

# Constructing Meaning from Disappearance: Local Memorialisation of the Missing in Nepal

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# Constructing Meaning from Disappearance: Local Memorialisation of the Missing in Nepal

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Disappearance in conflict creates challenges of identity and meaning for the families of those whose fate remains unknown: women, for example, who do not know if they are wives or widows and desperately seek to construct positive meanings from their experience. This empirical study of the families of those disappeared during Nepal's Maoist insurgency focuses on processes of local memorialisation and post-conflict politics of memory in rural areas and on how and why victims seek certain forms of recognition and memorialisation, including their psychosocial motivations. The means of memorialisation chosen by families of the missing served to confirm in a highly social way that the disappeared are missing not dead, and sought to integrate stigmatised families into communities from which they had been alienated by violations. Memorialisation can strengthen the resilience of families of the missing; as a social process, it addresses both the emotional and the social impacts of disappearance. Remembering the disappeared in ways that can aid the well-being of the families left behind demands local approaches that are contextualised in the cultural and social worlds of impacted communities: this challenges memorialisation, and transitional justice processes more broadly, that emerge exclusively from institutional processes directed by elites.

Memorialisation is increasingly recognised as an integral part of transitional justice processes. It is seen as a component of reparation that can provide recognition and acknowledgement to victims and serve to demonstrate a new regime's commitment to tell the truth about the past and to avoid repeating human rights violations. The practice of reparations is however typically elite-led, denying the agency of victims and perpetuating the disempowerment that victimhood represents. In this paper, I explore the practice of memorialisation of families of those missing in conflict. I draw on empirical research in rural Nepal where such processes have occurred locally as part of an intervention by a humanitarian organisation. My aim is to understand how a victim-centred approach to memorial activity and recognition processes interacts with transitional justice processes (Robins 2011). I seek to understand the emotional, psychological and social impacts of memorialisation (and of a failure to memorialise) on families of the missing, and contrast transitional justice processes that are metropolitan and elite-led with a memorialisation from below.

As a consequence of state-centred approaches to transitional justice and human rights more broadly, the practice of transitional justice has tended to focus on the creation of collective memory and the outcomes of institutional processes. Often the creation of truth commissions and national memorials (Jelin 2007; Hutchinson 2009) has overshadowed individual memories and processes that are enacted within families and local communities. Ethnographic approaches to traumatic pasts in a range of post-conflict contexts, including the majority world of the low income states of the global south (Ibreck 2010; Hopwood 2011; Igreja 2003), have however revealed a rich variety of local approaches to memory after violence that emerge from the everyday lives of those affected by conflict. The attention to local memory practices has led to greater prominence for victim-centred approaches to transitional justice. However, while victim-centred approaches have become routine in rhetoric, in practice, the situation in Nepal is typical of transitional contexts more broadly, where victims are also largely marginal players.

Putting victims at the centre of mechanisms to address legacies of violence ultimately means seeking to address their needs. While there is clearly a connection between a family's traumatic memory of an individual disappearance and schemes to remember the dead and the missing (Bell 2009), little has been written about how the experience of violence is transformed into formal memorialisation. Official memorialisation traditionally serves as a part of the politics of transition (Jelin 2007) and as such is rarely done on the terms of victims, other than when their interests coincide with those of the authorities. Paul Sant Cassia (2005), for example, has written powerfully about how in Cyprus memories of the missing have been manipulated by the state to reinforce narratives that directly, and very negatively, impacted upon how families perceived the fate of missing relatives. Memorials can however also promote social repair through acknowledgement (Barsalou and Baxter 2007) and – beyond official processes – can also be informally driven by communities and victims. For families of the missing who are unable to retrieve human remains, a memorial can be a space for mourning and remembrance, while physically refuting the denial that disappearance has occurred (Pollack 2003). As part of a reparative process, a memorial can give public endorsement and institutionalise the victims' narratives about the past.

### 1. The Missing and Their Families

Missing persons are “all those whose families are without news of them and/or are reported missing, on the basis of reliable information, owing to armed conflict” (ICRC 2003, 3). The needs of families of the missing are emotional, psychological, material, cultural, social and legal, mediated by the coping resources of individuals and communities (Robins 2011). To know the truth about the missing is a primary need of families; this need dominates the demands they make of the state and of transitional justice processes. Narratives around disappearance have emphasised issues of exhumation and identification, as a direct result of the “right to know” derived from international humanitarian law (Crettol and La Rosa 2006; Naqvi 2006) and the “right to truth” derived from international human rights law (Mendez 1998). However, for the vast majority of those missing in conflict globally, such processes are unimaginable due to a lack of political will and resources.

