

Not talking about traumatic experiences: harmful or healing? Coping with war memories in southwest Uganda

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Although there has been peace in most parts of Uganda since 1986, in Mbarara district in southwest Uganda nobody talks about their war experience; there is one big conspiracy of silence. According to the people who live there, it is not good to talk, it can be dangerous and can make you ill. This article deals with the question why these people keep silent about their horrifying war experiences. It appears that the community and the social and cultural institutions have been destroyed. People have no public space to share their memories of the war. Together with the economic, political and psychological aspects, this all contributes to a situation in which keeping silent might be the best thing to do.

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Keeping silent

Just after I started my research on why so many people with traumatic war experiences became members of the Pentecostal Church in Mbarara region in southwest Uganda, I met Lydia¹, a European woman who has lived in Uganda for more than 30 years. According to her, my research was pointless. War was no longer an issue; it had all happened a long time ago and people had forgotten all about it. She asked Mary, a Ugandan woman who joined her, to confirm her statement, but Mary looked

surprised and asked her how she could say such a thing, continuing: *'We still recall, but normally don't talk about it. We deliberately forget for the sake of peace and unity in our country. You can see women looking happy, but the war is still there, it remains in our minds.'*

This conversation gripped me and refused to release me. Why was a society veiling itself in silence so that even Lydia, who has lived there for 30 years, failed to notice that war experiences were still present in daily life for many people? What did Mary mean by: 'for the sake of peace and unity in our country'? Do people remain silent as a psychological attempt to keep horrible memories at bay, or does their silence have another meaning? And does this silence have a healing or harmful effect on the people and the community?

Much has been written about the relationship between the disclosure of traumatic experiences and the well-being of victims. In the literature on sexual violence, for instance, disclosure is considered as a prerequisite for a person's health (e.g. Herman, 1992, Kirkengen, 2001). This is the general opinion in many, mostly Western-oriented, scientific papers. Van der Velden and Kleber (2000), for instance, state that scientific research shows that in the case of traumatic experiences, remaining silent results

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in physical problems and reduces the subjective feeling of well-being. In mental healthcare for refugees with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, however, disclosure is currently not regarded as the sole therapeutic approach. In therapies for traumatised refugees nowadays the emphasis may also be on nonverbal approaches; on regaining control in daily life and creating social support. But in general, keeping traumatic experiences bottled up is regarded as unhealthy. This paper is a modest attempt to discuss the question of 'disclosure or silence', by analysing the socio-cultural code of silence in southwest Uganda².

The methodology

My period of research was qualitative in nature and consisted of 106 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 63 people. 34 respondents described themselves as members of Pentecostal Churches or the Charismatic Movement of the Catholic Church; the other 29 were Anglican. Apart from these formal interviews, 82 of which were recorded and transcribed, I discussed the way people cope with war experiences and the role of the churches, with my neighbours and acquaintances in Mbarara. The informants lived in one of three areas in Mbarara district³ where I conducted my research. Twenty male and twenty-one female informants lived in Mbarara city; four of them were adolescent, four were elderly and the others were adult. In Isingiro, I interviewed seven women (one adolescent and three elderly) and six men (one adolescent and three elderly). In Kanyaryeru Resettlement Scheme, nine adults were interviewed, two of them men. Six of the total number could be classified as belonging to the upper level of society, the rest were poor.

In Mbarara city I came into contact with

my informants via the three Pentecostal Churches and via the snowball method. In the other two areas I was introduced, at my request, to the leaders of those districts, who brought me into contact with informants who introduced me to others in their turn. Apart from these individual interviews, I organised three focus group discussions with health workers, medical students and women from Kanyaryeru. Because a constant comparative interplay between analysis and data collection is essential, I used the 'theoretical sampling' method, in which findings were confirmed, honed or corrected by new respondents and new interviews with some of the informants.

While the group of informants was not a random sample of people from Mbarara district, nine key-informants with whom I discussed my preliminary conclusions and interpretations nonetheless agreed that my findings were representative of the general Banyankore⁴ population in Mbarara district.

