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Conflict legacies

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

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1. ACCESSING PASTS IN THE PRESENT: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

INTRODUCTION

... the social world does not present itself as a series of separate analytical themes [...] we have to disentangle the multiple strands of social life in order to make analytic sense of them, before we reintegrate them into the synthesis of an ethnographic account [...] constructing a coherent account that does justice to the complexities of everyday life (Hammersly & Atkinson 2007: 193)

How does one do research on the impact of the past on the present, and how does one represent one's findings of 'legacies of conflict' as representative for the place they take in people's complex and composite everyday lives? The questions are especially important when one takes into account that 'not all memories are equally salient all of the time, and that the process of remembering and forgetting is tied to the very flow of social life and local people's attempts to control it' (Cole 1998: 627). This dissertation can approach such an aim only by carefully drawing out the fragments of daily life as observed in their complexity by contextualizing the references therein to the past, as well as the practices in which these references to the past are negotiated.

As shown in the Introduction, 'the political season' (i.e. the period of elections) can be considered a decisive moment in the individual's and the community's life, a period in which references to the past occur more frequently in everyday talk, in political speech, and in people's acting. In this chapter on my methodology, I show how other moments and informal conversations equally provoked people's references to the past. Important entrance points to the past were people's reflections on their personal histories, the narratives they used to recount their experiences and explain why they had become who they had become, or to explain certain choices they had made in their lives. Sometimes these fragments of 'biographic narratives' emerged spontaneously due to the informal qualitative methods used (such as walking together with my interlocutors); at other times, such accounts were solicited by me in informal conversations; in formal interviews; and, occasionally, accounts were registered on film.

I agree therefore with scholars who contend that an ethnographic approach, building on a variety of qualitative methods—such as informal interviews, participant observation, and walking while talking together—prove particularly fit for research of this kind, the kind that aims to assess the impact of past conflict and violence on communities in the present (Dickson-Gómez 2002; Argenti & Schramm 2010: 19). An inductive and

constant comparative approach (see Barnes 1996) led to the development of the research in the directions it went. Below follows an overview of the methodological approach and tools that lie at the heart of this dissertation and that shed light on the kind of data I was able to obtain. I begin, however, with the importance of building up relations of trust and allowing narratives to unfold. This was achieved by returning to the field several times. In addition, I describe the research population and setting.

UNFOLDING STORIES

Returning to the field several times allowed me to build up relations of trust with interlocutors and allowed stories to continue to unfold. Often matters could be more easily talked about when the heat of the moment had passed—for example, with regard to the elections referred to in the Introduction. Or with regards to violence; *‘Do you remember that war last year? It was us the organizers.’*²⁸ Muhamad here refers to a violent land conflict that took place between two clans in 2011 when I had just left Yumbe. I heard about it when I was in the Netherlands and had called him about it at the time, but he was evasive about what had taken place in the direct aftermath of events. Two years later during a short visit I made to Yumbe, he himself returned to the topic and suddenly narrated what had happened. He told me who organized the ‘war’ and how he and others had been in hiding in its aftermath for a time, while being sought by the police. He did not hide his own role in events, and he also told me which of the clans had so far won the legal actions that followed. I learned from others that they had won because of being politically and military well connected. I was also able to observe that the members of the two clans now greeted each other again in the small trading centre nearby and could talk about the matter, even though in a joking way that concealed some antagonism. It also became clear to me how one of the main organizers, an interlocutor of mine, had been in hiding in the nearby forest for one week; and after feeling increasingly uncomfortable with that, he left for the ROSS, first heading to Juba and later to Rumbek. By the time I returned in 2013, he was back at home and faced no problems staying there.

This example shows how returning to the field and following up on matters provided more in-depth data (such as how communities and individuals navigated the aftermath of a conflict) and how return allowed trust to grow. The latter was needed in order to become more informed about sensitive matters. Trust and the passing of time provided more insight into and access to my interlocutor’s reflections and social positions.

Within a period of three years, I was able to visit the field four times (for 13 months in total), which allowed stories to be continued. For young people who form the main focus of this research, following up on developments in their lives facilitated a focus on their agency and a much-needed contextualized perspective on youths and their

²⁸ With his reference to ‘war’, my interlocutor refers to a land conflict that had turned violent. Many young people had been mobilized to attack the people they saw as intruders on their land. Huts were set ablaze. Bows and arrows were taken by the attackers to the scene, but whether people were wounded or not remained unclear to me.

practices, something short-term ethnographic fieldwork less easily allows for.²⁹ I first arrived in Yumbe in July 2010 for a pilot study of almost two months. In 2011 I spent nine months in the field, in 2012 two months, and was there for a week in 2013. Contact was thereafter continued with some interlocutors through phone. The follow-up opportunities not only helped to build trust and allow for the heat of the moment to pass before asking detailed questions; it also allowed me to observe young people's trajectories (work, relationships) over a span of time: the trajectories, for example, of those who went to the ROSS (mostly to Juba) and returned home disillusioned, robbed, or motivated to go again, and how they tried to patch together a more meaningful future. I heard stories about and observed those who ran away from Yumbe and returned, and about those who gave birth, despite their young age, to one or more children (see Chapter 7). Returning over this period of time also allowed me to observe how some political agendas emerged during election times and were or were not followed up upon, and the sentiments this aroused. A few new NGOs began working in the area, as they were searching new fields of work, following a decline in their activities in the Acholi region.³⁰ In the meantime, the region became gradually more 'connected' as more telephone companies began providing services in the area and mobile phones became increasingly accessible within town.

