A post/colonial lieu de mémoire in India

Jørgensen, Helle

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Helle Jørgensen
Ironbridge International Institute for Cultural Heritage
University of Birmingham
Edgbaston Campus
Pritchatts Road, ERI building
B15 2TT Birmingham
UK

Email: h.jorgensen@bham.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines the afterlives of Indo-French colonial connections as they are expressed in postcolonial cultural practices surrounding Puducherry's memorial for World War I and subsequent French wars. Tracing the shifting web of memory and meanings woven around the monument across different contexts of local, national and transnational post/colonial memoryscapes, it demonstrates how this colonial heritage and the associated commemorative practices are used to negotiate and reconfigure postcolonial relations. It argues that this ambiguous site of remembrance gives rise to a multidirectionality of memory, which in many ways both resist and span the dichotomy between the colonial and the postcolonial.

Keywords: monuments – postcolonialism – colonial heritage - memoryscapes - Puducherry

Post/colonial lieux de mémoire in India: Commemorative practices surrounding Puducherry's French war memorial

Issues related to cultural memory constitute a central concern to postcolonial studies, as complex questions concerning the multidirectionality of postcolonial memory continue to spur debate on the status, uses and effects of colonial legacies as well as their fundamentally disjunctive temporality, "colonialism's ability to colonize not just space, but time as well".[1] After independence, postcolonies across the world have worked to reconfigure the national memoryscapes expressed in the material landscapes of everyday life through the restructuring or replacement of everything from place names to monuments.[2] Dealing with what has been left by the colonizers has often been discussed in terms of negative or dissonant heritage;[3] conversely postcolonial heritage and identities are often characterized by complex, even symbiotic interweaving with colonial heritage and memories.[4] Indeed, De Jong argues that in the postcolony it is the recycling of monuments that give them their potency, and proposes a perspective which perceives colonial memorials as objects of mimetic appropriation; *objets trouvés* of the postcolony.[5] Certainly, monumental structures have often provided the palimpsests on which new rulers can inscribe their narratives and ideologies, whether in situ or through strategies of physical relocation. But what happens if a colonial memorial is not free for appropriation – if it stays put in the postcolony, exhibiting both the permanence and the immobility that is the precondition for the efficacy of monuments? This article will investigate the

case of one such monument in India, which is apt to address both the classic conceptual debate concerning the 'post' in postcolonialism,[6] and the question of how colonial heritage and associated commemorative practices are used to reconfigure postcolonial relations.

Following India's achievement of independence, the state has appropriated a broad range of colonial remains and monuments as a legacy that has to be either discarded or culturally rehabilitated. Strategies for this have included removing statuary, reinterpreting monuments, and appropriating official buildings associated with colonial administration both physically and symbolically as sites of postcolonial power.[7] Yet still, as several analysts have pointed out, some colonial monuments retain an ambiguous position which resists easy recategorization in the context of the postcolonial nationscape. The classic example is colonial cemeteries and their memorials, which have been dealt with through neglect, or as Chadha puts it, "by forgetting the site of remembrance".[8] It is certainly true that monuments, their commemorative function and intended permanence to the contrary, are subject to the historic condition that meaning, like memory, is profoundly unstable, making them subject to an inevitable dialectic between remembering and forgetting.[9] Yet, as this article will discuss, the ambiguity of some colonial monuments in the postcolonial context may lie in the ways in which they, or commemorative practices surrounding them, resist forgetting. Buettner has suggested that the state and uses of colonial cemeteries serve as barometers for how both the formerly colonized and the former colonizers have assessed colonial spaces, artefacts, and relations after decolonization.[10] The same may be said for other such ambiguous sites of remembrance which resist the dichotomy between the colonial and the postcolonial and the strategies of cultural appropriation and rejection.

This article focuses on one such monument, the French War Memorial in Puducherry, formerly the capital of French India under the French name *Pondichéry* and now the capital of the Indian union territory of Puducherry. Erected in 1937 to commemorate the residents of French India who died in World War I, this monument is formally known as the *Monument aux combattants des Indes francaises morts pour la patrie* (that is, the "Monument to the soldiers from French India who died for the fatherland"). To most French speakers in Puducherry, the generic French term for a World War I memorial, *monument aux morts*; the monument to the dead, suffices in daily speech, whereas others locally refer to it as 'the French war memorial'. It differs from the monuments in colonial cemeteries which are more frequently discussed in research literature on the ambiguities of colonial heritage by commemorating war dead from India rather than dead colonizers. Rupturing any notion of simple dichotomies between colonizer and colonized, it commemorates those soldiers of Indian origin who, as the name of the monument says, "died for the fatherland" — that is, for France — and not only in World War I, but also in subsequent armed conflicts. Further plaques were later added to the monument, which has continued to commemorate Puducherry's dead in other French wars: World War II and the war in French Indochina. The monument remains a bit of an anomaly in postcolonial Puducherry and India at large, where its existence continues to rupture easy distinctions between the colonial and the postcolonial: While the French territories were surrendered to India de facto in 1954, with de jure ratification in 1962, the treaty of cession set apart five small properties which remained French territory in the decolonized French India: two belonging to French research and educational institutions; two belonging to the French consulate which was created as a consequence of the process of decolonization; and the final one – the *monument aux morts*, which thus literally remains a small piece of France in India.[11] Through an investigation of the postcolonial commemorative practices surrounding the *monument aux morts*,

this article aims to analyze the role which the monument plays in negotiating and communicating the contemporary afterlives of Indo-French colonial connections in Puducherry.

The findings in this article are based on ethnographic fieldwork carried out in Puducherry during multiple research visits in 2017-18 to follow commemorative events related to the heritage of colonialism and independence in Puducherry. They are also part of a much longer ethnographic research engagement with Puducherry, which I have visited several times from 2007 onwards in the course of three research projects, all related to contemporary uses of colonial heritage.[12] Participant observation for the study included commemorative events such as the annual celebration of July 14 (Bastille Day) in Puducherry, as well as everyday uses of the space surrounding the *monument aux morts* and the wider urban landscape and memoryscape. In-depth qualitative interviews served to elucidate the perspectives of planners and participants who engage in commemorative practices which focus on the monument, as well as more generally with residents of Puducherry for whom the monument is a part of their everyday surroundings. Interviewees included official sources such as staff at Puducherry's French consulate and Puducherry's public administration, and a councillor representing Puducherry's French in *le Union des Français de l'Etranger* (the Union of Frenchmen Abroad), as well as representatives of French institutions in Puducherry. Interviewees from Puducherry's French community included both people with and without direct connections to the French army, and covered a broad range of social experiences, from retired army personnel in their 80s to second generation visitors from France in their twenties. Interviews with members of Puducherry's general population were primarily carried out in Puducherry's historic city center, which constituted the confines of the city during French rule, and which is where the *monument aux morts* is located. Altogether 34 interviews were carried out for the project. Official as well as wider public discourses surrounding *monument aux morts,* and related experiences of how it fits into postcolonial imaginaries and relations between France and India in Puducherry, were explored through analysis of governmental sources such as webpages, reports on commemorative events surrounding the monument in Indian news media, and Indian visitor comments reviewing it on TripAdvisor.

