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Book Review

Beyond Monuments: The Politics and Poetics of Memory in Post-war Northern Uganda, by Laury L. Ocen (2022)

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Ocen's *Beyond Monuments* is both a rigorous scholarly study and a compelling literary work, combining accessibility with analytical depth. It offers cultural, historical, literary, and political readings of war monuments in northern Uganda, portraying them as complex symbols whose meanings are neither singular nor neutral. The central argument contends that monuments are not 'innocent': their significance reflects the interests of those who erect them, which often diverge from local perceptions. Through detailed analysis, Ocen demonstrates that monuments are embedded in lived experiences, with meanings continuously contested, reinterpreted, or rejected by communities, creating tensions between official (state-sanctioned) and unofficial (local) narratives. These tensions manifest in commemorative practices, victim counts, narrative framing, and the actors involved. Importantly, Ocen shows that these categories are not strict binaries; rather, memory is dense and negotiated. While official memory dominates annual rituals, local voices – expressed through songs, poetry, and plays – are often marginalised, highlighting the peripheralisation of unofficial forms of remembrance.

The time scope of this research is 1986-2006 – the period of active conflict led by two rebel groups, The Holy Spirit Mobile Forces (HSMF) and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) against the state, that ravaged the Greater North with more debilitating impacts in the Acoli sub-region and parts of Lango and Teso, (and indeed parts of Ma'di, although this is not included in the study) – with spillover effects far beyond. These were 20 years of civil war that left both physical and metaphoric ashes on the region and the lives of its peoples to merit Jan Egeland, the then United Nations Under Secretary for Humanitarian Affairs describe it as the "biggest neglected humanitarian emergency in the world" (p.84).

To ground this interdisciplinary and multifaceted research, Ocen employs theoretical lenses and methodology that do justice to the investigation of war monuments as live texts that transcend their annual official memorialisation rituals. The 'beyond' in this research is accessed through literary methods that look at monuments as objects for interpretation, not embedding stable, linear meanings. 'Reading' monuments as artistic texts cannot but yield multiple and competing shades of meaning as the readers come to the 'phenomena' (monuments) from specific political, economic, social, and cultural and other idiosyncratic viewpoints. There is a continuous struggle for control of meaning between the 'authorial' – official – voice behind a particular monument

and other alternative 'authors' – the unofficial – who are also creators of meaning in their own right. Using the Barthean theory of the 'death of the author' once a text has been produced, Ocen decentres the 'official' as the sole 'author' – narrator – to follow in interpreting the monument as text. He creates spaces for the 'alternative' voices of those on the margins, whose accounts are just as credible, if not more engaging for all its 'unedited' 'rawness' in capturing their versions of the truth via the artistic modes of songs, dance and poetry. Undeniably, the numerous popular songs and performances by the local oral artists such as the *Abwoc Yie Kec* and their rendition of songs such as "Alici" tell of the post-war miseries and the destruction of families as no conventional historical account could. The reader visualises what has become of families after the war – the period the official narratives speaks of the war as having ended! In a song such as Alici, the 'alternative' voice foregrounds a bigger problem that shows that "silence of the gun is only one phase" of the end of the war (p. 180). These alternative forms of memorilisation then work as meta-texts that challenge centralisation of meaning by official memories. On the historical lane, Ocen expands Thomson's (1994) concept of oral historians who use testimonies and life stories to focus on them as folk histories, and analysis of the "everyday history that invokes memory in ways that contest the validity of 'orthodox history'" (p. 221). These approaches and modes of interpreting monuments expose the silences concealed in official narratives. Looking at monuments as works of art, the author examines them in their constituent parts as "texture, shape, architecture, size, inscription, and metaphors" (p.80) that generate both denotative and connotative meanings. All of these, together with the environments of the monuments, contribute to the several dimensions of meaning.

