Transcultural Memory in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda War Commemorations

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Abstract

This article draws from debates on the transcultural turn in memory studies, exploring the multiple ways in which memory unfolds in post-war contexts and across cultures. Using interviews, ethnography and secondary sources, it builds on research critical of how specific post-war experiences in African societies are framed and subsumed into global memory practices and transmission, particularly in the global North. The article finds that, while on the surface memorials and rituals appear to be influenced by Euro-American-centric memory transmission practices, a deeper examination of commemorations in Northern Uganda reveals that processes of commemorating the past are complex and multi-layered. It argues that indigenous gatekeepers and keepers of memory are engaged in a dynamic process of creating something new out of the ruins of the past (Mbembe 2020). Local contexts allow for the examination of nuanced experiences and practices that should also be part of the knowledge of universal experience, leading us to rethink the relationship between what are referred to as universal models of remembering and their appropriation at the local level. This study proposes thinking differently about what constitutes this hybridity, especially local actors' strategic use of their available resources to meet their memorialisation needs and to find meaning in mnemonic rituals and spaces, in post-conflict countries.

Keywords: Commemoration, gatekeepers, indigenous memory, knowledge production, transculturality

Résumé

Cet article s'inspire des débats sur le tournant transculturel des études sur la mémoire, en explorant les multiples façons dont la mémoire se déploie dans les contextes d'après-guerre et à travers les cultures. À l'aide d'entretiens,

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de l'ethnographie et de sources secondaires, il s'appuie sur des recherches analytiques portant sur la façon dont les expériences spécifiques d'après-guerre dans les sociétés africaines sont encadrées et subsumées dans les pratiques et la transmission de la mémoire globale, particulièrement dans le Nord global. L'article constate que si, à première vue, les monuments commémoratifs et les rituels semblent être influencés par des pratiques euro-américaines de transmission de la mémoire, un examen plus approfondi des commémorations dans le nord de l'Ouganda révèle que les processus de commémoration du passé sont complexes et à plusieurs niveaux. Dans cet article, les dépositaires et les conservateurs autochtones de la mémoire sont engagés dans un processus dynamique de création de quelque chose de nouveau à partir des vestiges du passé (Mbembe 2020). Les contextes locaux permettent d'examiner des expériences et des pratiques nuancées qui devraient également faire partie de la connaissance de l'expérience universelle, ce qui nous amène à repenser la relation entre ce que l'on appelle les modèles universels de la mémoire et leur appropriation au niveau local. Cette étude propose de penser différemment ce qui constitue cette hybridité, notamment l'utilisation stratégique par les acteurs locaux des ressources dont ils disposent pour répondre à leurs besoins de mémorisation et pour trouver du sens dans les rituels et les espaces mnémoniques, dans les pays post-conflit.

Mots-clés : Commémoration, dépositaires, mémoire indigène, production de connaissances, transculturalité.

Introduction

The twenty-first century is facing an 'epistemic and systemic crisis' that affords scholars an opportunity to 'rethink thinking' in global knowledge systems (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3, 2020; Kebede 2004). The crisis is driven in part by the need to examine the world through an eclectic lens informed by cultural transmutability and heterogeneity, which requires a deflation of hegemonic knowledge. This is particularly relevant to mainstream scholarship on memory studies, a multi-disciplinary field (Roediger and Wertsch 2008) that has evolved in the past two centuries and has been shaped by a global environment of colonialism and imperialism. As such, it – like other fields in the Social Sciences and Humanities – has been dominated by the 'epistemicide' of non-European and non-Anglo-American knowledge systems. Customarily, European and Anglo-American post-war and post-Holocaust mnemonic practices and literature are placed at the centre of what is considered 'human heritage rather than a thought from one geographical centre' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 3).

In this article I analyse memory making in a non-western context. I focus on the memorialisation of crimes committed by the Lord's Resistance Army

(LRA) in the 1990s and early 2000s in Acholiland, Northern Uganda. The article considers mnemonic practices and knowledge that unfold in local contexts as important agents of memory. It then contributes to evolving debates in memory studies that de-centre the nation-state as the singular agent of memory (Erll 2011; Rothberg 2009), and to the scholarship on decolonisation that argues for the plurality of epistemology in global discourses (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018; Adesanmi 2012; Chakrabarty 2008), memory studies included.

This article draws from debates on transcultural and multidirectional perspectives in memory studies (Bond and Rapson 2014; Rothberg 2009). Using interviews, observation and secondary sources, it builds on research that is critical of the ways in which African societies are framed and subsumed into global mnemonic practices and transmission. While on the surface, mnemonic sites and rituals appear to be influenced by Western-centric mnemonic transmission practices, a deeper examination of community commemorations in Northern Uganda reveals that mnemonic processes are complex and multi-layered. There, the gatekeepers and keepers of memory are involved in 'recyclage', meaning that their commemorations are spheres where different actors engage in a dynamic process, creating something new out of the ruins of the past, in the present (Mbembe 2020).

