

Ambivalent Places of Memory: Mass Graves in Teso

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Abstract

This article is concerned with mass graves that have been constructed in the aftermath of different violent conflicts in the Teso region in eastern Uganda. These are not hidden graves, but rather graves that have been established by different actors – the Ugandan state, local government, and community-based organisations in cooperation with NGOs. By investigating customary practices of burial, mourning and commemoration I explore the ways in which people in Teso perceive the mass graves to deviate from conventional notions of memory, burials and graves. I draw on material from interviews with respondents from all four gravesites in Teso and from villages in Amuria and Katakwi to analyse the divergences that the mass graves represent and how they seem to challenge and contradict people's concepts and practices of how to come to terms with the violent past. By describing these differences that revolve primarily around notions of how to achieve a sense of closure with the past, I explain how prolonged mourning and memories of loss and suffering are related to local concepts of sickness. Furthermore, it can be argued that controversies evoked by the mass graves can reveal something about the current relationship between the government and communities in Teso. Taking the example of the mass grave in Obalanga,, I examine matters of commemoration, compensation and reparation.

For more than thirty years, Teso region in eastern Uganda has experienced a series of conflicts, stemming from recurring cattle raids, the Uganda People's Army (UPA) insurgency (1986-1992) and the incursion of the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in 2003. These violent conflicts caused loss of life, internal displacement and economic and social destruction in the region. In the aftermath of the violence, four mass graves were constructed by different actors: the Ugandan government, the local government and community-based organisations (CBOs) in cooperation with national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Although these four gravesites are all located in different areas in Teso and represent three different conflicts, which all had their own dynamics and parties, they share certain similarities. All four mass graves were built with the intention to preserve the evidence of the particular incident, to collectively mourn the dead and to be used as sites of public remembrance and commemoration, thus giving them the status of 'intentional monuments' (Riegl 1988).

Mourning and commemoration rituals are practices that produce meaning (Jewsiewicki & White 2005: 2) and aim to restore social and moral norms after a period of disorder caused by death and disaster (see Oliver-Smith & Hoffmann 1999). Following this perspective, the mass

graves provide valuable insights into how the dead are mourned and remembered and what kind of meanings people in Teso assign to them. Furthermore, responses to the mass graves reflect how the past and the future are mediated and envisaged (Jewsiewicki & White 2005: 2), particularly how communities in Teso perceive and relate to former parties of conflict.

This article investigates certain practices of memory in Teso: how the dead are mourned, buried and commemorated and how the mass burials are perceived to deviate from customary burials. It also discusses the notion of memory in relation to the violent conflicts in Teso and how it correlates with concepts of suffering and sickness. Furthermore the mass graves/memorials are intertwined with local, national and international politics of memory and are therefore contested places in the ongoing debate about reconciliation and reparation for victims of conflict in Uganda.

‘Landscapes of Violence’¹⁰: A Topography of Pain

Within the region of Teso there are four mass graves/memorials that serve as physical reminders of the diverse conflicts of the past.

In Mukura, located along the Soroti-Mbale road, a mausoleum comprised of a mass grave commemorates a massacre of approximately 69 people¹¹ during the UPA insurgency that ravaged Teso from 1986 until 1992. On 11 July 1989, soldiers of the National Resistance Army (NRA) rounded up about 300 civilians from Mukura and other surrounding areas on the suspicion of being rebels or collaborators. The soldiers incarcerated some of the villagers in a railway wagon, where approximately 69 of them died of suffocation (Justice and Reconciliation Project 2011: 5). The mausoleum, which was constructed by the Ugandan government, has the shape of a small house with the mass grave inside and a plate that lists 55 names of victims. Next to the mausoleum is another building, to be used as a public library according to respondents, but it was empty at the time I visited the site in 2011. The area around the two houses is fenced.