Because my main research question concerned not silence, but rather the role of the churches, people were very willing to talk. I think that if the emphasis had been on aspects of silence, it would have been far more difficult to obtain the same amount of information. During interviews, discussion focused on how people cope with their experiences, which led naturally to the habit of silence. It seemed that the respondents did not find it difficult to talk with me, because I was an outsider and my interpreter was not a member of their community. Only two people refused to talk with me, in each case because they wanted money that I was unable to give.

The horrors of war

During the time of Amin there were a lot of murders and a lot of disappearances. You never knew

who was in prison and for what reason. But it wasn't possible to complain, because if you asked about your husband who had disappeared, they might take your children. There was total silence. The fear was everywhere, 'what is going to happen next?' I know people whose parents or husbands had been killed, and definitely, we had to keep going on an unbelievable conspiracy of silence. In order to protect the living we were not able to protect the dead, we were not able to do anything about it. Silence was essential; we didn't know whom to trust. The whole country lived like that, it was the only way to live, otherwise one could be deported or killed' (Lydia).

In 1971 Idi Amin, the commander of the army, staged a coup. President Obote fled to Tanzania and started a Resistance Army there. Amin killed everyone (mostly prominent people) whom, he thought, sympathised with the Resistance Army (Mataze *et al.*, 1997: 48). During Amin's regime 70.000 Asian people were driven into exile and an estimate of 300.000 people died. People suffered enormously.

In 1978, with the help of the Tanzanian army, Obote and his Uganda National Liberation Army (UNLA) attacked Uganda and defeated Amin's army. Amin fled and Obote became president for the second time.

Unfortunately, this did not bring peace. Corruption and lack of army discipline caused many problems in society, and after fraudulent elections Museveni, the leader of the National Resistance Movement (NRM), started a guerrilla war against Obote. In an attempt to conquer Museveni and his men, Obote's army killed many civilians. People did not dare to say anything, afraid that it would be seen as criticism of the government. Even praying at night was too dangerous, one never knew if there were spies around (Pirouet, 1995).

Horrifying things happened. People and

animals were slaughtered or set on fire. Children were beaten from the backs of their mothers and the wombs of pregnant women were cut open. According to a health worker in Luwero Triangle⁵, 70 per cent of the women in that area had been raped by groups of more than ten soldiers (The NewVision, 1999: 32). Between 1983 and 1986 an estimate of 500.000 people were killed. About 250.000 Ugandans took refuge abroad and 700.000 became uprooted. In 1986 the NRM came into power with Museveni as president.

The wars were catastrophic for society. The soldiers, especially those of Amin and Obote, showed little respect for human life and dignity, and people betrayed their neighbours or friends to the soldiers, knowing they would be killed, mostly out of jealousy or to solve some personal conflict.

Murder and forced exile destroyed families. Nothing was left of traditional family and community feeling. People became isolated, which caused more political, economic and social insecurity. This situation went on for more than fifteen years. Fifteen years marked by anxiety and fear, never knowing whom to trust.

After the Museveni government came to power, peace returned to most parts of the country. The Ugandans started to trust Museveni, the soldiers began to be more disciplined and freedom of speech became more normal (Broere, 1994; Ruffert, 1996). Nonetheless, the Banyankore still rarely speak about their personal war experiences.

Silent in order to continue life

The silence that was a necessity during the war has not been broken since the return of peace, but seems rather to have taken root in society. Personal war experiences are kept private. In Banyankore society there are hardly any cultural forms and public

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opportunities of commemoration. It would seem that people are not allowed to remember. Furthermore, no one wants to listen to traumatic narratives, there is no receptive audience. Hariëtte, a Ugandan social worker from Mbarara district once told me: *'In our culture, we don't talk about problems, we don't have the courage to talk about things. If you want to talk about it, there is no one to talk to, nobody wants to listen. So people remain silent'*. In order to share memories, people need a public space where they can express their memories of war. By a public space I mean: 'a consensual reality and collective memory through which the fragments of personal memory can be assembled, reconstructed, and displayed with a tacit assumption of validity' (Kirmayer, 1996: 190). Memories are shaped by membership of the social group a person is part of. The group defines what may be remembered, how something may be remembered and how the audience will receive it. The norm in Mbarara district seems to be silence. Why is there no receptive audience and why do people lack the courage to speak up or to put it in other words, why do people remain silent? Several factors play a role.