After my 'final' return from the field, I kept in touch by phone and Facebook. Especially when in December 2013 conflict broke out in the new ROSS, I shared the worries about loved ones over the phone and was able to take note of people's increased feeling of insecurity in Yumbe (see Chapter 7). The new connectedness between the two regions (Yumbe/northern Uganda and Juba/ROSS) was quite obvious, and it became clear to which other regions young people tried to redirect their trajectories now that the path to the ROSS was unsafe. In other words, a frequent return to Yumbe between 2010 and 2013, coupled with the modern communication technology tools engaged with by more and more people in Yumbe, has facilitated to a certain extent the continuation in information flows over an extended period of time, sometimes providing more depth to my initial analysis and understanding of events.

WHY YUMBE?

Setting

This research project initially concerned the contribution of young people—in fragile contexts—to peace building or a relapse into conflict, and it was focused on Uganda. The work of Mark Leopold (2005a, 2009, 2010) and Kristof Titeca (2006) inspired my interest in focusing this particular project on the West Nile region. My choice for a different 'northern Ugandan region' was based on the idea that a large quantity of research was already being undertaken (including much research with a focus on youth) in the Acholi

²⁹ Which then risks the portrayal of youth as rather frozen in a particular time and space, while on many occasions young people's lives and their tactics prove to be highly dynamic and flexible once a longer-term perspective is sought (see Van Staple 2015 on young people entering and exiting gangs over the years).

³⁰ For which funding was reduced because the immediate 'humanitarian crisis' was over.

region, the region mostly affected by the infamous LRA since approximately 1986.³¹ For researchers and development organizations alike, ‘northern Uganda’ had become synonymous with the Acholi region, yet I came to learn that West Nile (like Karamoja in the north-east, a region I also considered for fieldwork) had had its own turbulent history with conflict—but one that had hardly been studied. Kristof Titeca in June 2010 suggested to me that undertaking research in Yumbe District would be worthwhile since it was the region within West Nile that had the most recent experience with conflict. The latest rebellion ended there in 2002 and had had a significant impact on young people. For example, many young ex-combatants after demobilization settled in Arua, the regional capital in which Titeca’s research had been concentrated. This was sufficient reason to focus my interest on Yumbe District.

Two reports by the Refugee Law Project in Kampala formed my main sources of information; and my initial access to the field was facilitated by the Transcultural Psychosocial Organisation (TPO) Uganda, an NGO that had been engaged in psycho-social support to Sudanese refugees in the West Nile region and had also been engaged in peace-building programmes with local people in Yumbe District. The modest infrastructure of TPO in Yumbe helped me to access the terrain and assess major themes during a pilot study in 2010. At the time of my first visit, TPO programmes were no longer active in Yumbe, as the latest peace-building programme had finished in 2009; but the organization was hoping for a renewal of funding by DANIDA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Denmark, which had funded activities to the end of 2009) for another year of working on reconciliation and psycho-social support. Nevertheless, this funding never materialized, showing that the area, eight years after the signing of the peace agreement, was no longer considered a ‘peace-building’ priority area, just as other comparable programmes had also already faded out.³² Initially, I was able to access the field with TPO’s ex-programme manager, a social worker by training. Many explorative FGDs about the ‘post-conflict developments’ in the district and recent past could be held with a large variety of people TPO had maintained close contact with before (local government staff at sub-county level, and groups of elders, religious leaders, women, and young people). After one intense week of such group discussions, I began to engage in informal conversations and observation, following up on these initial contacts and establishing further contacts with youths and other key interlocutors.

