# Humanitarian Remains: Erasure and the Everyday of Camp Life in Northern Uganda

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The impacts of protracted displacement can be understood through the spatial and material afterlives of war. In the context of Northern Uganda, the experiences of conflict that are interpreted in memorialisation are often reflected of how governments and aid agencies administered life during war. This article examines leftover aid rations, archives, former displacement camp sites and even unmarked graves as evidence to better understand what happens when people try to return "to normal" after decades of war between the Government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army. It asks what narrative and material erasure implies for survivors who seek to create memorials to reflect on the war and have come to find that the past has been destroyed. Understanding how forgetting occurs, whether intentional or not, illuminates the difficulty of using archival material or artefacts as tools for remembrance projects. The article undertakes an examination of the everyday experiences of displacement and traces of aid assistance to show how memorial efforts can better make sense the past in the present.

## Introduction

To date, scholarship on trauma, return, and conflict realities in Northern Uganda, following the war between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU), has not considered the multiple afterlives of large-scale humanitarian assistance programmes. Most research has focused on issues of accountability, the lives of former abductees, and transitional justice, while ethnographic studies have sought to examine how social, spatial, and moral systems of belonging are navigated upon return, primarily by those whom the LRA abducted. However, gaps in understanding remain: specifically how to regard the heritage of war in forced displacement-camp settings and how aid assistance impacts remembrance projects in the aftermath of war. These gaps exists both in the context of the war in Northern Uganda and in broader work on forced migration. Northern Uganda is a term colloquially referring to a multi-ethnic

region north and east of the river Nile as it bends through the country. Scholars most commonly use it to describe 'Acholiland' which was the epicentre of the war between the LRA and GoU.

Through an examination of what was left behind after internally displaced persons (IDPs) returned home, this article aims to do two things. First, it provides a conceptual framework for approaching material remains of displacement as part of a 'memorial complex'. Second, it suggests a way of interpreting the remains of aid assistance that is not currently undertaken in memorial or scholarly work regarding Northern Uganda. The paper develops the context conditions for remembering and forgetting, ranging from political decision making and humanitarian arching to evidence of camp life in music, markets, and dirty soil.

It is hard to overstate how defining camp life was for this region's recent history, and how central it is to memory projects concerned with this war. During my time as curator for the Images of War and Peace Making (2013) and Travelling Testimonies (2013–14) exhibitions, the IDP camp experience was referenced in nearly every interview when we asked people 'what should be remembered about the war in the north?'. This is not surprising, considering that nearly 90 per cent of the Acholi population lived in IDP camps where entire generations were born or died. Life was refashioned to include new living, eating, and socializing arrangements as well as new forms of death and burial. This article explores these phenomena of everyday memory and experience, as opposed to event-based memorial work typically developed through remembrance around massacres.

In presenting material evidence from camp life—objects, bodies, and archives—this article argues that tangible remains are important narrative agents overlooked by remembrance projects. Insights gained from tangible leftovers (including human remains) are valuable because they offer a sense of everyday remembrance, often revealing a history of forced encampment and prolonged suffering. The material culture presented in this article advocates for a more nuanced interpretation of these remains because while useful aid rations might be assimilated into everyday life activities, it has been documented by scholars that negotiations around the reburial of the dead who were left in former camps becomes a larger obstacle to moving on from the war (Jahn and Wilhelm-Solomon 2015; Meinert and Whyte 2016). A few national and private memorial collections include items of aid assistance, but interpretation of such objects remains thin, often adhering to what Laurajane Smith calls an 'authorised heritage discourse' (2006).

After positioning the research, the article opens with a contextual tracing of memorialization in Uganda that reveals an authorized discourse around the LRA versus UPDF war. Recognizing the role key actors play in creating a memorial complex, that contains such discourse, recasts the remains as tools for humanitarians to consider their 'duty to memory' which according to Ricoeur is critical for achieving justice in acts of mourning that aims to heal (2004). Understanding where and how IDP camps fit into the preservation and presentation of the war era leads into the second section that addresses how conventional ways of accessing the past within humanitarian histories are not viable. Examples of specific archives of aid assistance are examined through the lens of silencing and erasure,

revealing the absence of files and the broader concerns around whose voice is being represented.

The core evidence of this article is divided into three sections related to private (home), transactional (market), and landscape memories. The material culture addressed in these social and geographic clusters reveal the everyday relationships IDPs have, over time, to aid rations, such as food tins. Reflecting on camp remains *in situ*, such as waste and unmarked graves, develops a broader discussion around the characteristics of sites that inhabit traumatic memory. Following an understanding of how these new material cultures fit into the memorial complex, the article concludes with a turn towards accountability for lack of action and recognition.

Overall, this contribution offers insights into aspects of protracted displacement and the challenges of memorializing lived experiences after return. The findings presented below are important because they are largely unexamined both in Ugandan and wider global contexts. This discussion is also timely considering the emergence of commemorative activities and war-related collections in Uganda and the reuse of former camp sites to house South Sudanese refugees.

The absence of durable solutions for returning IDPs, the lack of a national strategy for post-war memorialization and ongoing instability in the region, all mean that objects, bodies, and archives exist in what scholars working on migration have described as unstable conditions (DeSilvey 2006; Squire 2014). Basu and Coleman elaborate on this instability by suggesting material cultures of migration create 'floating signifiers' that can be open to many sets of categories and interpretations (2008). This article thus seeks to stabilize the material cultures of Uganda's IDPs through positioning the things and dead-bodies of displacement within a larger memorial complex of interpretation. In doing so, the memorial complex becomes a conceptual contribution to the literature as well as a tool for critically exploring memorial developments related to displacement histories.