*Mukura mausoleum with mass grave, September 2011
(Photos: Anne Werbter)*

In Ngariam Sub-county, close to the border to Karamoja Sub-region, two gravesites have

¹⁰ Schramm 2011

¹¹ This number is disputed and has varied between 47 and more than 70 in reports by journalists and researchers (see e.g. Buckley-Zistel 2008: 111, Justice and Reconciliation Project 2011: 6).

been constructed in the aftermath of violent cattle raids that culminated in massacres of people then living in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps in 2001 and 2003. In Ngariam camp, cattle rustlers from Karamoja killed 17 people in an attack that took place around 2 pm on 13 September 2001. Around two years later, on 20 September 2003, 21 people were killed in Apeuro Aodot¹² camp during a cattle raid. In both places, the victims of the massacres were buried in arrangements that resemble a small graveyard. People referred to them as mass graves, although the remains were buried in individual graves. The term was used because usually people are not buried close to each other if they are not from the same family. According to former camp residents, the burial materials and coffins for the graves were provided by the district of Katakwi (interview 5 January 2013).



Grave site in Ngariam, January 2013



Grave site in Apeuro Aodot, January 2013

(Photos: Anne Werbter)

The largest mass grave in Teso region is in Obalanga, situated in the north of Amuria District. In this grave, a total of approximately 365 remains of victims of the LRA rebels, who

¹² Other spellings are Operu Odot or Opeuru Aodot.

attacked Teso in 2003, were laid to rest (Justice and Reconciliation Project 2012a: 5). After the first attack on 15th of June 2003, Obalanga Sub-county was used as an entry point by the LRA rebels into Teso. Obalanga was heavily affected throughout the LRA incursion and its trading centre became the largest IDP camp in Teso at that time, sheltering more than 40,000 internally displaced persons (interview with sub-county officials, 29 September 2011).

After the LRA was driven out of Teso by the national Uganda People's Defence Forces (UPDF) and the local militia named 'Arrow Boys', which was mobilized by Teso leaders, many villages in Obalanga sub-county as elsewhere in the region, were littered with dead bodies and bones, causing fear among the people who wanted to return to their homes. With the help of the community, scattered bodies and human remains were collected and also exhumed from makeshift temporary graves that were dug during the war and buried in the gravesite in Obalanga (Justice and Reconciliation Project 2012a: 22). The majority of the remains buried in this mass grave could not be identified because most of the corpses had already decomposed. Therefore, only a few of the concrete slabs that cover the graves display the names of those who are buried in them, while most remain blank. The construction of the mass grave in Obalanga was initiated by the community-based organisation (CBO) called Obalanga Human Rights and Healthcare Association (OHRHCA) who lobbied for support from local and international organisations, individuals and the local community to build it. The mass grave is fenced and located in sight of the main road.



*Mass graves in Obalanga, September 2011
(Photos: Anne Werbter)*

Besides these four mass graves, there are many other places in Teso region where massacres took place and people have been buried in the past. For example, a swamp north of Soroti town was said to be called *apal itunga* ('forgotten people') because many people were killed and buried here during the UPA war. Another such place is in Katine, located along the Soroti-Lira road, where LRA rebels ambushed a bus and killed 22 of the occupants in 2003. These places are not marked with any signs that indicate their history (to a stranger), but they are very well known to the local communities. Both, the marked and unmarked mass graves and 'spaces of death' (Luig 2012) make up a 'geography of pain' (Mueggler 2001, cited in Argenti & Schramm 2012: 25) that is embedded in the landscape of Teso and part of people's collective memory. While the memory of the unmarked places of death is produced and reproduced by telling and retelling

the histories and stories of those places, the mass graves/memorials are turned into sites of official and institutionalised commemoration.

However, the mass graves/memorials generate a lot of controversy among people in Teso for two reasons. First of all, it is contested if those mass graves represent the victims of the violent incidents appropriately, because they constitute a sharp contrast to customary graves and burial rites. And secondly, they reflect the power relationship between the government and the local communities in Teso, which is perceived as one of dominance and exclusion, not least because questions of responsibility and reparation remain unresolved.

