the body' (Gould, 2010: 19), therefore releasing nonconscious and nonlinguistic expressions of dissent as we show in the next two sections.

A Feeling of Historical Prejudice

During one focus group, we first showed a photograph of the mausoleum before presenting participants with photographs of Congolese figures. A participant gets very angry and abruptly decides to leave the conversation. Our attempts to calm him down did not succeed and we have to pause the discussion to have a chat with him while his emotions were still high. He angrily says the following:

> This is injustice. From an aesthetic point of view, the memorial of Brazza is by far prettier, larger. The statue of Fulbert Youlou is not well made. The statue of de Brazza is well maintained. This is an injustice. A gentleman like Bernard Kolelas only has a statuette, and he is someone who fought for this country [to become independent]. He is only represented by a small statue hidden in an alley. This is injustice.[3]

If the participants express so much anger at the contrast between the mausoleum and the statue of local heroes, calling it injustice, it is because the mausoleum is perceived as the symbol of colonial domination. In most of our conversations, there was no ambiguity for participants that the mausoleum represents French colonialism in Congo and Central Africa. A woman expressed her disbelief in the following quote:

> This is madness! The monument was erected as a reference to a colonial explorer. Yet we know that he came to steal. He signed a treaty with King Makoko that allowed France to ruin and impoverish Africa. The goal was to ruin an entire population, an entire race.[4]

The participants understand colonialism as both social domination and resource extraction under French administration in Congo. As one of them would say: 'They have robbed us of all our riches'[5], speaking of the French and their colonial policies in Congo. They also believe de Brazza used deceit to dispossess lands and natural resources from King Makoko, the native ruler with whom the French explorer signed a colonial treaty. In this context, where they consider that their representative has been manipulated, the Congolese believe that 'to build a mausoleum for Savorgnan de Brazza is to harm Africans'[6]. Most of the people we spoke with expressed a sense of frustration and injustice as they looked at the mausoleum, at the same time they felt that history made omission of King Makoko.

Demanding Reparation for Historical Harm

As much as people kept repeating 'this is injustice' out of frustration provoked by the contrast between the photographs, participants also believed that there is erasure of history, especially to the detriment of King Makoko. Unanimously, our interlocutors called for a statue in memory of the Congolese leader: 'King Makoko deserves to have a statue'[7]. One of them confided to us: 'King Makoko does not have a monument like that of Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza. This is injustice. King Makoko deserves a monument'[8].

But it is a different conversation when we asked them to decide whom of Savorgnan de Brazza or King Makoko deserves the highest recognition. 'We should just build the statue of King Makoko instead of building this mausoleum'[9] retorted a young lady. But another young man in the group didn't share this opinion. For him, Savorgnan de Brazza and King Makoko 'signed the agreement together; the statue of King Makoko must have been next to that of de Brazza'[10]. But both interlocutors agreed that the construction of a mausoleum dedicated to Savorgnan de Brazza does not do justice to King Makoko. They therefore conclude that 'history is badly written'[11].

Another participant goes further and asks no less than the removal of the statues: 'Symbols of colonisation should be destroyed everywhere (…). A detailed history of African leaders should be written instead. Let us talk about Thomas Sankara or Patrice Lumumba in the name of everything they have done (…)'[12].

However, as the participants spoke boldly about feeling historical prejudice through the sight of the mausoleum and demanded reparation for historical harm, they did so because photo-elicitation provided them with the environment to engage in meaningful discussions around the symbolic representation of colonial memory. Below we reflect on how photo-elicitation interviews empowered both the participants and the researchers.

Emboldened Researchers and Participants

Many participants stated that the research gave them the opportunity to reflect on African political issues through symbols of colonialism. Especially so, the research was carried out during a period of revolt against the French continued influence in many west African countries (Chatelot, 2023), and most of the participants emphasised this context and felt emboldened to share their opinion. From their perspective, the mausoleum undoubtedly represents French colonialism on the African continent. The story about the mausoleum is a story of colonialism and its representations in the everyday life of a postcolonial society. Participating in the research offered them the opportunity to share their story which resonates with the struggle for emancipation over the 'derogatory' meaning of colonialism symbols standing in plain sight in so many cities around the world (Shahvisi, 2021).

