



MONUMENT TO THE DEAD / LE PAVOIS

Algiers, Algeria

36.77334, 3.05746



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Executive Summary

Built after the First World War, '*Le Pavois*' was meant to symbolise unification between Europe and Africa. However, to the people of Algiers, it is a symbol of the colonial past and French oppression. After Algeria gained independence in 1962, discussions between city representatives and local artists arose about the monument's future. While officials wanted to demolish the monument, artists advocated for its historical significance, resulting in encasing the monument in a concrete sarcophagus. This case study examines the complexities of dealing with colonial legacies after independence, including social, historical, political, and artistic/aesthetic considerations.

Introduction

Le Pavois (Monument to the Dead Algiers) was commissioned by the city of Algiers following the First World War. The sculpture, created by war veteran Paul Landowski, was intended to commemorate the grief that both France and Algeria felt for the loss of their children who had perished in the war. Although the original intention of the memorial was to celebrate the relationship between Europe and Africa, many Algerians grew to regard the sculpture as a symbol of colonialism and oppression.

After Algeria gained independence in 1962, there was a great campaign to remove the monument from the newly decolonised city. However, an Algerian artist named M'hamed Issiakhem opposed the movement and asked instead if he would be permitted to reclaim the monument as a piece of Algerian art. Issiakhem encased the structure in concrete, creating a sarcophagus-like shell that obstructed any view of the original. Today, the monument stands as a reminder of French colonialism and of Algeria's complex, layered history.¹

Background

Algeria's colonial past

A French colony from 1830 to 1962, Algeria participated as part of the French *République* (Republic) in the First World War. The country was asked to contribute to the French military endeavour. More than any other colony in North Africa, Algeria provided both material and human resources to aid France in the war: more than 100,000 Algerians were sent to France to join the army or work in the factories.² The high price of this endeavour, and the frustration which arose from the unfulfilled promises of the French *République*, contributed to a feeling of hostility, which led to the Algerian War of Independence, fought between France and *le Front de Libération Nationale* (the National Liberation Front) from 1954-1962.

The brutality used by France during the Algerian War of Independence provoked increased anti-French sentiment in the country. In the aftermath of independence in 1962, the military assumed increasing power, first supporting Ahmed Ben Bella as the first president of an independent Algeria, and later, in 1965, with a military *coup d'état* (seizure of existing government) which brought Houari Boumédiène to power. The authoritarian nature of the political system formed by Boumédiène survived his death in 1978, Chadli Bendjedid's rule (1979-1992), the 1992 *coup d'état* and the civil war (1991-2002). While anti-colonial sentiment still endures, the political turmoil following the more than fifty years since independence has shaped the relationship of Algerians with their colonial past.

The Monument

¹ Beatrice Ivey, "The Landowski-Issiakhem Pavois," *Pieds Noirs Project*, November 28, 2018.

² Gilbert Meynier, "Algerians and the First World War," *Orient XXI*, March 10, 2016.

In the aftermath of the 1919 armistice, the municipal Council of Algiers, and in particular the then major Charles de Galland decided to commission a monument to commemorate the 10,000 soldiers from the city of Algiers who died during the First World War.³ A competition was announced in 1922, and a jury committee made up of 21 members decided to grant the mandate to construct the monument to Paul Landowski (a French sculptor of Polish origin, himself a veteran of the First World War and creator of the Christ the Redeemer statue in Brazil) along with the sculptor Charles Bigonet and architects Maurice Gras and Édouard Monestès.⁴ The project, which was also pursued by de Galland's successor, Mayor Alphonse Raffi, took five years to complete and was inaugurated with great fanfare on the 11th of November 1928, the anniversary of the general armistice signed by the Allies and Germany.⁵ At its inauguration, Mayor Raffi described the monument as not a 'purely symbolic monument' but also a commemoration of the shared loss by both French and Algerian communities during the First World War and a celebration of the fraternity of arms connecting the two communities.⁶ He, therefore, urged that everyone be inspired by the endeavours of those who gave their lives for the French common cause, remain faithful to the ideal of sacrifice, and to overcome divisions, stating:

Let us remain faithful to the noble ideal which animated them; let us apply ourselves to removing all that divides, to seeking all that unites, let us never forget that in an hour of peril all the French, without distinction, took up arms and marched into combat.⁷

Description of the monument

The '*Monument aux Morts*', also called the '*Pavois d'Alger*', is located in the administrative centre of Algiers at the top of the Jardin de l'Horloge Fleurie (the Geneva Flower Clock), close to the Government Palace and the Central Post Office.

The limestone monument depicts three figures – an Algerian Spahi (indigenous North African cavalry soldiers recruited in the French army), a French cavalryman, and a winged allegory of Victory – on horses, raising arms to carry a wounded body on a stretcher. There are four figures behind them: two women and two men, representing the two communities that are mourning the loss of their children, who perished fighting for France. On the base of the sculpture, bas-reliefs bear the names of 10,000 Algerians and French who lost their lives during the war.⁸ In 1978, this initial monument was encased in a concrete sarcophagus at the intervention of M'hamed Issiakhem; a sculptor tasked with reconfiguring the monument for a post-colonial context.⁹ Two fists breaking handcuffs were sculpted on the front of the monument in memory of Algeria's

³ L'Echo d'Alger, "La commémoration du Xème Anniversaire de l'armistice à Alger et l'inauguration du Monument aux Morts," *L'Echo d'Alger*, November 12, 1928.