Graves and Burials in Teso

In Iteso culture there is no tradition of building memorials or any other physical sites to remember the past. 'Physical memorials are not there. We would remember things and events through names', I was told, when I asked for places of remembrance (conversation with Robert, 9 October 2011)¹³. However, during burial rites, the dead are mourned at graves. In Teso, as elsewhere in Uganda the dead are buried at home in the homestead of the family. 'The clearest evidence that the dead belong in the family is that their graves lie in or on the edge of the courtyard', writes Whyte (1997: 90) about Bunyole in eastern Uganda. Most recent graves in Teso are cemented – depending on financial resources of the family – while older graves and those of poorer families are marked with piled stones. During get-togethers of family and neighbours or wedding ceremonies in the village, people sometimes used to sit on the edges of the cemented graves, eat and drink, or even dance on the graves, if there is little space in the compound. This reflects the integration of the dead into the everyday life of the living. Furthermore, as in many African societies, the living are considered to be in a profound spiritual relationship with the dead, which is expressed in the notion that the latter influence the well-being of the living. Sickness and other misfortunes within the family are often attributed to an improper or disrespectful burial; the disgruntled spirits of ancestors are believed to take revenge for the negligence by causing problems to their offspring. A proper burial is therefore important to pay respect to the deceased and to prevent their spirits from troubling the living (see de Berry 2000, Jones 2009).

Even when people were living in IDP camps due to the various conflicts, they were trying to bury their relatives at home in the village. If this was not possible because of ongoing attacks by the rebels or cattle rustlers, the dead were often buried temporarily in a separate place next to the camp and exhumed and brought home, when the situation was more secure. A former member of the Arrow Boy militia told me that he had buried many dead bodies of people who were killed by the LRA in makeshift graves during patrols in his home area. He said:

It was mostly Arrow Boys who buried them. When the people came back to the village, they were asking us: 'Where is the place where you buried our people?' Because we were the ones who buried the dead. We directed them. (...) Then they were taking them and buried them home. (Interview 17 August 2012)

¹³ All names have been altered for confidentiality.

This shows the great importance people attach to burials and graves¹⁴, and their strong linkage to home in Teso even in times of war and conflict.¹⁵

Contrary to cultural custom, the dead in the mass graves were not laid to rest in their family homes, but in a marked-off place, disconnecting them from the everyday lives of their relatives. Respondents expressed grief and sadness over the spatial alteration that the mass graves/memorials represent and said that they wished the dead could have been buried in their ancestral homesteads (group interviews: Orungo, 17 August 2012; Soroti, 2 April 2013).

The mass grave of Obalanga, where victims of the LRA attacks are buried, differs from customary graves, but also from the other mass graves in Teso in another aspect. As already mentioned, the majority of the approximately 365 remains laid to rest in this grave could not be identified and are therefore buried unnamed. There are only a few individual graves in this gravesite which are named, but most graves contain up to 20 unidentified bodies, according to sub-county officials (interview 15 November 2011). In Mukura, Ngariam and Apeuro Aodot, the victims of the massacre in the railway wagon and the cattle raids could be identified by the community or family members and their names are written on their graves. But the surviving relatives of those whose unidentified bodies were buried in the mass graves in Obalanga were not able to pay personal respect and to mourn their deceased family members, although communal prayers were held at the burial and at commemoration ceremonies for the dead buried in the mass graves. One condition for mourning, as Jewsiewicki and White (2005: 2) write in their introduction to a special issue of *African Studies Review* on 'mourning' in contemporary Central Africa, is the physical presence of the body of the deceased. They go on to explain that in order to achieve a sense of closure with the past, the (identified) body of the deceased is necessary, so that relatives can witness and perform rituals that transform the deceased into an ancestor. Without these prerequisites, as they put it, 'the ghost of the deceased remains obsessively in the present' (Jewsiewicki & White 2005: 2). In the case of Obalanga, there were several indications, that the spirits of the dead buried in the mass grave were perceived to be inadequately put to rest and therefore potentially harmful. One indication for this was, for example that the residents of Obalanga refused to maintain the mass grave because they were afraid to attract misfortune from the spirits of the dead, as the sub-county officials told me in September 2011, during one of my visits.