This article investigates the types of meaning elicited from objects, bodies and archives in the lives of former IDPs by engaging the scholarship on affect—as a non-discursive set of sensations among things, places, and events. Objects have corporeal relationships that evoke affective sensations among owners, viewers, and traders, triggering memories of intangible feelings like taste, belonging, and loss (Ahmed 2004; Frykman and Povrzanovic 2016). In addition, commodities of exchange indicate networks of trade, systems of power, and cultural influences (Appadurai 1988). The examination of affective relationships, demonstrated through aid assistance rations, archiving of data and failure to stop mass death, insists that IDP camps are a meaningful site of inquiry for national and transnational debates around whose heritage and what memory is preserved in the aftermath of war.

## Methodological Approaches: Positioning the Research

Aware that conflict produces plural, often contradictory versions of events, this research engages multiple points of view from a wide range of informants. The

perspective presented in this article is shaped by my prior role as a curator and heritage consultant working to restore and document difficult pasts in Uganda from 2010 to 2016. Working as a curator shifts the focus from *speaking to*, to *working with* formerly displaced persons: in this way, participant observation, in which my research into events and artefacts of war was integral to developing memorial exhibitions and collections, has been a unique form of ethnography. In particular, these insights are informed by my attempts to collect objects of camp life on behalf of the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC). Curating war stories requires a unique form of practice, one that makes space for debates, ambiguities, and continuing dialogue (Simon 2011).

My follow-up research from 2015 to 2019 formed part of a doctoral project on memorialization that investigated the linkages among memory, development, state-building and, aid assistance. Here I collaborated with memory workers to digitize personal collections, create pop-up exhibitions, and examine the politics of representing difficult pasts. The data provided below is the result of 'memory work' exploring personal histories, memorial GIS mapping across the landscape, focus group discussions, and individual interviews. Visual theorist Kuhn describes memory work as 'a conscious and purposeful staging of memory' (2000: 186). This staging is done by memory workers who make public difficult pasts for a variety of desired outcomes, such as reflection, recognition, or reconciliation. The institutions and people involved in preserving memories and artefacts of the war era, including myself as a researcher/curator, can all be categorized as memory workers for our role in unearthing the past and staging it in the present.

Documentation of traumatic memories in post-war settings is always susceptible to the retelling of prescribed answers. The Acholi people of Northern Uganda have been so thoroughly researched and have told their stories so many times that they have formed scripted narratives (Allen and Schomerus 2006; Verma 2012; Edmonson 2018). There is a need for alternative approaches considering the problematics around what people say to white outsiders like myself, in light of aid assistance programmes being dominated by foreign money and administered by 'experts'. As discussed below, in my decade of working with people in heritage projects across Uganda, utilizing sites, objects, archives, photographs, artwork, or intangible culture as a point of discussion and focus, many stories dislodged from rehearsed canons.

This article reflects research with residents in six former IDP camp sites: Purongo, Lukodi, Kitgum Matidi, Acholi Bur, Atiak, and Pabbo. The location choice is based on previous curatorial engagements and relationships with residents in those areas. There were 251 registered camps, with many more satellite and return settlements. A host of more than 100 INGOs and NGOs worked to alleviate the suffering of this crisis (Gulu NGO Forum 2018). Among the agencies who provided assistance and who are referenced here are World Vision, Oxfam, War Child, United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs, World Food Programme, ICRC, Uganda Red Cross, World Health Organization, Caritas, and UNICEF. Following discussions with aid workers leaving Uganda, the 'draw-down' phase of organizational departure prompted

these insights into erasures and destruction of records, erasures that create barriers to reconstructing the past through primary-source historical documents. Given the sensitive nature of such accounts, anonymity of respondents was granted where requested.

The discussion below is not intended as a comprehensive survey of camp life or return. As Kaiser has reflected, it would be inappropriate to generalize how all displaced people ascribe meaning to the things that surround them, but this does not negate the potential for understanding experiences through material culture (2006). Drawing on a heritage perspective, the article links three temporal domains: the past time of encampment, the immediate past or present moment of research and return, and a future-facing proposal for more nuanced memorial interpretation. Heritage research done in this way examines the tangible and intangible remains of conflict rather than assembles a collation of narratives to build a conclusive story (Harrison 2011). The work extends from contributions by Carr and Mytum, who have argued that 'the artefacts used and produced by those interned in camps can provide important counterpoints to the inevitably biased views of both the captors and the imprisoned' (2012: 4). In this way, the article expands Giblin's (2015) proposal to apply a 'modern conflict archaeology approach' by interrogating the social, spatial, and political dimensions of camp heritage in a way that scholars working in Northern Uganda have not yet undertaken.

## The Memorial Complex: Recognizing What is and Isn't Publicly Remembered

Every war-affected region faces a difficult task in reconstructing or remembering the events of the past for public exhibitions or institutional collections. To nationalize this process, countries like Rwanda have specific legislation that governs remembrance. In Uganda, however, fragmentation comes from an ambiguous Transitional Justice Policy (passed in 2019) that advocates for memorialization and reburial, as well as from multiple actors and narratives that have tried to shape the past, both during the war and its aftermath. The disconnect between historical violent events and how they are interpreted through memory work in this region is complicated further by the fact that the LRA are still active in neighbouring countries; at the time of this writing, a trial is underway at the International Criminal Court for the former LRA commander Dominic Ongwen.

