

The spectacle of death: visibility and concealment at an unfinished memorial in South Sudan.

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This article examines an attempt to build a memorial to local victims of civil war in South Sudan. The memorial commemorates the mass execution of civilians in 1964, close to the town of Gogrial in a rural part of South Sudan. During this massacre, local people were killed and their bodies piled up into a macabre structure by the side of the road, as a warning against supporting the *Anya-Nya* insurgency. This is an example of non-state memorialisation, which sheds light on the repertoires and regimes of memory that memorials draw on and their local and political resonances. Particularly striking is the way the memorial builders have incorporated global technologies of memory and put them in dialogue with local recollections of a massacre, historic Dinka myths about building out of bodies, and the politics of the dead and post-liberation memory in South Sudan. This has produced a fascinating – but ultimately unrealised – memorial which complicates some of the major themes in academic understandings of memorialisation in Africa, especially the stress laid on tensions between ‘official’ and ‘vernacular’ regimes of memory. The memorial is not a site of ‘counter-memory’; rather, it inserts a local event into an official national narrative of liberation.

Keywords: Memorialisation; conflict; necropolitics; dead bodies; South Sudan.

Introduction

At the side of the main road approaching the town of Gogrial, in a remote part of South Sudan, stands an unfinished memorial. Its large concrete structure is an imposing and unexpected sight against the expansive flood plains that stretch out behind it (see Figure 1). This memorial commemorates the site of the mass execution of civilians and the public display of their bodies at a place called Lol Nyiel, on the outskirts of Gogrial town, during Sudan’s first civil war in 1964. It is an incident that is remembered in Gogrial as an act of collective punishment perpetrated by the police against the local Dinka population for their support of the southern rebellion (the *Anya-Nya*).

[Figure 1: The unfinished memorial at Lol Nyiel, Gogrial, South Sudan (2011). Photograph by Zoe Cormack].

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This article explores this attempt to memorialise local victims of civil war in South Sudan. Drawing on material collected during my PhD fieldwork in 2011-2012 in Kuajok and Gogrial (then part of Warrap State) and subsequent archival research, it pieces together the events of the 1964 massacre and interprets the process of their memorialisation. As South Sudan struggles to come to terms with its legacy of conflicts, there are pressing reasons to understand the different ways that South Sudanese are responding to the memory of wars and mass death. The memorialisation of this massacre provides a lens onto the ongoing political 'life' of the dead in South Sudan.¹ It also powerfully demonstrates the agency of dead bodies to mediate and produce local interpretations of violence and memorialisation.²

The political and cultural work of the dead permeates every aspect of this memorial project. The 1964 massacre was a classic example of necropolitics: a spectacle of the state's 'capacity to dictate who may live and who must die'.³ One of many acts of state violence to which South Sudanese people have been exposed. Subsequently, the display of bodies became the focus for local memory of the massacre and drove the desire to erect a memorial. This article will explore how the bodies took on a new significance, interacting with indigenous Dinka ideas about mythic structures made of bodies, the control of death and moral community. In their project to publically remember the massacre, memorial builders in Gogrial have continued to engage the political significance of the dead in the new state of South Sudan.

The story of this memorial is also of wider significance for our understanding memorialisation in post-colonial Africa and in post-conflict states: shedding light on the repertoires and regimes of memory that memorials draw on and their local and political resonances. Research on memorialisation in Africa has been strongly influenced by the notion of a 'memory crisis', which sees memorials as elite projects, imported technologies driving tensions between 'local' or indigenous and official regimes of memory.⁴ Yet, the Lol Nyiel memorial does not sit easily with a clear distinction between 'local' and 'official' memory. Rather, this memorial highlights the interpenetration between different regimes of memory and between local and globalised memory practices. This interpenetration is most evident in the salience of dead bodies to inspire and shape a unique memorial.

Civil wars and memorialisation in South Sudan

South Sudan is one of the most conflicted parts of the modern world. A history of state orchestrated violence goes back to enslavement and colonisation in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which gave way to prolonged and increasingly intense post-colonial civil wars. Political unrest in the south began in 1955, the year before Sudan's independence, following a mutiny of Southern soldiers in the town of Torit. The conflict intensified after 1963.⁵ A peace agreement was signed in Addis Ababa in 1972 and held for eleven years. In 1983 a second war between the Sudanese Government and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) and

raged until 2005. The Comprehensive Peace Agreement which ended the second war included a provision for a referendum on South Sudan's independence, following a six-year interim period. In 2011, Southerners voted overwhelmingly for their own state, and Sudan was partitioned. After another brief intermission of peace, an internal conflict in December 2013 split the SPLM and SPLA. Large-scale violence and a new civil war enveloped the young state of South Sudan.

The October 1964 Lol Nyiel killings occurred on the cusp of intensifying and spreading violence in the first civil war, which has previously been concentrated in Equatoria Province.⁶ At this time, Gogrial was a district headquarters in the old province of Bahr el Ghazal. There had been a failed Anya-Nya attack on Wau (the provincial headquarters) in January 1964.⁷ Other massacres of civilians occurred in rural parts of Upper Nile in August.⁸ The following year, 1965, would be remembered as one of the most brutal of the first war: hundreds of civilians were killed in separate massacres in Juba and Wau, where Sudan Armed Forces attacked a wedding party. These events were reported in the Southern Front newspaper, *The Vigilant*, published in Khartoum. The paper was shut down for six months following this coverage.⁹ As horrific as these incidents were, the second civil war (1983-2005) saw even more devastating conflict. Gogrial was a strategic Government garrison and changed hands repeatedly, displacing civilians from the vicinity of the town for almost the entire war.¹⁰ After the SPLM/A split in 1991, violence became increasingly internal, pitting different communities against each other.¹¹ This caused damage to local relationships which continue to reverberate, adding fuel to the current war. In the mid 1990s Gogrial town also became a base for Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, an SPLA commander who had aligned with the Sudan Government. His raids and SPLA counter-offences contributed to a devastating famine in 1998.¹²

