

What Happens in the Forest? Memory, Trauma, Repression and Resilience amongst Congolese Refugees Living in Durban, South Africa

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Abstract

A project entitled ‘Dialogics and the pursuit of solidarity’ brings together Congolese refugees and Zulu street traders and students who reside in the inner city of Durban, South Africa. The first phase was referred to as ‘Voices’ and allowed participants to share their unique life-stories with us. Our adult female Congolese participants reported having suffered experiences of violence, most extreme, before leaving the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Several of the men referred to traumatic incidents that were endured ‘in the forest’, but one of these, an elderly gentleman, referred to these as ‘unspeakable’. What happens in the forest, and why are these memories so unbearable? Is it a case of what transpires in the forest remains in the forest? Or is it that these experiences remain repressed in the mind; geographically remote from the forest, but embodied as an ever-present menace if revealed or exposed? Despite the immense trauma that has been lived by our participants, our study indicates a tremendous resilience on their part and an adaptability to life contexts that remain hostile, and at best uncertain.

Keywords: memory, DRC, forest, trauma, survival, resilience

Introduction

The forest is not an equatorial forest, like you might imagine it to be. It houses villages, with no electricity and lots of

trees, far from the city. When the Rwandan troops and Kabila's rebel soldiers started attacking Bukavu, we fled westward to the forests in our thousands. The Hutus were already entrenched there and we had to pay them homage to cross bridges over water: food, money, clothes. Some of us only had bread. When the bombing started the Hutus would run with us, deeper and deeper into the forest. It was madness. Terrible things happened there; rape, killing, anything and everything taken by force, powerlessness. Babies were smashed to a pulp in front of their parents, mothers raped in their homes, in front of their families. I managed to return to our family home after about 100km, but others continued for hundreds of kilometres (D.M. 28).

This is one of the memories recounted to me of the period 1996-97, during the first Congolese War, by one of our participants, from South Kivu on the eastern boundary of the Democratic Republic of Congo. He has lived in Durban, South Africa, as a political refugee since 2003 and we have been working together since 2011 on a research intervention and community engagement initiative. One of our collaborative aims is to transform *xenophobia*, or hatred of the other (South Africa's scourge following the 2008 attacks) into *xenophilia*, or friendship with the other, through a phased, dialogical approach that mutually sensitises 'self' to 'other' and 'other' to 'self', over time. We engaged with 24 participants comprising gender-balanced and equal numbers of Congolese refugees and local (Zulu) South African citizens. The current paper is drawn from the narratives and observations emerging from one-on-one interviews with our research team.

Consider the instance of the elderly gentleman referred to in the abstract above. Upon recounting his traumatic experiences in the DRC, his dignified exterior and almost overly pronounced 'poker-face' are suddenly shattered. He becomes emotional and upon recalling the forest, he freezes. It is as if what has happened there, or rather, what it represents, is unspeakable, in another world. It is our concern to attempt to enter that world in order to better understand the relationship between violence, trauma, memory and resilience.

First we must turn to memory. Philippe Denis (2008:14) refers to the recent ‘flooding’ of academic journals with memory-related research. This surge in the uptake of interest with memory is not coincidental. Generally, the post-Cold War era has witnessed an increase in intra-state conflicts with devastating effects and a sweeping traumatic aftermath, both individually and collectively. Obvious examples from the 1990s include Bosnia, Rwanda and Somalia. Certainly in the case of transitional societies entering the 21st century, such as South Africa, the place of memory became pivotal to the agenda of change and transformation (see Colvin 2005; Denis & Ntsimane 2008).

In our attempts at ‘mapping memory’, therefore, Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwartz recognize that memory, in its ‘social location’, lies at the nexus of history, politics and ethics (2010:3). It is thus necessary to remain vigilant of the histories of remembering and forgetting, to accommodate various theoretical approaches whilst acknowledging limitations to analysis; there does not appear to be one ‘hold-all’ in this terrain.

Oral historian Sean Field notes that, ‘The dialectic of remembering *and* forgetting is not simply unavoidable; it is fundamental to constructing and maintaining self and identity.’ He continues to make the interesting suggestion that, ‘the notion of ‘memory work’ compels us to consider how people ‘work through’ the dialectic of remembering and forgetting (and silencing or denying) memories’ (2007a:21-22).