Michael Rothberg paraphrases Richard Terdiman's definition of memory as 'the past made present' (Rothberg 2009: 3). He posits that memory is a 'contemporary phenomenon, something that, while concerned with the past, happens in the present through labor or action'. But in Northern Uganda the present is shaped by a dissenting move from the dominant way of memory-making, consisting of a subversion of indigenous modes of memorialisation. This dissidence allows local actors to reverse the established order of principles and values in top-down commemorations that become possible through strategic appropriation and resignification. In response to this, Werbner observes that, in the context of postcolonial Africa, 'memory as public practice is increasingly in crisis' (1998: 1).

The article explores how different Ugandan actors mobilise the tragic past to shape knowledge and practices in local commemoration. The actors include 'gatekeepers' and 'keepers of memory'. The 'gatekeepers of memory' include those who work for Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) or are involved in International Criminal Court (ICC) cases as lawyers or translators. The 'keepers of memory' are survivors of the LRA war and participate in commemorations as the main custodians or owners of this tragic past. Yet, these categories are not binary. In this context, where victimhood is broadly defined and many in this region suffered from the

war, the roles are blurry and complex and sometimes inhabited by the same person. For example, many gatekeepers working in memorial centres as guides might also be victims of the war that is memorialised in those spaces, not to mention perpetrators and bystanders of the atrocities that occurred during the conflict as well. I label people gatekeepers or keepers of memory depending on the position they occupied at the time of the interview. Memory-keepers were identified based on their individual stories of victimhood. Considering this, how do the keepers negotiate their place in these commemorative practices? What do mnemonic practices produced in these local contexts mean for global discourses on memory?

Rethinking Memory Studies Frameworks in a Global Context

Until the 2010s, when transcultural memory debates emerged, much research was focused on the state as the main agent of memory, and on Euro-American mnemonic experience (Halbwachs 1925; Nora 1989; Winter 1998; Olick et al. 2011). Within transcultural scholarship these works have been criticised for their view of 'culture' as a monolith (Erll 2011: 7), even in works that tried to break away from 'a strict nation-focus' (ibid). This is regarded as a limitation because it ignores lower-class and non-Western practices of remembering victims (Said 2000), marginalising histories of colonialism and slavery within global knowledge production in memory studies (Rothberg 2009).

Hence the new generation of scholars have challenged 'the old-fashioned container-culture approach' (Erll 2011: 8). For instance, they argue that instead of fixating on '*lieux de mémoire*' ('sites of memory') established to transmit the past, scholars should pay attention to the dynamism and malleability of mnemonic transmission conveyed by '*noeuds de mémoire*' ('knots of memory') in collective memory, which go beyond 'the imagined community of the nation-state' (Rothberg 2010: 7). These knots can be found in communicative memory, which 'lives in everyday interaction and communication' and is accessible by those who lived through shared traumatic events in a particular period (Assmann 2011: 11). In his analysis of debates on how group memory evolves, Nicolas Russell concludes: 'In order to understand how groups remember collectively, we need both cross-cultural and culturally specific concepts of collective memory' (2006: 801). According to Wolfgang Welsch, because of globalisation and other modern factors that encourage movement and interaction in a society, the transcultural lens considers that 'cultures today are in general characterized by hybridization' (Welsch 1999: 5; Bisoka 2019). Thus, memories travel beyond national borders where crimes happened with people, media as

'carriers' of those pasts (Erll 2011:11). This continuous travel results in the transformation of mnemonic experiences, practices and are mobilized by various actors for political and other reasons (Mwambari 2021).

Eva Willems, paraphrasing Elizabeth Jelin, terms it 'a non-linear approach to memory that takes into account the plurality of voices that give meaning to the past and incorporates the way in which these meanings can change according to their historical and cultural context or their ideological and political purpose' (2019: 103). It is through this recognition of the fluidity of collective memory transmission, the mobility of mnemonic experiences and the plurality of experiences across cultures that commemoration practices in Northern Uganda can be examined. This allows us to revisit and rethink knowledge production on the dead, as well as their place and relationship with the living in African societies.

Debates on Dealing with Commemoration in African Post-war Societies

The Eurocentric canons that have dominated scholarship on the dead in Africa have privileged a generalisation of African societies as constantly in conflict and unable to imagine and create their future (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014). There is a lack of analysis in some studies and NGO campaigns of the deeper historical factors that have shaped the recent violence, which are rooted in colonialism and slavery. Through this lens African societies are characterised as in need of rescue by global humanitarian and political elites. Two examples can help illuminate this marginalisation within global discourses.

First, the portrayal of Africa as a place of violence can be found in scholarship and among international policymakers who Mahmood Mamdani called 'spin doctors of modern culture' (Mamdani 2009: 5). Former British prime minister, Tony Blair, for instance famously remarked that: 'The state of Africa is a scar on the conscience of the world. But if the world as a community focused on it, we could heal it. And if we don't, it will become deeper and angrier' (2001). Blair's statement characterised how African societies are perceived within the 'global coloniality of power' (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2014: 187) that shifts African societies, their experiences and knowledge about them to the periphery.

Second, alienation is also evinced in how the memorialisation of the dead are perceived in debates. Scholarship on post-war Africa features largely in social anthropology, in which various aspects of death rituals and their meaning for the living are discussed through lenses that seek memory practices akin to those of Western societies (Lee and Vaughan 2008).

