



**UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)**

**Conflict legacies**

*Understanding youth's post-peace agreement practices in Yumbe, north-western Uganda*

Both, J.C.

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Both, J. C. (2017). Conflict legacies: Understanding youth's post-peace agreement practices in Yumbe, north-western Uganda.

**General rights**

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

**Disclaimer/Complaints regulations**

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

## INTRODUCTION

### *'WHERE DO YOU GO WITH YOUR CHILDREN?'*

I arrived in Yumbe town, close to the border with south Sudan<sup>1</sup> in the far north-west of Uganda, on the eve of the country's 2011 presidential elections. President Museveni was running for presidency for the fourth time. That night a number of cows arrived at the Resident District Commissioner's (RDC) office. By daylight everybody could witness the overnight delivery. The cows were to be distributed among women's groups on behalf of the ruling president's National Resistance Movement (NRM). Other election-courting practices came in the form of last-minute cash that was to be distributed. In the course of the following day, initial outcome reports stated that Museveni could win the elections in Yumbe District for the first time since its creation in 2001. In the days thereafter, when this was confirmed, many men I spoke to said the NRM had won the elections in Yumbe because women had massively voted in favour of the party. Yet, according to the men, it was not only these few cows or small amounts of money distributed to women during election time that had most influenced their votes. Instead, they argued that women's fear of renewed conflict had played a large role in determining the election outcome.

In the run-up to the 2011 elections, women's groups from the leading political party NRM had been visiting Yumbe and moving around the countryside allegedly asking women the rhetorical question where they would run to with their children once another war had broken out. The suggestion made was that if people would not vote for Museveni, whose main promise was 'stability', war was likely to break out again in Uganda. Between 1979 and 2002, the region had experienced prolonged unrest and armed conflict, until the Uganda National Rescue Front II (UNRF II) signed a peace agreement with the Ugandan government in 2002. The question asked by the women's groups touched upon the difficult experiences faced by women in Yumbe during these decades: repeatedly having to run for their lives and out of despair, sometimes even leaving their children behind.

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this dissertation, reference is made to 'south Sudan' when referring to the region north of Yumbe before 9 July 2011. On this date, south Sudan became independent and became known as the Republic of South Sudan (ROSS). Depending on the time referred to in this dissertation (before or after 9 July 2011), I will use 'south Sudan' or 'ROSS'. My interlocutors, however, never made the distinction; and where I cite them, I will use their reference to 'south Sudan'.

'That war was the worst. You have to run away, naked or with clothes. Even children, you just leave them behind. Why? Because of the gunshot; when you hear it, you just forget everything. So many people lost their life.' (Faridah, an elderly interlocutor speaking about the 1980 'liberation war').<sup>2</sup>

Or as a 29-year-old woman recounted in late 2011:

... one of the reasons [that women voted for Museveni] was that when the president came for campaigns, he was threatening people's lives. He moved with these big guns<sup>3</sup> ... [They] were thought to protect him but you know when a woman sees a gun ... they [women] can reflect [on] the past war. [And they ask themselves] 'Ah... where do I go with my children' [when war breaks out]? So they [the women] said: 'No ... this one is going to be war [if the opposition wins], so I don't want to run again.' That was one reason. Secondly, they were giving them some money. (Video interview, 11 November 2011)

The idea that a fear of war strongly influenced women's votes came up during a focus group discussion (FGD) with male youth, after which they explained that for them—as young men—fear and this kind of intimidation were never a factor in determining their votes:

O: But ... men were not afraid of this war they were talking about!

R + A: We don't fear...

B: ... because for us, some of us now have the experience.

(FGD in Yumbe Town with young men about the elections of 2011, 25 August 2012 )

These interview fragments show how very specific strategies were employed to convince women to vote for the ruling party, while the male population in Yumbe—especially those men who had no fear of going to war because they 'have [...] experience' with war already—had to be appeased in a different manner by the re-running president.

A large proportion of former army and rebel men in Yumbe and the wider region had been waiting years (sometimes decades) for their pensions (as former soldiers under Amin) or compensation for renouncing armed rebellion (ex-rebels from the UNRF and UNRF II). In order to contain any initiatives of resistance<sup>4</sup> and the temptation to join armed opposition forces during or after the elections, the president sent his own brother,

---

<sup>2</sup> See also reference to such narratives in the work of Harrell-Bond 1986: 43-44. Alava & Lanken (2016) have recently shown that women in the war-affected Acholi region were preparing to run away 'with their children and most valuable belongings—just in case things turn sour' on the eve of the 2016 presidential elections. It is not clear from the article whether this behaviour was a direct consequence of political campaign threats as described here, or whether this was initiated by the women themselves. It is obvious that 'ghosts of the past', as the authors refer to people's past experiences, inform such behaviour, even if exact war-time experiences may not be wholly the same, and the experience of having to run and leave your children behind may be a specific West Nile experience during the liberation war.