In picking up on the idea of the ‘memory work’, I would like to suggest a comparison of the ‘memory work’ with the ‘dream work’, as developed by Sigmund Freud. Given the significant contributions made by psychology and psychoanalysis to memory studies (see Walker 2005; Maw 2007) and mindful of potential challenges (see Radstone & Schwartz 2010) this proposition seems to offer a reasonable avenue for exploration. Field for one recognizes that ‘oral historians and psychotherapists share an emphasis on the importance of attentive listening and empathy’ (2008:159). More specifically, if one sets memory in relation to trauma, Colvin (2005:155) suggests that some engagement with ‘the languages and practices of psychiatry and psychotherapy’ is unavoidable, since ‘stories of ‘trauma’ are always already implicated in some way in a specific perspective on psychological suffering and recovery.’

As to concerns surrounding the application of a so-called ‘Western’ framework of analysis to an ‘African’ experiential reality, it would be prudent

to note that one of the pioneering ‘parents’ of an African critical approach, the formidable Frantz Fanon, himself emerged, albeit not uncritically, out of the psychoanalytic tradition and continued to adapt and use this method creatively in his own reflections (see Fanon 1990).

Hence, on the contrary to any ‘Euro-’, ‘Western-’ or other ‘sceptic’ school, in the quest for restorative solidarity and to build ‘a new history’, Passerini (2005:250-251) recognises the value of psychoanalysis in ‘pushing the bounds of disciplinary limits’ without any ‘specificity’ to European memory, but rather for human experience at large. It is in this spirit of engagement that the current approach seeks to advance a critical inclusivity that in turn can promote universal solidarity with respecting local particularly.

‘Memory Work’: An Entry-point to Reaching the Unreachable?

We all have memories, just as we all have dreams. I would like to consider, momentarily, the ‘dream work’, before moving to discuss particular instances of violence and traumatic memories. To gloss a complex process, Freud recognises that the threats contained in the unconscious must somehow be filtered in order not to disturb the consciousness of the individual concerned. Dreams, which contain undesired wish fulfilment and which do not obey the parameters of moral acceptability are transformed from the latent dream to the manifest dream through what is termed the ‘dream-work’ (Freud 1991:204), in order to protect the individual from the trauma of the primal realm. The counter-movement, Freud suggests is the work of interpretation, which ‘seeks to undo the dream-work’ (1991:204). Earlier, Sigmund Freud noted that ‘interpreting means finding a hidden sense in something’ (1991:115).

Three points pertaining to the dream-work may prove useful for exploration with respect to memory. First, it entails *condensation*, by which process the manifest dream has a smaller content than the latent one and represents ‘an abbreviated translation’ (1991:205), which results in a fusion or a blurring vagueness. Next is *displacement*, which operates through censorship. This censorship operates via the substitution of something with only an unintelligible allusion to it (unlike waking associations) and

secondly, by shifting the emphasis from that which is important to that which is tangential (1991:208-209). Finally, and most psychologically interesting to Freud, is the *transformation* of thoughts into visual images. He argues that via this process, the dream-work ‘submits thoughts to a regressive treatment and undoes their development’; our thoughts originally arose from sensory images and it is thence that they return (1991:215). Upon deeper investigation into the interpretation of dreams, the meaning of representation and representability become pivotal, as developed by Freud elsewhere (1991b). This too, I shall argue, is critical to our topic.

Let us apply the above concepts to the experience of our protagonist who freezes after mentioning the forest. The forest somehow appears to represent the sum total of his experience: everything appears to have been shrunken or condensed into it. A tree or a wooded area might not be the most direct trigger to – or catalyst of – a traumatic memory, in this sense it represents a tangential allusion to it. However, in the case of some other victims of violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo, of course, it may serve as a literal symbol of their torture, as in the example of a mother who had her legs tied to two small trees whilst she was gang raped by armed militants (see Harvard 2010).

By zoning into – or out of ?– the forest, it was as if the man was allowing himself to be distracted by that which in fact does not appear to have been central. It is thus that disturbing memories, which often for victims of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) manifest as flashbacks or images, manifest as such and not as thoughts – for it is this regression to a more primitive survival state, such as experienced during times of primeval trauma that is precisely referred to as ‘unspeakable’ horror because it predates language. As Roberta Culbertson (1995:178) recognises, ‘because victimisation is communicated, if at all, only in the most primitive ways when it is occurring (as in cries of pain), any discussion of violence is always, whatever the problems, a discussion based on memory, in that it is about a kind of past knowledge.’