The multidirectionality of post/colonial memory
John Bodnar has emphasized that public memory constitutes a system of beliefs and views which are produced through ongoing negotiation of fundamental issues concerning the very existence of a society: Its organization and structures of power, as well as the meaning of its past, present and future. Notably, "[p]ublic memory emerges from the intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions", in which the former are oriented towards presenting ideals of official culture which underplay ambiguities, while the latter underscore not just what social reality should be like, but how it feels from the perspective of diverse and changing interests.[13] The post/colonial context is apt to explore these tensions in depth, with its social and cultural practices, which span histories of belonging and relationships at local as well as national and imperial scale, including networks of both inter- and transnational connections. These may serve to explode the still widespread tendency in cultural memory studies to theorize canonical memory rather than challenges to it, and to consider cultural memory in terms of a firmly established notion of coherent social groups rather than seeking out more multidirectional perspectives.[14] Theorizing the multidirectionality of memory takes into account contrapuntal readings of cultural memory, which emphasize both public and private memories, both regimes of memory and forgetting, acts of valorization as well as of indifference. It

requires critical attention to the flows structuring the dispersion and reconvention of communities of remembrance, in order to emphasize "the dynamic in which multiple pasts jostle against each other in a heterogenous present".[15]

War memorials, with their conventional roles as simultaneously the most local and most 'national' of historical symbols, may provide a privileged point of entry not only for understanding colonial history, but also for exploring connections between colonial and postcolonial worlds. This was proposed by Gregory Mann in a historical study of the erection of war memorials in France and its West African colonies (the largest contributor of colonial soldiers to France in the two World Wars).[16] Arguably, this approach would also shed valuable light on the legacies of other empires, such as the British, for which the experience of the World Wars and the question of how to commemorate them were equally momentous.[17] In the French context, however, an added relevance arises from the way in which studies of social memory in France have fed into the more general theorizing of social memory through Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire*.[18] Several critics have pointed out that a reading of Nora's classic but inexcusably Gallocentric work on *Les lieux des mémoire* might almost leave the reader with the impression that France had no colonies, as the imperial history of the country remains all but unaddressed; a *non-lieu de mémoire*.[19] For Nora, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* was an approach that grew directly out of, and could only be applied to, French national culture. Yet if such a concept is to be applied to the post/colonial realities of either the past or the present, in France or beyond, an approach that foregrounds multidirectionality is essential. As Sengupta has argued: "*Lieux de mémoire* in these contexts can only be multi-layered, conflicted and ever-changing, as they represent the points of convergence of the ambivalent trajectories of colonial relationships. The task (…) is to ask in what precise ways they do so".[20]

Paradoxically, therefore, in the post/colonial context, exploring the webs of meaning which surround colonial war memorials holds a potential to explode the narrowly national perspectives on communities of memory surrounding *lieux de mémoire*, which have been criticized as prevalent both in the field of cultural memory studies in general, and in much research on those sites of memory which specifically relate to French history. *Monuments aux morts* and the commemorative social practices which surround them capture many of the classic features and focal points of collective memory and *lieux de mémoire*: Monuments, ceremonies and holidays.[21] Following World War I, France launched a hitherto unprecedented scale of postwar commemoration, rendering such monuments omnipresent across the nation.[22] In the context of exploring the afterlives of French colonial history, the historic status of *monuments aux morts* as a phenomenon which has carried particular social and cultural significance in France adds further depth to the exploration of the post/colonial webs of meaning surrounding Puducherry's *monument aux morts* and the wider memoryscapes of which it is part.

This, in turn, foregrounds processes of post/colonial social memory in a part of the former French empire which has been neglected by most postcolonial scholarship, from French and Indian perspectives alike. Puducherry has an interesting position in the context of former French empire, which impacts on the politics of memory that surround it and its war memorial: Its remaining pockets of Frenchness in the postcolonial context create an ambiguous position. As I will show, a comparatively amiable process of decolonization in Puducherry and its continuing sociocultural impacts create the conditions for an ongoing state of functional ambiguity, in which Puducherry's French war memorial plays a particular role in the construction of post/colonial memory. If other quintessentially ambivalent sites of colonial heritage, such as the more frequently explored cemeteries, constitute barometers of postcolonial relations, then the *monument aux morts* does

more than this: it constitutes an active node in their negotiation, upon which different claims on post/colonial social memory and identity are actively produced in a creative tension between multiple stakeholders.

The French legacy and the changing postcolonial memoryscapes in Puducherry

Acquired by France in 1673 to underpin its participation in the lucrative East India trade, Puducherry, located on the east coast of South India, was a French colony for almost 300 years and served as the chief of a handful of geographically disparate settlements across India. After an intensive eighteenth century interlude of contestation with the British, which in the middle of the century seemed poised to result in French dominance, the British gained the upper hand in establishing empire in India, and French India was relegated to a marginal position on the subcontinent, which persisted till after the departure of the British in 1947. Decolonization of the French territories took place after a protracted political process of negotiation which first and foremost held symbolic significance for both India and France: For the former, it was part of a drive to remove the remaining, more marginal European colonial powers from the map of India now that the key colonial power had been dealt with. For the latter, it was an outcome of tensions between the realization that after the departure of the British, continued French colonialism in India had been rendered untenable; and a wish to retain some measure of French influence over a territory that, if not politically significant, then at least symbolically remained valued as part of the notion of a greater France.[23]

The decolonization of French India was not a clean break with the past, as it resulted in ongoing ties between the former colonizer and the formerly colonized. The contrast especially with the decolonization of the Portuguese territories in India, which required intervention by the Indian army in 1961, allowed both France and India to emphasize the politically negotiated cession of the French territories as a success story of ongoing fraternity and diplomacy which did mutual credit.[24] The notion that in particular the capital of the former French territories could constitute "a window through which France and India could communicate", as expressed by Nehru, was accepted.[25] Correspondingly, a continued cultural presence of France was agreed in the guise of the ongoing existence of Puducherry's French *lycee* (a state-funded secondary school), and the creation of a new research institution, the French Institute of Pondicherry, each of which still stand on small plots of French territory. Not least, the terms of the de jure cession in 1962 allowed the residents of the French territories to opt for French rather than Indian citizenship. A minority of around 2% of the population — 6,252 persons — opted for French citizenship, in spite of the doubts prompted amongst many on what might be the long-term consequences of choosing a foreign nationality amidst the process of decolonization and integration into the former British India.[26] The establishment of a French consulate in Puducherry was a necessity after this legal creation of a group of French nationals with roots and residence in India; and to date the consulate functions as much as a town hall providing ordinary civic services for the local French nationals as it serves more conventional consular functions. The fact that the consulate registered around 6,500 French citizens in Puducherry by 2015 (of whom only a minority are expats from mainland France)[27] contrasts with the vast changes that have taken place in the postcolonial social landscape of Puducherry. Whereas the French territories in India in their entirety had a population of just 300,000 persons in the 1951 census, the metropolitan region alone accounted for a population of 657,209 persons by 2011, due not only to general population growth, but also to a postcolonial history of massive migration from other parts of India.[28] Conversely, though the number of French nationals who originate in

Puducherry, and who increasingly constitute a minority population here, has also grown in size in the postcolonial period, their presence has by and large been relocated transnationally, as many from this group have migrated to settle in France, which is estimated to be the home of approximately 50,000 such persons.[29]