The emotional and psychological impacts of disappearance on families denied access to truth can be understood in terms of *ambiguous loss* (Boss 1999, 2004). Ambiguous loss occurs where a family member is psychologically present, but physically absent. It is the most stressful type of loss precisely because it is unresolved. Pauline Boss's studies (2004, 2006) indicate that situations of ambiguous loss predicate symptoms of depression, anxiety and family conflict. She has adopted an explicitly relational perspective, which differs from individualised trauma approaches, such as that of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), because it characterises the stress as external and ongoing. In the absence of routes to truth approaches must be found for families to continue living their lives:

The goal is to find meaning in the situation despite the absence of information and persisting ambiguity. Here, resiliency means being able to live with unanswered questions. Instead of the usual epistemological question about truth, we ask, “How do people manage to live well despite not knowing?”

(Boss 2007, 106)

Memorials are purported to promote healing and reconciliation, but, however such claims are couched, empirical support for them is scant. In this article, the needs of families of the missing for memorialisation are investigated in a low-income post-conflict context, Nepal, with a view to understanding how memorials – and memory more broadly – can positively serve the families of the missing. The aim is to establish how memorialisation can best foster resilience in the face of the experience of disappearance, and explore the potential for such processes to have a positive impact on the psychosocial well-being of families of the missing. Memorialisation offers the possibility of public memory as a therapeutic intervention to address legacies of disappearance, even where the disappeared remain missing.

The literature of the “memory boom” (Winter 2006) in the humanities has discussed memory under a huge range of qualifiers (including social, cultural, political, traumatic, and communicative). As a result, the very definition of memory is highly contested. Here, I will use only one term: following Nancy Wood (1992, 2), I understand *collective memory* to be “the selective reconstruction and appropriation of aspects of the past” that serve as the “social frame-

works” (Halbwachs 1992) onto which personal recollections are woven.<sup>1</sup> As such, all collective memory emerges subject to the capacity of a social group or authority to organise representations of the past. In any context, there is no one collective memory, but a multitude of overlapping, contradicting and reinforcing memories, resulting from the range of groups and institutions in society (ibid.).

The impacts of representations of the past on families and individuals cannot be isolated from the broader politics of memory in post-conflict societies. Politics are present around the issue of disappearance after conflict as much as at the time when the disappeared were taken. Just as during conflict sovereign power demonstrates itself through the ability to let live or make die (Agamben 2005), so in a time of transition the right to memorialise is contested as the right to possess the memory of the dead and define how they will be remembered. Memory is manipulated to prolong conflict or to end it: there is a “political economy of memory” (Küchler and Melion 1991, 30) in which memory is sanctioned by power and politically deployed. The mechanisms of transitional justice are particular forms of such memory politics, with the goals of reconciling conflicting parties, producing truths around which consensus can be built, and – since they occur under the auspices of a political authority – legitimating new regimes.

## 2. Post-Conflict Nepal

Nepal’s Maoist insurgency was driven by a legacy of centuries of feudalism in a Hindu kingdom built on a codified framework of social, economic, and political exclusion that marginalised indigenous people, lower castes and women. The vast majority of the nation’s 26.5 million people live in rural areas, where feudal social relations impact upon livelihoods, with a majority of the rural population having land holdings too small for subsistence. In 1996 the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (CPN-M) declared a

“people’s war” against the democratically-elected government.<sup>2</sup> The insurgency grew rapidly from its initial base in the hills of the impoverished mid-west with the Maoists successfully mobilising many of the most marginalised including women, the indigenous and other excluded minorities. As a result, many of those who became victims of the conflict are from such communities. While disappearances occurred from the start of the conflict (and even before it), the introduction of the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) into the escalating conflict in 2001 dramatically increased human rights violations (OHCHR 2012, 116). Disappearances were the defining violation of the conflict; between 2000 and 2003 Nepal was responsible for more cases of disappearance reported to the UN’s Working Group on Enforced Disappearances than any other state (Human Rights Watch 2004, 2). While disappearances were perpetrated by the Maoists, the vast majority were the responsibility of the government forces, with military commanders at different levels in the hierarchy using disappearances as a weapon. The district of Bardiya, where the intervention described here was made, lies in the plains of Nepal’s mid-west. Its inhabitants are agriculturalists. Bardiya is one of only two districts where the indigenous Tharu people comprise the majority of the population. Indicators of their exclusion can be seen in education: at 17.5 percent, Tharu literacy rates are half those among non-Tharu in Bardiya (Chhetri 2005, 25). The insurgency had a particular impact in Bardiya, where the war was linked to a conflict over land between the Tharu and high-caste hill migrants and led to a greater number of disappearances than in any other district.