⁴ L'Echo d'Alger, "La commémoration du Xème Anniversaire de l'armistice à Alger et l'inauguration du Monument aux Morts," *L'Echo d'Alger*, November 12, 1928.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Paul Landowski, "Monument to the dead of Algiers, or 'Le Pavois,'" *Paul Landowski*, n.d.

⁷ Translation by author See; L'Echo d'Alger, "La commémoration du Xème Anniversaire de l'armistice à Alger et l'inauguration du Monument aux Morts," *L'Echo d'Alger*, November 12, 1928.

⁸ L'Afrique du Nord Illustrée, "Le Monument aux Morts de la Ville d'Alger. La Visite du Gouverneur," *L'Afrique du Nord Illustrée*, November 5, 1927.

⁹ Beatrice Ivey, "The Landowski-Issiakhem Pavois," *Pieds Noirs Project*, November 28, 2018.

socialist revolution.¹⁰ The project represents an example of Brutalist art, an architectural style of the 1950s and 1960s characterised by simple, block-like forms and raw concrete construction.



Figure 1: "Le Pavois de Paul Landowski dans son sarcophage de béton" by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra via Flickr CC BY 2.0



Figure 2: "Le Pavois de Paul Landowski dans son sarcophage de béton" by Jean-Pierre Dalbéra via Flickr CC BY 2.0

History of the Contestation

During the Algerian War of Independence

During the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), the monument acquired particular significance for both French and Algerian communities: for the French, it symbolised the unity and common destiny of the two communities, while the Algerians viewed it as a symbol of the colonial exploitation they experienced at the hands of the French République. Two years after the monument was completed, the Sidi-Ferruche centenary monument was erected twenty kilometres away from Landowski's monument, marking the exact landing spot of the French Army in 1830.¹¹ The Sidi-Ferruche centenary monument was repatriated in 1962 in Port-Vendres, where there is an important community of *pieds-noirs*, a site of commemoration and a memorial, including a memorial museum which includes witnesses of French Algeria. A torch relay between the two monuments, which took place in 1930, was perceived by some as inflammatory and celebratory of colonial oppression.¹² These conflicting narratives transformed Landowski's monument into a venue of contestation, taking the form of official celebrations on one side and protests on the other. When the French Premier Guy Mollet laid a wreath at the war memorial, he

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Beatrice Ivey, "The Sidi Ferruch Monument," *Pieds Noir Project*, November 2, 2019.

¹² Beatrice Ivey, "The Landowski-Issiakhem Pavois," *Pieds Noirs Project*, November 28, 2018.

was met by angry protestors who later shredded the wreath.¹³ Pro French Algeria demonstrators were rioting on February 6, 1956, against the visit of the new president of the Council, as Mollet was regarded as having considered that the Algeria war is 'stupid and useless'. When Mollet returned to Paris, he had changed his mind and received powers from the National Assembly in particular for fighting against the Algerian rebels.

After the Algerian War of Independence

After the Front de Libération Nationale became the only constitutionally legal political party in Algeria following the country's independence in 1962, the monument was seen to support the state's narrative that French colonial rule had caused Algerian bloodshed. However, for more than a decade following independence, the statue was left almost untouched, with only the engraved names removed. In 1978, on the occasion of the Africa Games (July 13-28), hosted in Algeria, the wilaya of Algiers, led by Abderrezak Bouhara (1975-78), called to have the monument removed.¹⁴ A campaign led by artist Mohammed Issiakhem and his collaborators (Kerbouche Ali, Bourdine Moussa, Oulhaci Mohamed, Nadjar Mohamed, Bouarour Said, Ould Aïssa Ali, Filali Mustapha, Tadjer Mustapha, Bendaoud Youcef, Chaïb Salah, Ziraoui El Hadi, Ould Aïssa Raouf) resisted these calls, ultimately succeeding in preserving the monument and encasing it in a concrete sarcophagus.¹⁵ In this way, the concrete, supported by a wooden frame, protected – whilst also hiding – the sculpture.¹⁶ Issiakhem carved a pair of hands breaking free of handcuffs onto the front of the concrete casing, symbolising Algeria's socialist revolution.¹⁷ Successive governments upheld a commitment to concealing the colonial legacy embodied by the original statue for fifty years after Independence. When Issiakhem's concrete sculpture started crumbling in 2012, revealing limbs and faces of two figures, the wilaya of Algiers, alerted by an article published by *El Watan* (a newspaper in French in Algeria), filled the cracked and replaced portions of the concrete.

