

REVIEW OF *THE POLITICS OF MEMORY: TRUTH, HEALING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE*. EDS. IFI AMADIUME & ABDULLAHI AN-NA'IM, LONDON, NEW YORK: ZED BOOKS, 2000, 203PP, ISBN 1-85649-843-3, PRICE: PAPERBACK, \$22.50.

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This collection of essays examines how the politics of memory can contribute to the formation of strategies for achieving reconciliation in post-conflict situations. Activists, equity workers, policy analysts and academics address existing paradigms for achieving justice and reconciliation in the aftermath of deep internal conflict.

Different interpretations of social justice, the nature of conflict, legal accountability and the role of truth commissions, form the core of the anthology's structure. This thematic approach is developed within and between individual essays and it becomes possible to discern an implicit characterisation of each of the case studies; Rwanda typifies a trajectory of justice without reconciliation, South Africa illustrates reconciliation without justice and Nigeria/Biafra is judged to be a contested case.

Wole Soyinka (Chapter 1) draws on the central theme of the collection – truth, healing and justice – by asking how far memory should reach in Africa and elsewhere. Regardless of whether memory is defined an effect of the past (a burden) or of the present (a choice), one should not dwell on the former at the expense of the latter. Vestiges of the past can militate against putting aside the burden of memory, but reparations can lead to reconciliation as a prerequisite for the healing of injustices.

He reminds us that the first step in addressing the legacy of European and Arab colonialism is to remember the impact of the slave trade on the African continent; “a world view that separated humanity into the saved and the damned, the latter being qualified for mass deportations to distant lands as beasts of burden, provides at least a *prima facie* case for a preliminary hearing in the court of reparation.” (27)

He is also critical of “intensely argued apologia from some of our African and African-American scholars, who inform us that the condition of the slaves under Arab slave-owners was far more humane than under the Europeans or the Americans.” (30)

Embracing a “truthful, but critical embrace of our past” (33), Soyinka convincingly argues that the possibility of truth and reconciliation in the Sudan will remain a chimera, unless the memory and vestiges of slavehood relations are acknowledged.

Memory is not “a surrender to evil, not a condoning of wrongs” (30). In the ‘aftermath of a true tragic apprehension’ it can cease ‘to be a burden’ by becoming “an affirmation of existence ...and a resolve in defence of unborn generations.” (35)

Akachi Ezeigbo argues that Soyinka, Achebe and Emecheta have created a literary discourse that powerfully expresses the belief that peace depends on social justice. In particular, she links collective memory to political responsibility by asking whether the vocation of the artists is to “record the experience of his [or her] society” (58) and to bring forward ‘a voice of vision, of his own time’ to address existing problems.

In works such as *Maidens and Specialists* (1974), Soyinka recreates a society that has lost its compass. He introduces two old women who are not victims but agents of restoration, who reconcile opposing forces through acts of self-determination. In order to heal society, they destroy Dr. Beno who is the symbolic embodiment of oppression.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), Achebe links social justice to the empowerment of women. Beatrice and Elewa, who are more than a match for man, take responsibility into their own hands and set about restoring the world that exists around them.

Emecheta expands this focus in *Destination Biafra* (1986) where she explores the ability of women and children to survive the consequences of modern warfare. Emecheta’s vision is one that could equally apply to other countries on the continent, devastated by war.

Chapters 4 to 6 consider conflict, its context and consequences in Africa and elsewhere. Abdullah An-Na’im and Svetlana Peshkova (Chapter 4) explore whether social movements can contribute to healing in communities in a state of collapse. They are formed when “social actors concert their actions around common claims in sustained sequences of inter-action with opponents or authorities” (71) and are

composed of “a group of ‘non-elite’ people from a broad range of backgrounds who use political confrontation and socially-disruptive techniques to build, a new social order.” (70)

Social movements contribute to the search for justice by using their influence to ensure the following questions continue to circulate in the public sphere: (i) do the objectives of existing political leaders address the needs of the people as a whole? (ii) is a particular form of rule consistent with the peaceful co-existence of all its citizens and (iii) is cultural superiority compatible with the objectives of peace and stability?

The subject of Nnaemeka Ikepezes’ essay is marginalization. This is defined as “the deliberate disempowerment of a people politically, economically, socially and militarily.’(90) Specifying how “marginalizers” relate to the ‘marginalized’ is particularly precarious as the formation of an antagonist relationship between one group and another, appears to go hand in hand with a deepening of material inequalities. Yet it remains a useful term insofar as it places at the forefront of public discussion the circumstances in which at least one of the following relationships apply: fast-track/slow-track; centre/periphery; majority/minority; possession/ dispossession; dependence/ independence; superiority/inferiority, and domination/ subordination. (91)

Sydney Emezue and Azel Harneit-Sievers (Chapter 6) explore reconstruction in Nigeria/Biafra by interviewing ‘ordinary’ people who lived through the civil war. Their goal is to understand how Biafrans who survived the conflict consolidated their memories of the civil war by developing collective forms of remembrance. In particular, they analyse the content of Biafran propaganda constructed after the war had ended.