Despite this violent history, there is currently no official programme of memorialisation in South Sudan and reconciliation did not feature on the Government's agenda until 2011.¹³ However, South Sudanese lawyers and academics have called for a programme of memorialisation to begin as part of a process of transitional justice.¹⁴ A survey by the South Sudan Law Society revealed that many people are in favour of memorialisation initiatives.¹⁵ Other instruments to deal with the past, including a Truth, Reconciliation and Healing Commission and Hybrid Court were planned as part of the August 2015 peace agreement.¹⁶ However, following deadly clashes between the president and vice-president's guards in Juba in July 2016, this peace process is in stasis.¹⁷

Even without an official memorialisation programme, several sites associated with the graves of prominent figures in the liberation struggle became sites of memorial during the interim period. The most prominent is the mausoleum of John Garang in the centre of Juba. Garang was the charismatic leader of the SPLM/A, widely regarded as the 'Father of the Nation' who was killed in a helicopter crash in 2005. His grave is the central site for national commemorations and political rallies. Another example is the remains of Fr. Saturino Lohure, an Anya-Nya leader who was killed in 1967. His body was transferred from Uganda to Torit in 2009, where it has become a memorial to civil war.¹⁸ There are other cases of the graves of prominent

liberation figures merging with public sites of memory: such as the grave of another Anya-Nya leader, Gordon Muortat Mayen, who is prominently buried on Freedom Square in Rumbek.

The Lol Nyiel memorial should be seen in the context of these other memorials. However, Lol Nyiel is different because it is not the grave of a senior military or political leader, but a site where ordinary people lost their lives. Several comparable attempts to mark civilian sacrifice have emerged in recent years. For example, a museum commemorating the site of the 1965 Wau wedding party massacre (described above) was opened by Salva Kiir in 2014.¹⁹ An online memorial to those killed in all South Sudan's conflicts, which seeks to create a list of names of the dead, has been developed by Juba and diaspora based civil society groups since the outbreak of war in 2013.²⁰

Post-conflict memorialisation in Africa

The concern at Lol Nyiel to remember the ordinary dead of South Sudan's conflicts is one of its most interesting elements and complicates some of the orthodoxy on memorialisation in post-conflict and post liberation African states. Richard Werbner's influential argument declared the public practice of memory in post-colonial Africa to be suffering from a 'memory crisis'.²¹ Drawing on research in Zimbabwe, he identified a tension between the state's official commemoration of national heroes and the corresponding forgetting of 'ordinary' victims of atrocity. The consequences of this 'elite memorialisation' are political, as it reinforces the power of the state as liberator. More insidiously it marginalises the suffering and death of the masses, creating a dissonance between official commemoration and the unrecognised memories of the people.²²

Memory crisis has been a key theme in research on memorialisation in Africa and scholars have continued to find it productive to probe tensions between vernacular memories - 'the counter-memories of the people' - and the official memory of the state.²³ Recent work has noted that even as public memory and memorialisation on the continent has become more plural, in tandem with an emphasis in international human rights discourse to remember and document individual victims of atrocity, the 'crisis' persists in a more nuanced form. Victims of state terror remain officially forgotten only to be 'remembered at the margins, shaping identities and invigorating resistance'.²⁴

South Sudan exhibits many of the classic traits of a 'memory crisis'. However, the memorial at Lol Nyiel does not easily fit the opposition between 'popular' and 'official' memory. One reason is that it is not part of an official or state led programme of memorialisation. It is an example of 'non-state' memorialisation, which have become increasingly common in the region.²⁵ Second, in contrast to many of the government's official commemorative events that stress the contribution of senior military men to the liberation of South Sudan, this memorial marks the suffering and death of ordinary people. Yet, despite the non-elite focus, Lol Nyiel is

not a site of ‘counter-memory’. Rather than challenging a state narrative, the memorial builders at Lol Nyiel have sought to insert a local story in to the official narrative. The local concerns conveyed in this memorial are aligned with official narratives of historical injustice and resistance to the central state in Sudan.²⁶

Another way of understanding this memorial is as an example of the creolisation of memorializing practice in Africa (and beyond). A body of recent work has been charting how imported ‘technologies of memory’ are ‘grafted on indigenous modes of remembrance’,²⁷ gaining local traction and potentially creating vernacular *lieux de memoire*.²⁸ Paul Basu’s work on Sierra Leone has shown how memorials can be part of complex landscape of post-conflict memory, which may resonate with, rather than simply displace older mnemonic practices.²⁹ Similarly, the Lol Nyiel memorial is a response to local memory of the massacre that has appropriated globalized technologies of memorialisation, and placed them in dialogue with a local set of ideas about bodies, the representation of power and moral community.

Of all the local factors shaping this memorial, the bodies of the dead have directed the project most powerfully. The massacre itself was a gruesome act of necropolitics, in which the power of the Sudanese state was enacted through the taking of life. There are vivid memories of the brutality of the attack and the defilement of the bodies, which were piled on top of each other into a grotesque trophy at the side of the road. This image has come to resonate with - and destabilise - a series of Dinka myths and allegories about building out of bodies, even in ways that were unanticipated by the perpetrators.