Youth in Yumbe: A generational approach

As explained, the core aim of this research from its inception was to focus on young people and their contribution—in fragile contexts—to peace-building or a relapse into

³¹ See for example Dolan 2003; Finnström 2006, 2008; Blatman 2009; Blatman & Annan 2010; Mergelsberg 2010; Annan et al. 2011; Vindevogel 2011, 2013

³² Surprisingly, only a bit later the region was re-discovered as a ‘post-conflict’ area by NGOs and regional community based organizations and gained renewed interest. This was related to the development of a Transitional Justice agenda in Uganda and based on the realization that the whole north of Uganda had known significant conflict experiences and that the larger region shared many post-conflict challenges that had not yet been resolved (see Chapter 3).

war. Although the research location proved relevant to my aim, based on a review of the available literature, the first pilot study in 2010 was intended to be largely explorative and to refine the research questions. My first encounters with ‘youths’ in Yumbe were with those who had fought in the UNRF II as ‘former child soldiers’,³³ as well as with ‘ordinary youth’ often spending their days looking for work. These youth were primarily born in exile (which lasted from approximately 1979 to 1986/7) or in the period just thereafter. Both were periods that were marked by upheaval. The youths’ names often testified to episodes of significant hardship, both in the political and social and family sphere at the time they were born. A young woman, for example, would be called Adiga (‘there is war’) or a young man Moses (for someone who was born on the way to exile).³⁴ I decided to focus on the generation that was born and grew up in periods of displacement and conflict, who were roughly between the ages of 20 and 30 (the generation born 1980–1989) when I started fieldwork in 2010. These youths had personal memories of and sometimes experience with active involvement in conflict in the past, while they were now experiencing a more peaceful period—a period in which, officially, new opportunities for youth, as for the whole of Yumbe District, were supposed to present themselves after an intensely negotiated peace agreement. The peace agreement would offer sufficient opportunity to study how young people were able to navigate this ‘new situation’ and would reflect on both past and present.

Soon, however, a bias entered my fieldwork. Due to the fact that most young women of this same generation had not been to school or only for one or two years, and to the fact that I was still trying to learn the Aringa language, it was easier to spontaneously interact with young men who in general spoke quite a bit of English, and to expand my network of youth interlocutors through them. In most cases, it took many more efforts to reach out to young women and spend time with them, as they were always busy working or caring for children—whereas many young men had considerable time at their disposal and spent their ‘free’ time in public spaces. Nevertheless, I was greatly helped by two female research assistants later on to carry out FGDs with young women, while a few personal relationships I built up with young women also provided insight into their situation. While young women are underrepresented in this dissertation, they are therefore not completely absent.

The young men I worked with had a difference in educational backgrounds: some very few had completed a university bachelor study, but the large majority had dropped out of school at the end of primary or in early secondary school. This had occurred when the paying of school fees became too expensive for their parents. Although they often explained their parent’s poverty in relation to the previous conflicts—for example, the looting of cattle and properties or the loss of a parent—many young men reported feeling

³³ A relatively small group in Yumbe compared with, for example, the Acholi region. Officially, upon disarmament the UNRF II had 135 ‘child soldiers’ in their ranks. I encountered them because they presented themselves as rather vocal (and upset) in several of the FGDs held in 2010 with youth groups organized by TPO (see Both & Reis 2014).

³⁴ Something not necessarily unique to this generation: in other generations also, such events had happened and similar types of names could be found. More comparative research on names, hardship, and generations would reveal the many intricate local dimensions of conflict, poverty, and social tensions in Yumbe’s history.

disappointed with their parents for not helping them to study further. They had high aspirations with regard to education but had not been able to live up to them. Many of their own parents had never studied and were predominantly farmers. Young women and young men also reported that marriage was a way to get away from a heavily burdened household³⁵ and to no longer have to share scarce resources with their many siblings. As one of my interlocutors explained his 'early' marriage (he had been around 16–17, his wife 15), he wanted to have 'someone to cook for me'. He also mentioned he had been really fond of his prospective wife before they got married; but coming from a context of having lost his mother and growing up with stepmothers in a large rural family, his statement about cooking made sense. Getting married and having someone to cook for you after working long days in the field meant securing food for oneself and not having to engage in quarrels with stepmothers and brothers about resource-sharing and not having to spend money on food in town. Furthermore, young wives would supply a major work force for agricultural work to young husbands. When I met this interlocutor, he was still very fond of his wife, with whom he had had four children by the age of 29.

Marriage could occur around the age of 15–16 for girls, while men were often a few years older when they got married. For the larger percentage of my interlocutors who were Muslim (80–90%), the tying of the marriage bond (the *nika*) by the imam was the institution that was of relevance. Their marriages were not registered with the local authorities. Most of my youthful interlocutors were already married and had on average one to three children.³⁶ Occasionally they already had more than one wife.³⁷ Ideally, they had received a piece of land to cultivate upon marriage and had been able to build their own hut. Many, however, had also moved to Yumbe town to look for work and lived in rented huts, explaining that either they had no access to land (their fathers had never had much), or that subsistence farming would not allow a young family these days to live properly and they therefore had abandoned it. Besides providing food to the family, men felt responsible for supplying salt, soap, sugar, paraffin, and other household essentials to the home, as well as for paying for medical treatment and school fees. That they often had a difficult time fulfilling this responsibility becomes clear in chapters 5, 6, and 7.