Distrust of the government. Enock is a small entrepreneur in Mbarara town. He is 43 years old and has three children. His sister has been taking care of the children since his wife died. Enock was fourteen years old when his father was killed. His father had planned to visit Enock at his boarding school but did not turn up. Enock was waiting at the roadside when he suddenly saw a convoy of vehicles, including his father's car with a stranger behind the wheel. His father had run into Idi Amin's Intelligence Service, and had been murdered that very night. Enock does not know exactly what happened, and he never saw the body of his

father. He presumes that his father was killed because he was a successful businessman. But it is also possible that some jealous person had reported him to the soldiers as a rebel.

Enock was the first-born and suddenly became the head of the family, which changed his life dramatically. He could not finish his studies, and due to the fact that his family were forced to flee three times during the war, they lost all their property; his responsibility became an enormous burden.

Enock: *'There is no way to overcome the pain of the loss of a person. I always think of how my life would have been if my father had still been alive. His death brought problems at all levels...I will not talk about it to anyone, no; it is my inner secret. I fear even now, you never know, the killers are still there. I think it is better not to make a lot of noise, otherwise I would have gone to the commission of inquiry. Maybe they could find out if there is someone who can tell me where my father is buried so that we could rebury his remains. But I don't dare, because one of the killers might be in government with an important position, it is dangerous. My family and I suspect some people. We know, but we just keep quiet. It makes me very angry but I am helpless'*.

Enock does not even trust the Special Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights⁶ set up by Museveni when he came into power. Some of those who committed serious crimes have important positions in (local) government: only a few of these have been punished. Enock regards it as dangerous to start asking questions about the death of his father. He does not believe that justice will be done. He remains angry and bitter.

The government seems to have failed to establish a society where people feel safe enough to tell of their traumatic experiences, and in which people are called to

account for the atrocities they have committed.

Distrust and hatred among civilians. Bo was twelve years old when her father was murdered in 1972. She used to live on her father's compound, with her mother and her father's second wife, and seven children, five of which were her mother's. Her father was an important chief. The neighbours told her of the murder.

Bo: *'During Obote's regime until Museveni took over, it was a bad time, people had pistols and could take you into the bush and kill you, nobody could say anything. People were telling you, my gun is my life. If they came and wanted money and you didn't have it, they would kill you.*

The soldiers of Amin killed my father. My father was a chief and therefore they suspected him of helping Obote's men from Tanzania. They took him to the barracks and slaughtered him. They also put my brother in jail and tortured him; dragged him behind a jeep and so on, but he survived. They killed my father and tortured my brother, because people around us reported to the government that we were hiding rebels here, which we weren't. Those people were jealous, because my father was rich. The system here was that they would kill you when they saw you had money. Before my father was killed, the neighbours told him that they were going to turn him in so he would be killed. Ever since that moment, we have had to live with those people knowing that they turned in our father and brother, and we can't do anything. My father told us to stay friendly with them, so we do, as if nothing had happened. God will punish them.'

Distrust, fear, hatred and envy dominate interpersonal relationships. At first sight nothing seems to be going on, but most people still remain on their guard. It is considered as too dangerous to talk about traumatic war experiences. Remaining silent makes people less vulnerable, it safeguards them from repercussions by the neighbours,

for instance. Bo knows that talking would damage the already fragile social structure even more, while they have to go on living together.

War has destroyed the protection people normally receive from their social group. There is no safe place in their community anymore and people do not experience a profound *horizontal companionship* (Anderson, 1991). A sediment of hatred and revenge has remained, waiting to be stirred up. Nobody knows whether the veneer of common decency will crack again. Not only are people harmed, the whole of society is infected by distrust, veiled hatred and fear. People therefore have had little opportunity to put down new social roots. In such communities social healing is important (Allen 1991). Allen gives the example of North Uganda, where diviners or elders inform the community why the catastrophe took place and what must be done about it. Often they explain that the community has failed in its duties to the ancestors. The problem in southwest Uganda is that distrust prevails, which is so intense that no public account can be given. People are simply too afraid. Besides, the people in Mbarara town have ambivalent feelings towards diviners and traditional healers. They are seen as a sign of backwardness, for the citizens of Mbarara wish to be modern, and according to them, in modernity there is no place for traditional healers and diviners.

