In June 2006, *Politique africaine* will publish a special issue on colonial memories, with specific attention the ways in which such (often reconstructed) memories serve certain political ends, including specific public policies. *Politique africaine* published two short articles by Pierre Boilley and Jean-Pierre Chrétien, respectively, which were initial contributions to the topic (see no. 98, June 2005\(^1\)). The first article examined the debates around the article 4 of the law voted by the French national assembly on the 23\(^{rd}\) of February 2005, which acknowledged the positive role of France’s role overseas. The second article looked at the colonial past through the lens of “historical duty,” with reference to the Belgian debate over colonization and its recent manifestations (for instance, the Tervuren exhibition entitled “Mémoire du Congo. Le temps colonial” as well as the Lumumba and Rwanda commissions of inquiry). These examples were contrasted to the French case.

This special issue of *Politique africaine* will take up the thread of these two initial interventions on memories of colonization and their relationships to the political domain, with a particular regard to their role in contemporary social dilemmas. However, the contributions to this special issue will not be mere analyses of the relationships between history and memory, typical to a certain historiography, nor will they seek to interpret the mobilization of immigrant communities in France. The journal’s aim is to open up perspectives on the ways in which colonial history has been apprehended in the various public spheres, exploring the modalities and significance of various turns of memory with regard to colonial facts, often involving violence. To this aim, it seems helpful to consider this theme from a comparative point of view, looking at various approaches to “colonial facts” in former colonial metropoles and investigating the production of memories of the colonial past in Africa today.

This accounting of plural and often contradictory memories of “the time of the colonies” (*le temps des colonies*) in European societies and the political (and legislative) management of these matters differ from state to state, as Jean-Pierre Chrétien has attempted to show by contrasting the French and Belgian cases. What is the status of this debate on the colonial or imperial fact? Does it still exist? In what forms? What are its manifestations in various sites: Italy, Portugal, Great Britain, Germany, and even Spain? Do these former colonial powers also exhibit a “colonial breach” (*la fracture coloniale*), as is often claimed for the case of France?\(^2\) To what extent and in what conditions do these questions about colonial history and the increase in tensions over the nature of such memories articulate with debates underway in former colonies? Interactions between former metropoles and former colonies are multiple and not unidirectional. Thus the Algerian authorities reacted strongly to the vote on the law of February 23, which calls for


instruction on the “positive role” of French colonization in its former colonies in schools. Since the eruption of the “Lumumba affair,” there have been constant exchanges between Belgium and the Democratic Republic of the Congo over Belgian responsibility for blunders made during decolonization. The analysis of these kinds of interfaces of memory production should be extended to other cases, which have also instigated and perpetuated controversies and debates over colonial and postcolonial relations (as might be the case, for instance, at the time of the repatriation of “cultural artifacts” – the Axum obelisk from Italy to Ethiopia or the remains of Saartje Baartman, returned by France to South Africa).

One refers to the “need for history” (le besoin d’histoire). This idea merits clear definition – it must be clarified from a sociological point of view and situated in its temporality, according to specific cases. This “need for history” seems to arise in Europe, as in Africa, from chasms in “collective memory.” The latter is inevitably imperfectly constituted, being both the symptom of, and the reason for, profound crises in national identity. In this context, some African states have developed policies regarding memory, which should be examined. This may involve commemorations (monuments, museography, such as in the recent cases of South Africa, Ethiopia, Benin, the DRC) or the politics of “truth” (in instances of the publication of history schoolbooks, commissions for historical investigations, which sometimes occult the colonial “episode,” as in the case of Burundi). Elsewhere, it is the very absence of policy regarding memory which is striking – and one sometimes witnesses the development of official discourses on painful phases of colonization, which merit our attention (as for the cases of the repression of the brutalities of late colonial and early post-colonial Cameroon and Togo).

But the state is not the only agent presiding over the vagaries, appropriations and cover-ups of so-called collective memory. Demands that the state put an end to its amnesia prove that the dynamics of memory escape the confines of the state. These informal or non-institutional processes must also be examined. One must consider their specific logics, the ways in which they emerge and are maintained. They are sometimes structured into collective action (as in France, with the petition of the Indigènes de la République, or such associations like Devoirs de mémoire or Les damnés de la terre) or are transmitted in more diffuse manners (the emergence of group or family memory). Either way, these processes of memory formation merit attention. It would be interesting to know more about how debates over memory can nourish one another, being mutually constitutive. The intricacy of processes of memory production concerning the slave trade and colonization is a good example of this mutually constitutive dynamic. Generally speaking, mobilizations of memories seem to gain force when they connect to either autonomous or semi-autonomous forms of knowledge production, particularly those from the social sciences (with respect, for example, to slavery, colonialism, neo-imperialism, immigration, citizenship, etc.). These interactions relate to the trend once termed “new African writing on the self” (les nouvelles écritures africaines de soi), a mode of afrocentrism, often tending to manners of victimization, which lead to what Achille Mbembe has called “identity closure”³. Rather than condemning this trend for it historicism, one might seek a more fruitful inquiry by interrogating the efficacy of these representations so as to better understand how these registers of memory gain ground even though (or precisely because) they operate by amalgam. Whether one questions forms of memorial mobilization, their content or their force, one must insist on the

autonomization of memory with respect to the state, so evident in many present-day situations. And it goes without saying that the limits of the voluntarism of memory politics also merits study.