Massacre at Lol Nyiel

One of the challenges of understanding this memorial is establishing what happened at the massacre. As shocking as the acts of violence described at Lol Nyiel were, they are virtually un-documented and many of the South Sudanese with whom I discussed this article were unaware of the massacre. This lacuna was part of the drive behind building the memorial – to gain recognition for events that appeared to have been forgotten. It also poses challenges to interpretation. I have collected information about the massacre from sparse secondary documentation and archival material. Most details come from interviews in Gogrial and Kuajok, conducted during PhD research in 2011 and 2012. Because of the lack of contemporary documentation it is difficult, analytically, to define a clear narrative of events. While the massacre certainly happened, it is possible that it has also provided a memory device in which multiple separate stories of violence – rape, torture and killing – have accumulated that might otherwise have been forgotten. With this issue in mind, this section presents documentary and oral descriptions of the massacre.

We know that massacre took place during the intensification of the first civil war, in October 1964. A few contemporary accounts exist in relation to a tour of the South made in December 1964 by the then Minister of the Interior, Clement Mboro. Mboro, a member of the Southern Front Party (and from Bahr el Ghazal himself).

Mboro was taken to the site of the Lol Nyiel massacre on this tour. Bona Malwal writes that when Mboro reached Gogrial:

He was met very significantly by the crowd outside the town on the spot where a Northern police officer had a few months earlier bundled up more than fifty persons onto a heap, sprayed them with petrol and set them on fire alive while a number of tribal leaders he wanted to scare by this act were forced at gunpoint to stand by and watch their relatives burn.³⁰

The 1960s were a period of intensifying levels of violence across the South. Mboro encountered other testimonies of state terror in the rural areas: in the August before the Lol Nyiel massacre killings of civilians were reported in Kodok and Akobo, where forty-five men were killed by the army and their bodies left unburied.³¹ In 1965, the following year, notorious massacres of civilians in Juba and Wau took place.

The Vigilant, which covered the Juba and Wau massacres and other events in the South, did not begin publication until March 1965. The only contemporary record related to Lol Nyiel that I have found is the text of a speech by a member The Southern Front party, read to Clement Mboro on his December visit to Gogrial. It is concerned with the massacre and the deterioration of security in the South more widely. The speech gave an emotive description of the massacre, which differs slightly from Malwal's account:

Our town is small in size but big in name. What happened here and in the rural area will need volumes. We learnt many bitter lessons. Once we were blind but now we see.... What was done here? Fellow citizens were arrested and many foul games were played upon them. The well-known 'cubic metre' on the road you came [past Lol Nyiel] is not only a living memory in our minds, but a haunting one. It was just the beginning of the extinction method by the Hitlerite (sic) regime, since it happened during broad daylight for all to see. May God have mercy upon their souls. Women and girls were raped before their husbands and fathers in the native lodging area and the rural areas, even in custody beautiful women were raped and lashed. Both public and private properties were looted, houses and *dura* [sorghum] burnt. All this had official blessing in the name of restoring law and order by the so-called brothers. We wonder?³²

This speech is illuminating because it contains several points that were repeated in the oral accounts I gathered in 2012. Notably, the 'haunting memory' of the 'cubic metre' is a consistent and important feature of the massacre's description. It refers to the bodies of the dead, which the police had made into a very visible, macabre structure at Lol Nyiel. This is the 'heap' of bodies described by Malwal. The theatricality of the violence was profoundly disturbing and would linger in local memories. The speech also contains an interesting precursor to the tension between visibility and concealment that is important in the more recent accounts of the

massacre. The speaker emotively describes (drawing on Biblical text) how the massacre, carried out 'in broad daylight' made them see the reality of the war.³³

The narrative of events in 2012, explains that about two months before Clement Mboro's visit in December, around a hundred (or more) local people were rounded up by the police and taken to Gogrial prison. This is said to have been a violent crackdown against the local (Dinka) population, to prevent them from supporting the *Anyar-Nya*. After being held and tortured at the prison they were taken outside of the town and killed by the side of the road. Their bodies were piled on top of each other and their relatives were prevented from burying the bodies. There is a shared memory of the ferocity of the violence; descriptions of it consistently include people having their eyes pulled out and men being castrated, beaten and shot. All accounts state that the police were the perpetrators of this attack. The police force in the South was highly militaristic and often participated in operations against the rebels during the first war.³⁴ The instigator of this massacre was said to have been the senior northern Sudanese police officer in Gogrial at the time.³⁵

As well as extreme violence, the victimhood of ordinary people, and hence the brutality of the Sudan government, was emphasised. Accounts describe townspeople being rounded up, apparently indiscriminately, and taken to the police station. The idea that those who were killed were not insurgents is echoed in a speech made a few days after the speech in Gogrial (by an anonymous missionary educated Southerner) to Clement Mboro at Kuajok. The speech describes the victims of the attack at several points as being 'ignorant villagers' – and asks the Government to investigate why 'teachers, dressers, traders, students and other people in the market were put on a car and taken to be shot.'³⁶

Various details in accounts emphasise the brutality of the attack. Nyang Geng, who organized the memorial to commemorate the Lol Nyiel killings, explained the events like this:

This thing happened around October 1964, a lot of people say it was on the fifth of October. Gogrial was a very small town; now it is much bigger, I don't know the extra number, but it is thousands [more] who are [now] resident of the town. One day, the police forces in Gogrial went out and arrested people, from 16 or 17 years of age, even some people who didn't know their age: they were arrested and taken to the police station where they were tortured. They were whipped, some had their eyes pulled out of the socket, some had 6 inch nails nailed into their heads, and some had their tongues cut off. It was very bad. After some days, they bundled them on lorries. They took them to the place where I built the memorial. Some had already arrived died [sic]: those who had 6 inch nails in their head, they had already died. Those who were still alive were shot at close range and they were piled up, one over another. They were left there for wild animals and birds. People were not able to bury them, because there were snipers all around. When they saw someone come to take the body of a loved one, they shot him or her. People failed to collect the bodies, until they ended up in that place. That is a very famous place: we call it 'Metre'. What the meaning of 'metre' is - when they use a fire for burning bricks, they do it this way.