Giving a forensic analysis of the four war memorial sites in Abia, Atiak, Barlonyo, and Lukodi, the author persuasively argues that it would be grossly and inaccurate and "inappropriate to use a generalised type of monument (the public type) to represent" (p.15) the live and ever changing imaginations memorial sites engender. At times, the dominance of the public (official) cenotaph may repress the agency of the unofficial narratives, but never quite silence them. The different 'sources' of meaning-making are, thus, both complementary and competing. My recent group experience of visiting the well-curated memorial sites of Kwame Nkrumah in Accra and the Elmina Castle at Cape Coast in September 2023 is a testimony to this. The tour guides authorial explanations notwithstanding, we had questions that challenged some of the official narratives and edited others. Furthermore, in the presence of these spaces loaded with memories of pain, suffering as well as the human spirit of resilience and resistance, one is constantly emotionally and intellectually dappled. I particularly grappled with the 'right' posture for a photo at Nkrumah's memorial site. How I, who admires this iconic pan-Africanist, pose for a photo; with a smile and pride that such a 'hero' has left a formidable legacy on the African continent; or with a sad expression about how ironic history is in treating its heroes badly when they were alive and celebrating them extravagantly when they are gone? Again, was I visiting as a tourist or as a pilgrim? If such mottled and ambivalent feelings could be embodied in one Nkrumah admirer, one can only imagine the multiplicity from those who felt differently about the man and the place.

The book is structured into seven cohesive chapters, each readable independently, yet contributing to a unified analysis of monument memorialisation. Central debates concern the politics of memory: the state seeks to preserve "official" memories while suppressing others, reflecting divergent interpretations of history between the state and ordinary people. The introduction sets the tone: history's interpretation is "not linear but varied."

Chapter 1 surveys Uganda's political violence from colonial to post-independent times. Ocen argues that the major challenge lies in post-independence Uganda, where memory shapes turbulent transitions from colonial governance to self-rule. Ethnic politics and power accumulation mean that monuments celebrated by one group may be detested by another.

Chapter 2 examines local militias whose impacts on communities were marginalised in official narratives. Ocen notes the political expedience of silencing these groups, quoting President Museveni: "if a house is assailed by a deadly cobra and an army of red ants, it is only realistic that the house owner should ignore the soldier ants and deal with the cobra first" (p. 57). Leaders such as Captain Olake blur lines between villains and Robin Hood figures, and personal accounts, such as Morgan Brown's unpublished memoir, illuminate the everyday experiences of war. As Ocen argues, "foregrounding the role of territorial militias not only hybridises memory, but also provides clarity on intellectual grounds around which knowledge of post-war justice is produced" (p. 63). This chapter redresses historical omissions and offers rich material for literary or cinematic interpretation.

While Chapter 2 would be described as largely historical in both content and approach, Chapter 3 delves into the analysis of war monuments as object, text, and art: the concept of monuments as material objects having authors akin to literary works. The monument 'author' as the initial creator of meaning tries to centre meaning; but just as reader-response literary analytical lens would argue, the author does not have absolute agency as the meaning creator. This agency is shared by other interpreters and 'readers' of the monument. This view of monuments as works of art enlarge the reader's interpretation. Variables such as: who erected it, where it is located, how it is constructed – including its size, the epitaph, its surroundings, the custodian, the official and unofficial narratives and rituals surrounding it, emotional attachment or lack of it, all matter in accessing the meaning of a cenotaph. The literary side of the author, that subjects all these features to close reading, makes this chapter absorbing in helping one locate contradictory and hidden meanings surrounding the political and cultural nature of these sites.

Chapter 4 draws attention to the importance of meta-history. From looking at monuments as artifacts, in the previous chapter, here, Ocen expands the terrain of looking at history beyond the officially published stuff. He blurs disciplinary boundaries and pinpoints memory in "songs, dances, buildings, and post-war projects" (p.14); and indeed, all these tangible and intangible elements encode memory. The chapter exudes tragic-comic examples of war survivors who perform their stories through songs and dramas; thereby overcoming their painful memories and forging forward to reconstruct themselves from the fragments. This section brings the reader face to face with everyday heroism in keeping hope alive in the face of life-denying socioeconomic forces. The survivors 're-member' themselves and their community with hope inspiring visions. To quote the author who draws from Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o:

> They turn stories that would otherwise become stale or too painful to bear into something fresh and exciting. Their creative productions show how sad experiences of war can be re-appropriated into economic opportunities that translate victimhood into survivability, or into a vocation capable of 're-membering' ruins of war. (p.117)

Paradoxically, these categories, the enthralling ikoce and okome performers, are not often included on the programme for the official Memory Day celebrations. They nonetheless find opportunities in social functions to express themselves and 'heal' their communities with their often hilarious performances. This chapter demonstrates the invaluable role of art in navigating and transcending abject experiences. Ignoring art's way or keeping memory would rob history of a vibrant ace.