Violence, Memory and the ‘Survivor’s Paradox’

Culbertson (1995:169) identifies a ‘curious circumstance’ that pertains to victims who have survived episodes of violence. As she recognises, the

victim mostly remains silent about the experience, which albeit muted, 'remains somehow fundamental to his (her) existence, and to his unfolding or enfolded conception of himself.' Through suppression or repression, the self is hidden, or perhaps shielded from its devastating experience. Notwithstanding this silence, the survivor is left with the memory of the event, which as Culbertson suggests, 'seems both absent and entirely too present'. Although they manifest themselves as 'bits of memory' and are 'undeniable presences', she writes of their 'aura of unbelievability': though presenting themselves as clearly past, real, and fully embodied, they appear in non-narrative forms that seem to meet no standard test for truth or comprehensibility' (1995:169).

This brings us to what might be referred to as the 'survivor's paradox': 'to live with the paradox of silence and the present but unreachable force of memory, and a concomitant need to tell what seems untellable.' This phenomenon, Culbertson argues, 'obeys the logic of dreams rather than of speech and so seems as unreachable, as other, as these, and as difficult to communicate and interpret, even to oneself. It is a paradox of the distance of one's own experience' (1995:170).

Whilst in broad agreement with the notion of the 'survivor's paradox', we have suggested something quite different from our own analysis; I have argued that it is precisely because memory 'obeys the logic of dreams' that it is reachable. Akin to the 'dream work' that allows the unreachable to be reached in dreams, so too does the 'memory work' enable a framework for interpretation to occur; hence enabling the unreachable to be approached, even if never fully reached. The reason for the incomplete bridging, for want of a better metaphor, exists on account of the particular and peculiar nature of trauma, the experience of which serves to maintain the disconnect between the experience and the memory thereof.

This tension leads us into the domain of 'contestation' and specifically, into what Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone (2005) refer to as 'Contested Pasts'. Critical of simple 'traumatic memory theory' explanations, they take the more nuanced line that such theories are premised upon narratives that describe the psychological ramifications of a 'real event'. This becomes problematic, however, when set into play with whether the event actually occurred or not, or differed from narrational accounts; hence invoking, 'the context of a contested past, in which neither their events nor their meanings can straightforwardly be known' (2005:6).

Trauma: The Paradox of Destruction and Survival

For Cathy Caruth (1993:24), the problem of trauma is simultaneously one of ‘destruction’ and also, ‘fundamentally, an enigma of survival’. It is in ‘recognising traumatic experience as a paradoxical relation between destructiveness and survival that we can also recognise the legacy of incomprehensibility at the heart of catastrophic experience’. As she observes, “‘trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is not directly available to experience’”. The problem of survival, in trauma, thus emerges specifically as the question: “‘what does it mean for consciousness to survive?’” (1993:24).

She proposes that the cause of trauma is ‘a shock that appears to work very much like a threat to the body’s spatial integrity, but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time’ (1993:25). The issue is that the mind registers the threat ‘one moment too late’ – its shock therefore is in missing the experience of the threat of death (see also Caruth 2001). It is thus that the experience of waking from the dream and coming into consciousness is associated with the reliving of trauma. Caruth suggests that ‘the trauma consists not only in having confronted death, but in having survived, precisely, without knowing it’; hence on her reading, ‘Repetition ... is the very attempt to claim one’s own survival. Violence cannot therefore merely be located in past destruction, but in an ‘ongoing survival’ that belongs to the future... because violence inhabits, incomprehensibly, the very survival of those who have lived beyond it’ (1993:25).

In a subsequent development of her thinking, Caruth (2001) proposes that the repetitive re-enactment of the memory of a painful reality may translate into a creative act of invention, through what she refers to as the ‘language of trauma’. She observes that ‘in the life drive, then life itself, and the language of creativity, begin as an act that bears witness to the past even by turning from it that bears witness to death by bearing witness to the possibility of origination in life... The language of the life drive does not simply point backward, that is, but bears witness to the past by pointing to the future’ (2001:14).

Yet, Culbertson raises a conundrum: ‘if violence leaves memories of wounding and transcendence that for different reasons have little connection with language, then how can this so-called memory be communicated? How can we – survivors and non-survivors alike – come to know anything about

violence and its effects if we encounter fundamental difficulties in describing these effects?’ (1995:179).