Non-Western cultural practices are missed, silenced or ignored, relegating them to the periphery of what is considered the universal experience of commemoration. A study on Kinshasa in the 1990s during its civil wars concluded that the Congolese were so overwhelmed by the ubiquity of death that they found it difficult to perform their elaborate indigenous rituals to mourn the dead as their ancestors did (De Boeck 2005, cited in Lee and Vaughan 2008: 342). However, survivors of such violence cannot be spoken of merely as being overwhelmed by death or not memorialising because commemorations are not taking place in Western style. There is a dynamic memory culture that is overlooked when one's search is fixated on official sites and rituals. As this article shows, commemorations take place but sometimes in less overt ways, with different actors shaping the process and through multiple sites and avenues. Commemorations are interwoven with the everyday business even in the so-called 'failed states' (Ikpe 2007). Just like people find different ways to navigate everyday life, they also find new means of mourning their dead and conducting burials in multi-layered rituals that a 'distant beholder' (Olonisakin 2020) might miss and therefore declare non-existent.

This negative framing has triggered African societies' dismissal as 'less than' (Zeleza 2019: 18), and the othering of death experiences has then led to a particular perception of post-war memorialisation that is rarely part of the global memory studies discourse. Even when it is included, the most notable scholarship takes on an integration approach and selectively focuses on memorials, monuments and the rituals that mirror those in Western spaces. This is reflected in literature on Rwanda, South Africa and others that is concerned with what is familiar and often physical and tangible to distant beholder researchers (Gobodo-Madikizela 2012; Ibreck 2012; Jessee 2017; Longman 2017; Mwambari & Owor 2019; Purdeková 2017; Rosoux 2007). Therefore, methodologically, it is important to take the context of each local experience as a crucial part of rethinking how conflicts are researched in Africa during and after crises (Mamdani 2009; Ismail and Alao 2007; Mwambari, Purdeková and Bisoka 2021), and the complexity of how multiple post-war mnemonic practices evolve beyond Western contexts or models. It involves recognition of new ideas and approaches in studying unfolding mnemonic practices, for instance an understanding of memory as a dynamic and multicultural phenomenon (Kotzé, Els and Rajuili-Masilo 2012), as explored in next sections. These patterns can also be observed in literature that examines other post-conflict contexts, like Sierra Leone, Liberia, Somalia, Burundi and many others (Weah 2019; Purdeková 2017). The next section provides a brief context of the conflict and then analyses the unfolding of memory.

The Northern Uganda Conflict in Brief

After the National Resistance Movement (NRM) liberation war ended in 1986, violence continued in some parts of Northern Uganda despite the promise the NRM had made for a peaceful and prosperous Uganda (Peterson 2016; Walsh 2015). This was partly because of a 'pacification' campaign launched by the NRM/A in the north (Branch 2011; Weschler 2012; Meert 2020; Fisher 2020; Allen and Vlassenroot 2010; Dolan 2009; Amone and Muura; Tshimba 2017; Finnström 2008). The Amnesty Act was finally passed in 2000. Over the following several years, owing to programmes such as *Dwog Paco*, a radio show that publicised the Amnesty, combatants from the LRA gradually began defecting and returning home in greater numbers and taking part in reconciliation processes (Baines 2007; Porter 2016) and transitional justice mechanisms that turned 'artificial' (Macdonald 2019; Kim and Hepner 2020).

In 2006, representatives of the LRA and Uganda People's Defence Force (UPDF) convened a series of negotiations that would come to be known as the Juba Peace Talks. Although the discussions eventually deteriorated, the process nevertheless yielded a Cessation of Hostilities agreement between the LRA and the Government of Uganda (GoU). The agreement marked the end of the Ugandan phase of the LRA war, though the rebel group has continued its activities in an attenuated form in neighbouring present-day South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic. However, even with the war over, according to Mugero Jesse of the International Justice Monitor, approximately 50 per cent of families in Acholiland still reported at least one missing person in 2012 (IJM 2018). Former child soldiers also turned to other illicit activities that resulted in ongoing insecurity (Divon and Owor 2021).

The history of the Acholi and the different challenges they have faced spans decades and is as expansive as the knowledge production about it globally (Mwambari 2019; Curtis 2019: 6). Several reasons can explain this phenomenon, but three stand out. The first was the LRA's use of child soldiers to fight in the war, and the second was that this war became popular within the Western-centric humanitarian industry that evolved with the war (Komakech 2012; Komujuni and Büscher 2020). However, it is the third factor that made it a popular war – Invisible Children, Inc., an NGO which manufactured a global tunnel vision of the war for its own benefit (Daley 2013; Weschler 2012). Its campaigns dominated the global news and Internet, and appealed to young people by using modern technology, including the hashtag #Kony2012. Its founders and supporters played into a Eurocentric narrative that paired Africa and death in the vernacular like Blair's sentiments did.

#Kony2012 attracted criticism in the form of essays, academic articles and video messages, from Ugandans and non-Ugandans in and out of Africa. Nigerian-American author, Teju Cole, reproduced a series of tweets in his essay published in *The Atlantic*, remarking: 'The white saviour supports brutal policies in the morning, founds charities in the afternoon, and receives awards in the evening' (2012). Famed Ugandans, such as Rosebell Kagumire and Angelo Izama, responded, while the renowned Ugandan professor Mahmood Mamdani and Ethiopian-American novelist Dinaw Mengestu offered facts on the war and post-war realities, rejecting the attempt to feed an incomplete narrative of an African country into the global collective memory. Even with these efforts, Invisible Children was one of the best post-war 'spin doctors' to emerge out of Northern Uganda.