To effectively undertake an analysis of memory in the context of Northern Uganda I argue that we go beyond the 'sites of memory' (Nora 1989) or memoryscapes (Phillips and Reyes 2011) offered by previous scholars and advance the notion of a memory complex as a dataset of physical memorials and remains, political and social decisions around preservation and affective triggers experienced by the IDP population. Memoryscape stemming from Phillips and Reyes' definition (2011) of a particular landscape that is inhabited by a set of memory features that interact with globalized forms of participation and interpretation. This means that data comes from more than the physical distribution and meaning making around sites of memory as indicated by Nora, Phillips, and Reyes. Rather the memory complex, as it is discussed here is a set of actions undertaken

by religious, state, and NGO initiatives, interfacing with museum collections, sites of violence, and everyday life.

During the immediate phase of return from encampment, memorialization through monuments was part of the resettlement process, ushering in a new heritage of demarcated burials in mass graves. These efforts were inspired by visits to Rwanda and South Africa made by the Caritas team of the Archdiocese of Gulu. The Catholic NGO initiated burials, rituals, and prayers 'to show the people that the souls who had perished were safe (JB 2018)'. Despite these early efforts, today there is no systematic approach, meaning that the support for exhumations, burials, and memorial prayers are often improvised responses to the discovery of bodies. Paradoxically, the massacre site memorials do not match how Acholi culture, practiced in Northern Uganda, would burry those who died in other circumstances (Ocen 2017). Such marked sites are most often mass burials associated with attacks by the LRA, rather than deaths in camps. Even though many massacres happened near or within the camp boundaries and many of the memorial funding agencies were active at the time of the war, the commemorative events observed during my research make little to no reference to camp life.

Instead, these tangible memorials are often tied to overarching 'truths' around what happened, reinforcing the extant narrative of the LRA as singular antagonist. According to Keen (2012), the framing of the enemy and efforts for accountability are central to forming an overall perception of what happened. Preserving massacre sites also contributes to the development of the ideal enemy by creating a visible marker of violent pasts. The growing commemoration of massacre sites positions these monuments as anchor points for war narratives reinforced by the accountability paradigm. As many scholars have already explored, the work on traditional justice, the International Criminal Court, and other accountability mechanisms within Uganda, all implicate LRA combatants as the primary perpetrators (Finnstrm 2010; Schomerus 2010). There have been no trials for atrocities committed by government soldiers, no comprehensive reparations packages paid out to victims and very few officials recognize the IDP camps as a form of 'genocide' like the former UN Under-Secretary-General and Special Representative for Children in Armed Conflict Olara Otunnu (2006) advocated.

The history of camp life is necessary for a meaningful conceptualization of the memorial complex as more than a set of demarcated sites or collections, but rather a continual social and political renegotiation. People living in these camps, after all, did not voluntarily flee their homes, but were rather forced into 'protected villages' as part of the government counter-insurgency campaign. The International Crisis Group wrote, 'In March 1987 the NRA [National Resistance Army] forced 100,000 people into camps in Gulu' (ICG, 2004: 29). By 1996 it was official policy that if you weren't in a camp you were considered a rebel, and by the early 2000s aid agencies had become heavily involved in supplying rations and managing the camps. With the initiation of Operation Iron Fist (2002–03) the camps swelled to between 1,600,000 and 1,800,000. Conditions were so dire that more people died in the camps than from combat or LRA attacks, marking 1000 deaths per week at their height (UN Children's Fund 2005).

Freedom of movement came about after more than 10 years of humanitarian assistance and pressure from the Norwegian Refugee Council under the National Protection Cluster. Alongside the reported brutality committed by LRA combatants, the realities of encampment yield a history of civilian depravity and suffering that challenges memorial traditions in other areas of Uganda like Luwero or Kampala, where war heroes are celebrated with statues and battlefields are marked by graves of 'martyrs'.

The camps in Northern Uganda were a hybrid mixture of UNHCR refugee settlements and pre-war village settlements, situated in areas accessible for military personnel to dispatch protection. According to Stephanie Perham, the UNCHR coordinator of camps in Northern Uganda from 2006 to 2012, 'Northern Uganda marked a turning point in humanitarian response to IDP situations. IDP response was a new concept (2016)'. As a result, the camps did not receive the support afforded to refugee settlements, meaning that their inhabitants had to improvise, using mud, brick, and thatch to build their homes. By the early 2000s they had sprawled in size and scale, at one-point totalling 251 camps with numbers as high as 60,000–70,000 residents (Pabbo Memorial Site Management Plan 2011–15, 2011). Agencies struggled to provide even basic food, bedding, clothes, education, and medical care due to constrained resources, raids by the rebel LRA, frequent fires, and growing numbers of yet more IDPs.

The Uganda National Museum has collected several camp objects, including from Pabbo, the largest wartime settlement (Figure 1). During their exhibition 'The Road to Reconciliation' in 2013, the Museum reconstructed a hut to show aspects of camp life. In the same year, we (at Refugee Law Project) collected pieces of demolished camps for an exhibit at the NMPDC in Kitgum. Intertwined with the humanitarian forgetting in the developmental present, Pabbo's Memorial Committee's efforts to preserve part of the camp and collect objects is emblematic of the tension around memory that is illustrated throughout this article. Pabbo has become a go-to place for researchers as well as memory workers within the GoU and abroad, such as the British Museum. Yet as discussed below, a survivor-centred articulation of memory through the memorial space such as Pabbo is challenged by processes of silence and erasure.

Reinterpretation of IDP camps within the memorial complex requires the inclusion of everydayness in which the sites, artefacts, and memories of encampment are affectively present. The sites and collections introduced above are part of a memorial effort that signifies a moment in time when life radically changed. Yet in each of the above cases, these materials are rarely interpreted with the violence described by scholars such as Dolan (2009), and Branch (2009) or local organizations such as the Acholi Religious Leaders Peace Initiative. What, then, accounts for this void between experience and interpretation?

