

Crafting forgiveness accounts after war

Editing for effect in northern Uganda

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Fig. 1. Residents in Awach listening to accounts.

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A selection of the edited voice accounts of forgiveness from northern Uganda can be found at <http://enreca-gulu.net/research-projects/collaborative-research-projects/forgiveness-project/>.

The artist Tove Nyholm's project on Hannah Arendt and forgiveness, including two of the accounts from northern Uganda, is available at <http://www.tovenyholm.dk/English/sounds.htm>.

After two decades of conflict and forced internment in camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP), the Acholi people have returned to their homes and are trying to heal their wounds after the long war in northern Uganda. Bilateral and multilateral donors, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), cultural organizations, and religious institutions are all involved in the politically sensitive work of reconciliation. Yet for most people the actual restoration of peace lies in establishing an everyday life and being able to rebuild relationships with kin, friends and neighbours.

A year into a collaborative research project with Gulu University, we invited the Danish installation artist Tove Nyholm to work with us on these 'social repair' processes. Together we collected personal voice accounts of forgiveness and audio edited them in order to share them with a local public. The accounts were presented in a voice installation where people could listen and have their own account recorded if they wished.

The editing process – carried out collaboratively with the artist – raised critical issues regarding 'editing for effect', which are of wider relevance for discussions of ethnographic representation and social processes of editing past experience. As a way of crafting and controlling material, editing is always 'for effect'. But we were struck by the powerful potentials of this artistic editing and by the difficulty in foreseeing or controlling its consequences among listeners.

We suggest that personal processes of forgiveness resemble editing in the sense that past experience is revised and given narrative form, with an effect on the present and future of social relationships. When we edit, we foreground and background segments of data and experience, and cut parts of our representations. In doing so, we judge that some things are irrelevant while other aspects should 'stand out' for the receiver and ourselves as more important.

The artist Tove Nyholm, who had been working with installations of voice accounts in several settings, was inspired by philosopher Hannah Arendt's ideas about forgiveness. When we studied Arendt's writings, we found

that her insights into *who*, *what* and *why* people forgive, resonated with the accounts we heard. Arendt points out that: '...trespassing is an everyday occurrence which... needs forgiving, dismissing, in order to make it possible for life to go on by constantly releasing men from what they have done unknowingly' (Arendt 1998: 240). Furthermore, she writes: 'Forgiving and the relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal... affair in which *what* was done is forgiven for the sake of *who* did it' (ibid: 241).

As social scientists in the project, we were impressed and inspired by the artist's determined cutting and framing of the material; she worked according to principles apparently different from those we as anthropologists would use in editing personal accounts. This impression led to discussions and reflections about the politics of editing, not only artistic, but also anthropological and journalistic editing. All editing is a process of crafting and giving shape to material in order to make an impression and have an effect upon someone. The audience and intention obviously influence how editing shapes material and presentation. Anthropologists write and edit to present material and interpretations to academic audiences, while journalists inform national or international publics about current affairs. The intention in our project was mainly to present resonant accounts in local contexts in order to inspire reflection upon forgiveness.

In crafting the recorded material, we – the artist and researchers – shortened the accounts radically and sacrificed context. We edited the voices to achieve a sense of directness and immediacy. This raised questions about how we craft and manipulate material to realize effects and create versions of reality that may be valid in the sense that they 'work' for specific purposes. The classic pragmatist idea was that truth is measured by consequences and actions are assessed according to their effects (James 1997). But how are effects evoked? To which consequences do we look? Consequences for whom? The artistic installation project was appropriated and had consequences for listeners, who sometimes reacted in ways not foreseen at the outset. It also appealed to academics

Fig. 2. The sign at the forgiveness site. *Timo kica* means 'to do forgiveness' in the local Acholi language.



Fig. 3. A hut in the former IDP camp housing the forgiveness accounts.



and politicians; multiple agendas evolved along the way for different stakeholders.

In the aftermath of war

The year 2008 marked a significant turning point in northern Uganda as many people began returning to their homes from IDP camps. For more than 20 years the government of Uganda and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the rebel group led by Joseph Kony, locked the population in a brutal armed conflict that saw tens of thousands of people killed, around two million people displaced and thousands abducted to join the rebel army. During the war, both the rebels and the government forces committed crimes against the population (Dolan 2009; Finnström 2008).