Following its decolonization, the social and urban landscape of Puducherry has come to reflect a process of postcolonial integration with the former British India. The former French territories remained a separate political and administrative entity, the union territory of Puducherry, but soon saw a process of postcolonial change. As bureaucrats from the Republic of India moved into Puducherry to take over its administration, the French legacy was initially valued little, and the idea of making Puducherry a window onto France which Nehru had expressed took a back seat. If little overt antagonism was expressed towards the French legacy, cultural changes were nonetheless swift, for instance as English replaced French as the administrative language and *lingua franca* alongside Tamil, soon making its impact on the local educational institutions too. The focus of the local government was placed on integration with the rest of the newly independent India rather than on maintaining French legacies. This was also expressed in myriad ways in the urban landscape of Puducherry. Though many French street names remain unchanged in the former colonial city center, a process of renaming has also been going on, so that main thoroughfares in the city now bear names after founding fathers of the Indian nation, such as Jawaharlal Nehru Street and Mahatma Gandhi Road. Puducherry has thus been going through some of the same processes of symbolic decolonization that can be seen elsewhere in India, although it has done so at a slow pace, and subject to its own distinct dynamics in identity politics, as compared to the handling of the dominant British colonial legacy elsewhere in India. For instance the amount of controversy and overt iconoclasm which certain aspects of British colonial heritage, such as sites and monuments related to the famous uprising or 'mutiny' against the British in 1857 have attracted[30] have been absent from Puducherry.

If the colonial layout and buildings of Puducherry's city center have to a considerable extent remained to the present, a symbolic postcolonial memoryscape has been superimposed on the colonial one, as a landscape of postcolonial memorials has been constructed following decolonization. For instance, along the popular seaside promenade where the *monument aux morts* is located one now also finds a string of postcolonial monuments. Symbolically decentered to the southern margin of the promenade, but still highly visible, a statue of the eighteenth century French Governor-general Dupleix, who came very close to establishing French empire in India, illustrates the currency of De Jong's points on the postcolonial recycling of colonial monuments:[31] Removed from a more central location after the decolonization of Puducherry and relegated to a period of inconspicuous existence deposited at the French consulate, this *objet trouvé* of the postcolony was reintroduced into public view following internal Indian political debates on the prospects of dissolving the union territory of Puducherry in the late 1970s. Strong local protests to this proposal from the central government of India made it *de rigueur* to reemphasize Puducherry's French legacy as a defining identity, because Puducherry's continued existence as a political and administrative entity is exclusively predicated on its history of French rule.[32] Yet emphasizing Puducherry's Indian identity remains equally important. Further along the beach promenade one finds several postcolonial monuments testifying to Puducherry's integration into the former British India by commemorating the history of Indian independence, such as the *Ambedkar Mani Mandapam*, a memorial to Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, who was the chief architect behind India's constitution. Most conspicuously, and centrally placed on the promenade, a four-meter-tall statue of India's most iconic

freedom fighter, Mahatma Gandhi, stands facing the city from the sea, within direct view of the *monument aux morts*. Not to be outdone in displays of patriotism, the Government of Puducherry proudly claims this monument as Asia's largest statue of Gandhi.[33] Opposite it, across a square named *Gandhi Thidal* (formerly *Place de la Republique*) stands a statue of India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru.

In the continuing process of redefining official post/colonial memoryscapes and identities even the very name of the union territory and its capital city was officially changed from Pondicherry (the English rendition of the French *Pondichéry*) to the original Tamil Puducherry in 2006.[34] That the city is often colloquially referred to by its residents simply as 'Pondy' and remains known by both names in practice shows that local social memoryscapes do not always mirror, or change at the same pace as, official ones; if nothing else then for sheer force of habit.[35] The name change notwithstanding, the French legacy of Puducherry has also seen an official postcolonial political process of revaluation and renewed emphasis spanning four decades. Where the first instance was the identity politics of the late 1970s, which justified the union territory's continued existence by virtue of claims to a distinctly French historical and cultural legacy, this has been complemented by an intensive process of heritage and tourism development from the 1990s onwards. Here the French legacy, which sets it apart from other parts of India, has been used by both the government and private agents as Puducherry's unique selling point on a growing tourism market.[36] In this changing official landscape of post/colonial memory the *monument aux morts* has remained, on its own little island of French territory in the care of the French consulate. What the monument, in all its post/colonial ambiguity, does from this position, and with which implications for postcolonial relations in and surrounding Puducherry will be analyzed in the following sections.

Puducherry's monument aux morts and its iconography in the wider context of French Empire

Puducherry's *monument aux morts* was created to commemorate 75 soldiers from French India who died in World War I. Altogether, the French territories in India had sent 800 soldiers overseas to contribute to the war effort following a recruitment campaign launched in December 1915.[37] If the monument and its significance may at first seem small set against the enormity of the global historic events which it addresses, the ways in which this memorial is part of a greater history of empire and of commemorative efforts in this context also carries significance. Notwithstanding the famous critique of the absence of colonial remembrance in reflections on *lieux des mémoires* as launched by Pierre Nora, the memorialization of colonial losses in World War I in the context of French empire has more recently begun drawing scholarly interest, especially after the turn of the new millennium, and predominantly amongst historians.[38] The place of French India has remained lost from view in attempts at producing greater historical overviews of commemorative efforts,[39] but the body of research which has been produced on the histories surrounding such colonial *monuments aux morts* provides very useful context on the larger webs of meaning which emerge also around the memorial in Puducherry.

If the contribution from Puducherry was small in numerical terms, France was nonetheless heavily indebted to its colonies in World War I: over half a million colonial soldiers participated, and over 78,000 of them died. The Great War gave rise to a veritable national cult of the fallen, which saw erection of war memorials at a hitherto unprecedented scale internationally, but particularly in France, where scarcely a village is without its own monument to soldiers lost in the war.[40] If monumental recognition for the colonial soldiers was not particularly prominent compared to the veritable explosion of French war memorials, they were nonetheless not forgotten in French

commemorations. The iconography generally replicated that of the memorials commemorating European troops, thus eliding the differences and diminishing the gap between metropole and colony.[41] These memorials, in emphasizing the *national* contribution made by colonial soldiers, as they consistently did, bear witness not just to victories in war, but also implicitly symbolized victories of colonization.

As pointed out by Robert Aldrich in a review of such colonial war memorials within and beyond France, the commemoration of colonial troops in this context is not just an expression of gratitude and honour of sacrifice, but also speaks to another political context as it expresses a determination by France to keep the empire.[42] As similarly observed by Eric Jennings in the context of Indochina, the highly scripted discourse of fidelity and sacrifice on *monuments aux morts* served to legitimate French colonial rule.[43] It thereby both commemorated the dead and reflected colonial ideologies and power relations, which presented France and its colonies as united and indelibly linked. The monuments to the colonial soldiers of France thus fulfilled the same functions of remembrance as any other war memorial paying tribute to the dead, while being layered with other functions too. How the World War I monuments which had been erected throughout the French empire fared after decolonization has varied; many still stand, though mostly in countries where the decolonization was relatively amiable. Demonstrating how such memorials may serve as barometers of postcolonial relations, the particularly acrimonious decolonization of Algeria in 1962 prompted the drastic measure of relocating numerous war memorials erected here to France, for fear of their destruction or desecration following Algeria's independence.[44] To the extent that French *monuments aux morts* have remained following decolonization, they have left a lasting record of the links between France and its colonies, which add to the multiple historic functions which the monuments were created to perform. It is in this capacity, with all of its post/colonial ambiguities, that Puducherry's *monument aux morts* is of interest in the present study. In the following, I will discuss the iconography of the monument before I proceed to unpick the postcolonial webs of meaning which are woven around it.