## Silence and Erasure: Governing People and Narratives

Conducting an historical investigation of camp records and files is not straight-forward, as the archives are, like the massacre sites, spread out and difficult to

access. Nor does the simple addition of survivor-based camp interpretation counterbalance the official discourse found in post-war reconstruction because, as Branch argues, camp residents, at the time of the war, were expected to be mute (2012). Finnström has characterized the sentiment for dealing with grievances from Ugandan aid workers towards their foreign bosses as 'Better, then, to remain silent' (2008: 150), explaining how the ICRC forbade him from recording or photographing during his research.

This section outlines the forms of silence and erasure as they existed in the camps, highlighting the implications for memorial projects in the aftermath of the war. Specific mechanisms of power contributed to a technocratic elevation of the camp while simultaneously disregarding the everyday. First was the creation of people as datasets, after which came the second mechanism, the use of this data and testimonies of suffering to communicate crisis in journalistic and humanitarian reports. The third and final mechanism was documentation of a fairly illiterate population that created a technocracy of camp leaders and aid administrators who would speak 'on behalf of' the beneficiaries. Camp administration, done in this way, evinces three of memory theorist Paul Connerton's seven types of forgetting, namely 'repressive erasure', 'forgetting as annulment', and 'forgetting as humiliated silence' (208). Specifically these three types of forgetting are evinced below by showing how datasets can overpower people's voices, how the erasure or lack of access to data can dissolve the archives of an era and how misrepresentation through humanitarian reporting and media can depict a population without agency or dignity. Erasure, annulment, and silence create cleavages in society's ability to recall the past, sometimes forming contradictory realities between aid administrators and recipients of aid.

Data-gathering was undertaken by organizations trying to assess and respond to the 'needs' of displaced populations. Aid workers first used lists and files to identify beneficiaries and distribution routes. Humanitarian documentation also gave credibility to the scale of the encampment and the conditions of camp life (Okello 2017). Individuals were classified according to their potential to become aggregated data along markers of age, gender, camp area of residence, home residence, nutritional, or medical needs and education levels. Aggregation of identity in this way allowed management of the populations in accordance with humanitarian morals that aligned people with specific identities and rights, a practice that is central to techniques of control (Read *et al.* 2016). Over time the data gathering and management gave rise to a cadre of medical, educational, and logistical experts who were called upon to tell the story of mass displacement that was happening in Northern Uganda.

Civil Society Organisations for Peace in Northern Uganda used data to pose hard-hitting rhetorical questions that would spark action. In 2006, they wrote: 'Where else in the world have there been 20,000 kidnapped children? Where else in the world have 90 per cent of the population in large districts been displaced? Where else in the world do children make up 80 per cent of the terrorist insurgency movement?' The pattern of kidnapping, displacement, and rebellion worked to both reinforce the LRA as the singular enemy and to characterize the population

as helpless children, using statistics to do so. Moreover, in one of its press highlights, the UN recorded that 'Despite the gravity of the humanitarian situation, less than 10% of the $130 million requested by the humanitarian community for 2004 has been received. In some areas, malnutrition rates as high as 30% have been recorded among children (UNOCHA 2004)'. These numbers were void of personal biographies, social concerns, or insight into how survivors were experiencing their displacement. Instead, it was expressed as a 'humanitarian situation' with the 'humanitarian community' presented as the one in need, repressing the needs for security, culture, family, and other concerns of camp residents.

To be clear, the documentation was not always for numeric datasets. Displacement was also personalized through inserting individual voices into humanitarian reports and campaigns (Kindersley 2015). Glossy pamphlets adorned with high resolution portraits of named informants and testimonies sought to make the reader feel compassion. Yet as Kindersley points out, there is a certain amount of editorial licence that dilutes the legitimacy of using such material as valid truths in protracted displacement and where people are solely dependent on aid. She describes a kind of co-dependent testimonial reality in southern Sudanese cases, whereby the humanitarians and scholars are dependent on the story and the narrators are dependent on the aid assistance. This echoes what Finnström has described in the Northern Uganda context as a way to reinforce colonial imaginations of suffering (2010). Humiliation is compounded in these contexts because people are susceptible to unethical framing of their stories that could be paired with fantastical headlines or transliteration.

Mnemonic gestures towards silence, forgetting, and erasure reinforced the trope of the suffering other, appearing in headlines, accompanied by statistics, and testimonial extracts described above. Most notably, in 2003 the UN Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, Jan Egeland, remarked that 'The conflict in Northern Uganda is the biggest forgotten, neglected humanitarian emergency in the world today'. Humanitarian and journalistic reports used Egeland's statement and UN standing to keep the pictures of vulnerable others on the international radar. Humanitarian agencies and media outlets codified the situation as a 'forgotten war' or the plight of victims as 'silence'. One UNICEF document on rape in Pabbo camp was titled 'Suffering in Silence' (2005); and the US-based National Public Radio ran a special called 'Child Soldiers Fight Forgotten War in Uganda' (McGuffin 2005). The Institute for Security Studies followed this rhetoric in turn with their extensive report entitled: 'From Forgotten War to an Unforgivable Crisis' (Ruaudel and Timpson 2005), setting the stage for selective erasure, and nearly calling on their outside audience to remember-to-forget.