One metre this way, and the other that, and the height, width and length. They stacked people this way. [i.e. as if they were building a furnace of firing bricks] They built poles, one here this way. And inside here they stuffed the bodies. Some heads were disappeared: there were others [laid] the other way. They reached this height of 1 metre and they left them there. I don't know why they did this.³⁷

He describes in detail 'the metre' of bodies and its construction. The events at Lol Nyiel were sometimes described to me in English in Gogrial as 'the metre massacre'. The references to torture, especially pulling eyes out of their sockets, illustrate how motifs of vision and visibility are woven into and inform local accounts of this massacre.

In another account I recorded in 2012, a former schoolteacher from Gogrial, who was a child at the time, remembers helping people escape across the river in a boat he used for fishing. He said that residents of Gogrial could hear the screams from the prison and they were trying to run away from the town.³⁸ His account differs from Nyang's slightly, here sightlessness is emphasised differently. He explained that after being beaten in the prison, the captives were taken out of Gogrial Town. They were supposed to be driven far out into the bush, but one man named Garang Tong (who had been blinded in the prison violence) shouted to the young people, 'You youth, the place where we are being taken, this is our fate, but if any of you feel you can escape, leave us!' A tobacco trader from Rumbek, on hearing this, tried to make a run for it. He was shot at by one of the police officers, but they missed and he escaped. At that point the captors panicked and decided to kill the captives there, by the side of the road. The teacher said that he was able to give this extra detail in the account because there was another man who escaped and was rescued by a relative of his who took him home and cared for him for two months in their village.³⁹ At Lol Nyiel, the other captives were unloaded, bundled on top of each other, tied together and killed.

Another question surrounds the trigger for the massacre. I was not offered an explanation until I returned to England. The events are more complicated and have wider importance in the history of Sudan and South Sudan than had been apparent to me in Gogrial. When I came to write about the material I realized that interviewees in Gogrial and Kuajok had been rather vague on this point, commenting only that it was supposed to scare the local population away from supporting the *AnyaNya*. Local memory has cemented around the violent attack, and the escalating civil war that *followed* it, rather than on what led to this massacre.

Bona Malwal, who had written briefly about the massacre in, *People and Power in Sudan* gave me some more details about what had prompted the violence. He explained that the massacre had been preceded by an *AnyaNya* offensive on the town during which a northern trader had been killed.⁴⁰ There is also a reference to this attack in the doctoral thesis of Abdel-Basit Saeed, a university lecturer and politician. He sees the Gogrial attack in a different context. For him, it is related to the worsening relations between Misseriya and Ngok Dinka in Abyei. He records further details, indicating that the *AnyaNya* attack was relatively serious:

In September 1964 the southern Anya-Nya forces attacked the village of Goriryal [sic. Gogrial] in the northern reaches of Bahr al Ghazal Province, where some Misiriyya had settled as merchants. They killed the men and captured women and children and took them into their camp in the bush. ⁴¹

The next month, Cier Rehan, a chief from Tuic (immediately north of Gogrial) negotiated the release of these captives and returned them to Abyei. But news of the attack spread quickly among Misseriya people. According to Saeed's account, one of the sons of Deng Majok (the paramount chief of the Ngok Dinka) was a known *Anya-Nya* leader and he was believed to have been involved in the attack on Gogrial. This was perceived as a breach of long-standing good relations between the Dinka and Misseriya; a rupture identified as the start of serious deterioration in relations between the two groups, which were cemented by serious clashes between the Ngok and Misseriya in 1965. These clashes have been identified by other historians as a turning point in twentieth-century Dinka-Misseriya relationships in Abyei. ⁴² This element of the massacre: the violence perpetrated against the Misseriya and its reverberations in Abyei, appears to have been sidelined in the accounts in Gogrial.

Memorial at Lol Nyiel

In the years around South Sudan's Independence a group of older, educated men from Gogrial decided that these events should be memorialized. A structure has been built at Lol Nyiel, which is visible from the road and is intended to mark the massacre (Figure 1). Nyang Geng, who has led these efforts, explained his motivations to me:

We are now building a memorial, to remind the young ones who will come after many years, that something terrible happened here some years ago. So that there will be a memorial for them. The pain did not come out of nothing. A very high price was paid. This is why I am building that memorial...This [the current structure] is just a reminder but in the future there will be a bigger one, like a war memorial museum, but that will cost a lot of money. That will be finished by the government, because we have got a lot of history [here].

When I asked him to explain more about how he envisioned the completed memorial, Nyang described his vision for an interpretive visual display of the 1964 massacre. A major feature of the finished memorial would be boards and images that conveyed the violent acts, especially the piling up of the bodies. He described displaying the narrative of the murders as part of the commemoration, a way of inserting the event into recorded history.

There are many of our people who cannot read and write. So we need to make a drawing. I have told you that they tortured people and drove nails through their heads,

cut their eyes out and cut out their tongues. This will be the first thing to be shown. And second will show the piling up of the bodies. Because the people will not understand, unless they see it with their own eyes. Stage three will be the boards, with the names [of those who were killed]. Then we will write it in two languages, in Arabic and English; we will write what happened. When I get money I will get an artist to come and draw it. One, Two, Three. Then we will write all these things in English and Arabic, because some people don't read English.⁴³

Work on the memorial had stalled by the beginning of 2012 because of lack of funds. Nyang expressed a wish for financial support from the government, but this memorial is not part of, nor has it ever received funding from, a state programme of memorialisation. Money was raised for its construction by private donations from individuals, following a fundraising campaign by the memorial committee. However, the resources have not been sufficient and work on the memorial has now stopped, perhaps indefinitely. The memorial stands unfinished, born a ruin. The remaining part of this article reflects on different features of the 1964 massacre, local resonances of the violence and the politics of memory in South Sudan to understand the memorial's construction.