The answer:

what we normally call memory is not the remembered at all of course, but a socially accepted fabrication, a weaving together of the thin, sometimes delicate and intertwined threads of true memory ... so that these might be told. Memory is always in the end subjected to those conventions which define the believable. Often then there is a divide – between what is known and what can be said, or if said, made sense of, legitimated as part of a story’ (ibid.).

As such, Walker (2005:107) asserts that an ‘imagined scene’, one that appears to be barely, if at all, linked to the veracity of a real event, is somehow linked with that event. On this account, the ‘traumatic paradox’ points to ‘the inherent contradiction of traumatic memory... traumatic events can and do result in the very amnesias and mistakes in memory that are generally considered, outside the theory of traumatic memory, to undermine their claim to veracity’ (2005:107).

Hence, as Field and Swanson (2007:10) recognise, memory analysis involves the interpretation of myths, amongst others, not as a trade-off in establishing fact or fiction, but rather, as ‘internalized from popular mythologies or created with people’s memories and provide frames of understanding or ways of coping.’

Memory Narratives, Hermeneutics and Attestation

Indeed, many survivors of trauma fear that their stories will not be understood, or at a more disturbing level, that they will not be believed or fail to cope. This can result in re-traumatisation and further alienation or victimisation. As Kelly McKinney (2007:287) argues, ‘both the registration of a traumatic event and the memory work that happens after are interpretive, culturally constructed, and socially mediated processes.’ Rather than evaluating the memory as accurate or inaccurate, or of prioritising ‘juridical’ memory over ‘therapeutic’ memory, she suggests that the memory narrative is ‘literally’ embraced.

One might add that a hermeneutical approach would emphasize an exploration of what meaning or purpose the memory would serve. Berger (1997:572), for one, recognises that ‘trauma’ is not synonymous with disaster:

‘The idea of catastrophe as trauma provides a method of interpretation, for it posits that the effects of an event may be dispersed and manifested in many forms not obviously associated with the event. Moreover, this dispersal occurs across time, so that an event experienced as shattering may only produce its full impact years later. This representational and temporal hermeneutics of the symptom has powerful implications for contemporary theory.’

Narrative can be held as ‘an accounting time of events in time’ that limits what can be told; it also speaks to the heart of the problem of violence for as Culbertson notices, ‘narrative requires a narrator, but the destruction of the self at the root of much violence makes this... nearly impossible’ (1995:191). Hence, ‘the survivor survives twice: survives the violation; and survives the death that follows it, reborn as a new person, the one who tells the story. Hence the compulsion to tell’ (1995:191). However, this ‘reclaiming of the self’ has an opportunity cost – certain dimensions of truth are lost in its telling.

In terms of the complexity of dealing with traumatic memory, McKinney (2007:266) notes that certain clinicians ‘subordinate social needs of clients to the ethical call to bear witness’; they fail to take account of the ‘moral complexity of political violence, and lose sight of the understanding that traumatic memories are politically and culturally mediated’. Such an approach is counter-productive, serving to deny their agency instead of restoring it (2007:267). Moreover, she asserts that clinical practice with trauma survivors predominantly assumes that ‘every client holds some sort of traumatic memory... that by definition disrupts the continuity of identity or self but can also ground the survivor’s identity or self. Each person has a unique story, a story of memories that both construct and represent the self at reflected and unreflected levels’ (2007:270).

Paul Ricoeur, with his seminal philosophical writings on time, narrative and hermeneutics, came to identify the key importance of ‘attestation’ as bearing witness to the truth, in his ethical framework, as

presented in *Oneself as another* (1992). I have detailed the significance of this move elsewhere (Tschudin 2013). Suffice it for our current purposes to note McKinney's observation that in order to bear such witness, the client 'must remember'; thus affording a pivotal role to 'the memory constituted within the therapeutic construct of the trauma' (2007:277). As she recognises, given its impact on identity, trauma ruptures the continuity of the self and of the community, the fall-out becoming greater when the event is denied or ignored by others or the self:

'Memory then becomes the vehicle through which identity can be reinstated. Private trauma and personal memory are thus connected with public and collective memory, simply in the act of telling and receiving, if there is a mutual awareness among the bearers of witness that the trauma occurred within a historical and collective context' (2007:266).