Both popular forces and the media appropriate the past either alongside official, political appropriations or by filling official, political voids. These popular and media appropriations operate in very diverse social, economic, and political environments, which must be considered. Memory tends to emerge on the bases of those past events that can be related to contemporary preoccupations of specific groups and individuals[^1]. The collective use of documents, witnesses, and historical “proof” as a response to these preoccupations should encourage us to reflect upon conjunctures that promote, in a particular time and place, the emergence (or the suffocation) of public debate and collective representations of the colonial past. This brings to mind, for example, the successive use of photographs of mutilated Africans in the Congo during the reign of Leopold II at the beginning of the 20th century in Great Britain and the beginning of the 21st century in Israel. One might also refer to the present-day reinterpretations of collusion between Christian missionaries and colonizers at a time when new, independent churches market their “African-ness” to attract new church members – one can think for instance of the case of the forged letter by Leopold II that was used recently in Nigeria in fierce competition between non-indigenous Christian churches (European) and “autochthonous” churches (African). In other times and places, this counterfeit fostered the radicalization of identities in the eastern Congo by stigmatizing Tutsi groups and their relations, who were portrayed as the allies of European penetration of the Congo and the colonial servitude that followed. These attempts at “memory engineering” deserve further reflection.

It is also worth thinking about the reasons why reminiscences about the colonial past – which were often surprisingly wide in scope, creating severe tensions – are so intense and sensitive: possibly because the facts produced and taken up by collective memory often belong to violent categories. If we assume that colonization was by definition a violent enterprise, the brutality of certain episodes (massacres, repression, assassinations) is nonetheless the principal object of these processes of (re)discovery and (re)coding. A reflection on the relations between colonial memory and historical violence is thus worth pursuing.

The aim of this special issue is to assemble contributions that clarify in an original way the diverse questions set forth above. In this regard, texts on the following topics will be particularly welcome:

- a text or two on the question of memory processes at work in the former colonial metropoles, treating the less explored examples (Great Britain, Italy, Germany, Portugal)[^5]. A comparative approach is particularly warranted.

• a piece on the politics of memory (monuments, museums, commemorations) with respect to the colonial period in Africa (if possible, with a comparative dimension). This intervention could be a text on the negation of memory and organized amnesia by public agents in Africa, which would be contrasted (or not) with popular efforts to take charge of the past.

• a text on the circulation of documents, symbols or objects of history, present-day vectors of the reformulation of the memory of the colonial past. This paper might also discuss the emergence and rehabilitation of colonial “spaces of memory”. Here, we would like to ascertain all possible dimensions of the generation (traces of history), the diffusion (networks), the accommodation (to the local and national contexts), the impact, and the concrete effects of the resurgence or reinvention of memory. One could conduct such an analysis, for example, with respect to the counterfeit letter of Leopold II, referenced above, the interpretation of which varies according to its networks of circulation and the contexts into which it has been adapted.

• a text interrogating the indexing of diverse, violent events with the (re)memorization of a brutal colonial past. The recent exhumation of a 1955 decree on the state of emergency – whose reference to the Algerian war did not fail to incite symbolic protests – encourages us to reflect on the case of France. Here, mobilizations – which refer, intentionally or not, to the backdrop of the management of memory in the French colony – have proliferated over the past years. Given that, an article taking up the reflections put forward in the issue no. 98 of *Politique africaine* on the French situation would be appropriate. This might be an article elaborating the sociology of the mobilization of the *indigènes de la République*. In that regard, the issue 102 will include a debate over the edited volume entitled *La fracture coloniale*, which could be the space for such a reflection. Also, a more general analysis, exploring the linkages between contemporary violence to the framework of the colonial past (or that of slavery and the slave trade), in Europe as in Africa, would be particularly apt.

These possibilities set forth a set of potential interventions; other approaches to the theme described herein will be considered for publication.

**Practical Information**

The issue 102 will be published in June 2006. Proposals for articles (half a page or a page) should be received by 31 December 2005 at the e-mail addresses of the editor-in-chief and the two coordinators of the special issue. On 11 January 2006, *Politique africaine* will organize a workshop to discuss the contents of the special issue and to debate the questions raised herein. This workshop will hopefully include potential authors as well as those interested in the topic. The texts, in French or in English, should be sent to the same persons by 15 March 2006. The texts should not exceed 50,000 characters (space and footnotes included).

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The texts should be original articles, not yet published. They will be submitted for evaluation by the coordinators of the special issue and by the editorial board. This evaluation generally produced critical remarks; proposed modifications of texts must be addressed by the authors, who are responsible for revisions.

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