The necropolitics of the Sudanese state

The context of the Lol Nyiel massacre is a long tradition of the state in Sudan asserting power through spectacular displays of force, sometimes incorporating the display of the dead. The public execution of and defilement of bodies described in accounts of the Lol Nyiel massacre resonate closely with Mbembe's theory of necropolitics: that the ability to 'exercise control over mortality' is the fundamental attribute of sovereignty.⁴⁴ In the context of an escalating civil war, and following a rebel attack on a government town, the government response was a quintessentially necropolitical act designed not only to take life, but also to display the 'control over mortality' to living subjects through the display of corpses by the side of the road.

The state's use of force was formalised by the Anglo-Egyptian Condominium in the institution of the patrol – a military offensive that usually resulted in the destruction of property, loss of life and forced conscription of local people into the army. The aim of patrols was to demonstrate the power of the government. They were particularly intense in Darfur, the Nuba mountains and the South in an effort to 'pacify' the peripheries.⁴⁵ Patrols also had earlier roots and resonances, most notably with the predatory commercial expansion of Ottoman Egypt into South Sudan in the nineteenth century. For local people, the tactics of colonial patrols against the Lou Nuer prophet Ngungdeng, were virtually indistinguishable from the slave raids that took place under Turco-Egyptian rule.⁴⁶ Later patrols against followers of Ngungdeng's son Guek in the late 1920s were the most sustained in the South.⁴⁷ Memories of patrols would also have existed in Gogrial at the time of the Lol Nyiel

massacre. The town itself was established as a military post during patrols against the Dinka prophet Ariathdit, between 1918 and 1922, only forty-five years earlier.⁴⁸

These colonial acts of conquest and ‘pacification’ sometimes involved the display of dead bodies. The body of Guek Ngungdeng, who was killed in a military offensive in 1929, was mutilated and hung from a tree near his father’s sacred mound.⁴⁹ A photograph, taken in 1900, of the aftermath of the battle of Omdurman shows a communal grave of Mahdist soldiers covered with human remains that is strikingly like the pile of bodies described at Lol Nyiel. Severed heads of two local leaders were displayed during a patrol in Nyima in the Nuba Mountains in 1918.⁵⁰ Similarly, a patrol following the Nyala Rising in South Darfur in 1921 (the largest uprising against the Anglo-Egyptian state) culminated in the display of the decapitated bodies of opposition leaders and two corpses being publically burnt in Nyala Town. The historian Chris Vaughan has suggested that the theatricality of this display was not simply a colonial invention, but was influenced by a pre-colonial politics of dead in Darfur, in which public executions were carried out in Nyala to display the power of the Sultan.⁵¹

[Figure 2: Communal grave covered with the remains of Mahdist soldiers at the battle of Omdurman. 1900. Sudan Archive, Durham. SAD.A41/125]

Such acts of violence not only drew from the past; they were also projected into the future. The post-colonial state continued to violently suppress insurgency in Sudan’s expansive peripheries over the course of two long and bloody civil wars. Even the SPLM/A as a liberation movement and ‘state in waiting’ had an often-brutal relationship with the civilian population.⁵² The massacre at Lol Nyiel is one example, among many, of how the power of the state to take life, the ultimate indicator of sovereignty, was demonstrated to ordinary South Sudanese.

Like these colonial acts of necropolitics, the violence of the act outside Gogrial was not restricted to the moment of killing. It extended control over the aftermath of death. The heap of bodies at Lol Nyiel was made into a trophy of the state. These actions disrupted normal processes through which families could have mourned the death of their loved ones: the bodies were burnt or relatives were prevented from burying remains. This partly explains why the spectacle of the ‘cubic metre’ of bodies is so disturbing and has become an index for the extreme cruelty of the massacre.

Building out of bodies

The ‘cubic metre’ of bodies has been a recurring feature of accounts of the massacre since the 1960s. The brutality of the state and the disruption of the social mediation of death are not the only reasons the structure of bodies has become deeply entwined with memories of the massacre. The motif of using human bodies in

structures has a longer history in stories and myths in Dinka speaking parts of South Sudan.

Many historical account of building out of bodies are associated with spiritual-political authorities called *bany bith* (pl. *baany bith* master of the fishing spear). *Baany bith* still practice in Gogrial, but their political importance has diminished relative to the rising power of government and military authorities.⁵³ In the anthropological canon *baany bith* are famous for another spectacular mode of death: burial alive. Historically, when a *bany bith* grew old he would ask his relatives to bury him alive. Lienhardt interpreted this practice (which had been officially outlawed by the time of his fieldwork) as an act of social control over death. The *bany bith* was too important to be allowed to die naturally; and in this way of dying the individual life of the *bany bith* was given for the continued prosperity of the wider community.⁵⁴

Prosperity, community and the social mediation of death are key to grasping the local resonance of building out of bodies. Several historical accounts about structures of bodies are associated with the historic mound-shrine of Ayuel Longar. Ayuel was the first *bany bith*, the founder of clans and in Lienhardt's words the 'culture hero' of Dinka people. At one time his shrine, situated near the banks of the Bahr-el-Jebel in present day Unity State, was over 30 metres high but it had fallen into disrepair by the 1940s. Accounts recorded in 1948 by the Sudan Government administrator turned anthropologist P.P Howell tell how the shrine was constructed, on the orders of Ayuel, partly out of human beings: 'their bodies adding to the rising edifice...human bodies were used as props in the scaffolding.'⁵⁵ In another version, Ayuel Longar was speared by the moon, at the request of the sun, as punishment for the practice of building out of bodies. In this version, the famous mound was subsequently built around Ayuel's immobilised, but still living body.⁵⁶