The conflict ended in April 2006, with a “People’s Movement” uniting the Maoists and the constitutional parties against a king who had seized absolute power.<sup>3</sup> The conflict has left a legacy of some 13,000 dead, and more than 1,400 unaccounted for (INSEC 2010; ICRC 2012). As part of an

1 Halbwachs maintains that “there are no recollections which can be said to be purely interior, that is, which can be preserved only within individual memory. Indeed, from the moment that a recollection reproduces a collective perception it can itself only be collective; it would be impossible for the individual to represent to himself anew, using

only his forces, that which he could not represent to himself previously – unless he has recourse to the thought of his group” (1992, 169).

2 Following the end of the conflict, the CPN-M merged with smaller parties to become the Unified Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) (UCPN-M); here the acronym CPN-M is used to cover both.

3 This nomenclature explicitly references the People’s Movement of 1990, in which the *panchayat* system of government that accompanied absolute monarchy was brought to an end and multi-party democracy was introduced (Baral 1994). The 1990 movement was led by the political parties that went on to form the governments that fought the Maoist insurgency.

ongoing peace process the monarchy has been abolished, but seven years after the conflict and following elections in 2008 in which the CPN-M won most votes, Nepal remains in political limbo and is still awaiting a new constitution. Nepal's transitional justice process remains blocked by the political impasse that has characterised governance since the 2006 peace agreement. Coalition governments featuring prime ministers from all major parties, including the CPN-M, have come and gone, with all political progress blocked by an inability to reach a consensus. Two issues have been most responsible for this deadlock: the treatment of former Maoist combatants, which by now has been largely resolved, and the creation of a federal Nepali state on an ethnic basis, a Maoist demand rejected by the traditional political parties. While the peace agreement provided for the establishment of both a truth and reconciliation commission and a commission of inquiry into disappearances, the continuing commitment of all parties to impunity and a refusal to discuss the violations of the conflict has stalled progress on either. In the absence of a reparations program, families of the missing and other victims of the conflict have received significant payments characterised as "interim relief", but a wider acknowledgment of their victimhood has not occurred.

The scholarship on both collective memory and ambiguous loss remains predominantly driven by studies in and of the global north and it is appropriate to discuss the utility of such concepts in the Nepali context. In highly collective societies, such as those of rural Nepal, the way that memory and identity are articulated and negotiated are likely to diverge from those in cultures where the concepts underlying social theories of memory originate. In predominantly oral cultures, such as those of rural Nepal, the communities of memory that are most important are those defined by family, ethnicity and locality, with national narratives playing a smaller role, not least since the very idea of a Nepali was traditionally defined in a way that excluded most of the population. If however collective memory is understood as constitutive of culture and of its reproduction (Assman and Czaplicka 1995), then it is a concept of general relevance, even if the meanings it bestows and the way it does this are culturally contingent. Existing studies of ambiguous loss are largely restricted to a single cultural context, namely that of

Western, and largely North American, families. The data discussed here has provided one of very few empirical tests of ambiguous loss theory in a non-Western context; elsewhere (Robins 2010), I have argued that, from a psychological and emotional perspective, such theory is largely relevant to understanding the trauma of Nepalese families of the missing. All aspects of the impact of disappearance however (even those apparently most personal) have a social component that is of greater importance in the Nepalese context than in the West, and this will impact on the demands made of memory.

### 3. Methodology

The data presented here was collected over a four-year period and emerges from a long engagement with families of the missing in Nepal's Mid-West and Far West, where I worked during and after the conflict as a delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), seeking to protect those taken into custody by either party to the conflict and to support those whose relatives were missing. My work since has been conducted as part of a long-term engagement with families of the missing and their organisations as a critically engaged activist researcher. My initial studies were driven by an effort to understand the broad needs of the families of the missing in order to challenge a transitional justice discourse focused on prescriptive and externally driven approaches. I used a participatory methodology that engaged associations of families over a six-month period in 2008, two years after the end of the conflict. I met 151 family members from ten of Nepal's seventy-five districts, and used semi-structured interviews and focus groups to understand needs arising from disappearance. The study sought to steer the transitional justice debate towards addressing victims' needs (ICRC 2009; Robins 2011). Disappearances discussed here took place between two and twelve years prior to the study. While a minority of the disappeared are educated and urban, most come from rural backgrounds, their families being illiterate and poor. Since the vast majority of the missing are men, the typical interviewee was a rural woman of low educational level from an indigenous ethnic group.