<sup>3</sup> The elections of 2011 were also observed to be extremely militarized in other parts of the country, and in particular in Kampala (Kagoro 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Occasionally, dissatisfaction by these former combatants was expressed in the media, where they would threaten to form a new rebel group (UNRF III) because of unfulfilled promises by the government. Such threats by ex-combatants in the region are not uncommon; see for example Lecoutere & Titeca 2007.

Major General Salim Saleh, to soothe their grievances. The major general had about him an aura of largesse (consisting of belated pension payments, other forms of compensation, and development projects). On his arrival a few months before the elections, he and his men set up camp in a forested part of Arua Town. Elderly former soldiers, majors, and ex-rebels from Yumbe District flocked around the camp tirelessly, servile and respectful but with a strong sense of entitlement. They all wanted their individual share of the promises embodied by the presence of Major General Salim Saleh, flattered him, and flirted with political campaigning to fall under his grace. However, soon after President Museveni secured a new term in the 2011 elections, General Salim Saleh left with almost all promises unfulfilled (but, some argued, with his own entrepreneurial pockets stuffed).<sup>5</sup>

\*\*\*

In the above cases, important mechanisms emerge that are crucial to this dissertation. They are related to what I refer to as *the memory of conflict* in a broad sense. First: this *memory of conflict is politically exploited* by the ruling party when soliciting votes and thereby governing the ways in which the electorate conceptualizes the past (Cole 1998; Nyirubugara 2013). Second, *the memory of conflict* is an important point of reference, a source of fear, and inspires action (a specific way of voting) in women after eight years of peace in Yumbe District (i.e. it makes them vote for the party that promises stability).<sup>6</sup> Third, these memories of past conflicts are also exploited by former soldiers and rebels, who employ them by threatening to go ‘back to the bush’<sup>7</sup> if they are not ‘paid’; and this helps them enforce financial and political benefits, or the renewed promise thereof, at such politically critical moments as election periods. Fourth, the political use of such references to the memories of conflict provokes young men into feeling in certain ways. The men tap into collective, family, and personal memories of conflict to declare themselves experienced to deal with conflict circumstances. The fragment quoted from the FGD above shows foremost that, as the next generation—as youths and as males—the young men feel they have to take up a position within the dominant political manipulations of the memories of conflict. In their discourse, they refer to experiencing violent conflict before, to the option of renewed conflict, and—not least—they make implicit reference to their potential and fearless participation in conflict, if need be.

In other words, *memories of conflict* are used to impose fear and motivate certain types of acting by various parties in the so-called ‘post-conflict’ social fabric. These various practices described above are an example of how legacies from the past give shape to a range of emotional, social, and political practices in the region today. These

---

<sup>5</sup> See RLP 2014: 126-127.

<sup>6</sup> One important election promise by the incumbent president’s NRM was ‘stability’, a word found on many of its campaign posters and t-shirts. The need for such stability was promoted by using military means. About such a form of stability, Decker says: ‘Militarised notions of security promote protection yet rely on institutionalizing fear and violence at all levels of society, thus creating and sustaining profound insecurity, especially among women.’ (Decker 2014: 173, referring to Mama & Okazawa-Rey 2012)

<sup>7</sup> Going ‘back’ aims to refer to the memory of their armed rebellion before, and it can thus be seen as a political use of memory.

observations and the analysis of such practices are at the core of this research's interest, which questions the *legacies of conflict* in a community now officially living in peace since a peace agreement was signed in 2002. The opening case study, which elaborates on different groups' entanglements with *memories of conflict*, is one empirical example that shows the predominance of past experiences in present-day acting by people in Yumbe. While the period of elections can be seen as providing a particular vital conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 2005; Berckmoes 2014: 151), especially with regard to the (ab)uses of memory (Cole 1998; Nyirubugara 2013), in this thesis the analysis of the legacies of conflict will be extended to ordinary practices in daily life in Yumbe, in order to gain insight into these legacies' quotidian prominence. I argue that the study of people's practices in the present can shed light on whether a real break is experienced in the social-political domain between the past and the present: a past that was marked by violent conflict and marginality, and a present that is officially peaceful after a peace agreement signed in 2002 that included commitment towards undoing the region's marginality and was meant to bring a definitive end to the region's recurring rebellions.