Methodology

My analysis is drawn from twenty-five interviews conducted in 2018 and 2019, during three visits to Northern Uganda, and virtual interviews (due to the Covid-19 crisis) conducted between February and June 2020 (Mwambari et al. 2021). I also use insights from commemoration ceremonies I attended (which attracted between 50 and 250 participants), such as those in Mucwiini and Parabong, memorialisation ceremonies in Gulu, Kitgum and Lira, designed to serve a variety of interests, and visits to local marked and unmarked memorials. I analysed ceremonies that focused on the dead and those that focused on the missing, and the place of indigenous practices within these processes.

I have included insights from workshops that focused on themes such as the International Criminal Court (ICC), where the politics of collective memory was discussed in the context of ongoing local and justice-related challenges for the victims of the LRA war and many others. I benefited, too, from discussing memory issues with experts, local researchers and leaders of victims' associations. Our discussions centred around recovering 'knowledge stored in their language, practices, rituals, proverbs, revered traditions, myths, and folktales' (Chilisa and Tsheko 2014: 223). The interviews quoted in this article are mostly from victims of the LRA and in some cases the UPDF.

I use 'we' or 'us' in some places, referring to the translator and myself, as in many places I worked with research facilitators or translators since I do not speak Acholi or other local languages the interlocutors sometimes used. In addition, the names of the interviewees have been changed to maintain anonymity. This study also acquired ethical clearance as part of a larger multi-year project on the politics of memory in Uganda.

Gatekeepers and Keepers of Memory as 'Carriers' of Memory in Kitgum and Lukodi Memorials

In 2011, the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC) was officially opened in the same compound as the Kitgum District Headquarters. According to one of the NMPDC's local guides, Olaroker, the Centre's mission is to 'integrate history, education, culture, remembrance and human rights into one space where memories live and where memorialisation interfaces with the past, present and future contexts' (Interview, 2020). The Centre boasts a seasoned staff, the majority of whom are locals and some of whom have attended several commemorations around this region.

Upon entry, one is greeted by a guide and an exhibition of photographs going up the staircase as part of the design of the building, revealing the brutality endured by the people of Northern Uganda. The events and images are given a logical chronology to allow the visitor to map the conflict from the beginning to the end. At different points, the guide emphasised that at some massacre sites it is not clear whether a single party committed the crimes or both parties were responsible for the killings.

My conversations with the staffers and guides about the massacres followed the same script and mostly relied on similar accounts that were given by the respondents about the events. Although the purpose of the conversations was manifold, they uncovered two important points. The first was an emphasis on this mnemonic site as a place of education to construct cultural memory (Assmann 2006) in the specific context of Northern Uganda. The second was that the stories the site tells underscore the centrality of local histories, and continuously rehearse different narratives of the violent past that unfurled over time and its divisive nature among members of different clans who had known each other as neighbours.

Since the violence divided families – especially in cases where children were sent to kill their families or members of neighbouring clans – members of the same family could have different recollections and traumas of the war. The guide also spoke of young girls, who were forcefully taken into the bush to become child mothers during the war, who had photographs showing the cruelty they experienced (Baines 2017). Consequently, the Memorial Centre acts as a reservoir for these traumatic events, which are repeated and framed with the language as well as the gendered and local cultural context of the war (ibid). The Centre creates routes (Erll 2011: 11), through which individual memory travels to become part of the collective story of the past told about the war and its aftermath.

The NMPDC has also made an effort to exhibit indigenous implements that hold varied significance in Acholi culture, related to violence or practices of reconciliation (Finnström 2010; Tshimba 2015). For instance, the Agulu Rut (the twin pot), which is historically used for storing twins' umbilical cords, reminds the people of the Chief of Paimol whose twin brother was massacred at Nakamora. The Kweri Nyom (the dowry hoe) is exchanged as part of dowry ceremonies in Acholiland, but the particular one on display was used to murder the child of the clan chief of Padile in 1993. Another item is the Opoko (reconciliation bowl) for Mato-Oput (reconciliation), donated by the clan chief of Pabo (Olaroker, Interview, 2020).

Despite the emphasis on indigenous memory processes, the design of the building, the organisation of materials and the narrative around them during the tour gave the impression that the Memorial Centre had been built to mimic other memorial museums of past violence. At the end of the tour in Kitgum, I met Laker, a local guide, and I asked why the Centre felt like it was designed to fit international standards of constructing collective memory. She told me:

> Yes, it is. In fact, during training some staff members were sponsored to visit the Genocide Memorial in Kigali, Rwanda to learn how a similar Centre works. (Interview, 2018)

This visit to Kigali was confirmed by three other sources, including a former staff member and two other gatekeepers of memory working for NGOs, whom I met during commemoration events. Otim, a local guide from Gulu, told me that the trip was to learn 'how memory was being done in Rwanda', and its role in educating the youth about what happened in the past (Interview, 2018 ; Purdeková & Mwambari 2021).