Through oral testimony their major finding is that certain sections of the Biafran people sought to come to terms with the meaning of their defeat on the battlefield by introducing mythical claims into their post-war narratives of the war and its aftermath. For instance, it was claimed that the war came to an end “not through an outright military defeat . . . but through the intervention of some outside force.” (122)

Although there is no factual basis to the idea that intervention led to the cessation of armed conflict, remembering the war in these terms, does serve a strategic purpose. The opposition between the idea that the war would be won and the acknowledgement that it had in fact been lost is overcome through the formation of a collective myth. Since it was not the Nigerians who were observed to be present at the end of the conflict, it was not *really* the Nigerians who had defeated the Bi-

afra people. Using mythological truths to maintain a consistency between past and present beliefs enables a people to make sense of the present through a neutralisation of the past.

Chapters 7 to 9 examine legal approaches to truth and justice, versus truth and healing. Juan Mendez (Chapter 7) argues that where crimes against humanity have been committed the state owes each victim a right to truth, justice and reparation. International law is the basis of justice as it provides a right to a legal remedy, the prosecution of suspected perpetrators and a declaration of their innocence or guilt.

The victims of crimes against humanity are entitled to affirmative actions and legal obligations remain in force in circumstances in which one regime replaces another. However not every type of human rights violation gives rise to this responsibility. It is only when “extra-judicial executions, torture, disappearances and prolonged arbitrary detention . . . are committed as part and parcel of a deliberate, massive, systematic pattern” (128) that they acquire the legal status of crimes against humanity.

Julie Merton (Chapter 8) takes a long hard look at how international tribunals operate. Prosecuting individuals for crimes against humanity can only fulfill certain outcomes. The problem is that a reliance on due legal process is a blunt institutional device. It lets in enough ‘truth’ to prove a concrete issue but avoids the attendant human consequences that are part and parcel of a systematic violation of human rights. Victims can “testify about the hand that beat them, confirm the size of the room, the colour of the door, and the wooden table on which their bodies were broken.” (144) Yet what they cannot do is “talk about how their child’s face looked when the paramilitary troops dragged her away . . . or cry about their dog that was left behind [and worst of all] no-one will know the little things that enabled victims to survive.” (144)

Binaifer Nowrojee and Regan Ralph explore the link between violations of humanitarian law and women’s rights. Their particular concern is the failure of governments to take action against those responsible for crimes of sexual violence.

In Rwanda, rape and other gender-specific violations carry a severe social stigma. The suffering of individual women (physical and psychological) is aggravated, in the aftermath of civil wars, by a profound existential sense of isolation and ostracism. Many women do not dare to reveal their experiences publicly for fear of rejection by their family and the wider community and the cycle of despair that this produces is only aggravated by the perception that the perpetrators will not be held accountable.

Mahmood Mamdani (Chapter 10) offers some powerful reflections on the kind of truth that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was able to produce. On the one hand, the TRC, was about opposing truth to power through acts of witness. As a “powerful tradition” that “links the old testament to the enlightenment” (177) victims were encouraged to contrast their personal truth with the lies of apartheid. On the other hand, the TRC, concerned itself with the goal of linking power to truth. In doing so it institutionalised a mandate that led to unpleasant realities being ignored. The TRC became a process of truth-seeking orientated to the consolidation of new power relations rather than the production of truths about the legacy of apartheid.

Although the political compromise may have been justifiable (amnesty in exchange for truth), the wisdom of the attendant moral compromise is less defensible (with the price paid for peaceful co-existence being a forgetting of the legacies of apartheid). Whilst it may be possible for the majority to come to terms with the fact that “yesterday’s perpetrators’ lost’ the institutional basis of their power” (183) it may be much more difficult for them to also ‘live with beneficiaries whose gains remain intact.’

The Politics of Memory is an interesting attempt to explain how memory is formed in the shadow of deep internal conflicts. Its inter-disciplinary approach makes a useful bridge between the institutional context in which solutions need to be framed and the concrete issues political activists and equity workers continue to uncover. Many of the contributors do establish a link between memory and politics. This makes it possible to understand the political choices that need to be considered if strategies of reconciliation are to make a difference in the aftermath of conflict situations.