These two mechanisms, compressing lived experiences while elevating humanitarian concerns and speaking on behalf of people in the camps through media, demonstrate a blending of 'repressive erasure' and 'forgetting as humiliated silence'. The dynamics of lived realities in the camps, as depicted in works by Finnstrm (2008) or Dolan (2009), are erased by the amalgamation of data, editorial selection and transformation of everyday issues into humanitarian issues. By showcasing vulnerable beneficiaries as helpless rape victims and child soldiers,

these beneficiaries are humiliated into silence. Connerton offers the wounded as a clear case of humiliated silence, because there is voice for the dead in memorialization but there is no space for loss experienced by disfigured veterans. Is there a parallel between the returnees from the camps in Northern Uganda and the 10 million mutilated men in 1923 of Connerton's claim? Not exactly, but such examples do illuminate the third type of forgetting, in which history is not remembered publicly but bodily, in which experiences are discursively annulled.

Forgetting as annulment is most clearly seen in the neglect towards archives, or in some cases intentional destruction of the data collected during the era of encampment. According to Connerton's framing of data in the archive of war, the files are 'in principle always retrievable, [thus . . .] we can afford to forget it' (Connerton 2008: 65). However, destruction is so widespread it created a matter-of-fact response by colleagues during my search for records. 'They were about to burn them', said Francis Nono, showing me some of the 84 laminated panels of the Norwegian Refugee Council's sensitization campaigns from the camp era. 'It was just there, rusting', remarked Deo Komakech after negotiating with the Local Councillor of Acholi Bur trading centre to acquire a land-mine sign created by AVSI. 'They were just being eaten by rats', a colleague confided about the archives of returnees who had come from 'the bush' with the LRA. Allen *et al.* in this special issue, refers to 11,000 Save the Children returnee files that were found in a dumpster in Gulu town. And on and on.

In some instances it was more convenient for aid organizations to destroy boxes of files rather than move them from Gulu or Kitgum to head offices in Kampala, 200–300 km away. In principle, but not in practice, all NGOs and INGOs were required to give copies of their files to the District Records Office. Over the course of two years, I rarely obtained a concrete answer as to why and how the loss of records had happened. Yet, when two agencies anonymously admitted they had destroyed their files, they cited confidentiality and convenience as the rationale. While confidentiality is a valid response, it was clear that the decisions came not from the beneficiaries themselves but from the senior managers who were, again, speaking 'on behalf of' the formerly encamped people. In many instances the directives came from staff in head offices based in Europe or the US. The problem was not limited to the beneficiaries in rural areas: an interview with a colleague in Kampala revealed that he had tried to get access to his own records through OCHA and was denied. Interviews with senior managers, two sitting and four former, and a review of information management policies of leading agencies, revealed that the usefulness of the material following the war was never considered beyond their institutional needs for internal reviews and audits.

If forced encampment was primarily narrated by the data of those who managed the camps, then to reconstruct that past, as an addition to the memorial complex, would require access to those files. One NGO worker explained that the camp registration records would be useful for tracing missing persons, but that many had been destroyed—so she was 'lucky when former camp leaders made copies of their ledgers (2018)'. In the cases of Nazi-controlled camps or Japanese internment camps in the US, memorial interpretation relies on those archives for

*Figure 1.*
**Image of collections from the Uganda Museum.**

reconstruction and interpretation. So too are these archives used as evidence to show the atrocities that were committed and the reparations owed to those who suffered. However, as Rachel Ibreck has pointed out, humanitarians rely on silence and forgetting to erase their failures to save the suffering (2018), allowing a clean break from the crisis and the ability to move on.

## The Past is All around Us—Interpreting Remains

Relying on archives to reconstruct the past is, then, a fraught endeavour. If the archives are unreliable for sharing lived experiences, then one must turn to other sources for interpretation. Recently, scholar Laury Ocen has written about how oral culture and dramatic performance recalls camp life (2018). His published descriptions and more detailed PhD on memorialization in Uganda are useful

for conceptualizing a more malleable form of remembrance juxtaposed against fixed memorial sites. Ocen's oral framework can be used to further investigations through material culture. Across Northern Uganda, material indicators of the camps remain in seemingly public, decidedly private, and deeply intimate spaces. These tangible remains trigger affects for those who encounter them, sometimes in disturbing ways. In discussions with formerly encamped people, food tins, shoes, and jerry cans feature prominently in former IDP household collections, with some interviews focusing on donated clothing and food sacks. In this sense, materials and their moment of waste or reuse can be key indicators of how cultural heritage changes and adapts to encampment (Newhouse 2015). The object's presence indicates an intervention, but it can also signal absence of that which was left behind or the loss of abundance (Bshara 2014). Through exploring objects and camp biographies, a set of enduring memory-triggers reveal the stories of camp life and loss.

Some scholars differentiate between ordinary and abnormal affects regarding the materiality of camp life (Bshara 2014; Misztal 2003; Hasian 2014; Petti 2017). For Kathleen Stewart the ordinary affects are those sensations triggered by materials in everyday life: although not always difficult or traumatic, they have a relationship to the past (2007). Abnormal affects, then, are in this context are sometimes seen as the hauntings of spirits that result from polluted or dirty conditions (Victor and Porter 2017). To be sure, there are extraordinary events that invoke the ordinariness of the materials discussed, and it is possible to see the whole ordeal of encampment as extraordinary. But it is the everydayness of the objects and encounters with the past that makes the relationships discussed henceforth ordinary.

## Private Memory—Food Tins, Ration Cards, and Sustaining Life

The home is an intimate space that during the camp era was disrupted by a compression of 'too many people in the space' said Gladys of the transformation of Purongo (2018). The food and non-food rations distributed by aid organizations made up the majority of materials in a household. Rations were also distributed during the return phase (2007–10) to give material incentives for people to go home. As a result, returned IDPs have households that today include many of the durable rationed items that were issued.