Whether one sees the young men, referred to above and responding with 'we are fearless' and 'we have the experience of war', as trapped in symbolic violence, as victims of political manipulation forcing them to make such statements, as inherent warriors, or as skilled navigators of the discursive game around elections, the depth of their expressions and the legacies they touch upon deserve further analysis. For, departing from the notion that the region has a very long history of experiencing armed conflict (let alone all other types of crises), the question is this: how can such a history be shaken off or transformed into something more positive, without expecting a continuation, a reproduction of these kinds of conflicts? In other words, where lies the capacity for inhabiting peace for a society and individuals, both of which have been shaped by an environment that had violent conflict as one of its dominant historical characteristics and have suffered a constant political reiteration of violent stereotypes? This research investigates the persistent forces of violent legacies and how they structure experiences in a society (Dumont 1992: 277, cited by Peluso & Watts 2001: 6), versus the society's and the individual's capacities to instigate social change vis-à-vis a burdened history (Ortner 2006; Van Dijk et al. 2007: Introduction). The research studies this question from the particular perspective of those who grew up with conflict and now mature in times of peace. I argue this generational focus is particularly relevant for understanding the impact of the legacies of past conflicts on society (see Quesada 1998; Dickson-Gómez 2002; Uvin 2007; Tomlinson 2012). To better situate the relevance of this research question, more insight into the region's historical background is required. Below a brief overview is provided, while in the following chapters (2, 3, and 4) this history will be addressed in more detail.

## HISTORY OF TURMOIL

War broke out in what is currently known as Yumbe District in 1979 when Idi Amin was chased from power.<sup>8</sup> Amin had relied strongly on recruits from the West Nile region—more importantly, on Muslims from what are now Koboko and Yumbe District.<sup>9</sup> Since colonial times, the people from this region had been among those overrepresented in the Ugandan army; and Muslims, in particular, had few alternative paths to social advancement available to them (Meagher 1990: 66). When Amin, after his coup in 1971, became increasingly suspicious of dissent within the army, he gradually narrowed his trust base to the Muslims of his ‘home region’ and to Nubians (Hansen: 1977; Rwehururu 2008). Soldiers from other regions and ethnic groups were increasingly at risk of being killed (see Chapter 2, this dissertation; Rwehururu 2008). As a consequence of this support base during his cruel reign, when Amin was ousted his former military men fled across the borders to hide themselves (along with their accumulated property—see Woodward 1988; Rwehururu 2008) in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (then Zaire) and Sudan. Some of them were too slow to escape and were brutally and publicly executed with their family members in Yumbe.<sup>10</sup> Revenge for Amin’s regime not only befell his former soldiers and commanders (who had already mostly fled), but when previous president Obote returned to power in 1980, his army (the Uganda National Liberation Army—hereafter UNLA) widely sought revenge in the whole region, holding the people of West Nile collectively responsible for the atrocities committed under Amin (Harrell-Bond 1986: 40; Leopold 2005a, 2005b). People from Yumbe and its neighbouring districts fled en masse to southern Sudan and Zaire, returning to Uganda to their destroyed and looted properties only from 1986 onwards.<sup>11</sup>

While still in exile, soldiers and commanders from Amin’s exiled army formed the rebel groups of the Former Uganda National Army (FUNA) and later the Uganda National Rescue Front (UNRF),<sup>12</sup> with the aim to return to power and protect their own people. The latter army contained primarily recruits from Yumbe and, to a certain extent, reconciled with the new National Resistance Movement (NRM) government headed by Yoweri Museveni when he came to power in 1986.<sup>13</sup> From the early 1990s onwards, the region often fell victim to the Sudan (Khartoum)-supported rebel group West Nile Bank Front (WNBF); and after tension rose within this group, it split and the UNRF II was formed in 1997. The latter group recruited primarily from what is now known as Yumbe District. The WNBF was officially considered defeated in 1997 by the Ugandan army. The Ugandan

---

<sup>8</sup> A much deeper time frame of histories of conflict would do more justice to the role of violence and militarism in Yumbe’s history; these complex dynamics will be addressed extensively in Chapter 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 2.

<sup>10</sup> Field notes, JB.

<sup>11</sup> For more details, see chapters 2 and 3. Some people did not return before the late 1980s, after experiencing brutal SPLA violence in Sudan targeted against them.

<sup>12</sup> In retrospect, the UNRF became known as UNRF I after the UNRF II had formed in the 1990s.