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Contemporary responses

The legacy of the statue and its contested nature has endured well into the twenty-first century, with artists and intellectuals in Algeria and elsewhere reflecting on its significance. During the 50th anniversary of Algeria's independence, a crack appeared in the outer sarcophagus, exposing parts of the original sculpture, including faces and limbs. The monument was quickly shrouded in scaffolding and repaired. Although not explicitly taking a stance on the fate of the monument, the questions raised in this project seem to challenge the ideological approach taken by the central government towards the monument. A more explicit position has been taken by Farid Saadi-Leray in *Le Matin d'Algérie*, an Algerian newspaper, who proposed to return the monument to France,

¹³ Ibid.; Le Monde, "Les monuments aussi sont en exil," *Le Monde*, March 4, 1980.

¹⁴ Farid Saadi-Leray, "Emmanuel Macron fera-t-il découvrir et/ou rapatrier le grand Pavois d'Alger?," *Le Matin d'Algérie*, July 25, 2017.

¹⁵ Adlène Meddi, "Patrimoine: le Pavois d'Alger se dévoile," *El Watan*, October 25, 2012.

¹⁶ Élisabeth Caillet, "Le monument d'Alger et Landowski," in *Archives au Présent*, ed. Patrick Nardin et al (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2017), 113-120.

¹⁷ Beatrice Ivey, "The Landowski-Issiakhem Pavois," *Pieds Noirs Project*, November 28, 2018.

¹⁸ Adlène Meddi, "Patrimoine: le Pavois d'Alger se dévoile," *El Watan*, October 25, 2012. See also Amina Menia's website: <http://www.aminamenia.com/?browse=Enclosed>

more precisely to Verdun (the battlefield on which one of 1916's longest battles between France and Germany took place during the First World War).¹⁹

Decision-Making Processes

The decision-making process in 1978 as to whether or not to remove the monument followed internal negotiations between officials of *wilaya* (provinces) of Algiers, who wanted to demolish the statue, and a group led by Issiakhem, who wanted to save it.

Although the internal dynamics of the negotiation are unclear, the influence of Issiakhem – as a prominent international artist with a long record of collaboration with the official authorities – certainly helped him in his effort to save the monument. Issiakhem had indeed already built alliances with Algerian officials, having taken on various responsibilities for the Ministry of Culture. In 1973, he received a gold medal at the International Fair of Algiers for work he had produced for the stall of the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, while in 1977 he oversaw the production of a fresco for Algiers airport. He was also commissioned to design Algerian stamps and banknotes.²⁰ As such, his suggestions were perceived by the administration as an 'internal' perspective, meaning within the circles of artists and intellectuals. Discussions which were emerging in intellectual and artistic circles concerning the fate of Landowski's sculpture, or its movement to another venue, did not seem to have reached the level of the policy makers. The refusal of the city of Algiers to allow the Amina Menia to make a resin impression of the cracks in Issiakhem's sarcophagus indicates that the city's position is still to conceal the old monument.

Summary and Conclusions

Created under the French colony to commemorate the common endeavours of the French and Algerians during the First World War, the statue increasingly came to be perceived by Algerians as synonymous with the exploitation and unfulfilled promises of the French Republic. After Algerian independence in 1962, an attempt by the city administration to demolish the monument was met with resistance by a collective of artists led by M'hamed Issiakhem. In order to save Landowski's artwork, Issiakhem encased it in a concrete sarcophagus, which represents an alternative solution for decision makers addressing the issue of contested heritage. The decision to carve a symbol of the country's socialist revolution onto a monument depicting its colonial past demonstrates that two versions of history can co-exist. As Amina Menia puts it, there is a sort of 'silent dialogue between [two] artists', and memories which are 'interlocking'. In choosing to conceal, and not to destroy, the original monument, with its contours still vaguely discernible, decision makers have been able to symbolically 'preserve' one version of history, whilst not 'promoting' it to the viewing public. In passing through the *Jardin de l'Horloge Florale* (The garden of the flower clock), the garden where the monument is located, named after a flowered design of a clock, the eye is now drawn to a new chapter in Algeria's history - the colonial overtones of the former monument no longer dominates this public space, with ideals of progress and true freedom

¹⁹ Farid Saadi-Leray, "Emmanuel Macron fera-t-il découvrir et/ou rapatrier le grand Pavois d'Alger?" *Le Matin d'Algérie*, July 25, 2017.

²⁰ Élisabeth Caillet, "Le monument d'Alger et Landowski," in *Archives au Présent*, ed. Patrick Nardin et al (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2017), 113-120.

being embraced instead. The current president of France, Emmanuel Macron, has expressed a goal of political and symbolic gestures for reconciliation in order to take distance with the permanent replay of past conflicts. Recommendations are connected with monuments, and other spaces, such as the financing of a cemetery in Algeria where muslim militaries who died for France are buried.²¹

Research Contributed by Pegah Zohouri

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²¹ Benjamin Stora, "Les questions mémorielles portant sur la colonisation et la guerre d'Algérie," *Vie-publique.fr*, January 20, 2021.

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Figures

Jean-Pierre Dalbéra. "File: Le Pavois de Paul Landowski dans son sarcophage de béton (Neïl Beloufa, Palais de Tokyo, Paris.jpg." Alger - monument aux morts (1955)." Flickr, March 24, 2018. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/72746018@N00/40295761364>. (Cover Image)

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

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The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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