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Remembering a Colonial Capital: Urban Memory and Spatial Transformation in Lokoja after 1960

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between urban memory and spatial transformation in Lokoja, Nigeria's former colonial administrative capital, from 1960 to the present. While existing scholarship has largely focused on patterns of urban growth, planning challenges, and infrastructural change, this paper argues that Lokoja's postcolonial development cannot be fully understood without analysing how its colonial past is remembered, reinterpreted, and materially embedded in the evolving urban landscape. The study traces the city's colonial spatial foundations, shaped by its strategic location at the Niger-Benue confluence, administrative priorities, migration, and transport networks, and analyses its post-independence expansion, characterised by uneven development, environmental pressures, planning limitations, and the persistence of inherited colonial forms. Adopting a historical and narrative approach, the research draws on both primary and secondary sources. The findings show that colonial relics and monuments, including the National Museum of Colonial History, Mount Patti, the Iron of Liberty, the World War Cenotaph, European cemeteries, and Lokoja Club 1901, function as important but unevenly maintained sites of urban memory. These spaces are variously preserved, repurposed, contested, or neglected within the context of rapid urban expansion, while local communities, religious institutions, and heritage institutions actively shape both spatial practices and historical consciousness. By integrating spatial and mnemonic perspectives, the study contributes to scholarship on African urban history, memory studies, and heritage preservation in postcolonial contexts, while offering new insight into the dynamics of secondary cities. It highlights the need to recognise urban space as a living archive where colonial legacies continue to influence identity, development, and everyday experience in contemporary Nigeria.

Keywords: Lokoja, Colonial Urbanism, Urban Memory, Spatial Transformation, Heritage Preservation

Introduction

The transformation of African cities after independence has often been examined through the lenses of urban growth, planning challenges, and economic change. While these approaches have generated important insights, they tend to privilege material expansion over the less visible processes through which cities are remembered, reinterpreted, and lived. In the case of

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former colonial capitals such as Lokoja, this limitation is particularly significant. Lokoja was not only an administrative centre in colonial Nigeria but also a symbolic space where imperial authority, migration, and early urban formations intersected. Situated at the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers, it occupied a strategic position in the consolidation of British rule and the development of early colonial infrastructure. Its post-1960 trajectory therefore raises questions that extend beyond physical development into the realm of memory and historical meaning.

Colonial urbanism in Africa was deeply structured by administrative priorities, transport networks, and patterns of migration[2]. Lokoja's emergence as a strategic confluence town reflects these dynamics, with its spatial organization shaped by both riverine access and colonial governance. As a node of political authority and commercial exchange, the town developed around institutions, transport corridors, and segregated spaces that reflected the logic of colonial control. These early foundations did not disappear with independence. Rather, they persisted, even as the city expanded under new political and social conditions. Postcolonial urban growth in Nigeria has been marked by uneven planning, environmental pressures, and infrastructural challenges[3], all of which are evident in Lokoja's evolving landscape, particularly in the outward expansion beyond its colonial core and the increasing strain on urban services.
Yet, to understand Lokoja solely in terms of expansion is to overlook how its colonial past continues to be negotiated in the present. Urban space is not only built but also remembered. As Halbach[4] argues, collective memory is anchored in spatial frameworks, while Boyer[5] shows how cities function as repositories of historical imagery. In Lokoja, colonial relics, public institutions, and inherited spatial patterns serve as sites through which the past is both preserved and reinterpreted. Buildings, monuments, and institutional spaces do not simply endure as physical remnants, they acquire new meanings as they are incorporated into contemporary urban life. These processes are neither neutral nor uniform they involve selective remembrance, adaptation, and at times, neglect, reflecting broader tensions in how postcolonial societies engage with their past.