On the other hand, there is a significant difference between the NMPDC and the Kigali Memorial Centre. 'Unlike Rwanda's Kigali Memorial Centre,' said Okullu, an interviewee I met at a workshop in Gulu, 'the Memorial Centre in Kitgum makes an effort to tell both sides of the story' (Interview, 2019). Whereas in the Kigali Memorial Centre the Rwanda Patriotic Front's crimes are not included, in Kitgum it is not forbidden to discuss controversial massacre sites or highlight instances in which victims clearly identified the UPDF as the main culprit of the cruelty against civilians (ibid). However, the guide was quick to point out that most of the crimes committed by the UPDF are not always memorialised like those of LRA, but there are no aggressive forces to silence such narratives as he saw in Rwanda's context. Hence, although there is an element of fashioning the Kitgum Memorial Centre after other mass-violence museums that play a

big role in global dark tourism (Sharpley and Gahigana 2014), the local historical context and cultural attributes of the Acholi are taken seriously and embedded within the narrative and visitors' experiences, to attempt to fit indigenous mnemonic practices into global practices. The experiences of the staff members who visited Kigali might have shaped how they perceive **of** memory construction and, in some ways, they became 'carriers' of the genocide memory beyond Rwandan borders (Erll 2011: 12), but they remained conscious of the unique attributes of the practices in their contexts.

The other memorial centre I visited is in Lukodi, located in a small building within the vicinity of a school (JRP 2011). The guide was originally from Lukodi, a survivor of the massacres, who lost relatives and lived in a camp within the area during the war. Colour photographs of victims are displayed in a small room and organised to allow the visitor to follow the narrative of how the violence transpired. The Lukodi Centre is also designed to tell the complex history of this war and the path to reconciliation, targeting the young generation and visitors. The guide emphasised that localised mourning practices were still exercised in private places even though gatekeepers (religious, NGO and victims' association leaders) planned the communal commemoration events. The consistency of these commemoration events depends heavily on the availability of funding, as explained in the next section.

Overall, there are three categories of gatekeepers, determined by different factors, who have a sustained influence on existing mnemonic practices and continue to shape what the world knows about the massacres. The first group of gatekeepers comprises NGO employees, whose main duty is to fundraise, and build and manage sites, as is the case with Kitgum and Lukodi. NGOs compete for the same funding and have similar goals of constructing mnemonic practices of past atrocities in this context. NGOs possess tools to document the life histories of survivors and construct knowledge about these spaces of memory, and they hire most of their staff from the Acholi community, though also from other regions of Uganda. NGOs are the most influential intermediaries between the victim associations, narratives on local massacre sites, and the external world. Their insights shape the reports that are shared via online platforms and through audio and visual documentaries. They also have a significant presence on radio stations and in national newspapers, where they shape what is remembered and how. However, the memories produced by NGOs are highly selective and designed to cater to the NGOs' different needs (such as international funding) rather than telling the actual history of the massacres or stories of survivors. Thus, the relationship between what is gatekept and kept as memories is complex and dynamic.

The second element that has empowered and diversified gatekeeper proliferation in the Northern Ugandan context is the trial of former suspected LRA commanders at the ICC in the Hague and in Kampala. The ICC's intervention is considered 'distant justice and is required to give victims closure' (Clark 2018: 25). But for some victims it is not even justice, given that the ICC deals only with LRA crimes because their mandate does not include crimes committed by the UPDF. However, as Okal – a Kampala lawyer – revealed, the process was possible with the help of local survivors' testimonies (Interview, 2018). Okal gave an example of how she travelled all over Amaru district collecting stories from survivors about LRA Commander Dominic Ongwen, and her traumatic experience of listening to those stories and visiting sites where he committed the violence (ibid).

Okal told me how teams working with local and international lawyers became instrumental in shaping what is remembered about the massacres and in reviving mnemonic practices around them. These people form the second category of gatekeepers who are also 'carriers' of these pasts to the ICC and other forums. Auma, also a lawyer based in Kampala, mentioned that they criss-crossed the affected regions conducting interviews (sometimes with the same people) about specific dates and insisting on being given details of the places where massacres were committed, which at times interviewees could not recall accurately (Interview, 2019). The interviews were then shared with international lawyers to apply their legal interpretations and therefore were transformed and transported in that process to become the property of the international court and its archives.

The third and most crucial category of gatekeepers is the leaders of victims' associations. An interviewee and victims' association leader from Gulu, named Odong, explained that most leaders are survivors themselves, who rose to leadership either by founding the organisations or by being chosen due to their education or the respect they had earned among fellow survivors (Interview, 2018). One of the few women victims' association leaders I met at a workshop explained that she had been chosen because she had invited women to form a victims' association not only to talk to the ICC, but also to initiate self-help activities. This third group are both gatekeepers and memory-makers, who exercise their power even in post-conflict contexts that seek to suppress their agency to transform their societies (Olonisakin and Okech 2011; Ali 2017; Mwambari 2017; Munyi, Mwambari and Ylönen 2020). Thus, through the process of creating and crafting narratives of the past and different stories about the local context, the actors have become important carriers of the past, just like the guides at the Kitgum museums discussed above. They shape what is known in the global discourse about these communities in this dynamic process of producing knowledge about the past.