<sup>13</sup> Bogner and Neubert (2013) speak of reconciliation taking place in 1985/1986, but Kutesa (2006) reports a longer-standing agreement.

army, together with the SPLA, which was partly based in and supported by Uganda, had carried out attacks against the WNBF on Sudanese territory.<sup>14</sup> The UNRF II, however, was active until 1999, at least until before it slowly started engaging in peace talks with the government of Uganda. The talks finally resulted in a peace agreement in 2002. The national amnesty laws of 1999 provided that the ex-combatants could give up their armed struggle and return home without fear of prosecution.

Overall, the 1980s and 1990s were especially turbulent years. Besides the various activities by local rebel groups (WNBF and UNRF II) who were supported by the Khartoum government, the SPLA rebels in southern Sudan were supported by Museveni and occasionally also engaged in killing in this region.<sup>15</sup> Little of this history is known beyond the region. While a large-scale rehabilitation plan was finally developed (as promised in the extensively negotiated peace agreement of 2002) for this region by a stakeholder conference in 2005, most NGOs soon thereafter diverted their attention to the parts of Uganda affected by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA).<sup>16</sup> Thus, despite a strongly rebel-negotiated and extensive peace agreement that included many promises for 'rehabilitation', few of these promises were properly implemented, which left many promises still pending in September 2013 when I last visited the field (Both & Reis 2014). For this reason, and because Bogner and Neubert (2013) have called the peace in Yumbe a 'negative peace',<sup>17</sup> I speak in this dissertation of young people's post-peace agreement practices instead of their post-conflict or peace-time practices. I thereby question the official lines often drawn between conflict and post-conflict as two significantly different phases. I speak of the last decade and a half in Yumbe as 'post-peace agreement' rather than as post-conflict, in order to pay attention both to practices and processes that endure and to those that have been marked by a break or change since peace was signed in Yumbe in 2002.<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>14</sup> Leopold 2005a: ch. 1.

<sup>15</sup> Prunier 2004 has shown how the West Nile region became part of the war terrains of Uganda, DRC, and Sudan in the late 1990s. And such cross-border dimensions of conflict are still present (think of the ADF in DRC and the Ugandan government's unsolicited support for Salva Kirr, president of the still new Republic of South Sudan, when war broke out in December 2013).

<sup>16</sup> 'In Uganda itself, the focus of activities has shifted to the adjacent Acholiland since the military displacement of the LRA to nearby regions of the neighbouring countries. Many ideas for projects in West Nile have therefore been shelved, and most development organizations have not fulfilled the expectations they created during the peace negotiations. An extensive World Bank programme (Northern Uganda Social Action Fund, NUSAF) continues to be an important exception' (Bogner & Neubert 2013: 68). Another important exception has been a vocational skills and training programme that ran from 2006 until 2009 but was no longer functional when I first reached the field in 2010.

<sup>17</sup> They suggest that in some cases '... it might be necessary, for the sake of achieving at least a "negative" or scaled-down version of peace, to opt for "second-best" solutions and to accept that a peace agreement will serve the interests of the fighters and make them its main beneficiaries. It may also imply accepting that those among them who are responsible for serious human rights violations will receive amnesty and cannot be punished.' And they state: 'We argue that it is particularly in cases of negotiated peace that peacemaking is a political process rather than an attempt to pursue the ideal of a "positive peace" permitting reconciliation and transitional justice' (Bogner & Neubert 2013: 57).

<sup>18</sup> For similar approaches questioning the demarcation line between peace and conflict, see Richards 2005 and Debos 2016.

## LEGACIES OF CONFLICT

In this dissertation, focusing on the legacies of conflict means centring this study on the forces of history that are enduring and on the shapes these take in the present, in order to understand contemporary society in Yumbe. By speaking of *legacies of conflict*, rather than *legacies of violence*, I aim to draw attention to the social experience of conflict as containing more than the experience of violence only (see Lubkeman 2008: 10-12). Conflict has also generated opportunities, for example, for some interlocutors, while cultural, social, and political experiences other than violence might have equally deeply influenced the experiences of 'warscape inhabitants' (ibid.). Examples of such social experiences are, for example, the fact that inequality and envy were important factors fuelling conflict that may or may not persist in the present, but will not be easily captured under the notion of 'violence'.<sup>19</sup> By speaking of *legacies of conflict*, I do not mean to suggest that it is evident or known what these legacies are, nor do I aim to assess simply their effects. Rather, what these legacies are and how they operate in contemporary society is a research question here that requires further investigation. Following Stoler 2008, who argues that speaking of 'colonial legacy' as if it is a given what this legacy is does not contribute to our understanding of the pervasive impact of such specific pasts in the present. She argues that speaking in terms of such rubrics 'fail[s] to capture the evasive space of imperial formations past and present as well as the perceptions and practices by which people are forced to reckon with features of those formations in which they remain vividly and imperceptibly bound. They also gloss over the creative, critical, and sometimes costly measures people take to become less entangled' (ibid. 193).