This study therefore examines Lokoja as a space where urban transformation and memory intersect. The central argument is that the city's post-independence development reflects not only the pressures of growth and planning but also an ongoing engagement with its colonial legacy, expressed through both spatial continuity and reinterpretation. The study aims to trace the historical foundations of Lokoja's urban form, analyse the patterns of its spatial transformation after 1960, and explore how memory is embedded in

[2] S. A. Adesote and B. O. Osiyale, "Colonialism, Migration and the Emergence of Urban Spaces in Colonial Nigeria," *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2023): 72–79.
[3] A. L. Mabogunje, "Urban Planning and the Post-Colonial State in Africa: A Research Overview," *African Studies Review* 33, no. 2 (1990): 121–203.
[4] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[5] M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

and mediated through its urban landscape. In doing so, it addresses the broader question of how secondary cities with colonial histories negotiate the relationship between past and present.

The scope of the study is limited to Lokoja as a case study, with particular attention to developments from 1960 to the present. Its significance lies in its contribution to African urban history, where secondary cities have often received less sustained attention than major metropolitan centers, and to memory studies, where the spatial dimensions of remembrance in African contexts remain underexplored. By foregrounding the interplay between space and memory, the study also contributes to ongoing debates on heritage, identity, and urban change in postcolonial societies. Methodologically, the research adopts a historical and narrative approach, drawing on both primary and secondary sources. This approach allows for a layered analysis that connects material transformations in the urban landscape with the meanings attached to them over time. Through this framework, the study seeks to demonstrate that Lokoja is not only a site of urban growth, but also a living archive in which history is continuously inscribed, negotiated, and reimagined.

Colonial Foundations of Urban Space in Lokoja (Pre-1960)

The spatial character of Lokoja, as it exists today, cannot be understood without returning to its origins as a colonial administrative and commercial centre. Long before independence in 1960, the town had already acquired a distinctive urban form shaped by geography, imperial priorities, and patterns of mobility. Its location at the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers placed it at a strategic crossroads of trade and communication, making it an attractive site for early European presence and later, British colonial consolidation. This geographical advantage was not merely incidental it became the basis upon which Lokoja was developed as a node of authority and exchange within the wider colonial network.

Colonial urbanism in Nigeria, as elsewhere in Africa, was rarely organic. It was structured by deliberate administrative decisions that sought to facilitate control, extraction, and communication[6]. In Lokoja, these priorities were evident in the siting of government institutions, the development of transport corridors, and the organization of residential and commercial spaces. The town's early growth was closely tied to its role as a headquarters of British administration in the Niger region, where political authority and economic activity were spatially concentrated. As Adesola and Osiyale[7] observe, the emergence of urban spaces in colonial Nigeria was closely linked to migration and administrative expansion, processes that were clearly at work in Lokoja as people moved into the town in response to new economic and political opportunities.

[6]Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).
[7] S. A. Adesote and B. O. Osiyale, "Colonialism, Migration and the Emergence of Urban Spaces in Colonial Nigeria," *Sri Lanka Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2023): 72–79.

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Transportation played a particularly significant role in shaping Lokoja's early urban structure. River transport along the Niger and Benue served as the primary means of movement in the nineteenth century, linking Lokoja to other emerging centres and facilitating the flow of goods, personnel, and information. Over time, this riverine network was complemented by the development of road infrastructure, further reinforcing the town's position as a regional hub. The integration of these transport systems influenced not only the town's economic vitality but also its spatial layout, with settlements and commercial activities clustering around accessible routes. As Ali and Nomishan[8] demonstrate, accessibility was a key driver of urbanization in Lokoja, shaping both its expansion and internal organization.

At the same time, the spatial order imposed under colonial rule reflected broader planning ideologies that emphasized segregation, control, and administrative efficiency. Home[9] notes, colonial planning in Anglophone Africa often involved the creation of distinct zones for administrative, European and indigenous populations. In Lokoja, this translated into patterns of spatial differentiation that structured where people lived, worked, and interacted. Such arrangements were not only physical but also social, embedding hierarchies into the urban fabric and influencing access to resources and opportunities. Although these divisions were not always rigidly fixed, they contributed to a layered urban landscape in which power and space were closely intertwined.