Previous scholarship made similar claims indicating how photo-elicitation interviews can empower the research participants (Oliffe et al., 2008). But this isn't just about the participants. For us, as researchers, photo-elicitation interviews provided the lenses through which we were able to capture a story that we would not have been able to tell through traditional forms of interviews. The display of people's emotions and feelings was essential to understanding their everyday engagement with the mausoleum.

To that extent, the lack of major protests in Brazzaville, similar to the events that took place in Bristol, in Belgian cities and in other cities worldwide, should therefore not be interpreted as an approval of colonialism or an erasure of colonial legacies through the memories of the people who cross paths around the mausoleum every day. While the story of the mausoleum sits at cross-purpose with global unrests mobilised against memorials with colonial connotations, the political context in Congo certainly does account for the reasons why the statue of Savorgnan has been able to stand peacefully. Long years of political violence and authoritarian rule considerably hinder freedom of expression and restrict the public space where protest can find its expression.

Conclusion

Our fieldwork on the evocation of colonial legacies through the Savorgnan de Brazza Memorial reveals the extent to which photo-elicitation interviews enriched the quality of the data, as suggested by previous research (Samuels, 2004). We found that words only interactions pose huge challenges to making meaningful conversations with the research participants. Especially so as we, the researchers, were from a different cultural background to the participants and found it difficult to ask questions that are relevant to the participants everyday lives (Harper, 2002). Indeed, we only discover through the course of the fieldwork that the evocation of Savorgnan de Brazza instantly made people think that the discussions were going to be about Congolese politics, and so they would refrain to engage with us.

Using photographs during the interviews proved to be a very useful technique to overcome the cultural barrier differences between the researchers and the participants. We first started the discussions without the photographs and then later showed them at the end of the discussions based on our questionnaire. Compared to our words only interviews, these new orientations considerably changed the dynamics of the discussions, resulting in enriched data quality and very interesting research experience.

As the interaction with photographs made the research participants feel more comfortable and at ease sharing their perspectives on the mausoleum, we believe that the most salient benefit derived from how people express their feelings and emotions. As our empirical data show, using photographs allows to capture people's deep resentment against the mausoleum and how they protest the contrast between the lavish mausoleum on the hand, and the derelict statues honouring local historical figures on the other hand. Unlike words-only interviews, the photo-elicitation interviews offered the opportunity for the participants to visually explore the aesthetic, the magnitude, and the footprint of the mausoleum and to compare it to similar artefacts in the city of Brazzaville. Such contrast, and the emotions that they triggered, would not have been possible to capture if the participants were not exposed to the photographs.

Therefore, we believe that the combination of both visual and verbal, through photo-elicitation interviews, provides invaluable insights into how people construct their own narratives and articulate their perspectives of colonialism. In a political context where the repertoires of political expression are very limited, photographs can provide the participants with the tools to express their disagreement with public policies in alternative ways that would have been very difficult to be accounted for by the researchers.

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Notes

1. Focus group with entrepreneurs, Brazzaville, 18 August 2023.
2. Focus group with taxi drivers, Brazzaville, 13 August 2023.
3. Focus group with young musicians, Brazzaville, 14 August 2023.
4. Focus group with private sector workers, Brazzaville, 14 august 2023.

5. Focus group with teachers, Brazzaville, 22 August 2023.
6. Focus group with young graduates, Brazzaville, 13 August 2023.
7. Focus group with teachers, Brazzaville, 22 August 2023.
8. Focus group with women, Brazzaville, 11 August 2023.
9. Focus group with church choristers, Brazzaville, 19 August 2023.
10. Focus group with church choristers, Brazzaville, 19 August 2023.
11. Focus group with church choristers, Brazzaville, 19 August 2023.
12. Focus group with young graduates, Brazzaville, 13 August 2023.

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