In the opening of this chapter, I argued that the *memories of conflict* and the ways in which they are employed by various parties can be seen as one influential legacy of conflict in the present. But these memories are not static and given; they are attuned to various interests and gain their particular shape in the ethnographic present. They are powerful references to a past full of suffering—evoked and exploited by some, inspiring fear in others. The study of memory here can be understood as a study 'to understand the way people remember and forget their past' (Berliner 2005: 206),<sup>20</sup> acknowledging that memories are subject to interpretation as well as manipulation and are important to matters of identity, as they are collectively or at least partially shared.<sup>21</sup> In the examples above, memories come to the surface foremost as discursive and as provoking identification practices ('we are fearless'), actions (specific voting behaviour), and emotions (fear). There are also forms of remembering—for example, bodily remembering—which are not easily translated into words (Culbertson 1995), and these surface less easily in everyday speech. This suggests, then, that in order to study

---

<sup>19</sup> Even if these factors can be understood as related to structural violence and ordinary violence respectively.

<sup>20</sup> Berliner (2005a: 198) warns against the over-extension of the concept of memory and anthropologists' extensive use of the term without being precise. He is particularly concerned with the overlap between the concepts of 'culture' and 'memory'. In the following pages, I am explicit about which domains of memory are relevant for this dissertation and its research questions—namely, 'memories of conflict'.

<sup>21</sup> These remarks clearly correspond with the opening case study concerning the (ab)use of the memories of conflict in Yumbe. (See also Cole 1998; Fabian 2003; Connerton 2008; Nyirubugara 2013).



memory,<sup>22</sup> the study of narratives in which references to memories explicitly emerge should not be the only field of study. There should be room for studying the unspeakable, as something that may not reach the ethnographic surface other than in silences—or in other forms, such as through emotions, habits, identity questions. This particular concern will be further elaborated in the next chapter, which details the ethnographic methods that allow one to come closer to an understanding of the pervasiveness of legacies of conflict that, for example, endure in the form of embodied memories.

## HISTORY, STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

In the opening cases to this chapter, I have shown how historical experiences can strongly structure experiences long after events have taken place. This happened when political campaigns spoke to memories—embodied or otherwise—and revived them, informing how people acted. However, historical experiences not only structure but are also actively and reflexively engaged with by various actors. The analysis above of what memories are can illustrate this dynamic interplay between structure and agency. For example, embodied memories become part of what the actor carries with him and what influences him in the ways in which he contributes to social dynamics that shape society, politics, and an economy. At the same time, the ‘creative, critical and sometimes costly measures people take to become less entangled’ with historical legacies (Stoler 2008: 193) deserve attention. While my focus here is on histories of conflict as influentially structuring social experiences and informing practices in the present, an important word of caution is required. ‘Legacies of the past’ (such as in my case-specific ‘legacies of conflict’) are often invoked to explain current practices (Leopold 2006; Decker 2014) with good reason, but they never explain fully the situation in the present (see Rosenkrantz 2009: 49-50). Despite the fact that violence (as one of the dominant experiences in conflict) is often seen as a deeply influential force set apart from other experiences<sup>23</sup> and as a structuring event (Dumont 1992: 277, cited by Peluso & Watts 2001: 6; Sommers 2015: 31, referring to the work of Nordstrom 2004: 59-60), other older structures are for example still influential in societies emerging from the past, by which is meant that factors other than conflict, such as persisting inequality and marginality, are equally important to consider as structures operating in interaction with agents in societies emerging from conflict.<sup>24</sup> Such structures may be enduring, despite a formal peace agreement that has put an end to open conflict. Furthermore, new political, social, and economic realities potentially form new structures to reckon with. Thus, while the focus on the legacies of past conflicts in present-day practices is relevant to our understanding of post-conflict society in all its nuances and functioning, other structures and people’s ways of engaging with these

---

<sup>22</sup> ‘Forgetting’, as the counterpart of remembering, is equally part of the social processes here described, since together they are part of what is considered memory work (Cole 1998: 627; Fabian 2003: 490).