Cartographic practices and early planning efforts further reinforced this spatial order. Mapping, surveying, and the documentation of land were central to colonial administration, providing the tools through which space could be organized and controlled. As Uluocha[10] suggests, the cartographic legacy of colonial rule in Nigeria played a crucial role in shaping how urban spaces were defined and managed. In Lokoja, these practices informed the layout of roads, the demarcation of administrative zones, and the identification of land for specific uses. Even where formal planning was limited, the logic of spatial ordering remained evident, guiding the town's early development in ways that would have lasting consequences.

The colonial foundations of Lokoja were therefore neither neutral nor easily erased. They established a framework within which subsequent urban development would occur, shaping the distribution of infrastructure, access to land, and the overall logic of spatial organization. Yet, beyond their material influence, these inherited spatial forms also function as enduring markers of the city's colonial past. The alignment of roads, the siting of administrative buildings, and the persistence of early urban cores do not merely reflect historical processes they act as spatial reminders through which the colonial experience is continuously encountered in the present. In this sense, Lokoja's

[8] A. D. Ali and T. S. Nomishan, "Accessibility: The Role of Transportation on Urbanization in Lokoja, Nigeria, 1854–1991," *Romanian Journal of Historical Studies* 7, nos. 1–2 (2024): 45–54.
[9] Robert Home, *Of Planting and Planning: The Making of British Colonial Cities*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015).
[10] N. O. Uluocha, "The Cartographic Legacy of Colonial Administration in Nigeria," in *Proceedings of the International Cartographic Conference* (2016).

colonial past is not confined to archival records but remains inscribed in the everyday landscape of the city. Understanding these foundations is therefore essential not only for tracing patterns of urban growth, but also for appreciating how the city itself becomes a medium of remembrance, where history is embedded, revisited, and, at times, contested through space.

Post-Independence Urban Expansion and Spatial Reconfiguration (1960–Present)

If the colonial period established the spatial framework of Lokoja, the decades following independence witnessed its steady, and at times uneven, transformation. The city did not emerge anew after 1960, rather, it expanded outward from an already structured core, carrying forward inherited patterns even as new demographic and economic pressures reshaped its physical and social landscape. This continuity is important, not only for understanding patterns of growth, but also for appreciating how the colonial past remained embedded in the evolving city. As new districts developed and older ones were reconfigured, Lokoja's transformation unfolded as both a spatial and a historical process, in which expansion was closely tied to the persistence of earlier urban forms.

In the immediate post-independence years, urban development in Lokoja reflected broader national trends in Nigeria, where rapid urbanization often outpaced planning capacity. As Mabogunje[11] notes, the postcolonial state inherited planning structures that were limited in scope and often ill-equipped to manage expanding urban populations. In Lokoja, this resulted in a pattern of growth that was incremental and uneven, with new residential areas emerging alongside older colonial districts that retained administrative and symbolic significance. These older areas did not simply fade into obsolescence, rather, they continued to serve as anchors within the urban landscape, shaping movement, governance, and everyday spatial orientation.

The expansion of the city was closely tied to increasing demand for land, driven by migration and population growth. As Jimoh[12] demonstrates, access to residential land in Lokoja became progressively more complex, shaped by formal regulations, informal practices, and growing competition. These dynamics contributed to the outward spread of the city, particularly toward peripheral zones where land was more readily available, though often less systematically planned. In this process, the spatial logic of the colonial city, with its concentration of institutions and infrastructure in the core, was both reproduced and strained, as new areas developed with varying levels of integration into the existing urban system.

Environmental conditions further influenced the direction and character of urban expansion. Lokoja's location, while historically advantageous, also

[11] A. L. Mabogunje, "Urban Planning and the Post-Colonial State in Africa: A Research Overview," *African Studies Review* 33, no. 2 (1990): 121–203.
[12] J. O. Jimoh, "An Appraisal of Factors Affecting Access to Residential Land in Lokoja Metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria" (master's thesis, Federal University of Technology, Akure, 2017).