The decision to erect a publicly funded monument for the fallen from French India after World War I was made by Puducherry's Representative Assembly in 1935, and the resulting memorial was inaugurated by its governor on April 3, 1938. This was a time when the local authorities were faced with multiple issues which such a patriotic monument could serve to address. These included mounting political tensions where parts of the local population were beginning to argue for decolonization, current fears that France might yield its Indian territories to Great Britain in return for territories in Africa, and plans to bolster prestige through beautification in renewed urban planning. It was also only by 1934 that the first veterans' association was set up in Puducherry to make demands for their rights, which by 1936 resulted in the setting up of a tribunal for pensions and sanctioning of funding for a building to house the *Foyer du soldat*, a legion hall for the veterans, and further put commemoration of the war on the local political agenda.[45] Rather than ordering a readymade monument from a catalogue in the commemorative industry which the 'statuemania' of World War I had given rise to, Puducherry's *monument aux morts* was unique for its location, created by a sculptor and two architects from France. Consistent with the findings of studies from other parts of the French empire, both the statue itself and the overall architecture of the monument were distinctly European in appearance, with no attempts to draw on Indian elements of style: Symbolically the monument was, and has remained, entirely French. The resulting memorial in art deco style, which was erected adjacent to the then town hall and facing the sea on Puducherry's promenade, stands out from the urban landscape of Puducherry's former colonial city center, which

is predominantly characterized by eighteenth and nineteenth century architecture, interspersed with more recent postcolonial constructions.

Set in a small garden with a tiled path leading up to a little square in front of it, the monument is fronted by a statue of a soldier in contemplative repose, with his head bent down in mourning, and both hands resting on the muzzle of his rifle, its stock at ease at his feet. Standing elevated at a plinth, the life-sized statue is designed for an imposing view, especially at close approach where one must crane the neck to look up at him. Behind him, a white façade flanked by towering double columns carries the inscriptions of the monument. At the very top, in large red letters and most clearly visible of all text on the memorial, is the central dedication, which as all other text on the monument is in French only: "Aux combattants des Indes francaises morts pour la patrie" ("To the soldiers from French India who died for the fatherland"). Directly below it is a marble plaque bearing the names of the soldiers who died in World War I. Flanking the statue on both sides, two marble plaques with inscriptions commemorating the names of the soldiers who perished in World War II have been added in 1971. The inauguration date of these later plaques, November 11, Armistice Day, was clearly chosen to resonate strongly with the symbolic and commemorative practices already in place around the monument: As is typical of *monuments aux morts* the inauguration was far from the only commemorative event associated with the monument. Rather, the *monument aux morts* serves as the focal point in an annual cycle of public rituals associated with commemorative holidays with particular national significance.[46] These include Armistice Day, which commemorates the signing of the armistice between Germany and the Allies of World War I; July 14 (Bastille Day), the national day of France; and for World War II also Victory in Europe Day on May 8, which marks the formal acceptance of Germany's surrender by the allied forces. All three are major French national holidays, although in particular July 14 can be considered as the quintessential French holiday for everyone; a day on which France celebrates itself.[47] **[Fig. 1]**

The monument and the surrounding garden are set in a fenced-in enclosure to which the gate is locked, except on those few select annual dates when the monument is subject to commemorative rituals. More than just connoting the monument's extraordinary legal status as French territory set in India, this is a trait common for many *monuments aux morts* commemorating World War I also in France, intended to set them apart as hallowed ground; 'sacred enclosures'.[48] The front and by far most easily visible part of the monument, however, far from exhausts the commemorative ambitions and iconography of the memorial. On the back side of the *monument aux morts* a striking bas-relief in golden bronze with accompanying explanatory text represents the arrival to Puducherry in 1742 of the most famous and ambitious French official to preside over the colony, Governor-general Dupleix. Indeed, when the location of the monument was chosen, the claim was put forward that it was the very site where Dupleix was welcomed to Puducherry.[49] While no evidence has substantiated this notion the claim certainly demonstrates a contemporary drive to mythologize and glorify the French colonial rule in Puducherry. Above the bas-relief the text which is most visible on this side of the monument, in large red letters stylistically replicating the dedication of the monument on the front, reads: "Gloire – a notre France immortelle – gloire – a ceux qui sont morts pour elle" ("Glory – to our immortal France – glory – to those who have died for her"). **[Fig. 2]** The association between the commemoration of war dead and the glorification of colonial rule in *monuments aux morts* in the French colonies which has been suggested in studies focused on other parts of the French empire is thus abundantly evident in the very iconography as well as the location of the monument. Below the bas-relief more recent efforts to commemorate the fallen in other wars fought for France continue: in 2012 was added a plaque listing "les fils des anciens comptoirs

français de l'Inde mort pour la patrie" ("the sons of the old French territories in India who died for France in Indochina"), which the available space at the front of the monument cannot accommodate. As Robert Aldrich has pointed out, this form of continued updating of war monuments is not uncommon, and has the effect of minimising the differences between disparate conflicts, melding specific campaigns into a lengthy sequence of sacrifice and glory.[50]

While the iconography of Puducherry's *monument aux morts* still reveals many of the important historic contexts of meaning which the monument was created to address, this cannot stand alone in an analysis of its significance: an iconography of monuments is not sufficient to understand what monuments really do, as opposed to say.[51] The postcolonial significance of the monument lies in its recursivity in a range of social contexts of significance to the French citizens who have their roots and residence in Puducherry, including the negotiation of their relationship with France; as well as in the performance of postcolonial relationships between France and India. The following sections will reflect, first, on the role played by those who served in the army in imaginaries surrounding the French in Puducherry, and then on the symbolic memorial recursivity of the monument among them; and finally on the wider roles of the rituals surrounding the monument in the postcolonial context.

Images and realities of being French in Puducherry: the *soldats*
As a local scholar has remarked on Puducherry, "[i]t is striking to notice, through daily conversations, the association which the man on the street makes between French and soldier: public opinion is not based on facts but on realities which are most easily grasped – even though of course it is done in a simplistic manner. (…) [T]he *retraité militaire* [retired army man] represents for many the community of Frenchmen".[52] In actual fact, the veterans are not numerically dominant among the French population in Puducherry. Figures from 1988 indicate that at the time fewer than 1,185 persons (9% of Puducherry's French population at the time) fitted the 'old soldier' stereotype; and since this is an aging community those figures would have gone down since then.[53] Still, when the families of such veterans are also factored in, the connection with the army is quite a widespread way of relating to France among Puducherry's French population. The observation certainly still holds true that by virtue of their historic status of relative wealth, their many organizations, and their annual public displays at the *monument aux morts*, the retired soldiers constitute what is for many the most visible living reminder of the existence of Puducherry's French community and history.[54] Irrespective of the fact that those who opted for French citizenship in 1962 included other people than army personnel, and that these French residents of Puducherry do not constitute a coherently organized social community,[55] the soldiers (or *soldats,* as even Tamil and English speakers in Puducherry often refer to them in French) have come to codify the existence and experience of the French in Puducherry. In spite of the initial uncertainties caused by the option at the point of decolonization, French citizenship soon developed into a prized asset in postcolonial Puducherry. As the value of the Franc increased vis-à-vis the Rupee in the decades following decolonization, those residents of Puducherry who due to their French citizenship had access to positions entailing French salaries and pensions were at a distinct economic advantage vis-à-vis their neighbors with Indian citizenship. The *soldats* became envied and much noted locally, since after the minimum service period of 15 years in the French army they would be entitled to a pension on a par with their counterparts in France, which allowed them to settle and live very comfortably in Puducherry. As a local academic with Indian citizenship summarized the sentiment in an interview, referring to British

colonizers who made their fortune in India and returned home wealthy: "in British India you talked of *nabobs* – here of *soldats* and their pension".