Adorning many huts is one obvious signifier of aid assistance: the brand-marked food tin. Hundreds of USAID and World Food Program food tins remain amongst former beneficiaries, still used to store things like oil and millet beer. Occasionally those who were still living in camp areas or transition sites would have doors made from hammered and flattened out tins, which require between 15 and 21 tins for their construction. The doors are hung on the round mud and thatch huts that were characteristic of the camp era and are still in use today.

One such hut in the Pabbo Memorial Site remains empty after its owner died in 2016. In early 2019, neighbours repaired the hut and have preserved it as a

memorial to the woman who was one of the earliest residents: she served as a matron who would count the children before they departed for their nightly commutes to Gulu Town nearly 40 km away, to be safe from abduction by the LRA, a lived reality for thousands of youngsters who fled to urban spaces for protection. For the memorial committee trying to preserve a portion of the former camp, her hut, story, and door are a symbolic marker of both innovation and harsh experiences (Pabbo Memorial Committee 2018). One focus group discussion with the Committee revealed that she was symbolic of a broader failure of the GoU to successfully protect children living in the camps, with people commenting on the absurdity of a designation as 'protected village'.

The experiences indicated through these tins are multiple. On a medical level, they can express a disruption in diet and sources of nutrition. On a structural level, they can represent the gendered way in which distributions were given primarily to women as heads of household, thus destabilizing masculine hierarchies. These readings of the materials are part of an external, macro-level observation of camp life, whereas in my interviews people were much more personal in sharing their experiences of doing without enough food or redistributing rations amongst their ever-expanding family. One woman even remembered a moment of resistance wherein she and several other women refused rations because of the poor-quality grain that was being distributed.

Ration cards were links in the aid assistance network and signifiers of power. While the cards were not initially used, over time they replaced lists and indiscriminate distribution, becoming valuable documents to access assistance. During this research more than 40 ration cards were shown by beneficiaries who kept them with other important family records and land titles. In many cases, when asked why they kept the now-obsolete cards, former camp residents responded that they might be useful should war resume. Two young men explained independently that they wanted to keep these documents because they had relatives still in 'the bush' with the LRA and the relation could implicate them. Thus if they were to ever encounter military questioning they might need to prove that they were in the camps and were, therefore, not rebels; in fact they were located in camps with unarmed civilians.

Grace, of Pabbo Memorial Committee, remembered paying for a replacement card after the camp caught fire and everything in her hut was burned (2018). She was required to pay the administrator for each of the six women registered in her household. Indeed, mechanical and physical fires participated in the regular destruction of documents. Former camp zone-leaders, aid workers, and interviewees all explained to me that the destruction of ration cards was not uncommon, inferring that the negotiation around ration cards was a behavioural mechanism of control, meaning if people did not follow the prescribed rules of camp leadership or aid agencies, then their cards would be confiscated or they would be refused issuance of new cards. This process of denial or removal was yet another way in which people were erased from the transactional realities of aid-to-beneficiary encounters. An Overseas Development Institute report describes the erasure of peoples through computerized mechanisms whereby one individual

remarked, 'computer owango nyinga' (literally translated as 'the computer burned my name') (Bailey 2008: 11). Camp administrators in both Uganda and Sudan would use the technical malfunctions to deny aid as well as insert ghost beneficiaries to increase personal gains (Jok 1996; Young and Maxwell 2013).

Camp life is most often remembered for food insecurity and aid assistance. Both aid reports and personal interviews reveal a constant anxiety around food shortages, access, security of delivery and the ways in which people were governed by this basic need. The food tin and the ration card, key markers of this time, still serve as important tools for remembrance, durable markers of the often-ignored reality of camp life (Figure 2). Yet young people who never lived in the camp do not know these markers in the same way, demarcating an intimacy of knowledge only for those who directly experienced the war. According to Marianne Hirsch, this direct or indirect relationship with the past is how one can make sense of representation from the past in the present (2008). She makes a distinction between those who are able to identify images and objects, thus validating and authenticating the past, versus those who have to rely on first-hand knowledge to narrate meaning. Thus, to meaningfully interpret the remains of camp life, memorials must work closely with those who can recognize and explain the multiple relationships between objects and experiences.

Figure 2.
**Image of collections from Pabbo Memorial Site.**

*Transactional Memory—Music, Markets, and New Generations*

Materials, of course, move beyond the home, and must be examined both in private and public settings to be fully understood. As this section details, the residue of the war is still present in daily, commercial, and cultural lives: the movement of these objects into public spaces implies a wider exchange of memory as well as the transformation of passive objects into active agents.

Interviews in Gulu Market were prompted by a tracing of the materials presented in the homes and a curiosity about whether they were used as commodities. Some items were had just become standard market goods, such as watering jerry cans. However, the flower-painted metal trays that were issued 'one per household' are today used to cover pots of *kalo* (millet bread), *malakwang* (dark green stew made with peanut paste), or stewing meat. Sylvia, who was cooking on one of my visits, told me that these foods were never available in her camp unless people ventured out to their gardens to harvest them illegally. In debates with other women discussing their cookware, Sylvia referred to a particular style of plate as 'camp-original' from the first era of rations transported from the IDP camp in Palenga to Gulu Town 25 km away. Sylvia lived in the camp, that housed between 11,500 and 26,000 residents, for 'many, many, many years'. She explained that to her generation—those who have been cooking for households before, during, and after encampment—the plates are a symbolic reminder of that time they went without. To her generation—those who have been cooking for households before, during, and after encampment—the objects are a reminder of that time they went without (2018).