In Yumbe town, and even when migrating to Kampala, Arua or Juba, Aringa youths generally end up in the informal sector in heavy physical work that does not require any education. Therefore, many interlocutors refer to themselves as *jua kali*, a term originating from the informal sector in Nairobi (Swahili term for those working under

³⁵ Households are heavily burdened by poverty, among other reasons due to the large numbers of children per household as the outcome of high fertility and polygamous marriage (see Yumbe District Local Government Statistical Abstract 2012/2013).

³⁶ I still call them 'youth' because, according to a key interlocutor, marriage (which often takes place early in Yumbe) does not signify a progression from the status of youth to the status of an adult. He suggested the word 'youth' translates to *karile* in Aringa language for young men and that adulthood is achieved only after reaching 35 years of age. Being considered a youth in this agrarian society is related to being energetic and strong (based on informal conversation, 8 August 2012). Proverbs gathered by Dalfovo (1997) suggest a link between male youth and the ability to protect and defend the homestead. Middleton speaks of two categories of '*karule*', subdivided into young youth (*karule*) and 'big youth' (*karule wara* or *karule amboru*) for 'a man who is still formally a youth' (Middleton 1960a: 14).

³⁷ This was preserved for the more prosperous youths. In Yumbe these were often khat growers; see Chapter 6.

the 'hot sun'; see King 1996) and pointing to their availability for any kind of work. For example, many interlocutors work in the small loading and offloading sector in Yumbe and have allied themselves to the exploiters of trucks that are hired to transport stones, bricks, bags of cassava, or firewood, depending on the season. The work pays little and the long waiting times for work mean these young men have considerable time at their disposal, during which they often consumed khat (see Chapter 6). Migration to other towns was an important practice of young men in order to look for work. Young women were more confined to the domestic space. They did most of the subsistence farming and occasionally sold surplus produce from small or regional markets.

While I was based in Yumbe Town Council, I got to know young men in various sub-counties of the district. They would regularly visit Yumbe town or I would visit their homes on the weekends and sometimes on weekdays or on Muslim religious holidays, which allowed me to interact with and observe their rural livelihoods and families.

To further my understanding of the youths and their backgrounds, I tried to engage with their parents; other people in their forties and fifties; and quite a number of more elderly people, in order to obtain a more holistic image of people's historical experiences, generational differences, and the present-day social fabric (see chapters 2, 3 and 4). Gaining access to certain aspects of the elderly generation's narratives was not easy, however (see chapters 2 and 4).

YOUTH, BOREDOM AND MOBILITY: INTERSUBJECTIVITY IN SMALL TOWN ETHNOGRAPHY

One day early in my first fieldwork in 2010, when I was walking back from the district headquarters where I had been looking for someone who was not in his office, I walked faster than the young man in front of me, back to my home feeling a little upset with no appointments to fill my day. As I passed Charles,³⁸ he greeted me. We started talking, and I understood that he was a recent bachelor studies graduate and had hoped for the district to post certain vacant jobs, but they had not been published.³⁹ It turned out he had not been around in Yumbe for a while, but had just come with his young family and fortunately had something else to keep him busy as he awaited the job openings: a small telephone repair shop. During a summer holiday, while still at Kyambogo University in the Faculty of Social Studies, he had participated in phone repair courses and now he was a knowledgeable person in this field, training his brothers and a friend in Yumbe, maintaining his young family with the money his business rendered. Charles soon became

³⁸ Throughout this dissertation I have chosen to work with pseudonyms for my interlocutors in order to protect their identity and often I do not refer to the exact places where they lived within Yumbe District. The only exception being Charles, a decision made with his consent.

³⁹ It was often suggested in Yumbe that posts were kept vacant and not published until some relatives of people who already worked for the District had finished their studies. Related to this, many thought a religious motive played a role and there was a desire to wait for the graduation of those young men studying at the Islamic University in Uganda.

my main research assistant—or rather, co-researcher—on this research,⁴⁰ and a key interlocutor. His telephone workshop (a rented room on Yumbe’s main street) became a second home to me. From this spot, I experienced the same monotony as my interlocutors, occasionally encountered interesting people, and could observe and interact with the large group of young men (predominantly school drop-outs) hanging around and continuously on the lookout for work, mostly as loaders.