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presented constraints related to topography, soil variation, and vulnerability to flooding. Alabi[13] highlights how soil differences affected land use and planning outcomes, while Alabi[14] underscores the importance of environmental management and green spaces in sustaining urban environments. As the city expanded into new areas, these ecological factors became increasingly significant, shaping settlement patterns and, in some cases, reinforcing inequalities in access to stable and well-serviced land.

Transportation and accessibility remained central to the reconfiguration of urban space. While river transport declined in prominence after independence, road networks assumed a more decisive role in structuring the city's growth. The expansion of road infrastructure facilitated connections between emerging neighbourhoods and the historic core, encouraging the clustering of residential and commercial activities along major routes. As Ali and Nomishan[15] argue, accessibility has been a key driver of urbanization in Lokoja, influencing both the pace and pattern of its development. In this regard, the underlying logic of connectivity that shaped the colonial city persisted, even as its material forms evolved.

Yet, this process of expansion did not simply overwrite the colonial city, it layered new spatial forms onto existing ones. The colonial core, with its administrative buildings, institutional spaces, and symbolic landmarks, retained a distinct presence within the city. Even as new neighbourhoods emerged, the older parts of Lokoja continued to function as points of reference, not only in administrative and economic terms, but also in how the city's past was encountered and understood. These spaces carried traces of earlier meanings, shaping how residents navigated and interpreted the urban landscape. In this sense, Lokoja developed as a layered city, where different historical moments remained visible within the same spatial frame.

Understanding Lokoja's post-independence transformation therefore requires attention not only to patterns of growth but also to the ways in which space becomes a medium of memory. The expansion of the city reflects a complex interplay between inherited structures, planning limitations, environmental constraints, and everyday practices. At the same time, these changing spatial forms influence what is remembered, what is reinterpreted, and what gradually fades from view. As new districts expand and older areas are repurposed, the meanings attached to colonial spaces are neither fixed nor uniformly preserved, they are continuously negotiated in everyday life. It is within this evolving landscape that Lokoja is not simply growing as a city, but also remembering, in uneven and sometimes contested ways, its past as a colonial capital.

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[13] M. O. Alabi, "Urban Landscape Planning and Soil Variation in Nigeria: Lokoja as a Case Study," *Canadian Social Science* 8, no. 5 (2012): 99–104.
[14] M. O. Alabi, "Urban Sprawl, Pattern and Measurement in Lokoja, Nigeria," *Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management* 4, no. 13 (2009): 158–164.
[15] A. D. Ali and T. S. Nomishan, "Accessibility: The Role of Transportation on Urbanization in Lokoja, Nigeria, 1854–1991," *Romanian Journal of Historical Studies* 7, nos. 1–2 (2024): 45–54.

Planning, Governance, and the Limits of Urban Order

The expansion of Lokoja after independence did not occur in a vacuum, it unfolded within a framework of planning institutions and governance structures that were themselves shaped by colonial legacies and postcolonial constraints. While urban growth created new opportunities, it also exposed the limits of formal planning systems in managing a rapidly changing city. In many respects, the challenge was not simply one of growth, but of coordination, where inherited planning models struggled to respond to new social and spatial realities. These limitations are significant not only for understanding urban form, but also for appreciating how the material traces of the past are managed, preserved, or allowed to disappear.

In the early post-independence period, urban planning in Nigeria retained many of the assumptions and administrative approaches developed under colonial rule. As Mabogunje[16] observes, planning institutions in postcolonial Africa often lacked the flexibility and resources required to address the scale and speed of urban expansion. In Lokoja, this was reflected in the persistence of centralized planning approaches that were not always responsive to local conditions or the needs of a growing population. Efforts to guide development through formal plans existed, but their implementation was uneven, constrained by limited institutional capacity and competing priorities. In practice, this unevenness meant that certain parts of the city, particularly those associated with earlier administrative functions, were more likely to receive attention, while others developed with less oversight, shaping not only spatial order but also the visibility of different historical layers.