Those who were abducted were often forced to denounce, harm or even kill members of their families and communities, to make them believe that they could never return home (Dolan 2009). Many abductees did escape from the rebels, and returning home presented social and personal challenges (Verma 2012). Relations between family members, neighbours, and friends were strained by feelings of mistrust and betrayal, and often people felt that they lived together as 'intimate enemies' (Baines 2010). Experiences of betrayal at personal, interpersonal and political levels strongly marked the social atmosphere in northern Uganda (Finnström 2008; Meinert 2014).

During and after the war a plethora of NGOs, traditional and religious institutions were involved in reconciliation work including the facilitation of traditional cleansing ceremonies, reconciliation rituals, and reparation workshops (Akuni 2011; Finnegan 2010). Most initiatives were aimed at collective and political levels and many promoted Christian and/or 'traditional Acholi' ethics of forgiveness as the 'good' and right way to overcome problems. There have been intense debates among involved parties, as well as researchers, about what forms of retributive and restorative justice were appropriate in the aftermath of war – trial justice (The International Criminal Court and national courts) or 'traditional justice' such as reconciliation rituals (Allen 2006; Finnegan 2010). The aim of our project was not to continue this debate as such, but to bring in another perspective focused on the personal and interpersonal processes of dealing with 'wrongs' and social 'wounds', including those that were not directly related to the war.

What people regarded as most 'conciliatory' was the re-establishment of social relations – to live as a family, visit friends and enjoy civility with their neighbours. The accounts we collected reflected the urge to mend these everyday relationships by revising the past. People talked of 'letting go' of certain past experiences – editing them out – to give room for the flow of social life in the present and future. However, the fact that people wanted to move

on in everyday life by 'letting go' of interpersonal wrongs did not automatically imply that they disregarded 'trial justice' as appropriate for other scales of war 'wrongs'.

The majority of the accounts were about betrayal in relationships between close family or community members (Ovuga et al. 2011). While some stories were related to the war, very many had to do with everyday trespassing of norms: wrongs related to HIV, loyalty, property, love and other interpersonal issues. A stepmother's neglect, a father's failure to pay school fees, physical assaults, jealousy between co-wives, money issues: they were problems endemic to social life with its kinship organization and competition over resources. They concerned offences that might have occurred anywhere in Uganda. Even when accounts were about abduction and violence related to the war, they focused on the hurts caused by close relatives or neighbours in this connection. It was never a matter of forgiving Kony or the national army for the suffering they caused; these were considered distant evildoers beyond the reach of forgiveness. Rather, people were concerned about cancelling the bitterness of wrongs committed by those with whom they had to go on living.

Voices from within

The project, *Timo Kica: Voices from Within*, which ran from 2009–2013, involved researchers from Gulu University, two Danish universities, and residents of Awach sub-county and Gulu town in northern Uganda. The collaborators collected 42 forgiveness accounts in Acholi and English; 10 were edited for public presentation. More traditional ethnographic methods of interviewing people from organizations working with reconciliation and forgiveness, and following cases and processes of forgiveness over time were also employed. The material raises issues related to morality (Meinert 2014), mental health (Ovuga et al. 2011), ideas about evil (Whyte et al. forthcoming) and small-scale conflicts (Obika & Mogensen 2013). But the focus of this article is on the recorded

accounts, the editing and sharing of 10 of these and the consequences they had.

The researchers and the artist worked together as a group and found people who were willing to give accounts of personal experiences of forgiveness – *timo kica* in the Acholi language. We asked for accounts of having forgiven someone or being forgiven. Perhaps not surprisingly people only volunteered accounts of how they forgave others, not of having been forgiven. Forgiving is cherished as a virtue in northern Uganda, whereas admitting ‘wrongs’ may be more complicated, and in some cases may possibly even be considered dangerous.

The *Timo Kica* project intended to inspire individuals to reflect on the subject of forgiveness by relating others’ stories to their own experiences. The project did not mean to moralize or missionize or set in motion a specific political and development agenda. In the event, however, it took on the colours of a political and moral project. A basic assumption in the project was that forgiveness was a positive and useful process. Yet this is not always as simple and straightforward as it seems, and along the way different agendas and consequences emerged.