In these myths and accounts building out of bodies has often been understood as an allegory for building a moral community.⁵⁷ This is most clear in the detailed narratives describing the building of the *luak* (byre) of Cikom Mayual in Rumbek, told to Andrew Mawson by Makuer Gol, the keeper of the *luak* in the 1980s. Makuer described how Cikom used to make the *luak* out of human bodies: 'people will be the tree trunks [wall posts and rafters] in this byre'. If they refused, they were told they would die, but if they accepted, their people would live and prosper. Therefore, individual death was exchanged for the vitality of the wider moral community. Makuer described how over time the human bodies were replaced by normal building materials, which were brought by each of the sub-tribes of the Agar Dinka.⁵⁸ The periodic rebuilding of the shrine therefore became a time when the spiritual and political connection between Agar communities was reaffirmed through the architecture of the *luak*.⁵⁹

Building out of bodies could also be an indicator of cruelty. If done with the wrong intent, it also represents the abuse of power. In another story from Lakes recorded by Lienhardt, a malicious *bany bith* built a *luak* out of human bodies 'with some people standing and then others standing on their heads and other people on their backs'. In response, the son of the *bany bith* decided to bury him alive (without his consent) to punish his father and end the bloodshed.⁶⁰ During fieldwork Gogrial in

2011, I was told that Lual Ngor, an infamous nineteenth century local Dinka collaborator with the Turco-Egyptian slave traders, had built his *zeriba* (Arabic. fortified enclosure, used by commercial agents across the South) in Gogrial out of human bodies.

In multiple ways the ‘cubic metre’ of bodies at Lol Nyiel resonates with older registers of power and morality, but importantly, it also subverts them. Historic accounts of building out of bodies are often underpinned by an allegory of building social relations: people gave their bodies for the good of wider society. Conversely, at Lol Nyiel life was simply taken. The coalescence of memory around the ‘metre’ of bodies is indicative of how extreme violence had destabilised an older index of spiritual and political power. This was a more dramatic act of necropolitics than even the perpetrators could have imagined.

Returning to the form of the memorial, a plausible interpretation is that the cubic metre of bodies has been mirrored in the memorial itself. The concrete structure built at the site of death materialises the violence of the massacre and the *longue duree* of cultural resonances about building out of bodies that were destabilised through this act. This painful image is mnemonically embodied in the memorial in a way that could be both emancipatory – allowing for symbolic control over the massacre to be regained; or repressive – as the terrifying ‘cubic metre’ is now permanently written onto the landscape. This is one of the classic ambiguities of memorials: do they ‘heal’ or do they perpetuate acts of violence? ⁶¹

The politics of marking death

The desire to seek recognition for victims of atrocity has become a global feature of commemoration and justice.⁶² Memorials, imagined as a form of catharsis, have gained a prominent place in transitional justice.⁶³ Yet it is still much debated what memorials ‘do’: whether they have a therapeutic role in overcoming ‘trauma’ or, as part of process of creating a historical narrative, they are inherently political and politicised – a point that has been emphasised in recent scholarship on genocide memorials in Rwanda.⁶⁴

There are political undertones to the Lol Nyiel memorial. One of the key motivations of the memorial builders was to make the massacre visible and to raise its prominence in local and national memory. Through it, the historical significance of this massacre was being woven into a broader narrative of southern liberation. In a national context where the question of who fought hardest for ‘liberation’ permeates many aspects of politics and patronage, it is unsurprising that memorialisation is being drawn into crafting a narrative of struggle and sacrifice. Aspects of the massacres’ retelling, notably the invisibility of the connection to the border conflict in Abyei, also localise the significance of the massacre. What is arguably a very important event in the history of relations between Sudan and South Sudan has been parochialised. Specifically, the memorial seeks to assert Gogrial’s role in the struggle against the north.

The invisibility of the massacre in published accounts and in the wider public consciousness partly drives this, especially in a national context where the question of which regions or ethnic groups contributed most to ‘liberation’ is highly contentious and politicised.⁶⁵ Other contemporaneous massacres, notably the 1965 Juba and Wau massacres are much more prominent in South Sudan’s national historical memory as incidents of patriotic victimhood. The memorial builders in Gogrial also want the violence at Lol Nyiel to be recognised: this is an attempt to insert this local story into a wider national narrative of liberation.

The focus on visibility is not purely instrumental, and does draw on local memories of the massacre. A recurring detail in accounts of the massacre is people having eyes torn out. This is recounted by almost everyone who describes the massacre. It was one of the first things I was told about the killings. Sightlessness was explicitly marked in the retired teacher’s account – in which it was the blinded man who cried out for people to save themselves. This was also a public killing – its brutality all the more so for its cruel visibility – the relatives of the victims were forced to watch the killing. This was a corruption of sight both because of *what* they saw; and because they were coerced into watching it, thus they had to give up control of what they witnessed. The memorial seeks to retain control over what is seen.