Even if they have attained an iconic or stereotypical status as representatives of the French community in local imaginaries, the *soldats* of Puducherry is a diminishing group. Many in the younger generations now opt for academic education and careers which the comfortable economic circumstances of the *soldats* has made possible. Furthermore the initially temporary pattern of settlement of many French citizens from Puducherry in France for career purposes has increasingly become permanent, as the younger generations chose to stay on, and return to India only for holidays. In this respect the *soldats* can be said to mirror the wider French community in Puducherry: Following the process of decolonization and the patterns of mobility which this has sparked, the French have gradually come to constitute an aging and increasingly small part of the population of Puducherry, with a diminishing imprint on the cultural life of both the capital city and the overall union territory. This, in turn, has sparked concerns that Puducherry's French community is dying out, or that it is at risk of being forgotten by France.[56] The same process manifests itself with greater speed and force in the smaller enclaves of the former French India – which thus constitute a bleak look into a possible future for the French of Puducherry. For instance a researcher from Puducherry found one French citizen residing in Yanam, a 30 km^2 former French enclave, reduced to tears as he declared Yanam "a small forgotten France, abandoned by France".[57] In this context the continuing public visibility of the *soldats*, and of the larger population of the French citizens of Puducherry, is an issue with wider cultural, emotional and political implications. As the following reflections will show, in this context the *monument aux morts* has its particular role to play as a node of significance in a wider network of meaning which turns on memories and negotiations of the relationship with France.

In his historic analysis of *monuments aux morts* in West Africa, Mann suggests that "comparison between places, or even between past and present social locations, may prove less rewarding than the integration of disparate sites and discursive manoeuvres into a larger, more encompassing analytical framework that is at once localized and supra-local".[58] This approach can also serve to illuminate the significance of the *monument aux morts* in Puducherry and its place in a larger landscape of memory and its associated cultural and social practices. As Mann further suggests, "[a]n analysis of the memorials themselves represents nothing more than a device that allows the identification of significant nodes on a shifting web of memory and meaning".[59] What is interesting about Puducherry's *monument aux morts* is the way in which it is integrated in a network of memorial sites, practices and relations which is at once local, national and transnational, and which encompasses and negotiates the colonial histories and postcolonial challenges related to the French in India.

The *monument aux morts* stands out as a memorial of indubitable and very public significance to the French from Puducherry, clear for everyone in the city to see. As a retired Indian civil servant observed in an interview: "That is the place where they rally during the French festivals, to pay homage to the dead soldiers; that is the center of meetings; it has got a sentimental value, especially to the soldiers. That is a symbol of France". The monument and the annual commemorative rituals which are associated with it constitute clear reminders of the history and continued presence of the French in India in general, and the *soldats* and their service to France in particular. Memorial practices associated with contributing to French war efforts constitute strong private as well as public expressions of patriotism, and serve to signal the Frenchness of the French of Puducherry, in a context of decline where the feeling has grown that this identity, and the very

survival of the French in Puducherry, needs reinforcement. As one retired soldier tried to capture the sentiment of supercharged patriotism in an interview, "the French people of Pondicherry are more national than the [metropolitan] French". Because of its highly public position in Puducherry and its official status as a piece of France in India, the *monument aux morts* becomes a chief node in the communication of cultural memories and claims surrounding the French who originate in Puducherry. This, however, does not mean that it is the only such node, and before turning to analyse the annual ritualized practices which surround the monument, I will review the significance of other such nodes in the shifting web of memory and meaning of which the *monument aux morts* is a part.

The symbolic recursivity of *monument aux morts*

For the army veterans, the emotional recursivity of the monument and its relationship with deeply personal histories is significant, not least since army careers have tended to run in families for several generations, causing the events which the monument connotes to be intimately embedded in personal experience and memory. As an elderly veteran told during an interview, "my father and his brother were in World War I, and the brother of my father was (…) gassed (…), so he was very sick. He died very young, at 26. My father was [also] in World War II, at Indochina. (…) [From the sixties] I [too] was in the French army." Similarly, the families of those who have served in the army have been brought up to show respect and pride of this. Regarding the importance of the rituals surrounding the *monument aux morts,* a young academic on a visit from France with his family which originated in Puducherry, including his father who had retired from the army, commented in an interview:

> I grew up in this atmosphere and I went to a military school [in France], and my brother as well, and we grew up (…) with these values, on 14th of July we had to see this. (…) For me it's a way of respecting my country. (…) Here [in Puducherry] it's (…) [also] about showing that you were part of the French military, which here is a great honour; people are very proud of this.

A very tangible sign of the deep emotional relationship with the *monument aux morts*, which serves as a point of condensation for these sentiments, can also be found in several cemeteries in Puducherry. Here the recurrent modelling of private grave monuments as miniature versions of the public *monument aux morts* is an indication of the strong emotional recursivity which the monument has amongst the *soldats* of Puducherry and their relatives. **[Fig. 3]** It is evident from these private monuments that the public *monument aux morts* was soon adopted by Puducherry's *soldats* and their families to signal their pride in having served the French army, and has remained an important symbolic resource. Examples of this practice include grave markers constructed for soldiers who died in World War II, as well as those who continued to die many decades later, also outside the context of armed conflict. In some cases, further symbols are used to emphasize patriotism; for instance the inclusion of the French *tricolore* on the monument, or inscriptions providing details about the army service of the deceased, such as their rank and where they served.

This form of monument is especially prevalent in Puducherry's French colonial and still active Catholic cemetery at Uppalam. While the French population of Puducherry is religiously pluralistic, a high proportion of Puducherry's Catholics has historically been associated with the army and has opted for French citizenship.[60] However similar grave markers are also evident in cemeteries

related to other communities; for instance I observed similar monuments which included Hindu religious symbols. These graves are generally well kept and visited by family during significant holidays such as All Souls' Day for the Catholic community, unlike many French colonial graves at Uppalam which have begun crumbling and (*pace* other studies of colonial cemeteries in India)[61] show signs of having been taken over by more contemporary aspects of local social life, such as laundry hanging between them and ducks and chickens picking their way among them. Paradoxically, the mortuary architecture of miniature *monuments aux morts* serves as an indication of a living cultural heritage; a testimony to the Frenchness and patriotism of not just the commemorated dead, but also the families they leave behind. Yet at the same time the dwindling of the aging group of locally based retired French army personnel and the prevalent fear of the French culture and community of Puducherry gradually dying out lends an element of tragic irony to this insistent manifestation of cultural belonging through grave markers.