Commemorations as Complex Sites with Multiple Meanings and Practices

Commemoration ceremonies have multiple meanings and are where the gatekeepers and keepers of memory interact. These ceremonies in Northern Uganda are generally called 'Prayers', which reflects how they unfold. They resemble Christian church services, and in some locations Catholic and Anglican priests conduct them together or separately. The priest delivers biblical verses and his own interpretation, and the interpretation is often linked to past crimes but also emphasises reconciliation and the importance of maintaining peace (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011). Once these religious ceremonies are over, mostly male politicians and community leaders use these platforms to promote the interests of the groups they represent. These include local leaders who link commemorating the past with the development needs of the community, and women leaders who voice their concerns.

A ceremony I attended in Mucwiini took place near the site of the Mucwiini Polytechnic Massacre, where a memorialisation project was being built, though it was not yet open. Similar development projects were referenced in interviews at massacre sites in Lira and Gulu districts. Speeches that linked mourning practices to the economic development of the area expressed gratitude to the government and development partners from the global North but insisted that more needed to be done. A speaker at one of the events expressed his frustration:

> I haven't seen much development coming out of these commemorations. Schools and vocational institutions have been established in some sites, but they have not been of much benefit to the local communities. Victims and their relatives still have to pay for school. In many cases, children do not go to school. They spend most of their time at the trading centres. (Odong, Interview, 2019)

Women's organisation leaders and their members also used these spaces to challenge their male counterparts to be more inclusive in these ceremonies. This theme first emerged through songs from women's groups who claimed they were continuously marginalised because of their class status and gender-based discrimination in their community. Akena, a woman group leader from Mucwiini participating in one of the commemoration events, told me:

> Most of the women are poor and whenever we went to commemoration events, we were not allowed to speak about what happened to us during the war. The men spoke about our experiences, but they did not allow us to speak. I then talked to some of the women and we started to organise a self-help group that made handcrafts and sold them to visitors. Many of the women are widows from the war. (Interview, 2018)

At the Mucwiini commemoration in 2018, only men presided over the prayers and gave speeches. The only woman visible in this ceremony was a young lady whose role was to lead the music between the prayers and speeches. Towards the end of this particular ceremony, an elderly woman sent a message to the religious leaders and the victims association leading the prayers, requesting an opportunity to speak during the ceremony. Permission was granted, but she was allowed to speak only at the end of the ceremony, after it had been formally concluded.

Aber, who is a women's group leader in the same community, mentioned how she had rallied and organised her members a day before to rehearse a song she had composed about her husband (who had been killed in that community by the LRA) and others who were being remembered in that ceremony (Interview, 2018). She shared how women view their agency in the community context:

> When things start to get out of hand, women come together and deliberate on how to get back to the norm. That is why we thought that we should speak to the bereaved families through the mourning song we presented, and to remind these families that we should now move ahead from the past. (ibid)

Another member of that group expressed the frustration of being allowed to sing only when prayers had been concluded and how only a few people paid attention to their words. She expressed how important the lyrics were. She emphasised:

> Those songs reflect the way our people died, brutally. One old man was beaten, all the while begging for mercy and seeking to know what he had done to deserve such cruelty. He even offered that the rebels should take whatever they wanted but they kept beating him, and his wife too. The children who were murdered were smashed on trees and house pillars, while others were beaten using axes. That is what we came to sing about. (Amarorwot, Interview, 2019)

For another, this platform was a space to mourn her husband. These ceremonies, to her, were important in order to move on. She told me:

> These prayers relax my heart. I lost my husband during the massacres and when I pray and listen to the preaching, it calms me. This also takes away the painful memories from my heart, teaches us and protects our children. Those are the reasons why we attend the prayer services. (Aloyo, Interview, 2018)

These Prayers have evolved into spaces where communities 'knotted intersections' of their histories that cut across their lived experiences of loss and survival (Gilroy 1993 cited in Rothberg 2010: 8). In telling their stories they co-produce knowledge of their collective history of violent past and aftermath. They asserted their agency that is often overlooked in conversations in post-conflict contexts (Mwambari, et al, 2021).

Tension Between Religious and Indigenous Practices of Mourning the Wartime Dead and the Missing

While some of these survivors saw these commemorations as useful avenues through which to make different kinds of demands, others found them alien to indigenous mourning practices. A former local leader and victims' association member in Lira stated that remembering happens through rituals done by the family as well as the community. He expressed concern that when the dead are not adequately commemorated 'they become a bad omen to their living families'. In indigenous practice, they believe that the dead are still present and that they visit the living through spiritual encounters (Interview, 2019). Another study on Northern Uganda found it '… abundantly clear that, at the micro-level, individuals and communities clearly connected the world of the dead and the world of the living, entangling the material with the spiritual in their notions of justice and post-conflict repair' (Kim and Hepner 2020: 282). Thus, for some, remembering the dead in commemoration ceremonies only, as if they were dead and no longer part of everyday life, was not acceptable. They also objected to the role of cultural leaders at these ceremonies being replaced with politicians or religious leaders who fund and politicise these events or turn important locations for remembering the dead into tourism sites (Koc, Interview, 2019).