In the first year of the project, the artist trained the researchers to elicit and record narratives. Then they negotiated how each account should be edited into short poignant clips; recordings that lasted 15 to 60 minutes were reduced to 3-6 minutes. The process of editing involved highlighting wording, pauses, breathing, and specific expressions to emphasize salient points of the ‘wrong’ committed, the parties involved, the process, and the impact of forgiveness. The sound quality was professional, far better than that of the interview recordings ethnographers usually make. The stories sounded authentic and intimate; they were affecting in their simplicity.

The experience of hearing them was enhanced by their installation in an old IDP hut. The round mud brick house with its thatched roof and dim interior provided a quiet place for a small group of people to sit and listen. In the centre was a drum containing an audio player, which enabled people to choose accounts they wanted to hear. Speakers attached to the roof filled the space with a voice relating a personal experience of forgiveness. The artist was particularly careful to facilitate an atmosphere for individual reflection that was also a social space for appreciating and finding inspiration in someone’s ‘voice from within’. Recording, editing, listening and feedback formed a continuous process. The effects on listeners were marked and many appeared moved and thoughtful.

The *Timo Kica* project site was in Awach, a village that had hosted an IDP camp. Hundreds of people from the area came and sat in the cool half-light of the hut to listen to the accounts. Afterwards, some sought us out because they too had an experience that they wanted to share. Many were enthusiastic about the project and encouraged us to bring it to a wider forum. The drum and sound system were taken to eight other villages, where hundreds more were able to listen. Some of the accounts were played on three local radio shows (in Acholi and English), and listeners could call in and give their views. In the last year of the project, a replica of the sound installation was taken to the Uganda Museum in the capital Kampala as part of an exhibition on reconciliation. The intention was to take local accounts of what happened in the past closer to the political centre of the nation where the history of northern Uganda remains unclear to large parts of the public.

Cutting context for a purpose

Anthropologists have long been aware that writing books, and articles, and making films and other forms of representation are intense processes of editing, selecting, and giving shape to empirical material (Clifford & Marcus

1986). Informants’ accounts written into academic texts may seem like direct transcriptions from the field, but even these are subject to selection, cutting, editing, and tactics of presentation. So in this sense the crafting of ethnographic representations very much resembles creative aspects of artistic work. Like artists creating figures, researchers carve out accounts, chopping bits, editing, and choosing what to keep, what to leave and how to set the story and form an argument.

Yet working with an artist and voice material made us aware of differences in intention, technique, and effects. Broadly speaking, anthropological methods aim at collecting detailed empirical data on a topic, contextualizing the data by making links to the wider background and to theoretical frameworks, and developing explicit arguments and conclusions. Our intention is to convey our interpretation of the material clearly. In very general terms, artistic work presents a perspective through material creatively reworked as an intensively edited version of reality. The artist’s interpretation is inherent in the artifact, but not necessarily made explicit as such. Interpretation of the work is open-ended and ultimately depends on the audience making its own associations and conclusions. The effect sought is ‘affect’ in the sense of moving someone else to reflect or feel or make meaning.

In the process of selecting and editing the voice accounts of forgiveness with the artist, this aspect of ‘crafting’ for affective effect on the audience became particularly clear. What seemed like almost ‘holy’ contextual information to the anthropologists was sacrificed again and again for the sake of clarity and effect. The artist put it pointedly: If you want people to listen and be touched and inspired by the accounts, you have to make the right choices and you have to take care of the essential bits such as the sound of breathing, and the pauses in speech. Too much contextualization brings the creator’s interpretation to the fore, while the bare frame of a brief direct authentic-feeling voice appeals to the listener to contextualize within his or her own experience.

An instructive example is the editing of Akello’s account of how she came to forgive her father. In the short version, she tells that he never encouraged her to go to school, because he thought education was wasted on girls. Her mother quarrelled with him and left, taking her away from his home. Two weeks later she was abducted by the LRA. Although she was only 11 years old at the time, she was given to one of the commanders, an older man who already had many other wives. The older wives mistreated her, even more than their common ‘husband’ did. They were staying in Sudan, but fled back to Uganda when Ugandan government troops attacked their camp. In Uganda she escaped, together with several other abducted girls. She stayed for nine months at the GUSCO (Gulu Support the Children Organization) reception centre for LRA returnees. Her father did not come near her during that time, nor did he come to see her after she returned home. Finally, after two years, she went to visit him. It was only then that he apologized for having neglected her. She declared to him that she no longer had a ‘bad heart’ towards him, even though she had been hurt that he never came to talk to her as his child, after all the terrible things that had befallen her. The short edited version ends with her assertion that she and her father are now close, and that he consults her on family matters.