Silent to protect the loved ones. Enoch not only remains silent because he mistrusts other people, he also tries to protect his children and mother from his own pain.

Enock: *'We don't talk about those feelings, and usually my mother will not talk about my father at all. Even myself, I will not talk about it to anyone, no; it is my inner secret. It is better to try to forget.*

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But the bad memories remain a burden to me because that violence was too much....Talking about it means that it will overwhelm you. It disturbs me; even now that I am grown-up. I don't have a father, I lost my wife, and so I cannot talk about it. I have to take care of my children and it is very difficult. I am always asking myself how I will survive tomorrow, how do I earn money. I am always afraid that something will happen to my children and I am constantly worried about tomorrow. Mostly, I don't even have time to go for a beer, because I have young children to look after. I feel I should do my best. My children do not have a mother. So, I try to give them a better life. I do not talk about what happened during the war, it would only upset them. I do not show them my own grief, because I know they have their own grief about the death of their mother.

John, a medical student, once told me an incident he experienced during the war. He was still a child and lived with his parents in the Luwero-triangle. One day he joined his father and some other people, going home on the pick-up truck. They passed a roadblock and the soldiers took his father into the bush. People who were taken into the bush rarely came out of it alive. Although a child, John knew this and realised that the soldiers would kill his father. The driver, however, refused to go any further without John's father, and after a verbal dispute the soldiers let him go.

John: We never talked it over. We try to forget and go on. I will not tell my children, because it will upset them and if they tell their children, it will upset them too. It is useless. We people think that it is better to forget bad experiences, or at least seal them off, so that people can forget. That is better because otherwise it upsets people. To talk means to remember; it means opening wounds.

John, like Enock, remains silent to suppress the pain, afraid that it will get out of control. They also keep silent because they do not wish to burden others with their horri-

fic personal experiences. John has never talked it over with his father and probably will never do so. He will certainly not tell his children, nor will Enock.

Similar patterns in other groups of survivors. Studies on families of Holocaust survivors (Aarts, 1994; Bar-On *et al.*, 1998), people living in a dictatorship (Becker & Weinstein, 1986) and refugees living in exile (Van der Veer, 1998) often describe the same pattern. The parents, who survived the extermination camps and often lost the majority of their family members, rarely talk with their children about their personal experiences. They only talk in general about the war, but do not mention their own experiences. They are not able to talk about it, because words are not adequate to express their feelings and they are afraid of being swamped by pain and grief. Furthermore, these parents do not want to burden their children. Children, however, sense the non-verbal message that their parents have a secret, and are unable to speak about it. They will not ask their parents, in order to protect them. The children keep silence too. Meanwhile the fantasies of the children can develop without being corrected. This conspiracy of silence within families of Holocaust survivors is such a burden for the children that some of them have developed psychiatric symptoms, even though they have not experienced the war themselves. Being silent can put people in a paradoxical situation: though the intention is to avoid burdening other people, the burden becomes a fact.

Describing and expressing emotions is unhealthy. For the Banyankore, actively forgetting is an important way of dealing with painful memories. Forgetting is considered to be the best way to deal with them. In their

view, it makes no sense to remember dreadful experiences; that won't bring the dead back to life. They feel the same way about emotions: 'Crying is no good, what do you gain by crying? You only make more problems for yourself, because it makes you ill, gives you a headache or pain', an Anglican pastor told me, 'You have to keep it inside and try to forget'.

The Banyankore are taught to suppress their emotions. Not only those of pain and grief, but also laughter. It is regarded as weak and shameful, and a man who cries is a fool. Only children are allowed to express their emotions, though even they are told that it is very childish to do so. Laura, who had lived a while in England and had seen how Western people deal with emotions, told me:

'My culture has not given me permission to express my emotions. During my childhood they told me: don't express your feelings. My parents never told me, but I saw people keeping their emotions inside and people praised me for burying my own emotions. They encouraged me to suppress them. Now, I feel only that I am uncomfortable, but I can't say that I feel sad or depressed or have grief. There is just one mass of emotions inside; I can't distinguish one from another. We are not taught to do so.'