Local studies of Lokoja further illustrate these challenges. Simon[17], in his examination of the physical development of the central area, points to the difficulties of coordinating land use, infrastructure, and population growth within a coherent planning framework. Similarly, Baba[18] emphasizes the need for viable planning strategies, noting that without sustained policy direction, urban development tends to become fragmented. Such fragmentation has implications beyond physical layout. As different parts of the city develop at different rates and under varying degrees of regulation, the historical significance of particular areas may be reinforced or diminished, depending on how they are integrated into contemporary planning priorities.

One of the most persistent issues has been access to land and the regulation of its use. Jimoh[19] highlights how bureaucratic procedures, overlapping authority, and informal practices have complicated the process of acquiring residential land in Lokoja. In practice, this has led to a situation in which formal planning

[16] A. L. Mabogunje, "Urban Planning and the Post-Colonial State in Africa: A Research Overview," *African Studies Review* 33, no. 2 (1990): 121–203.
[17] R. Simon, "Planning the Physical Development of Lokoja Central Area" (master's thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 2014).
[18] R. Baba, "Viable Planning Strategy for the Development of Lokoja" (master's thesis, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1995).
[19] J. O. Jimoh, "An Appraisal of Factors Affecting Access to Residential Land in Lokoja Metropolis, Kogi State, Nigeria" (master's thesis, Federal University of Technology, Akure, 2017).

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regulations coexist with informal mechanisms of land allocation, creating a hybrid system that is difficult to regulate consistently. The result is a pattern of development that is uneven, with well-planned areas existing alongside settlements that lack adequate infrastructure and services. Within such a landscape, spaces associated with the colonial past may be preserved in some instances, particularly where they retain administrative or economic value, while in other cases they are absorbed into new patterns of use, their historical meanings gradually obscured.

Environmental management presents another dimension of planning difficulty. As Alabi[20] argues, the provision and maintenance of public open spaces are essential for urban sustainability, yet such considerations are often marginalized in the face of rapid development pressures. Alabi[21] further demonstrates how variations in soil and terrain complicate planning decisions, particularly in a city like Lokoja where environmental constraints are significant. These factors highlight the extent to which effective urban planning requires not only institutional capacity but also a sensitivity to local ecological conditions. At the same time, environmental change can alter the visibility and accessibility of historically significant spaces, influencing how they are encountered and remembered within the urban environment.

Beyond technical and environmental challenges, governance issues have also shaped the limits of urban order. The multiplicity of actors involved in urban development, including government agencies, private individuals, religious institutions, and community groups, has created a complex landscape of decision-making. Okewu and Yusufu[22] show how religious organizations, for instance, have played a notable role in shaping urban space in Lokoja, contributing to both its physical expansion and its social character. Such actors are not only agents of spatial change but also participants in the production of meaning, as the spaces they create and occupy become embedded in the social and cultural life of the city.

These dynamics suggest that the urban form of Lokoja is not simply the outcome of planned interventions, but the product of ongoing negotiation between formal structures and lived realities. Planning frameworks provide a framework for order, yet they are continually reshaped by social practices, institutional limitations, and environmental constraints. This tension between intention and outcome is central to understanding the city's spatial configuration. At the same time, the limits of planning have direct implications for how the city remembers its past. Decisions about what to preserve, what to redevelop, and what to neglect shape the conditions under which urban memory is sustained or eroded. Areas of historical significance may be maintained as recognizable landmarks, repurposed for new uses, or gradually displaced by expanding development. In this sense, planning and governance

[20] M. O. Alabi, "Urban Sprawl, Pattern and Measurement in Lokoja, Nigeria," *Theoretical and Empirical Researches in Urban Management* 4, no. 13 (2009): 158–164.
[21] M. O. Alabi, "Urban Landscape Planning and Soil Variation in Nigeria: Lokoja as a Case Study," *Canadian Social Science* 8, no. 5 (2012): 99–104.
[22] A. D. Okewu and A. M. Yusufu, "The Role of Churches in the Urbanization of Lokoja, Kogi State, Nigeria, 1991–2020," *Wukari International Studies Journal* 9, no. 3 (2025): 166–172.

are not neutral processes they play an active role in determining how the colonial past is encountered in the present. Lokoja's evolving landscape therefore reflects not only the challenges of managing growth, but also the selective and often uneven ways in which its identity as a former colonial capital is remembered, reinterpreted, and, at times, forgotten.