<sup>23</sup> See for example Cole 1998: 627, and Nordstrom & Lubkeman’s critique of Nordstrom (Lubkeman 2008, Introduction).

<sup>24</sup> These structures are not completely disconnected from conflict, as conflict often springs from these.

structures—their co-creation of these (see Van Dijk et al. 2007; Vigh 2009) in the present—also require space in the analysis.

With regard to the legacies of conflict, the interest here lies not in tracing direct lines from the past to the present, but rather in questioning other structures and agentive processes that engage with, mediate, and potentially challenge these legacies. In other words, I am interested in the negotiation between structure and actor (Van Dijk et al. 2007: 6), with a focus on considering ‘how social situations appear to be governed by underlying or overarching principles and predicaments but still produce their own forms of reflexivity, their own forms of thinking about these structures and the actors involved that inform their agency’ (ibid. 8). A focus on agency allows for the notion that people make their own history and are not only made by history (Ortner 2006: 2); and an empirical focus on practice in this study, as core to practice theory, allows us to empirically examine how people tend to make this history. This focus will allow a *grounding* of our understanding of the interplay between agency and structure in social practices (Ortner 1984, 2006: 4; Shepler 2014).

One way of applying this notion of agency vis-à-vis a conflict-burdened history occurs in the work of Mark Leopold. Portraying the West Nile region as emerging from a history marked by violence and marginality, in his book *Inside West Nile* (2005a) Leopold describes how a small group of adult and elderly informants in Arua aimed to change the course of this history. In the late 1990s, during Leopold’s fieldwork visit, he found them in the process of reconciling with the central Ugandan government through the ‘rewriting of history’. They aimed to do so by giving better readings and explanations of the past and ‘to justify themselves as the victims, rather than the perpetrators, of the violence and marginality of their history’ (Leopold 2005b: 212). One could argue that they wanted to contest being collectively associated with the district’s violent history and, in particular, contest the association with the brutal Amin regime (ibid.; see also Leopold 2005a). Leopold even referred to this agenda of the elders as the people trying to awaken from a ‘historical nightmare’ (2005b: 213) by taking the course of history into their own hands, through reflection and a re-writing of that history. This is a relevant example for the kind of practices vis-à-vis historical legacies and people’s engagement in social change that I aim to study in this dissertation. However, as an empirical example it also raises a pertinent question that speaks to the core of this dissertation. Leopold’s work provokes a question about the extent to which these initiatives of the elders in the regional urban centre of Arua in the late 1990s resonate(d) with sentiments and practices in places like Yumbe, at the time lying at the margins of what was then Arua District. And how well did and do recurrent peacemaking initiatives by local leaders (elders) and intellectuals in the region<sup>25</sup> resonate with those who do not belong to the educated elite or elderly people, but are ‘common people’ in West Nile—more particularly, young men?<sup>26</sup> In other words,

---

<sup>25</sup> The Aringa Obongi Peace Initiative Committee (AROPIC) was formed largely by a community of elders that were deeply engaged in ‘bringing the UNRF II rebels back home’, resulting in the 2002 Yumbe peace agreement.

<sup>26</sup> Leopold somewhere states about his elderly informants: ‘It could be very reasonably argued that I have overemphasised the role of a small (elbeit influential) number of elder males....’ (2005a: 158).

practices that actively attempt to negotiate legacies of violence are likely to be the political project of some actors but not of others. This suggests that multiple practices in this field are likely to be found in a 'post'-conflict society. The ethnographic material in subsequent chapters explores such practices and the variety therein as they emerged among youth in Yumbe.

## YOUTH, MEMORY AND GENERATIONS

The aim of this research is then to capture the influence of legacies of conflicts in particularly as they present themselves among young people in Yumbe, a generation born and raised in periods of conflict, while later maturing after the signing of peace. We can argue that for such a generation, memories are influential in the dynamic process of identity-making, especially also in 'post-conflict settings' (Onuoha 2013: 2185-2186). Youth is considered a formative period, and it is argued that 'memory plays out differently in different generations, but that the period of adolescence and early adulthood that is often linked to "youth" is the primary period for the *generational imprinting of political memories*' (Onuoha 2013: 2191, referring to Shuman & Scott 1989, emphasis mine).