Concerns about visibility resonate with local memories of the first civil war more broadly. These are also crucial for understanding the desire for a prominent memorial. In my interviews with older people in Gogrial, the first civil war was remembered as a time of secrecy, trickery and hiding: a time when people had to cover their tracks, literally and ordinary people had to conceal their daily lives in order to avoid being involved in public displays of death. One woman recalled how the footsteps of visitors would be swept away by women so the police or the army would not accuse the household of harbouring *Anyar-Nya*.⁶⁶ The first civil war memories of one veteran, who joined the *Anyar-Nya* in the mid 1960s centred on disguises: he recalled people fixing small branches and bunches of grasses onto the back of their bicycles so the authorities would not be able see the tracks where they had passed. He got scarified (six marks on the forehead, denoting initiation into manhood) at this time, because ‘I had to mingle with the community in order to hide’.⁶⁷

The memorialising project is clearly engaging with South Sudan’s history of struggle and liberation. The memorial builders are marking a unifying historical injustice, drawing attention to Southern victimisation by the Sudanese state. One possible reading of the centrality of the building out of bodies motif is as a way of expressing contribution to the nation. It echoes older allegorical accounts of men whose bodies were used in the construction of spiritual centres, giving their lives in the process for the maintenance of a moral community, but in the case of Lol Nyiel, their lives and bodies are now being cast in ‘martyrdom’ to the creation of the new nation.

Like all interpretations, the narrative the memorial offers is selective – there is a tension between what is made visible and what is concealed. One obvious indicator of selection is that there is nothing else in Gogrial, an area not lacking in sites of mass

death, which has been subject to a memorial. Many more recent sites of violence in Gogrial, such as those associated with the rebellion of Kerubino Kuanyin Bol, are symbolically loaded with the divisions between South Sudanese that were created during the second civil war. These sites have not yet been explicitly marked. While this memorial is part of the patriotic narrative of southern liberation from the oppression of the central state, it does not address more difficult histories of violence within the South.

Conclusion: beyond memory crisis

The original massacre at Lol Nyiel was a necropolitical act, always intended to theatrically assert the sovereign power of the state to take life. It has also had an inadvertent afterlife. The perpetrators, almost certainly without realising the whole significance of their actions, piled the bodies of the dead in a way that resonated with, and subverted, a *longue durée* of local cultural motifs around building structures out of bodies. Powerfully impressing itself on local memory, this act has been resurrected in mnemonic form in the concrete memorial. It is overlaid with longstanding tensions between visibility, concealment, memories of hiding in war and the desire of the memorial builders to gain wider recognition and make the suffering explicit.

At Lol Nyiel, the memorial builders have drawn on a global technology of memory – the monumental memorial – to address a local history and legacy of civil war. They have used the monument to respond to a particular suite of local events and meanings. This memorialising act has a complicated relationship with official narratives of struggle in South Sudan. It has been constructed without any state support, and even in reaction against the broader national amnesia about the Lol Nyiel massacre. The memorial's celebration of the contribution of 'ordinary people' does differ from official commemorative events and sites in South Sudan, most strikingly the mausoleum of John Garang in Juba, which celebrate the contribution of senior military men. However, this intervention does not convey a tension between vernacular and official memories, nor it does not seek to challenge the broader national narrative of liberation: it inserts and highlights a local story.

The fact that this memorial is not complete might suggest that the project failed to capture public imagination in Gogrial, outside of a relatively small circle of local elite. But since most memorials are elite projects of some form, it would be unfair to dismiss it on that basis. A more mundane explanation for the unfinished project is that the memorial was a victim of economic and political instability. Its construction began in a narrow window of possibility, as South Sudan's independence began to appear on the horizon and financial contributions were forthcoming. That moment passed with the economy progressively weakened since 2012 and the outbreak of civil war in 2013. Without a consistent source of funding, this was always a precarious project.

The memorial's premature state of ruination is itself a reminder of the unstable political situation in South Sudan and that traumatic events are ongoing. As the legacies of South Sudan's struggles continue to violently play out, one message that can be taken away from Lol Nyiel, one of many 'forgotten' massacres in South Sudan's history, is that the sacrifice of family members and neighbours in the civil wars is something that South Sudanese want to mark and remember. Just as in some areas local prophets are taking on the work of interpreting catastrophic violence for ordinary people;⁶⁸ so too are South Sudanese using and adapting global technologies of memorialisation to interpret the loss of so many lives.

Acknowledgements

My research in South Sudan was supported by an AHRC doctoral studentship and a travel grant from the British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA). This research would not have been possible without the help and generosity of many people in Kuajok and Gogrial, including Akol Wek Kuanyin, Nyang Geng Akier, Bona Bek, Adut Madut Akec, Deng Mariak Deng, Aciec Kuot Kuot and Makuc Aruol Luac. I benefitted enormously from discussions at the conference *'Legacies of Struggle in Eastern and Southern Africa: Biography, Materiality and Human Remains'* held at the BIEA, 18-20 March 2015. I am grateful to all the participants, especially Joost Fontein and Justin Willis whose comments opened new angles on a chapter of my PhD thesis. Two anonymous peer reviewers provided further thoughtful suggestions. My ideas have been shaped through ongoing discussions with Cherry Leonardi, Nicki Kindersley and Katie Hickerson.

Notes

¹ Verdery, *The Political Lives*.

² Fontein and Harries, "The Vitality," 116; Krmpotich et al., "The Substance," 375.

³ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 11.

⁴ Werbner, "Introduction," 1.

⁵ Rolandsen, "A False Start."

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See the entry for Bernadino Mou Mou in Kuyok, *South Sudan*.

⁸ Deng, *War of Visions*, p.143-144.

⁹ See, The Vigilant. (1965) 'Juba Death Toll Rises to Over 1400: Massacres a Deliberate Army Plan', 13 July; '76 Southerners Slaughtered in Wau: Plan to Kill Educated Southerners Started', 14 July. Available in Sudan Archive Durham (SAD) SudA++PK1500VIG.