Our emotional behaviour has been shaped by the cultural ideas of our society and cannot be regarded as a direct expression of emotional impulses (Mesquita, 1996). As far as members of society share the same experiences, they also share the same reactions. Those reactions can be different from reactions in other societies. In Mbarara people have to remain silent because their emotions are too painful to experience or too disturbing in the social context. People learn that remaining silent is normal and healthy. However, in the Pentecostal Churches people are urged to express their

emotions, and so they do. But in their view, it is not they who express, but God. God has taken control and God is expressing emotions.

During my research in the rural area, a woman named Grace approached me. She was tilling the land and wanted to know what a *muzungu*⁷ was doing there, far away from the main road. When my interpreter told her the reason, she said that terrible things had happened. I asked her if she was willing to tell me about it.

Grace: *'During the time that the Kikito⁸ were fighting the army of Tanzania, my brother had a bus. When he drove past this place, the soldiers thought that he was going to Tanzania. They confiscated the bus and killed my brother. I have never seen his body.'*

M.T.: *'Are you sure that your brother has been killed?'*

Grace: *'I have heard that he has been killed and that his private parts were cut off and put in his mouth. It happened in 1972 and I have never seen him again so he can't be alive. Terrible things happened in that period. Those army men, they took everything, all the animals and property, and they also killed my cousin.'*

M.T.: *'How did your family react to the fact that you couldn't bury the body of your brother?'*

Grace: *'They didn't have an option. They had to forget the whole thing.'*

M.T.: *'Was it possible to forget?'*

Grace: *'It took a long time before they could put it out of their minds, but I still remember.'*

She thinks that her family has forgotten her brother's death, and that she has failed to do so. By remaining silent she hopes that her family will think that she has forgotten it. Memories of personal experiences are reduced here to an internal, individual activity, because remembering personal traumatic experiences as a social activity has become impossible through the conspiracy of silence.

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Silent because the economy needs all the attention. Isingiro, a sub-region of the Mbarara district, is a poor area with more than 186.000 inhabitants, of whom 80% earns their living by farming.

Mary: 'In 1972, the soldiers came on a shooting expedition from Tanzania, but they went straight to the barracks where the Kikito stayed. They did not interfere with people very much, but the Kikito in Isingiro became suspicious of us. In 1979, the soldiers from Tanzania and the liberation groups came to attack the Amin regime. People in Isingiro had to flee and suffered a lot. They tried to take some animals with them and some of their belongings, just a few things, because they couldn't carry a lot on their heads. The soldiers destroyed all the property they left behind. When the people of Isingiro returned home, most of their animals were dead, the crops were destroyed and their property was looted. Most people developed mental problems. You know, before the war people had problems with getting water. They had to get water from very far away and they needed a lot for their land, so most of them had built big water-tanks. The Kikito destroyed those tanks during the 1979 war. Can you imagine what that war did to those people? Coming back and seeing the remains of their tanks. To get water they had to walk for hours and hours, but they still couldn't get enough; it was hot and the land dried out. It took a long time to rebuild those tanks and some of them have never started again, because they had no money and no property.'

The two villages I visited in Isingiro had no electricity. The wires were destroyed during the war in 1979 and the remnants are still hanging there as a reminder of the war. Because people lost all their property, they had no means of support. Hard work is seen as a means of forgetting, and is also necessary in order to stay alive. Due to lack of transport it is difficult for the farmers to sell their crops, and the increasing dry periods make life even more difficult than it already was. People consider their bad eco-

nomie position as a result of the war; their suffering, their sleeping problems and nightmares—something that in western countries is often regarded as a sign of post-traumatic stress—are, according to them, caused by their economic situation. A woman who had lost her husband, four children and all her property, told me:

'If you are poor like me, you can't forget. I had eleven children, of which four have died. Three children can go to school and the other four are at home because I can't pay the school fees for them. The house is not good, it is partly roofless and I worry a lot. I was not able to get much land because my husband died and because the children were too young to help me. I still have problems with the land; it is not enough. I can't sleep at night and I suffer from nightmares. You have to be rich to forget your experiences.'

Thus, they think that if their economic situation improved, they would be able to forget their war experiences. It is not the memory of atrocities that gives them this illusion, but their economic misery.