The close association of the grave monuments with intimate family histories, or what might be termed their not only vernacular but private commemorative role, has ensured their continued social relevance in Puducherry. However, other aspects of the commemoration of memories of the *soldats* and their role in Puducherry do appear to be on their way to the dreaded process of cultural oblivion referred to above. For instance not many people in Puducherry know that the street names Rue Capitaine Marius Xavier and Rue Victor Simonel commemorate soldiers from French India who laid down their lives in World War I. But also more community-directed commemorative efforts show signs of being slowly forgotten. An example is a small monument which is located outside the city center of Puducherry in the residential neighborhood of Reddiyar Palayam, which was formerly widely known by the epithet 'Little Saigon' because it housed many soldiers and administrative personnel returned from service in French Indochina.[62] Few of these have remained, but on a quiet street in this neighborhood one still finds a monument erected by the community of expatriate locals with connections in Saigon to commemorate Puducherry's effort in World War I. This memorial takes the form of a statue of a uniformed soldier painted in black, flanked by a somewhat larger statue of the French national symbol Marianne in silver color, who is holding one arm protectively around the shoulder of the soldier. The legend "Don des Saigonnais originaires en Rettiarpaleom, 1917" ("Given by Saigonese originated in Reddiyar Palayam, 1917") was still legible when I visited the site during my fieldwork. However, unlike the well-tended soldier graves on Puducherry's cemeteries, it was apparent that this monument was consigned to oblivion for most practical purposes. It stood disregarded on a quiet street in an enclosure strewn with castaway rubbish, with its main inscription "Vive l'Armée française" ("Long live the French Army") all but illegible for lichen. **[Fig. 4]** In 2012, a reporter from the widely circulated Indian newspaper *the Hindu* published a piece on this "long forgotten memorial", speculating what the monument might connote, and suggesting after conversations with local residents, variously, that it represented either Napoleon and his wife Josephine; India and France; or a mother sending her son to war.[63] The fact that the journalist eventually got an angry rebuttal of her ignorance from the Facebook group *Anciens de Pondichéry* ("Old-time Pondicherrians"), which identified the monument as representing a Tamil soldier and Marianne, demonstrates that to the extent that a community of memory still relates to this memorial, this has largely moved away from the locality and now exists in online media capable of spanning the gap between the diminishing group of those who relate to the memorial in Puducherry and their counterparts in France. But even here the more specific identification of the memorial as most probably representing Captain Marius Xavier required research and involvement of several discussants on the Facebook page.[64]

In 2019 the monument was eventually subject to a restoration in which it was repainted and the enclosure surrounding it was cleaned. It was the centenary of World War I in 2018 which prompted a small association to form in order to collect funding for this purpose.[65] While this shows that the community of memory which relates to the monument has not disappeared altogether, the extent to which the monument has thereby also been restored to more widespread living public memory remains doubtful. In an advertisement for a small ceremony held at the monument on July 21 2019, Anciens de Pondichéry lament that "[t]he Memorial was restored a few months ago (...). It was forgotten for a very long time, and doesn't enjoy a big promotion (...). Too many people often [do not] know anything about it."[66] Sitting between the intensely private significance of the grave markers and the significantly greater public visibility of the *monument aux morts* on Puducherry's promenade, it is apparent that this memorial had increasingly been losing its commemorative role and capacity, to the point where a final attempt at salvage was recently attempted. In an international comparative study of the afterlives of war memorials, Login makes the point that factors such as structural threats to the integrity of monuments and the reaching of major anniversaries of the events which they commemorate can provide an impetus for renewed engagement in contexts where monuments have otherwise passed from a living culture of social memory to forming part of a more remote and detached historical memory. She observes that while memorials which are a part of active collective memory will be subject to continuous engagement such as ritual activity, those that have come to be part of historical memory are generally not, although attempts to restore such monuments to relevance in contemporary memory culture may occur when prompted by current events and concerns.[67] Clearly, this is the process which is at stake here.

If the *monument aux morts* is the most public symbol of the French *soldats* in Puducherry, it has its more inward-facing and in this respect still socially efficient counterpart in the *Foyer du Soldat*. The building, which is located centrally in Puducherry's city center, is used for social and cultural activities such as private parties and French classes, but also serves as a setting in which to celebrate the war efforts of the *soldats*. Amongst more generic symbols of France which decorate the building internally, from a bust of Marianne to the portrait of the most recent president of France, one also finds items such as a framed copy of the text from General de Gaulle's famous appeal of June 18 1940 to support the war efforts for the occupied France. The fact that soldiers from French India responded to the call remains a source of immense pride to Puducherry's *soldats*, who have continued to idolize de Gaulle. This is also apparent in contemporary political stances where the demonstrative patriotism amongst the *soldats* and the French of Puducherry in general is reflected in a continuing trend of marked conservative and nationalist leanings at elections: Indeed, in a study in the nineties, sociologist William Miles found members of Puducherry's French electorate who stated that even now they are voting "for de Gaulle", i.e. for his political legatees.[68] If participation in World War I constituted Puducherry's first contribution to French war efforts in Europe, sparking the erection of the *monument aux morts*, then the more recent participation in World War II has certainly taken over as the most prominent element in social memory amongst Puducherry's *soldats*. A life-sized statue of de Gaulle is the most recent addition to the décor or the hall, sparked by efforts after a restoration of the building in 2010 to turn the legion hall into a museum which could be open to the public during a few days of the week, and thus propagate the memory of the contributions of the *soldats* and the history of the French in Puducherry more widely. This more institutionalized and public-facing permanent commemoration has, however, not been realized yet, and the *Foyer du Soldat* currently remains closed territory to those who are not already

related to the history of the building. As a node in a network of memory the *Foyer du Soldat* speaks for a felt, but not realized, ambition to address a wider (and increasingly unaware) public to remind it of the French legacy of Puducherry and its *soldats*.

The key context in which the above legacy does get communicated with unrelenting force for everyone in Puducherry to see remains the annual rituals surrounding *the monument aux morts*. At such events the *soldats* in particular gather solemnly at the monument to honour their comrades and France, decked out in their uniforms and medals and carrying their banners, to observe the ritual of flag hoisting, the playing of the French national anthem and laying down of flowers. Even children who attend will often be dressed to emphasize their Frenchness, such as t-shirts with the Eiffel tower; and after the ceremony the participating families will line up under excited chatter to have their photos taken in front of the monument. **[Fig. 5]** Importantly, this display of patriotism shown by members of Puducherry's French community is also directed towards French officialdom, represented by the consulate which is responsible for the monument. These ritual events serve to communicate with force to both India and France in the most publicly visible setting possible that *the participants are French* and that *they are still there* in Puducherry. In the context of a postcolonial France which has been accused of a process of selective colonial forgetting that also impacts on the recognition of those of its citizens who originate in the former colonies,[69] these identity claims also have a wider currency in France. What exactly is made of the continued 'being here' of Puducherry's French, the monument, French officialdom and the annual rituals tying them together in the postcolonial Indian context will be explored in the following section which focuses on the rituals surrounding Bastille Day.

Commemorative practice as postcolonial recognition: Ritualized practice surrounding *monument aux morts* on Bastille Day

As reception theory posits, texts need readers, performances need spectators, and statuary needs viewers; and since those who receive also interpret, the historical narratives which are constructed in the process can also be seen as mobile, challenged and subject to struggle.[70] This realization makes the ongoing postcolonial negotiations of the significance of rituals surrounding the *monument aux morts* a topic of wider interest. Paradoxically in Puducherry the *monument aux morts* at once glorifies French colonialism (notably at its backside, which is hardly visible to the wider public) and codifies positive postcolonial relations between India and France in annually repeated performative practice. The rituals which surround the monument are carefully choreographed to communicate mutual respect between France and India. Thus, as national flags are hoisted at these events, the Indian flag will invariably be hoisted first, accompanied by the Indian national anthem, followed by their French counterparts, with the music for both provided by Puducherry's police orchestra. Official representatives of both Puducherry and France will be in attendance, their arrival signalling to the crowd that the ceremonies are about to begin. The ritual display and the presence of these dignitaries in turn ensures that each event is well covered by local and regional news media who will provide recurrent, if fairly formulaic notifications that on the occasion of the French national day, homage has been paid to the monument by French citizens and delegates along with officials from Puducherry's administration, and that the tradition is due to Puducherry's French colonial history.[71] Since cultural memory is constructed through repetition and recursivity of experience both within and across different media,[72] this in itself almost ritual circulation of news

surrounding the annual rituals at the monument contributes to the wider dispersion of at least a limited memory of the historic and present relations between France and India which these events imply.