During school holidays, Sylvia's youngest daughter would serve food during the lunch rush time in the market. The ration trays both covered and served the food in Gulu Market, and as I interviewed her mother, she was learning the biography both of the plates and of her mother, having been too young to remember camp life. As I conducted this memory work with Sylvia the plates of Palenga were a voicing agent, activated not just by the cooking process but also by my research, showing my own entanglement in the process of remembrance. Such activation echoes times when the food ration card is passed around the Pabbo memorial site when visitors come.

Like the plates, ration tins signify a relationship between displacement and cultural expression. Musician Opira Morise Kato remembers making musical instruments out of the USAID branded food tins and the plastic jerry cans. Drums and *adungu* stringed-instruments were most common. Different objects produced different sounds for his lamenting tunes that described the squalor of camp life. Many musical groups who perform using these adapted instruments don't always play music about the war, they also use the same instruments to play songs of 'traditional Acholi culture' as part of diverse sets in public performances. During the war, the use of tins as instruments was a practical response to limited resources, but today they are now a marker of resilience. After one cultural event, I interviewed another musician using a USAID tin-based instrument, Patrick, who explained that he is showing not just his musical talent, but also his ability to make

instruments in a time of depravity. Like the tins in the house, one had to live through the war to get these supplies: they were not something you could just buy in the market.

More subtly, memory is transacted through the oil lanterns now sold in markets across small trading centres and big towns. They represent a mode of camp life of improvisation and ingenuity like the doors and instruments, but also mark the past as a time of insecurity. Unlike the larger oil and grain tins that could be hammered out into doors or cut into instruments, these smaller, flimsier tins were cut and reshaped into lanterns, using discarded clothes or fibre ropes as the wick. Discussions with former camp inhabitants and market sellers in Gulu and Anaka revealed that unlike their counterparts discussed above, these were not objects of nostalgia linked to Acholi traditions of architecture, music, or food.

Conversations around the lanterns offered glimpses into the securitization of camp life: namely, curfews. In the Anaka Subcounty camp of Purongo, that bordered the nearly 4000 km$^2$ national park, particular insecurities were expressed. James remarked, 'When you hear the gumboots coming, you would know to blow out your lantern'. James was a young man at the time of writing, but referred to his memories as a boy when his family moved into Purongo camp, linking audible military patrols to the lanterns. Another resident of Purongo, Betty, recalled that when her husband would come home drunk, she would wish for a light to sober him up, because his demands in the dark were often too much for her to deal with: she felt embarrassed by the calls for intimacy while sharing one hut with two children and three other young dependents (2018).

The use, remaking and playing of rationed objects are ways in which camp life was transacted, through affects and ways of knowing. The rationed objects may be ubiquitous, yet the memories are individual, creating a network of shared but unique avenues for interpretation. Locating these objects in markets and performances illustrates how memory can inhabit materials and reach different audiences outside public memorial collections and through generations. The memorial collections that interpret camp life can gain perspectives through these objects, from the point of view of those people who lived through the war, rarely capture these insights. Reading the material landscape from the survivor-centred manipulations and interpretations of humanitarian rations allows for a new introduction of narratives into the memorial complex.

## Landscape Memory—Dirty Soil and Leftover Markers

### 'Since the camp, my land is impossible'

This statement was offered by David, an elder landowner in Kitgum Matidi, whose father had allocated a portion of their ancestral land to the government for the IDP camp. David's sentiments are in reference to the disposal of waste, the leftover unusable rations and the burial grounds. David and other landowners who loaned land to IDPs lament the unexpected amounts of trash that they dug through when trying to cultivate their land. For David and others, human bones also arise as part of the soil complex, making the barrier to negotiating return even

more formidable (Jahn and Wilhelm-Solomon 2015). Indeed, the return phase of resettlement was defined as a return to agricultural life in which the soil would provide in traditional ways, set apart from the food rationing and unemployment that characterized camp life. However, there was little to no planning for the environmental pollution and uncertainty that occurred from the camp and war era. The waste and human remains in the landscape constitute a third layer of camp life that persists into the present. Highlighting their significance shows the thinness of the boundary between camp life and camp death, making a potent claim for the need to reinterpret the experiences of the past.

Former camp sites have a unique monumental marker: the towering white metal portable toilets. These objects in the landscape are at the fringes of former camps, and are also zones where bodies were buried. I identified 102 of these toilets in my attempt to map memorial sites across the war-affected landscape. In one stop I met Immaculate gardening in Acholi Bur: pointing to the toilets then drawing in the air, Immaculate described the geography of the camp as having the army in the middle, the residents as their shields and the ancestors to keep them contained. For her, the bodies, the security and the surveillance created a border-land that she dared not cross. That zone, especially for a woman, was a place of violation of body and spirit. In this way, the aftereffects of war in the physical space are 'recursively implicated in the ordering of a whole sequence of events' (Hetherington 2004: 160). In the absence of removals, the toilets are metaphorical pollution zones that signal a time of insecurity and death.

After the camps were dismantled in Northern Uganda, why did bodies remain in the soil? According to the EU Humanitarian Action and Coordination, the closure of a camp 'is often the least planned and managed phase of the camp lifecycle; potentially resulting in unsustainable solutions for displaced populations' (2014: 3). In Meinert and Whyte's observations of Awach camp, 'no camp burial ground was demarcated' to begin with; they referenced the District Planner as explaining that 'There were no regulations for cemeteries to be inside the camp, however travel restrictions and security made it difficult to practice the last funeral rites' (2016: 199). Haphazard burial indicates that camp residents and managers assumed the crisis would be short-term, and there were limited provisions for Acholi rites and rituals for the dead. Moreover, lingering insecurity meant that people were unsure if they could return with their dead or if they would be back in the camps again. These 'solutions' did not include the spiritual impact on post-displacement environs. In a multi-stage departure, IDPs were sent to their home areas without a systematic plan for their dead or missing.