Often the boredom was quite tangible in the workshop. However, technicians always have an old phone to work on; and when they could access electricity from a neighbour’s generator (after payment), they busied themselves playing music and mixing on an old PC. Personally, I was extremely frustrated at times during my fieldwork, especially when my appointments were cancelled or when I could not find the people I was looking for at their homes. On such occasions, I often decided to go to the workshop to ‘hang out’. An indication of the prevailing boredom can be read in the fact that the young men in the workshop often fantasized aloud about the start of the rainy season, the period in which people would by accident drop their phones (which were especially useful as torches at night in a district without electricity) in puddles of water at night and then come to them for repair work. It was the experiencing of this boredom that enabled me to approach what the young men next door to the phone shop must feel almost daily—passing their time in a make-shift shed because there were too many of them for the occasional work of loading the lorry that was stationed there. I became very annoyed with feeling stuck at these moments, particularly when Charles and his brothers *did* have something to do (those stupid phones!). It made me feel very frustrated, having a lot of time at my disposal and being totally incapable of beating the young men around in their rapid play of draughts. I occasionally started ‘thinking too much’ and felt depressed. I longed for cigarettes and alcohol⁴¹ already in the mornings. I realized later on that in this condition I was probably approaching as much as I could⁴² the experience of so many young men that spent their time hanging around in trading centres looking forward to the hour they would start chewing khat—normally after lunch, as they knew khat made them lose appetite—as the only excitement of the day in the absence of work. ‘Over-thinking’ and thinking too much about the past were general references often made when I later studied their khat use practices in more depth (see Chapter 6; see also Mains 2012, 2013).

While this research concentrated primarily on Yumbe District, it did not exclude those who were mobile—those I envied at times of boredom. (Envy was also an emotion experienced by my interlocutors that I came closer to understanding in such situations; for a discussion on envy, see Chapter 6.) A number of my interlocutors lived in Arua and occasionally came to Yumbe, and I tried to encounter them in both places. I followed a few interlocutors in Kampala. In addition, after the independence of the ROSS on 9 July

⁴⁰ It is important to note that ‘assistantship’ was perhaps at stake when organizing and facilitating FGDs, but at the same time we discussed data obtained afterwards together, including possible interpretations, brainstormed about subsequent research questions, and talked about the pros and cons of our methodology.

⁴¹ Despite the fact that I did not have the habit of drinking much, nor did I smoke any longer. I did not start drinking or smoking at such moments, as that would have been difficult in the predominantly Muslim setting in which I conducted my fieldwork. (See Chapter 6 for more references to alcohol, class, and gender in Yumbe.)

⁴² Van der Geest 2007 writes about intersubjectivity and its limits in ethnographic research.

2011 (and already after the referendum in January 2011), this new neighbouring country became an even greater centre of attraction to youth from Yumbe than it had already been since 2005 (see Chapter 7). I informally interviewed youth that had been there before (in even more insecure times) or were planning to go now. Suddenly, there was a new topic that everyone was eager to talk about. I met those that came back and followed through others the news about those who went away. I visited Juba myself briefly at the end of November 2011. This short visit proved very insightful in terms of experiencing insecurity, as well as observing from close up how my interlocutors tried to ‘navigate’ this insecurity (see Chapter 7). The stay was short as I did not have a research permit and felt rather unsafe after an incident with what were probably secret services in the migrant quarter of Jebel, where some of my interlocutors lived. It was the part of town where, according to my interlocutors in Yumbe that had been to Juba, many foreigners (Ugandans and Kenyans) disappeared or were killed overnight.

It was these experiences of boredom, envy, excitement about travelling, and some of the stresses of travelling (bad vehicles, motor problems, arriving late in the night) and insecurity in Juba that enhanced, in my belief, my understanding of the experiences of the people in my research (Van der Geest 2007; Vysma & Tankink 2007).

‘TALKING WHILST WALKING’:⁴³ EMBODIED MEMORIES, LANDSCAPE AND DISCLOSURE

As part of discovering—as a participant observer—where memories of past conflicts emerged in daily life, the relation between memories and walking⁴⁴ became interesting. This was not a planned approach; however, analysis in retrospect shows that *talking whilst walking* shed light not only on (1) the relationship between space and memory (see for example Anderson 2004: 254; Jones et al. 2008; Berckmoes 2014, ch 3.) but also on (2) the connection between the physical act of walking and the triggering of narrating about memories, embodied or otherwise. I even argue that (3) engaging in the act of walking and talking with my interlocutors occasionally allowed me to access information that would otherwise have remained inaccessible to me. Below, I explain these three aspects of the methodological tool of *talking whilst walking*.

Engaging in walks with research participants has been used as a planned or spontaneous research method in order to grasp the meanings and recollections people attach to their surroundings (see for example Anderson 2004; Jones et al. 2008). Often, the matter of ‘mapping’ urban spaces and understanding historical relations between people, and between people and places, are at the core of the interest of such methods (see for example Both 2008; Berckmoes 2014, ch. 3). In particular, conflict and post-

⁴³ The terminology is borrowed from Anderson (2004), who uses it to explain the act of talking while walking through an environment as a qualitative method to access ‘knowledge recollection and production’. The aim is to draw attention to people’s relation to place as important for memory and identity and to expand qualitative research methods to incorporate this relation.