Urban Memory and the Colonial Past in Lokoja

Having traced the historical formation and post-independence expansion of Lokoja, attention now turns to a quieter but equally important question, how the city is remembered by those who live within it. Urban space is not only something people move through, it is something they come to know, to recognize, and, often quietly, to remember. In Lokoja, the legacy of its past as a colonial capital is not only preserved in buildings and street patterns, but also in the ways residents speak about certain places, hesitate over others, and attach meaning to spaces that might otherwise appear ordinary.

The idea that memory is tied to place is not new. Halbachs [23] reminds us that collective memory is anchored in physical surroundings, while Boyer[24] suggests that cities carry layers of historical imagery that shape how people see and understand them. In Lokoja, this connection between memory and space is not abstract. It is encountered in everyday life, in the continued presence of old administrative buildings, in the layout of the town, and in the quiet familiarity of places whose histories are not always formally recorded but are nonetheless widely known.

Many of these colonial-era structures still stand, though not always in ways that immediately announce their past. Some have been repurposed, others partially altered, and a few remain largely unchanged. Yet, their presence continues to shape how the city is experienced. As Zhang et al.[25] note, in postcolonial cities, historical spaces often persist not only as heritage sites but as lived environments, where their meanings are constantly reworked. In Lokoja, a building does not need a plaque to be recognized as "colonial"; its identity often survives in memory, passed through conversation and familiarity rather than formal designation.

It is through such everyday encounters that the past becomes meaningful. Zubairu Adaji[26] spoke of how certain buildings in the older parts of Lokoja are still referred to by their colonial associations, even when their functions have changed. For him, these were not distant historical relics, but part of the city's identity, quietly reminding residents of "where everything started." His words

[23] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[24] M. Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).
[25] X. Zhang, J. Edelenbos, and A. Gianoli, "Identifying Modes of Managing Urban Heritage: Results from a Systematic Literature Review," *City, Culture and Society* 36 (2024): 100560.
[26] Zubairu Adaji, interview by Hasiyah Anavami Sule, Lokoja, Nigeria, January 18, 2026.

suggest a form of memory that is not imposed from above, but carried informally, embedded in how people talk about place.

Bashir Anave[27], offered a similar thought, though with a slightly different emphasis. He described the old town as a space one does not simply pass through without awareness. Even in the absence of formal markers, there is, in his words, "a sense that this place has seen things." Such expressions are difficult to quantify, yet they reveal how memory operates at an emotional and experiential level, shaping how space is perceived rather than simply how it is used.

Not all memories, however, are sustained with equal clarity. Maimuna Sulaiman[28], drew attention to the ways in which some parts of Lokoja's past are gradually slipping from everyday awareness. As the city expands and newer areas become more central to daily life, older sites lose their immediacy. Younger residents, she noted, are often more familiar with emerging neighbourhoods than with historically significant locations in the old town. Her observation reflects what scholars of urban memory have long emphasized, that remembrance is selective and often uneven[29]. Some places remain vivid, while others fade quietly into the background.

This unevenness is also shaped by institutional and material conditions. Chikezie et al.[30] highlight the potential of Lokoja's colonial relics as sites of tourism and historical engagement, yet this potential depends on how such spaces are maintained and presented. Similarly, Ononogbo et al.[31] point to the challenges faced by institutions such as the National Museum, where limited resources and public engagement affect how history is curated and encountered. Where preservation is weak or inconsistent, memory becomes more fragile, relying increasingly on personal recollection rather than shared public narratives.