It is thus that we conclude with the leading role of memory in the reclaiming of identity. Different examples exist of the use of a dialogical approach to recovery and positive social change amongst those who are traumatised by violence and displaced, either within or beyond national borders. Recently Hermenau *et al.* (2013) documented the use of narratival therapy with child soldiers in the DRC, while Emmanuel Ntakarutimana (2008) documents the use of *ubuntu* in dealing with those affected by ethnic violence within Burundi. Sarah Dryden-Peterson (2006) considers the profound challenges associated with urban refugees living in Kampala, Uganda, with the related title of interest, 'I find myself as someone who is in the forest'.

So What Happens in the Forest? Survival, Repression and Resilience

Annete Lanjouw (2003) suggests that while the African Great Lakes crisis has disrupted life in countries such as the DRC and Rwanda since the 1990s, the legacy of conflict reaches back into the colonial and pre-colonial past. She notices that much of the assistance post the Rwandan genocide has been provided to refugees and those who have been displaced, whilst many of the communities receiving these have been 'far worse' off (2003:93). On one day alone in July 1994, 500,000 refugees arrived in Goma, DRC from Rwanda, with another 300,000 arriving within a few days, finding shelter in the

Virunga National Park. The UNHCR Global Report (2000) is not exactly flattering about the level of refugee support provided to the DRC.

Indeed, the pre-existing poverty and lack of infrastructure and development have only been exacerbated by the devastation of war. Lanjouw records the profoundly negative impact of the war and resultant displacement on the environment and protected areas because of necessary human encroachment for survival or opportunistic exploitation of natural resources. As Draulans and Van Krunkelsven (2002) observe, the DRC is home to more than half of Africa's remaining forests; the impact of soldiers, refugees and the local people fleeing into the forest to avoid this influx and to survive off natural resources is astounding.

A 1998 World Resources Institute report already identified the problematic geo-politics involved, with the DRC serving as a staging ground for Cold War proxy battles and immense commercial exploitation, resource plunder and kleptocratic rule. Almost ten years on, Mulvagh (2007) identified the wholesale abdication of responsibility by Kinshasa to its international legal obligations; it is as if the national government benefits from the destabilisation and insecurity of the protracted conflict in order to maintain its position in power. Despite the death and destruction, the forest continues to represent a site of refuge and nourishment. As such it represents ambivalence and ambiguity.

Why did our participant go silent after mentioning the forest? There are most likely multiple and complex causes ranging from direct experience(s) to remote and vicarious reasons. When I asked another one of the men about the reason for the silence, he asked me if I was aware of the 'Massacre of Kasika'. I replied that I was not. He provided an answer to my question with an emotive story:

In 1998, some of the Mai-Mai or local militia had resisted those who had come to occupy and exploit the eastern DRC from Rwanda. The massacre was an act of retribution for the Mai-Mai assassination of one of the RCD (Rally for Congolese Democracy) warlords. On 24 August 1998, numerous villages were attacked and over a thousand local people were killed in retaliation by the RCD. The Mwami Francois Mubeza, chief of the Nyindu ethnic community, was murdered by the rebels. This occurred after he witnessed his wife, pregnant with twins, having her stomach slit open whilst still alive,

with the unborn children ripped out of her and butchered in public view.

Whilst it is not the aim of the current paper to assess the truth claims of the narratives shared, this episode has attained mythical status in the DRC and it holds truth value for the teller. Walker (2005) confirms that not all false claims 'signify pure invention' but rather that such fallibility attests to the traumatic experience (2005:155). Such a sentiment is further supported by authors such as Sean Field who go further to argue that, 'factually incorrect' memories have the capacity to reveal 'psychological truths' through the reconstruction of what happened and of what possibly happened' (2007b:115; cf. Portelli 1991).

Aside from the sheer horror of the episode and its literal visceral effect, the participant did say that it was taboo to speak about this and other goings-on in the forest amongst one's peers but that it was necessary to share with those who were outside of the frame. Whereas we can only speculate as to the silence based on our analysis of the 'memory work', we can attempt to understand its functionality based on the historical context, using our conceptual tools as interpretive guides. As Hodgkin and Radstone (2005:23) recognise, 'the past is not fixed, but is subject to change: both narratives of events and the meanings given to them are in a constant state of transformation.' Our aim is to consider the transformational significance both of remembering and forgetting and the dialectical movements and dialogical moments between.