⁴⁴ Travelling cramped together together with interlocutors or strangers in local taxis also provoked interesting narratives about travelling, insecurity, and tactics employed in the past to avoid rebel capture.

conflict geographies can be brought to light by this method (see Both 2008, Berckmoes 2014). In rural Yumbe too, the landscape evoked memories while walking, or travelling on motorcycle, or in a taxi. In general, these were war-related memories—memories of events (such as public executions, ambushes, landmines) or feelings of unsafety that the landscape still provoked in people.

However, it became obvious that the act of walking—a daily act very common in rural areas, and very common in war-time when people had to seek refuge—provoked references to embodied memories. In light of the silences and the many ‘embodied memories’ in a post-conflict environment that cannot be easily shared (Culbertson 1995), my walking together with interlocutors sometimes provided insights into imprints from the past that remained an influential (corpo-)reality for my interlocutors today. For example, walking along the road and asking questions about the very long distances people walked in the opposite direction to the Saturday market provoked Faridah, my elderly female co-walker with whom I was about to visit a sick fiend, to narrate how during a period of rebellion she would engage in trading eggs and walk very long distances. In her case it was the talking about walking long distances (triggered by our walking) that provoked her memory and caused her to narrate the tactics used as a female trader in times of rebellion. Her story about ‘zigzagging’ (see below) also returned again on this occasion. Similarly, walking or walking and talking about walking often provoked comments that lifted a veil with regard to embodied memories when with young former combatants. When walking them as visitors to the gate of the compound I was staying in and asking someone if it was not too late to reach home (when it was dark and he would not have his usual borrowed motorcycle available), or when talking about the night in general, ex-combatants would start to convey stories about how they used to walk at night when they were rebels, walking long distances, and the places they would roam. Sometimes this would reveal dynamics they were otherwise not open about—for often ex-combatants had a tendency to state that ‘they fought only in Sudan’; yet at such moments when ‘walking through the night’ came up, occasionally walking in Yumbe District as rebels emerged as a topic, including references to the violent way they dealt with people they encountered on their way who tended to disclose their presence to the authorities.

Not only elderly people or ex-combatants gave me a hint of their embodied memories with regard to walking. Walking with Charles one night, I asked him if I could help him carry the heavy bags he had, and he immediately replied: ‘If it was war now, would I not carry Coco [nickname for his daughter] much further than this?’ When I asked him a few days later where that comment came from and whether it was something he thought could happen again, he told me something I knew: his mother used to hide herself with her newborn son (himself) during the years of war in West Nile (the early 1980s), without fleeing to Sudan (like almost other people had done)—until things became too unsafe in the end. His mother used to repeat the story, and it had recently come up again during election times when some women were afraid of a new war (see Introduction). In fact, he had been born in the midst of the period of war in West Nile in 1983. The impact of war on his life in the present emerged beyond having an Aringa name that so strongly referred to it—his name translates as ‘they have come to kill us’; there

was apparently an embodied disposition, an inbuilt reference to war and its potentiality that he carried along through his life (see Chapter 5).

Bypassing a village home and talking about the future of Uganda, two young ex-combatants I was walking with spontaneously narrated how villagers normally support local rebels and could thus be considered the greatest aid to the rebels. But then they went on to say that when villagers made noise,⁴⁵ they (as former rebels) would have to kill them. This led me to understand better their possible violent engagements during rebel times and their prevailing rebel-related attitudes/norms⁴⁶ about who *deserved* to die under which circumstances, lifting a certain veil on their situational interpretation of ethics. Confession-style statements also came about when walking in the evening and young men referred to spaces (roadsides) where occasionally rape and gang rape⁴⁷ had taken place. Roads at night were often dangerous places for girls and young women, and as such these were other 'unconscious confessions' made by young men while walking together.⁴⁸ It is likely also that not sitting together face to face but walking next to each other triggered different kinds of informal conversations and made interlocutors less conscious of what they were sharing. I often rushed home after such walks to note down what had been shared, sometimes rather shocked at myself for having pretended at the time that what my interlocutor was saying was acceptable or normal behaviour. Later, I often felt the responsibility to challenge the ideas of my interlocutors by carefully provoking them to reflect on the practices they were talking about, or I would return to the topic, as neutrally and 'uninterestedly' as possible, to verify their accounts. While these were not necessarily 'confessions' in the eyes of my interlocutors, they concerned information that was not so easily shared either. The physical and remembered landscape itself apparently provoked such themes for discussion that I could not have elicited in our conversations myself.

Thus walking and talking often evoked expressions and narratives concerning the past, embodied memories, memories of walking, or the landscape provoked memories. Landscapes in particular were often associated with memories of unsafe areas in the past ('*this is where rebels would hide because of the bushes*'), or people referred with nostalgia to homes where powerful people used to live before their homes were turned into ruins after the fall of Amin's regime (see Chapter 4). Other landscapes provoked memories of where the local self-defence group laid an ambush in 1980, or where landmines had been set or rebel atrocities had taken place before; and according to many people, the

⁴⁵ This would reveal the presence of the rebels.