Burial Rites

To put an end to mourning after some time in order to achieve a sense of closure with the past is a central part of the burial rites in Teso. The funeral ideally consists of two parts, referred to as *aipuduno* and *asuban* (Lawrance 1957: 99). *Aipuduno* is the ceremony where the relatives and neighbours come together to bury the deceased. Usually, prayers are said, elders address the mourners to speak about the deceased and food and local beer is served.

The second part of the burial, *asuban*, is called last funeral rites. It is supposed to be a

¹⁴ Another example that underlines the importance of burials in Teso is certainly the institution of burial groups that emerged in the aftermath of the UPA insurgency. Jones (2007, 2009) shows how burial groups developed as a collective insurance scheme to help its members meet the cost of burials and to organise them on a minimum level of order and respect after chaos and war.

¹⁵ Furthermore, graves indicate the home and land ownership of a family and gained increasingly importance in the light of the intensification of land conflicts during the ongoing resettlement process after a period of war and conflict in Teso.

joyous ceremony, where the whole clan gathers and celebrates with a lot of food and beer. This burial rite is meant to mark the end of mourning (Lawrance 1957: 100, Nagashima 1976: 59) and used to be held in the month of November. According to the Iteso calendar, the month of November is called *Osuban* – after *asuban* meaning ceremonies. As Akello writes: ‘This is a leisure month with plenty of food. (...) But since those living are part of those dead, Iteso usually reserve this month for all kinds of ceremonies related to their departed relatives. Then nobody may be laughed at for having given a poor memorial ceremony for a departed relative for everybody has food enough to feed the people who come to the ceremony’ (Akello 1981: 123).

The ritual of *asuban* is still well known in Teso, but rarely carried out. For example, in Palam Sub-county in Katakwi District, a region that was strongly affected by cattle raids, the last funeral rites were celebrated only in a few homes, after postponing them for ten years or longer due to lack of financial resources.¹⁶

Even though there is a decline of the ceremony of *asuban*, its central meaning to mark the end of mourning is still important. The LC3 chairperson for Palam Sub-county told me that many people would nowadays combine both ceremonies, ‘the *alomun* and even the *apunya*¹⁷, the last burial rites, just there and then (...) in order to save resources’ (interview 15 November 2012).

Another indication of the continued concern with marking the end of mourning can be found in the way the first burial rite was explained to me. While Lawrance, who served as a district commissioner in Teso in the 1950s refers to the first burial rite as ‘the ceremony of taking out the corpse from the house’ (Lawrance 1957: 99), it was interpreted to me as: ‘coming out of the problem you had. (...) resuming with usual duties’ (conversation with John, 15 November 2012). Contrary to Lawrance, the respondent here refers to the living who are coming out of mourning rather than the corpse being brought out of the house. That could indicate that the meaning of the first burial rite has changed over time to include the purpose of the second rite, which is not carried out regularly any longer. In other words, the fact that the meaning of *asuban* — to bring an end to mourning — seems to have persisted even though the ceremony itself has not, is a clear indication that it is of great importance for people in Teso. It also emphasizes the flexibility of ritual structure, a point that has already been made in many other studies on burial rites (cf. Luig 2009, Jones 2009) and rituals in general. If social circumstances require, people often change or replace certain elements of rituals while holding on to its central aspects (Luig 2009: 118). Lack of resources and the experiences of violence, war and camp life has influenced and altered the way burial rites are performed in Teso today.

The Memory of Loss: *too much thinking*

The importance of putting an end to mourning – and in a broader sense to dwelling on death – was also emphasised in the notion that prolonged mourning and painful memories can have a negative effect on the individual’s health in the form of a disease called *aomisio*, translated as *too much thinking*. This correlation was clearly articulated by Lydia, as I sat with her one day at the house where she grew up, near to her father’s grave:

¹⁶ Both, Henriques (2002) and Jones (2009) make similar observations for southern Teso (Ngora District) after the UPA insurgency.