Silence on the part of the government. There are no war memorials in southwest Uganda. Nor are there any public events to help people to remember. The only reminders of war are buildings which have not been restored yet. The only commemoration of the war is the National Resistance Movement Anniversary Day on 26 January; the day on which Museveni became president. This day is celebrated with military parades, in which the emphasis is on what the movement has done for the people. It has liberated them from their dictators and it has brought them freedom, democracy and economic growth. When witnessing this celebration I noticed that during the whole day only one person paid attention to those who had died, saying: *'For those men who lost their lives in the bush I*

pray that they will rest in peace. I assume that he meant the soldiers, because he spoke about the bush. No attention at all has been paid to the civilians who lost their lives.

The government constantly emphasises the improvements that have come about. For them the war must be seen as one of liberation, in which soldiers and civilians gave their lives for a good cause. And of course, living conditions are much better. A war of liberation without bloodshed is, after all, impossible. People enjoy freedom of speech, they are allowed to congregate, there is a democratic structure and civil rights are taken seriously, although everything is far from perfect. The problem is that this approach allows little room for personal grief. Even the newspapers tend to class war-related topics within the context of what people have gained by the victory of the National Resistant Movement.

To keep silent in order to remember later. In the Netherlands just after the war, most people took it for granted that they ought not to speak about their horrifying experiences. It was a kind of mutual tacit agreement not to talk. The war was over. It was a generally shared attitude. Most people unconsciously felt a need for 'a new start' (Van der Veen, 1993). According to Van der Veen, sometimes it is better to forget temporarily in order to remember later.

To remain silent can be seen as a necessity: people have to rebuild their lives and to wait until their pain is bearable. These periods of silence are also seen in other post-conflict situations. It was only after years that the first personal testimonies about atrocities during the Cultural Revolution in China emerged. And it is only recently that the first autobiographies about the Cambodian regime of the Khmer Rouge appeared in the bookstores. People appear

to need quite a long period of time before they dare to feel what has happened. I am not sure if this is also the case in Mbarara; time will tell. Apart from the fact that there were no books dealing with personal experience in Mbarara, there were no songs or any other cultural form concerning the war period either, except for the songs of soldiers. But things are changing. Just before I left, a remarkable advertisement appeared in *The New Vision*, a Ugandan newspaper. The heading was: 'Looking back':

Send us your stories. We Ugandans can look back over the last 30 years at the bad times and the good times, at narrow escapes and at death. Why not record the legacy?

Do you remember the night the soldiers banged at the door?...When there was no salt, did you dig for it? Did you get rich?...Which end of the gun did you see? Were you mistaken for a guerrilla? Did you queue for the wrong commodity? Were you a hero? Fountain Publishers would like you to share your experience with the present and future generations (The New Vision, 1999).

People were urged to send their stories to the publisher. I do not know if such a book has been published yet, but it will be the first book with stories of the war from ordinary people. Will the veil of silence be lifted?

Silence and interpretation

In Mbarara war has not only affected people inwardly, but also their way of life and the social, economic, political and cultural activities that connect them with their specific history and identity, with its traditions, norms and values. Deep distrust, hatred and suspicion have taken root in society and have been disastrous for people's lives. Culture and society no longer provide guidance in dealing with pain and suffering. As long as the current situation is not considered stable and safe, people deal with mem-

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ories as they did in a chaotic past. Although most people explained to me that they considered being silent as natural behaviour, many of them told me that it was also a burden.

According to Scarry (1985), pain has an isolating effect on people as long as they cannot find words to describe their feelings, or are not able to make a connection between their pain and an external object or artefact. The notion of pain can only be shared in the culture of language, ideas, objects and arts. The problem of suffering can be considered as that of making sense out of their experience and finding meaning in the ordeal they have gone through. Only by constructing some kind of interpretation can a human being solve the problem of lacking words for his pain. Religion can offer such an interpretation, and many people try to find some relief in religion. It has given people answers throughout many centuries, and it provides answers for 'events which lack not just interpretations but *interpretability*' (Geertz, 1993:, p.100). Furthermore, churches often give people social and economic support. The Pentecostal churches and the Charismatic Movement of the Catholic church are especially popular (c.f. Tankink, 2000, 2004), but in my observation the interpretative framework of the churches are used only within the churches themselves, not outside. In the case of southwest Uganda, a generally shared collective interpretation is missing.