Chapter 5 takes us into the National Memory and Peace Documentation Centre (NMPDC) in Kitgum District that exposed 'war' items donated for display. Consistent with the author's style, the reader is invited to be critical in appreciating the museum objects which are categorised and labelled in particular ways, to tell particular stories. Read outside their traditional cultural contexts, these object can only yield partial and 'doctored' meanings, for these objects and their placements are not innocent. Whose story does this museum established by NGOs tell, especially when the Kitgum Local Government contested its establishment? Furthermore, what are the museum images of recovery telling and suppressing? Ocen argues that rather than depend on the explanation of the guides, the displayed images and items should be an opportunity for viewers to interpret these objects beyond the appearances and the explanations in order to tease out the silences.

Chapter 6 problematises the fast-pace post-war recovery phase of Northern Uganda: to interrogate how a region recently described as humanitarian emergency could quickly turn into a beacon of hope. This phase, mediated by "a massive influx of organisations, immigrants, and interventionists whose aim appears to be fast-tracking northern Uganda's recovery" (p. 26) cannot pass unquestioned. The analysis exposes a kind of conviviality between the local communities and the foreign organisations that became destructive as this killed initiatives and festered unprecedented dependency syndrome. Often, the glossy picture painted about the fast recovery concealed fresh challenges. The majority of the affected people continued to have victim mentalities than emerge as survivors of the war. The physical indicators of economic activities around memorial sites notwithstanding, it takes time for war-ravaged communities to genuinely transit from being victims of the war to survivors. The real survivors are "those affected emotionally and physically by the war – formerly abducted persons, children, and perpetrators who have undergone post-war reforms to enable them to overcome the secondary effects of war" (p. 195).

In Chapter 7, Ocen wraps up the arguments in the book and points to possible future research areas.

Ocen's reading of war monuments as "keepers" of memory is compelling, employing a multi-layered, interdisciplinary approach that underscores his central thesis: interpreting monuments in a monolithic manner impoverishes their meaning. Like Keats' *"Ode on a Grecian Urn"*, each "sign" on a monument yields varied interpretations for present and future readers. The book is a monumental scholarly achievement,

revealing new insights and recruiting readers to share his critical lens, enhancing both analytical rigour and human empathy. Its depth and breadth make it essential reading for scholars across history, politics, cultural, and literary studies, and for all who care about our shared human condition.

The above recommendation notwithstanding, for the kind of scientific analysis Ocen offers in this book, I find it glaring on his part to omit the GANAL (Gulu Archdiocese, Arua, Nebbi and Lira Dioceses) Provincial Annual Peace Week initiated in 2005, by the Archbishop John Baptist, as part of the recovery process to mitigate the ravages of the war on the region. This is a segment, in my view, that would form part of the mosaic piece of the region's recovery process under the leadership of the Catholic Church. To date, this religious arrangement of the annual peace week celebrations that rotate around the four dioceses in Gulu Archdiocese wields a force in marshalling the people of the region to name and face the demons from the past that has led to conflicts among the ethnic groups that have a lot in common, to forge for a more harmonious coexistence. The Peace Week that gets these communities together transcends narrow faith celebrations as they attract politicians, community leaders as well as other faith affiliates from the region. For a region that imagines itself as marginalised, the events here include discussions on how the archdiocese can emerge out of material poverty. The GANAL events have expanded to embrace its members who live in the 'diaspora' – in Kampala and other cities outside the ecclesiastical province. Annually, the Sunday after the celebration of the Feast of the Uganda Martyrs on June 3 has become the occasion for GANAL members to celebrate their prayer get-together in Kampala. The religious, the political, and the cultural interlace in this space. This event is a significant offshoot of the northern Uganda war, and it continues to function as a space for the ethnically diverse Archdiocese of Gulu to find exit routes from toxic and divisive politics within the region. It is the Catholic Church's way of mediating peace in such situations. In my view, this segment would fit perfectly into this book. This notwithstanding, Ocen's is a solid scholarly contribution that ought to find a space in every public and private library.

References

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