The longer version has many details about her life in captivity, the LRA camps, her alliance with other girls in the same situation, and the whole apparatus of amnesty for returnees. Here she explains that during her stay at GUSCO, she was counselled and advised about the virtues and benefits of forgiveness. Later she again met the women who had abused her when she was with the LRA,

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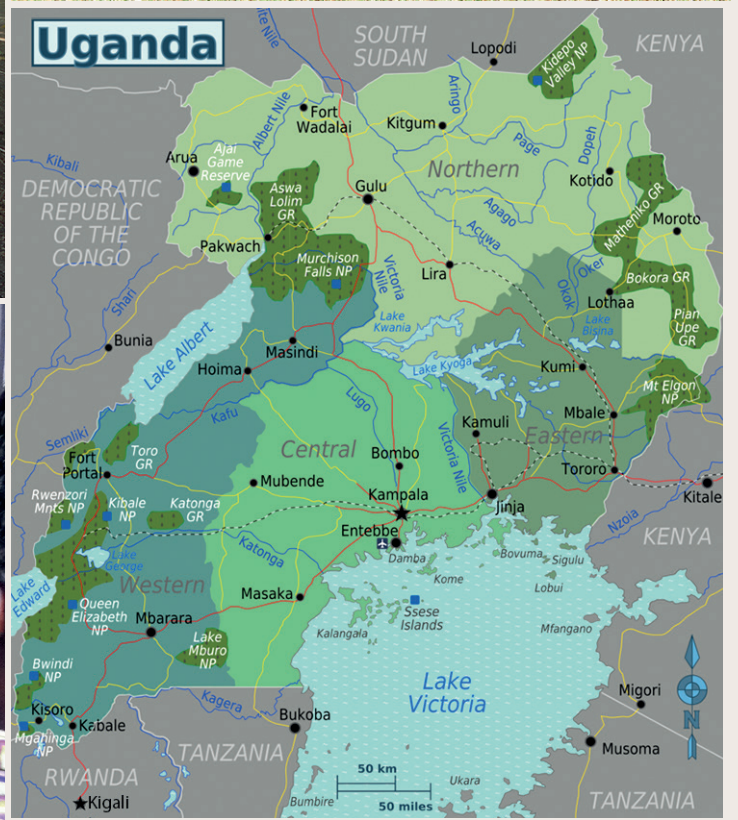
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(from left to right above to below)

- Fig. 4.** Researchers and artist discussing the editing of an account: What to keep and what to cut?
- Fig. 5.** The voice installation in a drum. Buttons are for selecting which account to hear.
- Fig. 6.** Residents in Awach listening to accounts.
- Fig. 7.** Officials and citizens listening to accounts inside the hut.
- Fig. 8.** Listeners discussing forgiveness in Paibona Village, Gulu District.
- Fig. 9.** Waiting to listen.
- Fig. 10.** Alice (researcher) recording an account with a woman from Awach.
- Fig. 11.** Map of Uganda.



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after they too returned from the bush. She told that she was friendly with them and that she forgave them, as she had learned to do from the counselling she had received. The longer account has more explanation about her parents' relation to one another and it contains fascinating material about the conditions for female abductees.

We anthropologists understood that matters pertaining to marriage, gender relations, and LRA tactics had to be cut given the focus on forgiveness. But Akello's recounting that 'some people' used to take them from GUSCO in order to teach them how to forgive those who had wronged them was also edited out. This seemed to us an important context for the whole project; it revealed something about the promotion of forgiveness as a value, a movement of which our own project was a part. We knew that forgiveness was encouraged from multiple sources. Christianity, especially the Roman Catholic version, which was very strong in Acholiland, taught forgiveness. And in the interviews we found people who felt that forgiveness was an important element in Acholi culture. Akello's remarks index another factor supporting forgiveness: the widespread activities of many organizations for peace and reconciliation.

However, this context of the several forces for forgiveness was edited out in favour of the artistic intention to directly appeal to listeners. And indeed, this was an effective tactic in that the simpler story of tension between father and daughter, of a child feeling that her parent neglected her, came through more strongly. This plot of a father's disinterest and alienation, leading to a child's suffering, and finally to reconciliation and respect was one that resonated with very many listeners.