⁴⁶ This does not mean they would be likely to still act upon such norms; on other occasions, rebellion emerged as a topic in our discussions as something they hoped to stay far away from in the future, having already experienced war and knowing very well what it entails.

⁴⁷ My term. They were explained as acts by adolescents who, upon discovering a friend at night in the company of a girl after visiting a disco, threatened to disclose that their friend had slept with the girl. In order to prevent being denounced the boy would have to 'allow' his friends to sleep with her also.

⁴⁸ Roaming around (especially at night) was associated with danger and deviant behaviour in the aftermath of war, and young men through the use of khat tried to (discursively at least) withdraw from various types of immoral activities (causing disorder, insecurity, theft, or 'defilement') (see Chapter 6). For a definition of defilement see footnote 339.

appalling condition of certain roads often signified the political neglect that was endured in the aftermath of peace (see Chapter 3).

BIOGRAPHIC NARRATIVES: HISTORICIZING THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE

While initially I had not intended to focus on young people's life histories, reference to their past often recurred in their narratives during our everyday encounters, for example while walking (see above). They referred to aspects of their biographies as explanative for who they had become, or for certain choices they had made in their lives or were about to make. While understanding these narratives as referring to local lived histories and revealing the personal dynamics of past times, I also pay attention to what was omitted (Willemse et al. 2009: 86) and to the social setting and shifting contexts in which these narratives were spontaneously shared or elicited by me. Following Willemse et al. (2009), I therefore pay attention to both the explanative and elaborative functions of biographic narratives about the individuals' shifting identities over time, and to the pro-active aspect of the narrators' creation and reconstruction of identity and agency in these accounts (ibid. 101). Most often these narratives referred to historical circumstances (the uncertainty and insecurity that prevailed during certain episodes of conflict they had experienced, for example, or to exile or displacement) as well as to social relations and what had gone wrong in them before. Such references to their past in my interlocutors' accounts served to explain acts such as joining a rebel group, moving away from home and engaging in the informal economy to pay for one's own schooling, or trying to make a life and escape despair by going to Juba.

More particularly, youths explained their present situation or past choices often in relation to their parents'⁴⁹ lack of care/love (Bolten 2012; chapters 4 & 6 this dissertation). This lack of love was attributed to war, displacement, and poverty, but it was also expressed more in terms of a generational conflict between fathers and sons (see Chapter 4). In addition, often parents had died during one of the conflicts or related to the poverty and related poor health that reigned—and still reigns—in its aftermath for many. Orphanhood, thus, was often referred to as well as very explanative for the ways in which one's life course was influenced. This shows that besides reconstructing a past and elucidating social relationships, these narratives taught me much about these young people's emotions. Emotions of disappointment and disillusionment prevailed. Love (in the form of reciprocity and care; see Bolten 2012) was considered vital to one's development (ibid.) but was often considered inadequate.

I began noting down the aspects of young people's life histories that they narrated to me in fragments over time. This allowed me to conduct follow-up research, often in our informal encounters, of how exactly things had been during their childhood.

⁴⁹ 'Parents' should be read here as a broad category. Although the failure of fathers was especially prominent in many accounts, uncles (other parents) occasionally filled such gaps, or were absent, and were also incapable of providing in the aftermath of war. Occasionally, young men also referred to 'brothers' helping them. 'Brothers' refers not only to male siblings of the same parents, but can also refer to the son of a father's co-wife or the son of one's father's brother (i.e. cousins).

While I saw these biographical narratives as fundamental building blocks in my research, particularly for the relevance that my interlocutors attributed to them and the emotions they elucidated, the narratives remained fragmentary in nature⁵⁰ and were connected mainly with specific periods my interlocutors saw as influential to their lives or explanative of certain aspects thereof. It is obvious that one cannot analyse these histories that were shared without also trying to pay attention to what interlocutors tended to *forget* to narrate (see for example Fabian 2003) and what they tried to legitimize in retrospect (joining a rebel group, for example) by narrating their story. These are aspects I pay attention to in chapters 4 and 6.

In terms of methodology, young people's references both to their past and to their own embeddedness in complex family relationships influential for their present-day being allowed me to re-historicize and re-contextualize the study of youth in a way not found much in the abundant number of recent youth studies. This drew the focus back to family contextualization and family—as well as clan—history as influential factors shaping the life course and emotions of young people in ways that, according to them, explained their practices.

Another manner in which young people's pasts and their family histories⁵¹ were accessed was by the study of names. Young people of the generation I focused on often had names referring to conflict, hunger, or to complex social relationships⁵² that had marked the circumstances of birth and early childhood. Sitting with interlocutors and asking about their names, the names they had given to their children, and also the names of their brothers and sisters, parents and, if they knew, grandparents, sometimes provided interesting data about episodes⁵³ of family histories.⁵⁴

Altogether, several research methods—informal interviewing, following up on knowledge about personal and family history shared in informal interviews, questioning about family names, and asking young people about their specific experiences in the past—were combined to gain an understanding of young people's life course and how this influenced their current being, their present-day social positions and practices.⁵⁵ These often fragmentary stories were gathered over a stretch of time and are occasionally brought together into a single 'life history portrait' in the chapters of this dissertation.