We interviewed Ladwar, a young woman living in Barlonyo and a victim of the Northern Uganda war, which had claimed her father and aunt. After realising that the youth spent much of their time idling at the trading centre, she launched a drama group for them, which performs at various events. Their sombre compositions align with the ceremonies and memorial events, and describe how the rebels attacked the camps, in a bid to remind people about what happened. Other songs focus on the restoration of peace (Riaño-Alcalá and Baines 2011). For Ladwar, some cultural leaders who had previously believed in the indigenous process of remembering the dead had transformed themselves into religious leaders and corrupted the process to claim a leadership position in the community (Interview, 2020).

Billie, also from Barlonyo, was working for an FM radio station involved with commemoration. He organises gatekeepers and keepers of memory to educate the public on what happened in the past and why commemoration is important. His analysis was as follows:

> Religious leaders conduct the sessions with the steering mandate alternating between the Church of Uganda and the Catholic church each year. There are about eighteen sites in Northern Uganda, all under one leadership umbrella,

whose representatives attend these events, such as the Acholi, Lango, Teso and West Nile. The site leaders organise the events and mobilise funds. The chairperson of the Barlonyo site is the one who ultimately decides who can participate in or organise the events. At the beginning, food would be provided but now they just provide sodas and water. The number of visitors has also dwindled. In the past, the ceremony attracted people from all over the country. This is a day where we pray for healing. (Interview, 2020)

Toolit, a former Barlonyo local leader at the time who also worked as a medical doctor, gave his own analysis of what has changed:

> Celebrating the dead is vital in our culture. When celebrating the dead, the clan leader calls for a family meeting, designs the budget and requests the family members to contribute to the event. The clan leader and head of the family invite people from different clans, religious leaders and other community members. They then kill a black bull under a tree. The members of the grieving family tie a white cloth around their heads as a sign of mourning and remembering the dead. However, these practices have been abandoned and shunned as 'bad practices' because of religion. For Barlonyo and other massive sites, the cultural aspect has been abandoned too. The drama group also sings songs of peace, love and reconciliation. At first the organisers used to provide the transport for people from different parts of Lira and even beyond Lira district which brought in many visitors but this has since stopped and consequently reduced the number of visitors. People also lay the flowers on the graves, then the head of a cultural institution or sometimes a guest of honour is invited to give the speech. (Interview, 2020)

Another Barlonyo local, Woko, who was introduced as an influencer in that town, explained that he and many others he knew in his community stopped attending or even encouraging people to attend these events because they no longer used indigenous practices that they considered to be vital in dealing with those who had died or disappeared during such violence (Interview, 2020).

Nyaburu, one of the interviewees in Lukodi, was 20 years old when rebels attacked her village, and she lost her husband and brother during the massacre. She complained that she is no longer able to commemorate her late husband and brother due to how commemorations are organised nowadays:

> According to our cultural traditions, when we are celebrating the lives of the dead, we have to kill a bull and sprinkle the blood on the grave to appease the spirits of the dead relatives. This is however not the case when we are celebrating the dead here. The religious leaders conduct prayers and preach the word of God. (Interview, 2018)

Finally, this tension between religious ceremonies and indigenous practices of remembering the dead is evident in specific commemorations of the missing, which are organised by local and international gatekeepers as well as keepers of memory. On the International Day of Missing Persons in 2015, over 800 families turned up to commemorate their loved ones. Some of the families shared their sentiments, emphasising the importance of remembering, saying that though the pain would never leave them until death, it was a good thing that the public knew about it. They appreciated the fact that the event had been organised, at least for them to remember their loved ones, if not for anything else (International Committee of the Red Cross 2017). In another similar study, 'pain-related' stories were told. The study quoted one of the families from Acholiland:

> It is very important to have someone confirmed dead and buried in the compound (at the family home). It is better than the thought that the person is still alive somewhere, which sometimes shifts to a fear that the person is dead. This is so painful, so we are never settled. We are always living in unrest. There is hope, but the hope is always accompanied by the worries and the sad feeling that the person is dead. There is no closure. (Hollander 2016: 298)

In Lukodi, one of my interviewees, Olum, explained the importance of remembering his missing relatives. He took us to a field and showed us the site of one of the IDP camps in Lukodi. Olum talked about his brother, who had been abducted as a teenager, and how they remembered him:

> The LRA ambushed us at night while we were sleeping and took some boys, among whom was my brother. After attaining peace, many boys started to return but my brother did not. My mother and grandmother searched at the World Vision Centre where the rescued boys were taken but we did not find him. (Interview, 2019)

He told us that they memorialised him not only in ceremonies but also whenever they tell friends and other family members about him. He said he can feel it in his spirit that his brother is still alive and has kept his brother's personal belongings in the hope that he will return. Olum's conviction is based on a cultural belief that elders can gather and call the names of those who have gone missing and feel whether the person is still alive. If they feel that the person is alive, the family is told to wait for him to return. These indigenous beliefs exist elsewhere in Uganda, as a means to solve social problems. It has been documented that over 70 per cent of Ugandans believe in indigenous practices as a way of solving complex social problems (Peterson 2016). In most commemorations the memory of the missing is kept alive through stories. These bodies retain power among the living (Kim and Hepner 2020: 833).