Young people that feel marginalized can eventually use political memory as a tool for mobilization when they connect their present-day grievances to memories of marginalization and aim to air their anger or to improve their situation (Onuhua 2013: 2191). Indeed, memory is a particularly malleable tool for political mobilization, and this is often considered the danger of memory in post-conflict societies (Nyirubugara 2013; Onuoha 2013):

Memories of persecution, suffering and marginalization can sustain group identities, and even after festering for years or decades can translate into a basis for future violence. As the proverbial 'double-edged sword', memory practices can either be harnessed in fostering post-conflict reconciliation and overcoming religious, ethnic, social and political cleavages, or be deployed in perpetuating and hardening deep-seated conflicting positions. (Onuoha 2013: 2182-2183)

While Onuoha centralizes political memory, on another level one can question the role of family experiences and how they shape young people's practices or outlook on the world (see for example Quesada 1998; Dickson-Gómez 2002), especially since primary socialization and learning generally take place in the family and extended family realm. This is not to say that family memories are not political—they can relate to strongly to political events or politicized interpretations of events—but that they are at the same time 'closer' to people and potentially formative on a less conscious level. As we shall see in this dissertation family memories of traumatic events, can also be seen as potentially harmful to the post-conflict context. Political memories of persecution and marginalization can have negative impacts; in the same way, memories of traumatic family/personal events are associated with potential social dysfunctioning and the reproduction of traumatized worldviews, which in turn may facilitate new conflict in the next generation (Quesada 1998; Dickson-Gómez 2002; De Jong et al. 2015). Thus, there are various dangers associated with the political use of memory and the general

transference of memories of conflict and violence to young people that have no first-hand experiences of conflict themselves—or had only at a young age—while at the same time youth are expected to epitomize societal hope. This hope arises with regard to the idea of the predicament of history versus the abilities of ‘new’ generations:

What we call disorder and ruin, others who are younger live as the natural order of things; and perhaps with ingenuity they are going to master it precisely because they no longer seek their bearings where we took ours. In the din of demolitions, many sullen passions, many hypocrisies or follies and many false dilemmas also disappear.... But underneath the clamor a silence is growing, and expectation. Why could it not be a hope? (Merleau-Ponty 1964b: 23, cited in Finnström 2008: 244)

Acknowledging the ambiguous position of youth vis-à-vis their potential engagement with the history of conflict, this dissertation aims to apply a fine-grained ethnographic approach<sup>27</sup> to uncover some of the crucial mechanisms of the interactions between memory, generation, and conflict. It is important to recognize that such memories may be elusive (Cole 1998: 611) and only occasionally come to the ethnographic surface. Based on Onuoha’s (2013) article on young people’s mobilization in a pro-secessionist movement in Nigeria and the politicization of memory to address present-day grievances, and aware that memory is subject to manipulation, it is equally important to ask questions such as the following: What, if at all existent, is *the project* of young people in Yumbe vis-à-vis history (remember the project of the elders in Leopold’s work referred to above)? To what extent do they engage reflexively with the potentially structuring component of the memories of conflict? Which emotions prevail in relation to the memories of conflict? And how do the young act upon such emotions?

By raising these questions, this study brings back into focus the question of history in the study of youth. It pays attention to where young people come from and how this shapes their post-peace agreement practices. While an increasing number of studies aims to address the plight of youth in Africa, this historical perspective has largely been missing. A contemporary perspective has been dominant because of significant challenges facing young people in the present in Africa (and arguably elsewhere) (see Christiansen et al. 2006; Mains 2007; Honwana 2012; Sommers 2015). A dominant question in studies of African youth concerns what young people do in and after war-time and how to understand their practices (see for example Utas 2005; Vigh 2006; Coulter 2008; Berckmoes 2014; Sommers 2015). The focus is often on the latest episodes of conflict and on how young people emerge from these. (One notable exception is the deeper time-frame included in the study of urban youth in Burundi by Berckmoes (2014).) In this dissertation, history as a shaper of young people’s practices holds a central position, in order to understand patterns of reproduction and social change and, in turn, to understand when and where post-peace agreement practices show significant breaks with a troubled past.

---

<sup>27</sup> As suggested by Argenti & Schramm 2010: 19.

## STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

This introduction has embedded the research questions and the theoretical framework in an understanding of the memory practices in Yumbe, taking an example from what happened around election times. Powerful questions emerged from the case material presented, a case in which people acted upon the political manipulation and strong forces of history in this particular part of the country. The remainder of the dissertation engages with these questions following the structure presented below:

Chapter 1 concentrates around the questions of how to carry out research on the past in the present and provides an account of methodological challenges. In addition, the research setting of Yumbe is introduced, and particular attention is paid to the profile of the youths and their parents that constitute the research population.