In this region of Uganda, reburial does not have a fixed formula, and is contingent on many factors depending on faith, clan, proximity, condition of death, and resources of the family (Meier 2013). In the development agendas for resettlement as viable citizens, many bodies have been left in the camp environs. These spirits are held to be disruptive to the landowners as well as the families that left them behind. People often only opt for reburial when development dictates it (e.g. road expansion projects), making a reactive, not proactive, response to returning society to spiritual harmony. This *ad hoc* reality is exacerbated by poverty,

whereby people look to external sources to pay for exhumations, rituals, and reburial, such as the Japan International Cooperation Agency funding the reburial of over 200 people in Pabbo for urban expansion (Jahn and Wilhelm-Solomon 2015). Furthermore, Acholi Ker Kal Kwaro, the authoritative cultural institution does not initiate reburial that could mitigate adverse effects from the unsettled dead, despite being active actors in building up the memory complex by presiding over historical reburials and contemporary commemorations. As a result, many residents living in former camp zones rely on a disjointed group of elders to respond to found remains.

Looming, is a larger question as to who is actually responsible for reversing the abnormal affects caused by toilets and bodies. It is now a decade since the last camp closed. The toilets, rubbish, and bodies now represent the failure of aid and serve as markers of forced encampment. In spite of scoping visits by outsider forensic anthropologists, no comprehensive effort to identify or resettle the dead has taken place. There is, however, a need to perform rites or removals for residents who experience the abnormal affects induced by the unsettled dead. Some people even relate the phenomenon of Nodding Syndrome to this condition of spiritual unrest (van Bemmel 2016). Exclusive to this war-affected region, Nodding Syndrome is an unknown condition that has impacted populations in the post-war region, resulting in loss of appetite, disillusionment, aimless wandering, and other associated ailments, primarily defined amongst youth. In discussions with former camp residents, Nodding Syndrome was given as one of many afflictions caused by the unsettled past, marked by bodies, missing persons, and an overall lack of repair for violations committed during the war.

Officials pass on the responsibility, saying that it requires a collaborative effort among the Ministry of Lands, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and Ministry of Finance. It is unlikely that the Ministry for Tourism, Wildlife, and Antiquities, which has been involved in defining the memory complex through the Commission for Museums and Monuments, has the capacity for such an undertaking despite their recognition of community requests to engage. This declared need for coordination—without its manifestation—is a convenient way to redirect responsibility and to deny the historical record of the scale and impact of mass death and suffering that resulted from the camp era.

**Conclusions**

The lens of heritage utilized thorough out this article expands the memorial complex beyond authorized discourse to include lived realities within material and spatial dimensions to advance a reinterpretation of the past. In this reframing of legacies of displacement in the present, the camp can be understood as a site of disharmony, even if the material afterlives are not overtly traumatic. The accounts provided show that objects are not merely everyday materials that have been transformed by war: they are objects that have come into the everyday through the war, and in some ways, despite it. The humanitarian leftovers create a temporal and physical proximity to the memory of encampment, occasionally re-lived

through food, enshrined in music, or rendered into architecture. In contrast to administrative datasets and archives, personal histories of humanitarian remains reveal a rupture in life during the camp era: one dominated by feelings of confinement, surveillance, and deep insecurity.

Prolonged compliance and silence during the war can hinder the ability to participate in memorial projects and articulate narratives that do not fit the official discourse and result in forms of forgetting and erasure. The power of humanitarian agencies to silence beneficiaries is a phenomenon documented within Northern Uganda and has been observed by scholars in other contexts (Harell-Bond et al. 1992; Malkki 2005). However, the inability of beneficiaries to speak is rarely linked to the aftermath of the camp era, in recalling the past for memorial efforts. Humanitarian failures do not feature in the exhibitions or sites that reference the camps: public narratives remain trapped in aid legacies of power and control that vilify the LRA.

There is a danger, however, in a critical type of documentation, in its potential to reframe the past. 'If we just name and shame every organisation who wronged us in the war then who will support our fight for government pay-outs?' one former camp leader asked. Returning to Ibreck, it is important to recall that humanitarian memory is tied to institutional amnesia, thereby remembering successes and forgetting failures (2018). If humanitarian memory did engage its failures, in the context of Northern Uganda, then it would have to recognize that agencies have a role in remembrance projects, specifically related to their archives and the reburial of those who died during their administration. This is perhaps a moral duty to memory that extends beyond the moment of crisis.

As should be clear, objects, bodies, and archives are key evidence to counter dominant discourses regarding the infliction of violence—violence that occurred, in this case, during the war between the LRA and the GoU. Bodies and objects link the landscape to the lived experience. They also indicate violence done to the land and highlight the consequences lingering from the unsettled dead. While mortality might be constant in human life cycles, the unknowing of who is buried where and whether their remains are resting peacefully is also a new phenomenon in Northern Uganda. In these cases, sites of harm require additional cleansing to make the land tenable for returnees. So too are bodies in the landscape a constant reminder of the failure to protect and the impunity that still remains. The investigations around these bodies are useful for creating more durable solutions for return.

In summary, this article has argued for a more nuanced interpretation of what is left behind after people return from internal displacement, and has advocated for accountability from humanitarian agencies who supported both the encampment of people and the erasure of the past. Erasure and silence have manifested through data accumulation (in the moment of crisis), repression of popular political voices (for the duration of emergency), and lack of accountability (after the fact). Remembering the narrative, detail-driven dimensions of the encampment experience would not only disrupt that erasure, but recognizing the material landscape of war would create a shift towards survivor-centred perspectives as a necessary counterpoint to the existing memorial complex.

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