During interviews, the organizers and participants in the Bastille Day celebrations were very clear about the importance of observing protocol when celebrating a French national holiday in postcolonial India. A former president of the local *Alliance Française* explained that here Bastille Day was for instance not celebrated, as it was not appropriate for an Indian organization on Indian territory to do so; but for French institutions such as the consulate the question was different. However, as he added: "Even if a French national wants to celebrate (…) [with] a French flag, on the particular day, he should keep also, side by side, [the] Indian flag, that is the rule." The Puducherrians of French citizenship whom I talked to felt both very French and very Puducherrian, and very proud to be both, although they did not refer to themselves as Indian. Nonetheless the rituals surrounding Bastille Day do make a strong point of paying their respects to India and emphasising positive postcolonial relations. The ritualized practice surrounding the day commences already on the 13th of July, when a *retraite aux flambeaux*, a march with lanterns, an old French tradition commemorating the storming of the bastille, is made by the members of local French patriotic organizations. The participants proudly parade accompanied by a march band, displaying the banners of various, mainly military, French associations while carrying lanterns, alternately in the French and the Indian national colors; and small Indian and French flags are handed out to anyone who wishes to march along. The route passes by sites of particular significance to the French of Puducherry, commencing from a park dedicated to a statue of Joan of Arc, the patron saint of France, which is located in front of the church *Notre Dame des Anges* (Our Lady of Angels), where Catholic services are still held in French. The councillor representing Puducherry's French in the Union of Frenchmen Abroad, who is one of the organizers, emphasized the significance of paying obeisance to not only the *monument aux morts* and the *Foyer du Soldat* along the way, but also to the Gandhi statue, and was proud to hold invitations for light refreshments for the marchers not only at the consulate (the final stop on the march) but also, *en route*, in the garden of Puducherry's Lieutenant Governor. Thus, from all sides a carefully orchestrated politics of mutual French-Indian respect and recognition is played out. This continues on the 14th of July when the already described main Bastille Day ritual takes place in the morning at the *monument aux morts*, followed in the evening by fireworks sponsored by the consulate, which also hosts a celebration for specially invited guests, including representatives of Puducherry's government and the heads of local French institutions and associations.

For all the carefully staged and negotiated politics of recognition which surround the rituals associated with the *monument aux morts*, the significance of these events to the majority of Puducherry's residents is fairly limited. The events and the symbolic role of the monument are well enough known locally, but are also observed to be a matter first and foremost for Puducherry's French community. The retired Indian civil servant whom I have earlier quoted for his pertinent observations on the significance of the monument and the surrounding rituals to the French was equally clear on its relative lack of significance to other residents of Puducherry: "We are not concerned", he commented – adding that from his own personal perspective the monument primarily held architectural interest. A local guesthouse keeper whose wife was French, but without roots in Puducherry, similarly commented on the Bastille Day celebrations: "I honestly can't be bothered! You know, you see it once a year. From my house, I can see the fireworks; that's really [all] – no, I don't bother." These comments point both to the wider local recursivity of, and the

disengagement with, the *monument aux morts* and the rituals surrounding it. The monument and the related annual commemorative celebrations remain present and resist forgetting in Puducherry because of the persistent reminding which is orchestrated by the French community; but if it *is* recognized as heritage by others residing in the city it is first and foremost as somebody else's heritage. Yet both the monument and celebrations of Bastille Day are also mentioned in promotion of Puducherry to tourists as elements adding a quintessentially French cultural touch to the city.[73] The question of how the monument matters to the greater Indian public, such as visitors to the city, and what sort of postcolonial imaginaries this implies, is explored in the following.

Monument aux morts in wider Indian public perceptions

Wider public perceptions of the monument are evident in a broad range of comments by visitors from other parts of India on TripAdvisor, where the monument, as a prominent landmark which is inevitably passed by any visitor on Puducherry's popular seaside promenade, has its own entry with just short of 400 reviews. The comments here, which provide more overt reflections of the postcolonial imaginaries involved in experiencing the monument and its place in Puducherry, speak to well-defined trends in perceptions. Frequently, the engagement revealed here stops short at noticing the monument as a visible and architecturally distinct, if not necessarily particularly significant feature in the urban landscape, snapping a few pictures, and moving quickly on, with interests soon displaced elsewhere, such as the many adjacent food outlets. Comments abound that the monument is a landmark which cannot be missed, a 'must see' in more than one sense; if nothing else then literally due to its central location. Yet they just as often point out that there is "nothing much to see or do here",[74] with a dismissive 'just' often interjected to signal a lack of general interest: "it is just another war memorial";[75] "It is just a symbol of remembrance of French warriors".[76] The contemporary relevance of what is commemorated is evidently hard for many to see, visible though the monument itself is. For some, even the notion of what is commemorated appears quite hazy, as reflected in a comment stating that the monument commemorates "the French war in India".[77] But is this response remarkable, or just a parallel to experiences of many other disregarded war memorials across the world? Many scholars have proposed that monuments have a 'shelf life', and that after those who constructed them have died or moved away they lose their meaning and visibility; but in a more rewarding analytical perspective such monuments can, even with the passage of time, be seen as polyreferential entities that can draw on a multiplicity of cultural referents and be appropriated for many different purposes.[78] As I will show, the public Indian reception of Puducherry's *monument aux morts* relates not just to generalized processes of forgetting caused by the passage of time, but to specifics of the politics of commemoration surrounding the World Wars as well as postcolonial politics of memory both in Puducherry and in the wider Indian context.

The reverse side of the coin concerning the frequent absence of wider public engagement and awareness of what is commemorated is that Puducherry's *monument aux morts is* in certain respects rather closed in on itself. It is surrounded by a wall with a padlocked gate which is open for public access only on a few select annual holidays that see the monument being subject to the ritualized commemorative practice analysed above. The lack of direct access does prompt some comments that since the commemorative text is hard to read at a distance, and hard for many Indians to understand because it is all in French, the monument might be easier to understand, and perhaps more engaging, with some explanatory text mounted outside.[79] Of course, this discrepancy

in communicative efforts begs the question of who is the intended audience for what the monument, in its current state, commemorates. Explicit heritage interpretation that explained its significance would in a certain sense go against the grain of the monument, as it would constitute an implicit acknowledgement that it no longer works in its intended function as a memorial.[80] In Nora's terms, this would constitute a slippage from the domain of memory to that of history. However, with its main audience, the French of India and their chief interlocutors in the French and Puducherrian official setting, it continues to have the intended effect as a center of memorial engagement; here, no explanation is necessary. For the wider Indian audience, in a broader and perhaps more immediately accessible perspective, the monument "represent[s] the French colony period".[81] However, this does not set it significantly apart from the current presentation of the rest of Puducherry's colonial city center, which has a strong emphasis on its Indo-French cultural legacy in the ways in which it is presented to tourists by both public and private agents in Puducherry's booming tourism industry.[82] In a city currently marketed intensively for its French connections, which are still evident in architecture, street names and so forth, the notion of representing the period of French rule in a wider sense adds little distinct meaning to the monument, which so to speak drowns as a drop in an ocean of other signs of Frenchness which are apparent to visitors throughout the city center as cultural signifiers, albeit with limited historic information.