Chapter 2 explores the historical sources on the people in Aringa County—now Yumbe District. Limited resources are available simply because many authors/researchers did not reach Yumbe in particular. This chapter sheds a confrontative light on the long history with violence of the people of the West Nile region, from slave raiding and ivory hunting to colonial occupation and post-independence armed conflicts. It shows why questions about ‘conflict legacies’ are pertinent for the region.

The remaining chapters focus on an analysis of the empirical data. Chapters 3 and 4 engage with questions of the concrete legacies of conflict and their persistence in Yumbe. The chapters offer analyses of the intergenerational dynamics as well as of the dynamics between the margins (Yumbe) and the centre (read ‘the president’). In chapters 5 through 7, I analyse young people’s everyday practices in Yumbe. These chapters illustrate how young people’s references to deprived childhood and their social imagination (influenced by the past) influence their practices in the present. While some practices are new and creatively engage with the memories of a more troubled past (see Chapter 6 on khat use and Chapter 7 on migration), others show a more reiterative process of identity formation in accordance with definitions of violent masculinity and persistent Aringa stereotypes (Chapter 5). The data in these chapters together provide an insight into processes of social reproduction as well as breaks vis-à-vis a troubled past.

More specifically, people’s recurring experiences with violent conflict in Yumbe and the impact thereof on social life today form the theme of Chapter 3. This chapter is oriented particularly towards those people who were victimized in one of the many armed conflicts between 1979 and 2002 and towards the factors that continue to trigger their painful memories. In their accounts, this group of parents establish a direct link between enduring poverty and the inability to overcome their experiences in the past. From their narratives, we gain an impression of how their offspring are shaped by their parents’ experiences.

In Chapter 4 a different group of parents in Yumbe and their relation to their children (sons in particular) is placed at the centre of the discussion. This chapter addresses the theme of militarism and focuses on how former military fathers lost property and status in the post-Amin period of exile and how their sons relate to this lost wealth they never had but have heard of. The chapter portrays how Uganda’s contemporary politics plays a role in encouraging many people in Yumbe to hold on to

military identities. The impact thereof on fathering and the social reproduction of this militarized masculine model are explored in this chapter.

These chapters (3 and 4) show that there are reasons to believe that young people's perspectives on life in Yumbe have been shaped significantly by the forces of history and the intimate transference of its outcomes through parent-child relationships as well as political centre-periphery relationships. How then do young people themselves currently engage with these legacies? The remaining chapters are predominantly focused on young people's positions, perspectives, and practices in Yumbe today. In their practices, we see how they try to position themselves vis-à-vis such a past and which resources they can engage with to challenge this past.

Chapter 5 focuses on the diversity among youth categories in Yumbe and the limited resources they possess to establish a position in society. We see that, depending on their histories so far, young people have gained insight into life and emphasize certain resources and positions above others. These themes are discussed as *habitus* and are related to the social imaginary of youths in Yumbe today. For poorly educated and disappointed youth, we see a strong fall-back on Aringa masculine identities, identities that allow them to think of themselves as natural fighters but also identities that are perfectly fit to engage in the high-risk migration to Juba popular in the period from 2005 to 2013 (see chapter 7). We also see that there are young people that actively try to break with a past of violence, who want to live better lives than their parents and who are unlikely to be drawn into rebel groups that might be formed in the future.

In Chapter 6, insight is shared by young people on the use of *khat*. Under conditions of high unemployment and abundant free time, it is attractive for youth to become involved in chewing *khat*. However, this chapter suggests there is more to understand from the use of *khat* in Yumbe than just leisure. *Khat* promises some youths ways out of difficult memories and frustrations. The discussion about *khat* also offers a new lens on the social fabric in Yumbe through the perspectives of young men. In their defence of *khat* use, they come with very insightful concerns about social relations and social order in society, concerns that can be related back to the experience of instability and insecurity not so long ago, and to their wish—and also perhaps their inability—to do things differently.

Chapter 7, the last chapter, focuses on the practices of youth in search of work and better futures. Growing up close to the national border and the recent developments in the ROSS play an important role in their search. In this chapter, I also show that migration has been and still is a last resort for youth and elders who transgress social norms and have to flee or are temporarily expelled from the region, and that it tends to be young women who pull the shortest straw in this process.

After these broad but in-depth explorations of transmissions of memory, political exploitations of the past by various actors, and present-day practices of youths, the Conclusion aims to answer the main research question about the legacies of conflict in Yumbe and aims to draw attention to the way in which young people in Yumbe are positioned and are positioning themselves differently with regard to the legacies of armed conflict, violence, and military identities.