Effects beyond control

A multitude of agendas developed from the forgiveness accounts. A group of researchers at Gulu University transformed the project in a more interactive direction, by encouraging discussion among listeners about the nature and benefits of forgiveness. Other researchers made a more academic analysis of ideas about evil, morality and other themes in the accounts. Some developed a focus on the mental health effects of forgiveness. The cultural leader (*Rwot*) and members of the community of Awach sub-county wanted the forgiveness hut to remain and accounts to keep flowing in and out. For them the project had a political aspect. At the Uganda Museum in Kampala, the political stage was national and other kinds of forgiveness were at stake. All of these appropriations of the project ultimately rest on its effectiveness at reaching many kinds of people and moving them affectively. The accounts were easily accessible, concise, and so open that listeners could make their own sense of them. But in editing for effect through affect, the artist and researchers could not always foresee the consequences their creation might have for listeners.

Often people who listened were emotionally touched and thoughtful afterwards. Some were very quiet, some talked intensely to each other, and others wanted to record their own account right away. One man, whom we call Luka, was disturbed and did not know what to do about 'this thing you have started'. He said he had a story to tell, but he was not ready yet. By listening to the accounts he realized how much he was tortured by the memory of an incident from his childhood and the anger associated with it. Months later, he wanted to tell his story and he persistently followed us up in order to do so.

Luka recounted that at the age of five, he witnessed his father being chopped into pieces by a government soldier who suspected him of being a rebel. He and his parents were on their way to town where they planned to stay with relatives because of the insecurity at the time. After the murder, he and his mother had to return to their village,

but could not carry the body because it was reduced to pieces thrown in a pile. Several years later, the soldier who had ordered his father to be killed came to Luka's home. It turned out that he was related to Luka's mother. The soldier was profoundly apologetic, and prostrated at their feet begging for forgiveness. As a family, they all agreed to forgive the soldier. Luka said he had never told anyone that story, not even his wife. He thought that telling such painful stories could give others 'ammunition' to hurt him later. Yet when he heard the forgiveness accounts, it became essential for him to share his own.

For Luka, forgiveness was a cure for a broken society; he accepted the moral premise that it was a good thing. But he was concerned about the potential adverse effects of listening to the accounts, as were we. The project gave careful introductions before people listened to the accounts, and afterwards we discussed them with those people who wished to do so. But Luka said we should have warned the audience that the stories they were going to hear could be upsetting. We did not intend people to re-live traumatic experiences of the war or other existential dramas. Yet the voice accounts were moving in individual ways, which made it difficult to know exactly what they set in motion. Even though the edited voices obviously 'worked', there was no guarantee that the effects were only 'good' for all.

Editing forgiveness

We undertook this project as a kind of experiment within a larger more conventional set of studies on recovery from armed conflict in northern Uganda. Working with an artist and involving members of a local community directly in the creation of the installation opened new perspectives and challenges for us as anthropologists. The artist's intention was to give listeners occasion to reflect, but the project also gave us the opportunity to consider aspects of presentation and representation that we often take for granted.

Editing and thereby crafting personal accounts is never an innocent process. Whether it is artistic editing for effect, academic editing for an argument, or journalistic editing for 'information', it is done with an aim in mind that will necessarily shape what is cut and what is kept. Working in the northern Ugandan context where reconciliation, retributive and restorative justice are being debated, we wanted to bring into focus how everyday forgiveness is being practiced in interpersonal relations in northern Uganda.

We thought that for ethical reasons we could not keep these insights for an academic audience, but wanted to contribute to ongoing local discussions and inspiration. Even when we knew that this was not innocent, we ventured to collect, edit and share local accounts locally. We did not intend to teach or counsel people about wrongs and forgiveness, much less to make them revisit a past they would rather forget. Some people, like Luka (and there were others), may have used the occasion to 'unburden' themselves, but our intention was reflection and discussion, not therapy.

Working with our artist colleague, we saw the possibilities in radically editing oral accounts. They reached a diverse audience, many of whom would never have read a textual rendition of forgiveness accounts. The edited voices had moving effects. They inspired some listeners to edit their own experiences of wrongs in rethinking and sometimes in telling and recording them, as Luka did. In this way forgiveness as a social process resembles editing processes in that some passages of past experience are struck out in order to make a narrative of sociality flow again between people separated by wrongs. Yet, in everyday life new experiences – new wrongs – have the potential to undo the editing or forgiving, which is seldom a finished process, but an ongoing endeavour. ●