¹⁷ In Katakwi District the burial rites were also referred to as *alomun* and *apunya*, meaning the same as *aipud* (‘to come or bring outside’, Kiggen 1953: 233, 338) and *asuban* (‘the annual feast for the departed’, Kiggen 1953: 341). These differences may be due to variations of dialect of Ateso. Nagashima, who conducted fieldwork in Katakwi district in the late 1960s also refers to *apunya* as the ritual for marking the end of mourning (Nagashima 1976: 59).

- Lydia: *When I think of my father, I think of the assistance he could give me if he were still alive. (...) But I can come to this house, dance and drink and be happy with my family. If someone dies, your mother, your sister, you stay with the ones who are still alive. You cannot mourn all the time. It is not good. You mourn and then you forget.*
- If your heart thinks too much, it will drop down. I don't want to remember too much, I don't want to get ulcers.*
- A.W.: *What happens if you 'mourn all the time'?*
- Lydia: *Ulcers are growing in the heart. This is very bad.*

(Interview 11 December 2012)

As depicted in Lydia's account, to mourn and remember 'too much' of the deceased and of the loss associated with him, is believed to have a physical impact, namely developing 'ulcers' or 'wounds' (*edola*) in the heart. This is not meant in a metaphorical sense. Painful experiences and memories of loss and suffering are said to trigger thoughts and worries that can in turn cause a locally defined disease, called *adeka na aomisio*, literally the disease of thoughts. This condition is referred to by respondents and in the literature as *aomisio* and translated as *too much thinking* or *overthinking* (de Berry 2000: 292). As indicated above, *too much thinking* is associated with the growth of ulcers or wounds in the heart. In the context of the concept of this local disease, the ritual of *asuban* that marks the end of mourning can be also understood as a precautionary measure to protect people after the loss of loved ones from the disease of *too much thinking*.

Similarly to Lydia's remarks when she pointed out the need to 'forget' or rather to avoid the memory of her father's death, respondents emphasized that the mass grave/memorial in Obalanga kept them from forgetting the deaths caused by the LRA attacks. They said it would continuously evoke painful memories. Thomas, a peasant and former member of the Arrow Boy militia and his nephew Peter remarked:

- Thomas: *We are not happy with it. Because that thing reminds us of the people we have lost.*
- Peter: *It reminds us a lot. Actually by now, by this time we would be forgetting it. But if you again reach Obalanga and you see that thing, actually, you break into tears. It brings back the memory.*
- Thomas: *If you reach Obalanga, you will see (...) it hurts. Then you remember and it hurts. (...) That thing, it can hurt you. Really.*

(Interview 17 August 2012)

For Thomas and Peter, the sight of the mass grave in Obalanga triggers painful memories and thoughts of the suffering and loss they encountered during the LRA attacks, particularly the violent loss of relatives and friends. Peter suggests that without the mass grave they would have 'forgotten' about it by now, but it 'brings back the memory' every time they see it. As depicted in Thomas's and Peter's account, the mass grave represents not only an alteration of the spatial, but

also of the temporal dimensions of mourning and commemorating the dead compared to the customary graves. As a result of these alterations, they feel distressed by the recurring memories.

The mass graves/memorials provoke resentment because they continuously represent the violence and the loss of the past and thus keep the memory of it alive, while people try to come to terms with the past by avoiding the memory of it. That people have not ‘forgotten’ the violent past in the sense that it has fallen into oblivion, became evident during many conversations, as most people in Teso do remember the past very well.

Whereas in Western cultures it is often thought important to keep alive the memory of a violent past in order to ‘never forget’ and ‘to learn from the past in order for history not to be repeated’, in Teso painful memory is ‘believed to hold back’ I was told, as it hinders one in continuing with life (conversation with Opiyo, 17 December 2012). What was prevailing in the conversations with people concerning the violence of the past was not an ‘imperative to remember’, but rather an ‘imperative to avoid’ the memory of a violent past in order to come to terms with it.