⁵⁰ This is why I prefer the term 'biographic narrative' instead of life history (see Willemsse 2014: 39).

⁵¹ These were, of course, focused on particular parts of family histories and never 'complete' histories. See also Kratz (2001) for the cultural variety in what researchers eventually capture in their writing under the 'genre' of life histories.

⁵² In particular, the relationships between the father and the mother, or between the mother and her husband's kin, came out clearly in such discussions.

⁵³ I refer to 'episodes' here to acknowledge that such recorded histories can never be complete family histories.

⁵⁴ Sometimes my young interlocutors could not elaborate much on certain names but were helped by someone nearby—a sibling, friend, or older person on many occasions—to supplement what they knew. The informal manner in which I inquired about names often drew in these people around us.

⁵⁵ Analysis took place, amongst other ways, by reflecting on the interpretation of data in the field, together with various informants, predominantly through informal conversation. This in turn yielded not only analysis, but also new research data.

With people that were of older age, I engaged in life history interviewing in a more formal manner. These interviews often started by asking about the 1970s (after the period of Idi Amin's regime) and whether they remembered how life was in this particular period during which they were teenagers. Such interviews, a few of which were recorded on video, revealed more information about another historical generation, about life when they were young, and allows for some comparison between generations, as well as for a better understanding of how specific historical moments were experienced.⁵⁶ Four elaborated (though still fragmentary) life histories emerged out of such interviews and follow-ups (with two women and two men) and contribute considerable insight, especially since they are supplemented with more anecdotal references to specific periods and experiences by other 'adult and elderly interlocutors'.⁵⁷ Elsewhere (chapters 2 and 4) I explain how direct interviews with Amin's former soldiers and people of other army ranks were difficult to obtain. With regard to older histories, a few recognized and respected 'elders' shared more extensive 'oral histories' on invitation. The latter accounts went further back in time, explaining the course of history by starting with the people's early migrations from what is currently known as the Republic of South Sudan or with periods of slave raiding at what must have been the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries. Some of these oral histories are used the following chapter (2), where I give an historical overview.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed the main research methods I applied in order to study the influence of past conflicts on present-day social life in Yumbe District. The main reasons for focusing this research predominantly on young people in Yumbe as the main interlocutors have been discussed. I have argued that their historical generational position

⁵⁶ Sometimes it was difficult to discern any chronology in these narratives, as was for example the case with Faridah (see introduction, this chapter and Chapter 3). Her way of narrating the past decades resonates with what Bolten (2012: 25) describes as explained by a chaotic or traumatic past: '[...] one experience of violence may be so near another emotionally that they are narrated together, though they may have taken place years apart. Similar events are clustered....' In Chapter 3 I allow to emerge some of the confusion that her style of narrating the past evoked, whereas in other places I show how she merges ideas about potential threats in the present with specific lessons learned in the past, allowing very specific periods of time, again, to merge.

⁵⁷ Sometimes these were interviews about particularly violent moments in people's lives during the various periods of conflict in the region. Such interviews were ethically complex. While some researchers refer to the potential 'first curative effects' of biographic storytelling, and not asking about people's suffering can lead to a feeling of exclusion (Rosenthal 2003: 925), this is considered particularly the case when the situation has changed/improved, whereas in ongoing uncertainty, instability, or crises this needs to be handled particularly sensitively (ibid.). During the fieldwork it became clear that many interlocutors of this category had not been able to experience a real break with past events (see Chapter 3), and this made the difficulty of sharing experiences they had long kept silent about not necessarily easy. Therefore, people were approached either through acquaintances and snowball sampling, or from groups in which they had been previously organized as self-help groups by TPO and in which people had become familiar with talking about what happened to them and had been equipped with the tools to provide each other with psycho-social support. Informed consent was always requested, and people were promised their accounts would be anonymized—something applied consistently throughout this dissertation.

(born and raised in war-time, now maturing post-peace agreement) make their relation to the past conflicts particularly relevant to study. 'Talk' had a major role to play in the ethnographic encounters I engaged in, but I have tried to show in this chapter how bodies, emotions, movement, observation, and intersubjectivity all contributed to an accumulation as well as triangulation of the data that were used to address the research questions and contributed to their shaping over time. The chapters that follow have emerged from an inductive approach to the field but are unavoidably based on a selection that touches upon the core of my main research interest and leaves other fields of social life relatively untouched. Wherever possible, I try to give *thick descriptions* in order to contextualize the findings I base my interpretations upon.