What emerges from these accounts is a picture of a city in which memory is neither fixed nor uniformly distributed. It is carried in different ways, through buildings, through stories, and through everyday movement across space. Some aspects of Lokoja's colonial past remain highly visible, reinforced by institutional presence or continued use, while others persist more quietly, sustained through individual and collective recollection.

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[27] Bashir Anave, interview by Hasiyah Anavami Sule, Lokoja, Nigeria, February 2, 2026
[28] Maimuna Sulaiman, interview by Hasiyah Anavami Sule, Lokoja, Nigeria, February 6, 2026.
[29] Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[30] J. Chikezie et al., "Tourism Potentials of Colonial Relics and Implications for Development of Lokoja Community, Kogi State, Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Management Sciences* 24, no. 1b (2023): 74–82.
[31] K. U. Ononogbo, M. A. Habeeb, and M. N. Tsado, "Challenges Confronting the National Museum of Colonial History, Lokoja," *Journal of Economics and Environmental Education* 5, no. 1 (2021): 77–90.

To speak of Lokoja as a former colonial capital, therefore, is not only to describe its history, but to recognize how that history continues to be felt in the present. The city's spaces are not neutral, they are layered with meanings that are constantly being negotiated, sometimes consciously, often unconsciously. In this sense, Lokoja is not simply growing or changing, it is remembering, in ways that are partial, uneven, and deeply human a living city where the past is not only preserved, but quietly carried in everyday experience.

Sites of Memory: Colonial Relics, Heritage, and Urban Meaning

If memory in Lokoja is carried in stories and everyday encounters, it is also anchored in specific places across the city where the past becomes more visibly present. These sites do not merely exist as remnants of an earlier time they function as points where history is encountered, interpreted, and, at times, contested. Through them, the city's colonial past takes on a material form, shaping how residents and visitors alike engage with Lokoja's historical identity.

Among the most prominent of these sites is the National Museum of Colonial History, located within the former colonial quarters of the town. Housed in a colonial-era structure, the museum represents a deliberate attempt to preserve and present Lokoja's role in the early administration of Northern Nigeria. Its collections, which include artefacts, archival materials, and visual records, offer a curated narrative of colonial rule. Yet, as Ononogbo et al.[32] observe, the effectiveness of such institutions is often limited by challenges of maintenance, funding, and public engagement. As a result, the museum stands not only as a repository of history but also as a reminder of the difficulties involved in sustaining formal heritage in a rapidly changing urban environment.

Other monuments across Lokoja provide more immediate and publicly visible connections to the past. The World War Cenotaph, situated along Murtala Mohammed Way, serves as a memorial to Nigerian and British soldiers who participated in the World Wars. Its continued presence within a busy contemporary setting reflects how colonial-era commemorations have been absorbed into the rhythms of modern urban life. Similarly, the Iron of Liberty, located within the compound of Crowther Holy Trinity School, marks a significant historical moment associated with the liberation of enslaved persons. As both a monument and part of an active educational space, it illustrates how memory can persist through continued use rather than formal preservation alone.

The spatial memory of Lokoja is also expressed through its landscape. Mount Patti, rising above the town and overlooking the confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers, remains one of the most historically evocative locations in the city. While some of its colonial structures are now in varying states of preservation, the site continues to function as a vantage point from which the

[32] K. U. Ononogbo, M. A. Habeeb, and M. N. Tsado, "Challenges Confronting the National Museum of Colonial History, Lokoja," *Journal of Economics and Environmental Education* 5, no. 1 (2021): 77–90.

historical and geographical significance of Lokoja can be appreciated. Bashir Anave[33] (interview, 2 February) described visits to the hill as moments that make "the whole account of Lokoja visible," suggesting that memory is not only tied to buildings but also to landscape and perspective. As Wei et al.[34] argue, such spatial layering allows traces of the past to remain embedded within contemporary urban environments.