Post traumatic Stress Disorder and social suffering

Many people I interviewed told me that they had sleeping problems, nightmares and other symptoms. Does that mean that they are suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and that their

silence should be explained as an avoidance symptom? According to Giller (1998), many people in Uganda could be diagnosed as suffering from PTSD, but the problems presented are otherwise. They do not complain of PTSD symptoms and their social functioning does not correspond with PTSD symptoms. The people in Giller's research complained about the inhuman economic position and about the impossibility of giving their children enough food. Once more, it would seem that it is questionable whether Western concepts of trauma and PTSD, originating in psychology and psychiatry, are adequate to understand the silence and processes of social breakdown and disorganisation, especially in the case of sociocentric societies. According to Summerfield (1997, p.23) using the term 'traumatisation' is for the majority of survivors a 'pseudo-condition, a reframing of the ordinary distress and suffering engendered by war as a technical problem to which technical solutions (like counselling) are supposedly applicable'. I agree with Summerfield that survivors are more concerned about their shattered social lives than about their interior lives. By using the individual paradigm instead of the social paradigm, it is easy to overlook the way the social environment interacts with the person who has experienced dreadful things. And it is precisely the reactions of the environment that determine how people perceive experience and its place in a person's life. The concept of PTSD, thus, is insufficient to understand why people in Mbarara district keep silent.

In my opinion, it is preferable to use the anthropological term 'social suffering': a 'universal aspect of human experience in which individuals and groups have to undergo or bear certain burdens, troubles, and serious wounds to the body and the

spirit that can be grouped into a variety of forms'. Suffering from war experiences may be seen as an extreme form. Suffering may have been given different meanings in different cultures but the suffering itself is an 'intersubjective human condition' (Kleinman 1995, p.101). The important thing is what is at stake for the persons themselves. Treatment and other forms of aid must not be seen, therefore, in the narrow context of psychological treatment: building houses and reconstructing water-tanks can also be very therapeutic. Recognition of economic needs by international society might also contribute to relieve suffering.

Silence and collective healing

In a society, such as the Mbarara district, where daily life does not centre so much on the individual but on relationships within the family and community, 'psycho-socio-cultural' damage has taken place (Richters, 1994). The community and the culture need social healing and people need not only economic and material support, but also social and, in my view, historical connectedness. According to Richters, testimonies can form a bridge between the psychological and social process of recovery. Social healing can take place when trust and respect have been recovered in a society. Therefore people should be called to account for their deeds: they should experience a kind of justice. Only then can they create a new public space where memories of the past can be shared and where they can experience community spirit.

The problem with this approach, in the case of Mbarara district, is that not only soldiers but also many civilians had committed blameworthy or criminal acts, and if everyone were to be punished, it could destabilise the country. On the other hand, though,

distrust can be stabilising as well.

In Germany, for instance, after World War II, only the most prominent war criminals were punished but the millions of ex-nazis were mildly penalised and integrated in the new order (Bot, 2000). For the first twenty years there was a habit of silence in Germany too, but it prevented many people from being excluded from the new democratic order, which would have marginalized them, thus forming a threat for the government. Although this might not satisfy the craving for justice, it helped Germans to rebuild their society as a stable democracy. It is questionable, however, whether this approach would be advisable for Uganda. A prerequisite would be a blueprint of civic spirit and order from before the war. But Uganda had just started as a postcolonial society, and civilian life and the government had not yet achieved stability when war broke out.

The war of Uganda also differs in character from that in Germany. In Uganda there was a war of liberation and such conflicts, according to Werbner (1998: 75), are often justified by governments as a means of bringing about a homogeneous state, with ideals of freedom and equality for all, without paying attention to the suffering caused by such wars. Differences in memories can lead to conflicts which can only be solved if the pain and suffering are recognised in public (Werbner, 1998: 100). If that is not the case, it may be more difficult to achieve collective healing and a shared history; which are essential in order to break the silence. In this process of acknowledging pain and suffering, an important role can be played by art, theatre, literature and music. Singing songs together in Mbarara district has always been a way in which people express and share their grief.