Maw (2007:81) suggests that (as per the title of her own work), 'the quickest way to move on is to go back', citing the example of bomb blast victims where 'the struggle between forgetting and remembering is perhaps most clearly articulated in the physical avoidance of places reminiscent of the blast (trauma) and the need to return to the site of the bomb blast (trauma).'

In the case of the old man, he goes back to the forest in his articulation, but once there, he avoids it, as if in a 'double-bind' dilemma. It may well be the case that he directly experienced or witnessed 'unspeakable' crimes, as a victim, as a relative or friend, as a bystander, or possibly even as a perpetrator. It may also be the case that, as with the Massacre of Kasika, indirect or vicarious experiences of violence are sufficiently disturbing to enforce silence.

There are certain unavoidable realities that require mentioning. A report by HEAL Africa (Lwambo 2011) has identified the disturbing issue of masculinities in the eastern DRC, focusing on the mismatch between dominant male ideals and their realities on the ground. Men appear not only to be perpetrators of, but also victims of, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) although it is taboo to discuss the latter topic. Several Congolese men, however, have confirmed the phenomenon of indiscriminate male on male rape in the forest and the need for counselling, therapy and support, perceived to be solely provided for women.

A 'hegemonic' masculinity has been identified as promoting an environment characterised by generalised violence and SGBV, indicating an urgent need for holistic approaches that empower men to adopt non-violent strategies in daily living. However, it is the women who bear the brunt of the conflict and its aftermath in the DRC, and especially in the forest. For sombre reading and harrowing accounts of extreme sexual violence against women in the eastern DRC, refer to the Harvard Humanitarian Report (2010) flagged previously. This epidemic is characterised by the use of military rape as a weapon of war, largely involving gang-rape, torture and sexual slavery. More recently, accounts of civilian rape have escalated incrementally. The impact upon tens of thousands of women who have reported, and upon countless others, and their families, is indescribable.

One of our participants, a mother from Kivu, described how she witnessed the murder of her father in front of her by rebel soldiers. Following this, she was gang-raped by them in the presence of her children. My research team members indicated their own distress by the fact that she did not appear to be emotionally moved when recalling this episode. Instead, she was more pre-occupied with obtaining the rental money required to enable herself and her children to remain in their current accommodation in Durban. As researchers who subscribe to a rigorous ethical code we were unable to accommodate her request, as difficult as the situation was; all we were able to offer was free psychotherapeutic counselling which she politely turned down. She then appeared to carry on with group interactions unperturbed.

Our research indicates an extreme resilience on the part of the Congolese refugees with whom we interact. Nietzsche (1997) comments that everything deep loves masks, and this appears to be the case with many of the traumatic incidents experienced and confined to the recesses of memory. The encouragement to participate dialogically and share these memories

necessitates the creation and sustenance of a space, within which vulnerability is permitted and catharsis is encouraged.

Giving voice allows for the voluntary reclamation of identity, the ownership of experience and the celebration of life. This in itself becomes a form of ‘engagement’ that may sometimes, but not always, have ‘therapeutic benefits’ (see Colvin 2005 for a mixed account); ‘healing’ is too contested a word (see Field 2001; 2007b; 2008). As Maw (2007:90) suggests, oftentimes the ‘missing link’ is the lack of exploration, ‘the experiences of these survivors, the familial and social contexts from whence they emerge and in which they recover.’ As an illustration of this proposal, let us consider a somewhat alternative and more optimistic account from the forest.

An informant from South Kivu recounted how his sister’s child had been lost during the mass flight into the forest described above, when the invading Rwandan and associated Congolese rebels advanced. The boy was around nine years of age at the time. The family feared the worst and he was presumed dead.

Ten years later, a relative who is a senior officer in the Congolese military was assigned to eastern DRC. He encountered a group of young people living in the forest and sought to reintegrate them into their communities. The relative saw my friend’s sister on the street of their hometown and informed her of his mission. She hoped against hope that her child was alive, but when she went to look at the group to possibly identify him there was no register.

In a state of despair, she shouted out ‘Babu!’ at which point a young man looked at her. He could not recognise his own mother, but he remembered his name. He had survived as a child soldier and even profited diamonds from fleeing residents, although he lost these in a subsequent conflict. Now, several years later, he is happily married and re-integrated within his community. To his family, a dream has come true. The distance between trauma and dreams is not so far, perhaps, separated only by memory, resilience and creative possibilities for recall.

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