Scholars have written on this spiritual dimension of Acholi culture and the relationship to their dead (Atkinson 1994; p'Bitek 1971). An article about the legacy of earlier waves of violence in the 1980s, when President Museveni was capturing power, observed '… that apparitions frequently haunted survivors at night, appearing in dreams or knocking at doors, often asking relatives to find their remains and bring them home for proper burial' (Hepner, Steadman and Hanebrink, 2018: 137). The proper burial includes indigenous rituals to appease the spirits to end this form of presence that the missing maintain among the living. An example was given in this study:

> In one village ghostly fires and cacophonous voices could be seen and heard from a distance around a mass grave of NRA soldiers. In another, young children ran screaming from school where a pit latrine had been used as a grave, complaining of spirits beating them about the head. At a site where NRA soldiers had been buried en masse, a borehole could be observed pumping water, or sometimes blood, itself, at dusk. People walking along the road at night might even pass a ghost or see uncanny, white-skinned babies perched in trees. (ibid: 137)

These researchers concluded 'the dead are not vacated in Acholiland but retain a presence and an agency among the living' (ibid; Elgerud and Kim 2020: 598). These experiences are also reported in other contexts, such as in Peru (González 2013; Willems 2019, especially chapter 5; Baines 2010b) or Eritrea (Hepner 2020). This is important to understand, because those who go missing also possess a kind of agency through what their families describe as spiritual attacks or visits. Their presence and agency are felt by some more than others. Erin Baines, a long-time researcher in Northern Uganda, writes:

> In northern Uganda, women are more susceptible to spirit possession, disrupting their reproductive abilities: babies are still-born, young children die of inexplicable illnesses, purposeful murderous acts, or accidents; women become infertile; and men, impotent. The next generation is threatened as a result of the ruptured moral fabric unless some action is taken. Individuals who fought in war or lived in the military camps are seen as vehicles through which the unquiet spirits of the war dead can enter and afflict entire communities. (2010: 423)

I spent time with survivors in different contexts, trying to understand why these Christians who were so invested in Christian practices and prayers still believed in how the missing and the dead should be discussed and their spiritual attachments to the living. For example, at one point before the Parabong commemoration, I asked one of the organisers, Abel, who had been baptised, if he believed in the indigenous beliefs about the spiritual visits. He told us a story:

> When I became a Christian, I stopped believing in such practices. Then our whole family converted to Christianity. At one time a relative died and we brought her body inside the house. It did not take long for us to realise that those who warned us were right – an uncle passed on soon after we buried the relative. (Interview, 2019)

Transculturality and the Plurality of Mnemonic Discourses in Northern Uganda

As can be gleaned from the preceding discussion, there is an ongoing marginalisation of indigenous rituals, especially spearheaded by religious gatekeepers who have imposed religious and non-indigenous practices of burying and remembering the dead. These changes were introduced during colonialism to undermine indigenous practice and knowledge of commemoration. On the other hand, through songs, dance and other artistic expression, survivors perform the old ways of mourning the dead, carried from the precolonial period. This is also manifested in how they treat the bodies of those who were buried after they were found in the bush, as the stories of interviewees discussed above reveal. In this context 'the needs of the dead bring issues of socioeconomic justice to the forefront as survivors request various forms of memorialization; and in a similar vein, the graves become physical representations of community suffering' (Kim and Hepner 2020: 832).

Cultural beliefs and artifacts are exhibited at the memorial centres of Kitgum and Lukodi to emphasise the uniqueness of the violence and recovery. This assertion is not to essentialise African burial rights or ways of remembering, but rather to draw attention to the diversity created by combining the indigenous with borrowed practices. Thus, what we have is a new culture of mourning, which goes beyond mimicking Eurocentric approaches but co-exists in this recycling of experiences (Mbembe 2020).

Second, as mnemonic practices and ideas travel and interact in these contexts, we witness a transcultural experience in which memories travel to later generations through these sites, to schoolchildren, to visitors and also through international processes of justice. Within these travels and frictions there are agreements and tensions among actors. Within the communities themselves, interviewees also attested to the existence of rituals at the family level in addition to collective commemorations. This reveals in itself a form of 'internal hybridisation' within mnemonic processes.

Third, rather than viewing these local commemorations as mimicking Western ceremonies, or seeing the survivors as having to choose between one or another or terming these contexts as 'overwhelmed by death' and resorting to

truncated European practices, we find that memory transmission is complex, and different cultures borrow from each other both locally, during Prayers, but also across borders for the gatekeepers who want to study how memory is done in Rwanda. There is an ongoing negotiation between the perspectives of both gatekeepers and keepers of memory. They are interdependent in how they create knowledge about the past, express contemporary needs, and envision the future, ultimately creating something new.

Conclusion

This study on communities in Uganda proposes thinking differently about mnemonic rituals and spaces, and their hybridity. Instead of viewing hybridity primarily from its 'origins', the idea is to consider it from the way in which local actors strategically use the available resources to meet their needs in remembering and finding meaning in mnemonic rituals and spaces. This is a true decolonised approach, which refuses to evaluate the actions of non-Western societies from a certain complex and search for purity (mimicry or not). Instead, these actions are constituted from the strategic mobilisation of available resources (from the North or from the South) for the needs of local communities in mourning. Future research would be wise to focus on the nuances that exist in these mnemonic practices, which are often hidden and indeed ignored in international literature.

Acknowledgements

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