¹⁰ Human Rights Watch, *Civilian Devastation*, 96.

¹¹ Jok and Hutchinson, "Sudan's Prolonged."

¹² Medley, "Humanitarian Parsimony."

¹³ Deng et al., "New Beginning," 9.

¹⁴ Deng, "Memory, Healing"; Jok, "South Sudan."

¹⁵ Deng et al., "New Beginning," 56.

¹⁶ IGAD, *Agreement*, 40-45.

¹⁷ Kindersley and Rolandsen, "Prospects for Peace."

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- ¹⁸ Peter Lokale Nakimangole. 2011. 'EES Commemorates 56th Anniversary of Torit Uprising.' Gurtong Media, 20 August
<http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/5609/EES-Commemorates-56th-Anniversary-Of-Torit-Uprising.aspx> (accessed 02.01.2017)
- ¹⁹ Mayen Deng. 2014 'Update: Kiir visits Wau, opens its headquarters.' Eye Radio, 14 July
<http://www.eyeradio.org/kiir-visits-wau/> (accessed 02.01.2017)
- ²⁰ 'South Sudan: Remembering the Ones We Lost.' <http://rememberingoneswelost.com> (accessed 02.01.2017)
- ²¹ Werbner, "Introduction,"
- ²² Werbner, "Smoke."
- ²³ Marschall, "Commemorating."
- ²⁴ de Waal and Ibreck, "Alem Bakagn," 196.
- ²⁵ Giblin, "Post-Conflict Heritage"; Coombes et al., *Managing Heritage*.
- ²⁶ Jok, "The Political History."
- ²⁷ Rowlands and de Jong, "Reconsidering Heritage," 22.
- ²⁸ Nora, "Between Memory."
- ²⁹ Basu, "Palimpsest Memoryscapes."
- ³⁰ Malwal, *People and Power in Sudan*, 84.
- ³¹ Khalid, *The Government They Deserve*, 192.
- ³² Archivio Comboniani, Rome (ACR) A.85.26 'Speech delivered by Southern Front at Gogrial during the visit of Sayed Clement Mboro, Minister of Interior, December 1964.
- ³³ John 9:25 (King James Bible) 'He answered and said, whether he be a sinner or no, I know not: one thing I know, that, *whereas I was blind, now I see.*' (emphasis mine).
- ³⁴ Berridge, "Under the Shadow," 212–213.
- ³⁵ Interview with Nyang Geng and Bol Lual, Kuajok. 22.03.12.
- ³⁶ ACR A.85.26 Speech at Kuajok Mission Station (28 November 1964) to the Minister of the Interior.
- ³⁷ Interview with Nyang Geng, Kuajok. 22.03.12
- ³⁸ Interview with a former teacher from Gogrial, Kuajok, 27.03.2012
- ³⁹ Interview with a former teacher from Gogrial, Kuajok, 27.03.2012.
- ⁴⁰ Bona Malwal, personal communication, Oxford 13.06.13.
- ⁴¹ Saeed, "The State," 214.
- ⁴² Ibid., 214–218; Johnson, "Why Abyei Matters," 5–7.
- ⁴³ Interview with Nyang Geng and Bol Lual, Kuajok. 22.03.12.
- ⁴⁴ Mbembe, "Necropolitics," 11–12.
- ⁴⁵ Willis, "Violence, Authority," 93.
- ⁴⁶ Johnson, "Ngungdeng," 127.
- ⁴⁷ Johnson, "Evans-Pritchard," 236
- ⁴⁸ Majak, "The Northern Bahr Al-Ghazal," 240–242.
- ⁴⁹ Johnson, *Nuer Prophets*, 200.
- ⁵⁰ Willis, "Violence, Authority," 96.
- ⁵¹ Vaughan, *Darfur*, 76.
- ⁵² LeRiche and Arnold, *South Sudan*, 84.
- ⁵³ Lienhardt, *Divinity and Experience*, 168; Cormack, "The Making" 255.
- ⁵⁴ Lienhardt, "Burial Alive," 133.
- ⁵⁵ Howell, "'Pyramids'," 52–53.
- ⁵⁶ Johnson, "Fixed Shrines," 48.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 49; Mawson, "The Triumph of Life," 131.
- ⁵⁸ Mawson, "The Triumph of Life," 102–107.
- ⁵⁹ *Luak Mayual*, also known as *Luak Makuer Gol* has remained politically significant since Mawson's research. It was used by SPLA in the civil war and after the CPA local politicians visited it during their mobilisation campaigns. It is a sad sign of the deteriorating state of local relationships in Rumbek that the *luak* was burnt to ashes during inter-sectional fighting in

Lakes in 2015. Gabriel Mayom. 2015. 'Rumbek Sacred House Torched by Arsonist.' Gurtong Media, 08 April

<http://www.gurtong.net/ECM/Editorial/tabid/124/ctl/ArticleView/mid/519/articleId/16480/categoryId/1/Rumbek-Sacred-House-Torched-By-Arsonist.aspx> (accessed 02.01.2017).

⁶⁰ Lienhardt, Divinity and Experience, 315.

⁶¹ Viejo-Rose, "Memorial Functions," 473.

⁶² Laqueur, *Work of the Dead*, 432.

⁶³ Hayner, *Unspeakable Truths*, 12.

⁶⁴ Meskell and Scheermeyer, "Heritage as Therapy."; Meierhenrich, "Topographies."

⁶⁵ Leonardi, "'Buckets of Blood'."

⁶⁶ Interview with elderly woman in Barpuot, near Kuajok 7.11.2011.

⁶⁷ Interview with MP for Alek South in Kuajok, 21.10.2011

⁶⁸ Hutchinson and Pendle, "Violence, Legitimacy."

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