Relations between the Government and Communities in Teso

Since the mass graves/memorials in Teso are public places of official and institutionalised remembrance of the conflicts, they are inextricably linked to local, national and international memory politics. One can argue their construction is a political act itself, as they intervene in the relationship between the government and the communities in Teso (cf. Luig 2012: 179). As mentioned above, the mass graves/memorials in Teso represent different conflicts and have been built by different actors, under different circumstances. For the sake of clarity, in the following I will concentrate on the mass grave of Obalanga, where the victims of the LRA invasion have been buried.

In Obalanga, the mass grave was initiated by a community-based organisation called Obalanga Human Rights and Healthcare Association (OHRHCA), which, under the leadership of local politicians, lobbied for support from local and international organisations and individuals to construct the mass grave.¹⁸ The mass grave was built to promote healing, to remember those who lost their lives during the LRA attacks, and to bury the remains and bones that were scattered in the area in a decent way. Yet, it was also constructed with the aim to preserve the evidence of the violence inflicted by the LRA on the community and to counter claims by the government that the LRA invasions had not affected Teso. Representatives of the local government in Obalanga said during an interview that the government had attempted to downplay the impacts that the LRA incursion had on the Teso region. As one respondent put it: ‘All that time the rebels were here full time. Night and day. But sometimes you wondered when government said the rebels are no longer in Teso region, when we had them here. When our people were tied in the camp, they could not even move 100 metres away from the camp’ (interview 29 September 2011). This comment illustrates the tension between the government and the communities in Teso. It also indicates that

¹⁸ Concern Worldwide donated burial materials of 400 bags of cement, iron sheets, wire-mesh, timber and fuel to facilitate the transport of human remains from the countryside. Action Aid donated 1000 metres of burial linen. Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO) donated 50,000 Uganda Shillings and Teso Islamic Development Organisation (TIDO) 10,000 shillings. War on Want donated 200,000 shillings, Teso Diocese Development Organisation (TEDO) donated 130,000 shillings, and Julius Ochen donated 575,000 shillings. Archbishop Henry Luke Orombi donated one million shillings to fence the burial site. (interview 29 September 2011, Justice and Reconciliation Project 2012a: 22-23).

unresolved questions of responsibility and interpretation of the past are raised by the presence of the mass grave/memorial. Many people in Teso placed responsibility on the government for not having reacted in time to the LRA incursion and for its failure to protect them and their property sufficiently.

Furthermore, it should be noted that many people working for local NGOs and local government in Teso are often acutely aware that their counterparts in northern Uganda (mainly in Acholi and Lango regions) received much more attention and aid from international NGOs and donors in recent years. They are also aware that mass graves and memorials correspond with a certain symbolism of an international culture of remembrance and commemoration that is recognized by international NGOs. Recently, a number of national and international NGOs have begun to document the various civil conflicts, counter insurgencies and mass displacements in the northern region of Uganda by means of memorial sites and mass graves with the aim to promote dialogue, memory work and reconciliation processes on a national level.¹⁹

In this regard the construction of the mass grave/memorial in Obalanga has to be understood as a strategy to unveil and verify the violence and deaths caused by the LRA in Teso region, in order to put pressure on the government to acknowledge its role in the conflict and to attract the attention and support of international NGOs.

Commemoration and Compensation

On June 15 – the day Teso was attacked by LRA rebels in 2003 for the first time – annual commemoration prayers were introduced at the mass grave in Obalanga beginning in 2005. The memorial prayers prompted controversy among government and opposition politicians from Teso right from the start in 2005, when opposition members of parliament blamed the government for negligence, saying it has led to the massacres in Teso (Omoding 2005). Grace Akello, a politician from Teso, then Minister of State for Northern Uganda Rehabilitation, criticized the opposition MPs for using the memorial prayers for politicking (Omoding 2005). The tension between opposition and government politicians in Teso continued in this regard and culminated during the tenth anniversary of the LRA attacks in 2013 when personalities from Teso were pressured to shun the memorial prayers in Obalanga altogether.

