

# Individual vs. Collective Memory

## Individual and Collective Memory

Memories can be interpreted through the lens of an individual, as well as the perspective of a group. Individual memory is defined as a personal interpretation of an event from one's own life. Although the term 'individual' does imply that the personal outlook is the only one contributing to memory formation, as social beings, this is virtually impossible. The social group in which s/he identifies with unquestionably influences the opinions, beliefs, and attitude of the individual.

Individuals weave together their past experiences to form collective memories. Collective memories are socially constructed based on common sentiments, values, and the present circumstances in which the group finds itself. Thus, collective memories are highly malleable. Memories created by groups serve an important role in creating a sense of identity within the group. They may also provide the members of the group with a particular method of interpreting their common experiences that may allow the individuals to cope when memories are particularly traumatic.

Here I will discuss the example of postwar Sierra Leone, and the ways in which individual and collective memories are intertwined in religious practices that assist in grappling with a violent history.

## Sierra Leone



Sierra Leone's Civil War (1991-2002) was characterized by the obscenely cruel methods of warfare employed, such as maiming (often to the extent of amputation) and the use of child soldiers. In the aftermaths of this conflict, many human rights organizations and other institutions dedicated to bringing peace to the war-torn nation encouraged citizens to give a verbal account of their personal memories. However, the majority of Sierra Leoneans did not wish to speak about their personal experiences of violence in public, believing that open discussion of the violence would invite it back into their lives. This belief is reflective of a collective solace that many found in religion. Christian beliefs allowed people to interpret their experienced atrocities as an invasion of evil forces, ones that can be driven out through prayer and healing sessions with a pastor. One such example of the power Sierra Leoneans found in prayer can be seen in the experience of a girl named Agnes, who was captured by the RUF after losing her mother and brothers in the bush. In an interview with Rosalind Shaw, Agnes states:

*"When I lay down I was afraid, I asked the pastor to pray for me. After that I never experienced that again. I remembered how I lived with the rebels; that made me afraid at night. I felt better after. Not afraid; I just felt cool."*

I feel that Agnes' story exemplifies the role that collective memory plays in coping with personal memories for the victims of Sierra Leone's civil war. Although one might interpret people's unwillingness to discuss their personal experiences with violence as repressive, this reluctance can be seen as a way of coping that helps compose a larger framework for the collective methods of remembering. Those who choose to go to church and have the pastor expel evil spirits from their body are constructing a collective memory based on common beliefs. This collective memory is unified by their common belief in religion, and by extension, the ability to eradicate the crippling power of violent memories through prayer. This collective memory process also plays a crucial role in making Sierra Leoneans' individual memories of conflict more manageable. Although certain forms of individual memory, such as scars and missing limbs, are permanent testaments of the violence one experienced, the spiritual relief provided by a shared faith in religion has helped many victims to regain control over their lives.

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