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Counselling

While people remained silent in their own community, they were very willing to talk with me about their silence and their suffering. I suppose that they considered it as less risky to talk with an outsider like me. What consequences does this have for counselling? How do silence and distrust affect counselling by local helpers? Would it be better to have counsellors from outside the community? Could traditional healers and judges play a role as 'counsellor'? How to connect social healing with individual healing? I do not have the answers, but the questions are well worth thinking about.

To conclude, healing a society in a post-conflict situation requires a multilevel approach, whereby the economic, social, political and psychological needs are addressed, and processes that lead to a balance of power are set in motion. Justice, truth and reconciliation must be part of that process. A feeling of justice and safety could be seen as a condition for healing, but also as the final result of the process of healing (Van Willigen, 2000). It is the social context that determines which interventions and processes are needed. The communities affected must give form to this with their own pain as basis, and the government plays a crucial role in initiating the conditions in which justice can take place.

For counsellors is it important that the many reasons why people in Mbarara district remain silent indicate that the cultural, social, political, economic and psychological situations are fragile and the pain too fresh. As long as this situation does not improve, people will have to keep quiet. Silence is needed in order to go on living, and under the circumstances described it is probably the best option for the people of Mbarara district 'for the sake of peace and unity in their country'.

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¹ All names have been changed for reasons of privacy.

² This article is based on my M.A. thesis for my study Cultural Anthropology, entitled: *Beyond human understanding. De invloed van de Born-again kerken op het omgaan met pijnlijke oorlogsherinneringen in Mbarara district, Zuidwest Oeganda.* (The influence of Born-again Churches on coping with devastating war memories in Mbarara district, Southwest Uganda). 2000. University of Amsterdam: unpublished, and on my article 'Zwijgen' (Silence) in *Medische Antropologie*, 2002, 12 (2): 207-224.

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³ The first area is Mbarara city, the commercial centre of the area on the road to Congo and Rwanda. It has 80.000 inhabitants and is growing extremely fast; over the last five years the number of inhabitants has doubled. During the wars the city was completely destroyed, but a few buildings survive as reminders of this terrible period. Since 1989, Mbarara has had a university and people from all parts the country come to Mbarara to work or study.

The second area is Isingiro County in the southern part of Mbarara district, bordering Tanzania. While Amin was in government, the fighting in these parts was very heavy. People had to flee and when they were able to go back, they were confronted by a situation in which their animals were killed, their crops were destroyed and their property was looted. Until now there has been no electricity in that area. Many people have had no means of building up their lives and the increasingly long periods of drought make the situation even worse.

The third research area is Kanyaryeru

Resettlement scheme. It was founded in 1986 to resettle Bahima refugees from Luwero Triangle. During my research 6.000 people, mainly war widows with their children, lived there. They had lost many relatives, all their property and cattle. The Kanyaryeru Resettlement Scheme was founded in part of a national park and at first the land was still uncultivated. As a pastoral society, these Bahima refugees were not trained in the cultivation of land and faced big problems in producing enough food for their children. Now they have adapted to this new situation.

⁴ In Southwest Uganda live the Bahima and the Bairu. However, the people do not like to use the names of these ethnic groups. The Bairu in particular object to them because in the past they were seen as subordinate to the Bahima. People in the Southwest prefer to call themselves Banyankore, literally 'people who speak Runyankore'.

⁵ The Luwero Triangle is the 'killing fields' of Uganda. Obote II has tried to depopulate this area by trying to kill everyone and to destroy everything.

⁶ The Museveni government appointed the Commission of Inquiry into Violations of Human Rights in 1986. The commission held public hearings around the country. In the second year the commission stopped working due to lack of funds. In the following years they received some financial support and in 1991 they submitted their report to the government. The government did not distribute it, however, and only a few people saw the report, or knew that it was available (Hayner 2001:56).

⁷ All white people are call *mazungu*.

⁸*Kikito* means the Amin-period, but it also means the soldiers of Amin. Literally the words means 'army boots'. It refers to the way the soldiers of Amin walk: they made a lot of noise with their boots.

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