One reason for the ongoing political disputes concerning the mass grave/memorial is that reparation and compensation claims by the communities have not been satisfactorily responded to. There is no coherent government policy of providing reparations to victims of war and conflict in Uganda. Pledges made by President Museveni seem to take long to materialise and thus leave residents frustrated. For example, the President is said to have promised residents of Obalanga a memorial secondary school in 2005, but first instalments allegedly did not reach the Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) of Amuria until 2011 and it took another three years until the school was under construction (interview with sub-county officials, 29 September 2011 and residents of Obalanga, 19 March 2014). In addition, the Museveni government is said to have paid compensation to selected individuals, which causes resentment and mistrust among those who were also affected by the conflicts and did not receive any compensation. For example in December 2012, during a tour in Kaberamaido District, President Museveni personally pledged compensation to the widow of Charles Opio-Ocwa, who was part of the Arrow Boy militia and killed the LRA commander Tabuley in 2003, according to media reports (Odeke 2012). Since there

¹⁹ For example, Justice and Reconciliation Project, Refugee Law Project, Kitgum Peace Documentation Centre.

is no standardized government policy to provide reparations and compensation to victims of conflict, a number of individuals and groups from different regions, including Teso, Lango and Acholi, have sued the government for compensation over losses sustained by war and conflict (cf. Justice and Reconciliation Project 2012b). Currently, there are several cases from Teso pending in court.²⁰

To apologise genuinely, acknowledge responsibility and pay compensation are important steps in reconciliation processes in Teso and elsewhere in Uganda. The compensation payments promised by the government are of potentially strong symbolic value as they recognise individual and collective suffering (Buckley-Zistel 2008: 113). But if these promises are not kept and compensation payments do not materialise, commemoration prayers lose their meaning and instead of strengthening a process of healing and reconciliation, they reinforce anger and resentment against the government. Commemorating the dead without a genuine apology and substantial material compensation by the government only reminds people once more of the loss they have encountered and intensifies their feelings of marginalisation and exclusion from economic and political participation.

Conclusion

The mass graves/memorials represent a certain sort of politics of memorialisation. While emphasising what people in Teso have lost and what has been done to them, they seem to remove agency and authority regarding (re)interpretation of the past from people. They silence the memories and experiences of those who survived and other forms of collective memory and means through which people come to terms with violence in Teso.

For many people in Teso, the mass graves represent a spatial and temporal divergence from the customary graves in the homestead, thus generating a permanent presence and visibility of the deaths and violence of the past conflicts. This permanent visibility was often perceived to keep alive the memory of the past, mainly the memory of the painful loss of loved ones, who had died a bad death (Bloch & Parry 1982) – a death which did not happen at the right time or in the right place. Therefore, the mass graves seem to challenge and contradict people's concepts and practices of how to come to terms with the violent past by not thinking too much about it.

At the same time, local politicians and NGOs make use of this very presence and visibility of the mass graves to document and discuss the loss and suffering people endured during the conflicts and wars, thus recognising their plight. They also utilise these graves to put pressure on the government to acknowledge its role in the conflicts and to pay reparations to people in Teso.

The ambivalent meaning of the mass graves/memorials outlined above was well expressed in Sarah's account, when she spoke about the mass grave in Obalanga:

It is good to have those graves here to a certain extent. But it keeps on giving you memories (...) because whenever you cross, you see. I wish the community had thought it wise (...) It could have been [better for] people to be buried in their own ancestral burial grounds, but unfortunately some people could not be identified. (...) But at the same time, it can build on the history of Teso. Our

²⁰ For example, Teso Cattle Rustling and War Victims Association represents over one million claimants in the whole of Teso region and has filed four separate cases to claim compensation from the Ugandan government (Justice and Reconciliation Project 2012b: 8).

suffering. How Iteso suffered. And those ones could be used as a reference. (Interview 2 April 2013)

Acknowledgements

This paper is based on fieldwork in Teso (between 2011-2014) made possible by an Elsa Neumann scholarship, Freie Universität Berlin and financial support by the DAAD. Permission was obtained from the Uganda National Council of Science and Technology.

I would like to thank Professor Susan Reynolds Whyte, Professor Ute Luig and the anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments. My utmost gratitude goes to the many people in Teso who allocated their time to my research. Especially to my host families in Katakwi and Amuria: *Ejalama noi!*

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