Less formally preserved, but equally significant, are the European cemeteries scattered within Lokoja. Once located at the margins of the colonial settlement, these burial grounds are now surrounded by expanding urban development. Their current condition, often overgrown and partially neglected, reflects the pressures of urban growth and shifting priorities in land use. Zubairu Adaji[35], noted that many residents pass these cemeteries without fully recognizing their historical importance, even though they contain some of the earliest material traces of colonial presence. This gradual marginalization of memory sites aligns with broader patterns in postcolonial cities, where heritage is unevenly preserved and often reshaped by contemporary needs[36].

There are also spaces where colonial memory persists through adaptation and continued relevance. Lokoja Club 1901, originally established as a recreational space for colonial officials, has evolved into a community-oriented institution, reflecting broader social transformations while retaining its historical associations. Similarly, long-standing religious and educational sites, including Crowther Holy Trinity School, remain active parts of the city's social life, embedding historical narratives within everyday practice. Chikezie et al[37] highlight the potential of such sites for cultural tourism, yet their significance extends beyond economic value; they serve as living links between past and present.

Taken together, these sites reveal that Lokoja's colonial past is neither uniformly preserved nor entirely erased. It survives in monuments that remain visible, in landscapes that continue to shape perception, and in spaces that have been adapted to new uses. The visibility and condition of these sites vary, shaped by institutional support, urban development, and everyday engagement. Some remain central to public memory, while others persist more quietly, sustained through familiarity and lived experience.

In this sense, sites of memory in Lokoja are not static relics of a closed past. They exist within a changing urban environment where preservation, neglect, and adaptation occur simultaneously. To move through the city is therefore to

[33] Bashir Anave, interview by Hasiyah Anavami Sule, Lokoja, Nigeria, February 2, 2026.
[34] W. Wei et al., "Research on the Historical Spatial Characteristics and Conservation Strategies of Colonial Cities in Asia and Africa: A Case Study of 21 Typical Cities," *NPJ Heritage Science* 2024.
[35] Zubairu Adaji, interview by Hasiyah Anavami Sule, Lokoja, Nigeria, January 18, 2026.
[36] X. Zhang, J. Edelenbos, and A. Gianoli, "Identifying Modes of Managing Urban Heritage: Results from a Systematic Literature Review," *City, Culture and Society* 36 (2024): 100560.
[37] J. Chikezie et al., "Tourism Potentials of Colonial Relics and Implications for Development of Lokoja Community, Kogi State, Nigeria," *Nigerian Journal of Management Sciences* 24, no. 1b (2023): 74–82.

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encounter a layered landscape in which the past is unevenly inscribed but continuously present, shaping how Lokoja is understood not only as a growing urban centre, but as a place where its history as a colonial capital is still remembered.

CONCLUSION

Lokoja's colonial past continues to shape the city's present, not only through its physical structures but also through the memories and everyday experiences of its residents. Some sites, such as the National Museum of Colonial History, Mount Patti, historic cemeteries, and missionary compounds, serve as tangible anchors of memory, preserving stories of administration, trade, and European influence. Other spaces, including former administrative quarters, riverside compounds, and areas within the old Government Reservation Area, retain quieter significance, recognized through local narratives and personal recollection rather than formal markers. The city's layout, patterns of residential and commercial growth, and lingering colonial architecture all carry traces of its past, reminding residents of how Lokoja was shaped and how it continues to evolve.

Memory in Lokoja is uneven and selective. While some sites remain vivid and actively engage residents, others have faded amid urban expansion, new neighborhoods, and changing daily routines. Oral testimonies underscore that memory is not only preserved in bricks or monuments but lived through conversation, experience, and recognition of place. Colonial relics coexist with post-independence transformations, highlighting the tension between preservation and change. Lokoja, therefore, is not only growing or modernizing, it is remembering, negotiating its layered past, and continuously reshaping its identity. The city stands as a living archive, where history is both material and experiential, partial yet profoundly human.

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