As far as the monument's specific function of commemorating participation in the two World Wars is concerned, the commemorative context concerning these in the formerly British India no doubt also impacts on how a wider Indian audience understands it. Khan has e.g. observed that India has an asymmetrical relationship with World War II, not least because both India and the UK had other concerns than commemorating Indian participation in the war immediately following India's independence.[83] In spite of massive Indian participation in the war, only a limited public commemorative culture surrounding it has developed, due to ambivalences arising e.g. from the fact that the Congress party which came to rule India after Independence had been against participation in the war. In this context it is also worth noting an article published in the Indian newspaper *The Tribune* during the centenary of World War I, which pointed out that the state of Punjab, famous as India's 'Sword Arm' and supplier of a disproportionate amount of soldiers for the British army which participated in both World Wars, failed to organize an event to commemorate the 100-year-anniversary of the Armistice and "our long-forgotten heroes".[84] That Puducherry did commemorate the event was remarked upon here; but of course, the politics of memory which operate in the context of the former French India are subject to their own distinctive dynamics which mean that here such an event would never be passed by without celebrations.

This is however not to say that the *monument aux morts* elicits no more historically aware or emotionally engaged responses from Indian visitors. Those curious or historically minded enough to look up background information on the monument can still find it, for instance online at the list of the city's monuments and statues published by Puducherry's Tourism Department. The Indian visitors whose comments do engage more closely with the monument in its capacity as a war memorial in fact quite closely reflect the discourse which is apparent on this governmental webpage (sometimes to the point of reproducing it verbatim). Here the monument is described as "a solemn reminder of those brave soldiers who laid down their lives, for their country during the First World War", and it is also mentioned how "[e]very year on the 14th July (Bastille Day) the memorial is beautifully illuminated and homage is paid to those brave martyrs."[85] A heroic discourse in which the soldiers are referred to as 'brave' and as 'martyrs' and are honoured for their sacrifice recurs in visitor comments.[86] Not only is this a common discourse surrounding *monuments aux morts*;[87] it also

closely reflects the comments on another, much more recent, war memorial located further down the promenade which commemorates the sacrifices of Indian soldiers in the Kargil War between India and Pakistan in 1999.[88] Here, to a considerable extent the question of whether the sacrifices commemorated were made for France or for India seems to matter less, in effect shifting the perspective on the meaning of the monument away from perceiving the soldiers who died for France as colonial subalterns contributing to the glory of France, to heroes expressing valor and agency in a way which remains continuous with and relevant also in a postcolonial Indian perspective. As one comment expresses it, the French war memorial is "a memory of the Indian contribution to the world war".[89] The effect of this discourse is one of reappropriating and valorising the monument from a more postcolonial perspective by emphasising *Indian* agency. Here, the pattern is quite similar to De Jong's observations on a relocated and reinterpreted World War II monument in Senegal, which he analyses as a quintessential *objet trouvé* of the postcolony.[90] However, in the case of the *monument aux morts* in Puducherry a greater ambiguity and multidirectionality of memory remains, as the monument serves multiple purposes of commemoration and politics of recognition in a complex post/colonial context and web of meanings. It is to the wider implications of this situation that I will turn in the conclusion.

Conclusion

De Jong suggests that colonial heritage should be located in a history shared between the colonizers and the colonized; and that this colonial heritage is used to *reconfigure* postcolonial relations.[91] This process is very much at stake in the context of contemporary cultural practices surrounding Puducherry's *monument aux morts*; but not in a simple two-way relationship between former colonizers and formerly colonized. Tracing the shifting web of memory and meanings woven around the monument across different contexts of local, national and transnational post/colonial memoryscapes, it is evident that this ambiguous site of remembrance gives rise to a multidirectionality of memory, which in many ways both resist and span the dichotomy between the colonial and the postcolonial. Set in a postcolonial Puducherry which continues to carefully balance its cultural and political integration into the formerly British India, and claims for the currency of its French legacy in identity politics and tourism, the monument remains French in the literal sense of being set on French soil, and hence constitutes a symbolic anomaly in independent India. Commemorating soldiers from India who died for France, at the same time it transcends easy distinctions between colonizers and colonized, in a way which allows scope for its appropriation to support both narratives of French glory and Indian agency in postcolonial imaginaries. As a French monument with a small, but active French community of memory which ensures its ongoing cultural life and symbolic recursivity, this colonial monument which has stubbornly remained in a postcolonial context is neither entirely free for Indian appropriation, nor for wholesale rejection, but remains in a continuous, if functional, ambiguity. The monument manages, paradoxically, at once to glorify French national pride and the French colonial engagement with Puducherry, and to signal mutually respectful postcolonial relations through the annual commemorative practice which surrounds it. In this respect it underpins a series of postcolonial identity claims and memories which cut across Puducherry's French community, French and Puducherrian public authorities, and a larger public in Puducherry.

Whether for Puducherry's small French community or for its government, drawing continued attention to their colonial French heritage remains relevant in a postcolonial perspective where, to borrow from Nora, "[w]e speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left".[92] Yet the famous claim of Robert Musil that "the most striking feature of monuments is that you don't notice them" does not entirely hold in the case of Puducherry's *monument aux morts*.[93] Rather than falling prey to the invisibility and neglect which for instance characterizes so many colonial cemeteries in India, the monument exists in a persistent tension between the pull of remembrance and forgetting in the postcolonial context. For Indian tourists, taking a snapshot of a monument whose history may remain hazy to some still implies some measure of awareness and reflection that Puducherry used to be a French colony, and that this is a subject of continuing interest. For the Indian residents of Puducherry, some measure of disengagement with the monument is evident, not because of any active distancing towards it on their part, but because it is primarily experienced as somebody else's heritage, however much it is also part of the background of their daily lives. Yet it is at the same time clear that the monument and the commemorative activities which surround it remain visible in Puducherry and stubbornly refuse forgetting, creating overlapping communities of memory which to various extents keep connecting with the history and relations connoted by the monument across post/colonial contexts. If the dynamics of empire were transnational and transcultural,[94] the postcolonial dynamics surrounding this colonial monument are equally so, as they continue to negotiate experiences and memories of post/colonial relations.

List of figures and captions

Fig. 1: Puducherry's *monument aux morts*. (Photo by the author, 2017).

Fig. 2: French colonialism is glorified backstage at the *monument aux morts* through a relief depicting the arrival to Puducherry of Governor-general Dupleix, here photographed with patriotic banners tucked away after the Bastille Day rituals. (Photo by the author, 2017).

Fig. 3: Grave markers of many *soldats* stylistically reference Puducherry's *monument aux morts*. Here three adjacent grave sites emulate the monument's architecture with towering double columns. (Photo by the author, 2017).

Fig. 4: The World War I monument erected by Puducherry's Saigonese community in Reddyar Palayam in a neglected state, surrounded by garbage. (Photo by the author, 2017).

Fig. 5: Bastille Day at the *monument aux morts* as a patriotic photo opportunity for the French of Puducherry. (Photo by the author, 2017).

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