I used my research data to design an intervention to support families of the missing. It was implemented by the

ICRC in the district most affected by disappearances, Bardiya in the Mid-West plains, in 2010–11, as an explicit response to my assessment of the needs of affected families. The ICRC intervention, known as *Hatey Malo* (“holding hands”), was rooted in community support groups consisting of eight to fifteen women, dedicated to either wives or mothers of the missing and facilitated by trained local paraprofessionals. These met every seven to ten days with the aim of building connections between women and creating a space free of stigma, where they could construct positive meanings from their experience to challenge their isolation, create a forum for emotional sharing, and universalise their understanding of the impact of disappearance. The intervention also included referral to other organisations to address legal, administrative or mental health issues, and economic support was provided through provision of livestock to families. Community interaction programs brought together local leaders, affected families and support group facilitators, to ensure that communities were supportive, or at least that stigma was lessened. Commemoration of the missing was an explicit part of the intervention, with each support group given 10,000 Nepali rupees (about US\$150 at the time) for a memorial activity relevant to and chosen by its members. This intervention has since been duplicated in sixteen of Nepal’s seventy-five districts. I was not involved in the intervention, but evaluated it in Bardiya upon its completion, through interviews with twenty-four of the women who participated and ten focus group discussions. I met with 105 women, representing 39 per cent of all the families of the missing in Bardiya, for the evaluation. Interviews and focus groups were recorded, translated and transcribed; the texts were then iteratively coded for analysis by both frequency of topic data and for selection of relevant text segments.

#### 4. The Families of the Missing and the Politics of Memory

The experience of families of the missing in Nepal is dominated by the need for truth about the disappearance and for economic support; the latter is the result of traditional poverty and the loss of breadwinners (Robins 2011, 90). For most families, judicial processes are not a priority given that the law has traditionally been a weapon used against the marginalised, demonstrating the lack of resonance of international post-conflict discourses – traditionally domi-

nated by legal approaches – with victims’ agendas (Robins 2012, 14–21). Whilst in Nepal the commitment of all major political parties to impunity means there is unlikely to be any substantial judicial process, it remains at the centre of demands of national and international rights activists, seeking to advance a transitional justice agenda. For the families of the missing the truth-telling they seek has two goals. The first is to confirm the fate of loved ones, and this is understood by most as a demand for the return of their relatives or of human remains: the bodies of the dead permit mourning and the satisfaction of social and spiritual obligations (and creation of social meaning) through traditional death rituals such as cremation. The second goal is to see the value of both the missing and their families affirmed, through the sanctioning of families’ narratives, officially and by the community. For the families of those made missing by the Maoists, the problem is the opposite: during the conflict they were seen as innocent victims and valorised by the state, and now they perceive themselves as having been forgotten, as those responsible for their victimisation have assumed political office. Victims’ needs of memorialisation are to create positive meaning from the event of disappearance. Since meaning is found relationally through social interaction, they seek to affirm their understanding of disappearance with powerful and culturally salient meanings. Elizabeth Jelin writes:

[T]he presence of trauma is indicated by the coexistence of an impossibility of assigning meaning to past occurrences, by the inability to incorporate it in a narrative and its recurrent and persistent presence and manifestation in symptoms.

(2003, 17)

It is this link between meaning and memory that invests memorialisation with a potential therapeutic value: remembering is the collective act of accepting a particular narrative of the past as meaningful. Victims of violence are the most heavily invested in memory, precisely because their resilience in the light of their experience depends on the meaning the latter is given in their everyday lives.

Though we may not be able to build something grand as the state can do, we would like to make something on our own initiative even if the state did not do that. We want future generations to remember the contribution of [our brother] for the sake of the nation. People still remember the contributions of

martyrs who lost their lives for the sake of the country even in the distant past.

(Brother of missing man, Gorkha, 18 June 2008)

People will know about the missing family because the name will be written on the board or in some other place: we will have peace if we could make it.

(Wife of missing man, Bardiya, 9 February 2011)

According to the theory of ambiguous loss, the meanings families give to disappearance, constructed relationally through social interaction in family and community (Berger and Luckmann 1966), are crucial to their ability to cope with its impacts (Boss 2007, 105–7). Memory similarly emerges from the representations ascribed to disappearance by the community, national actors (notably political parties) and the state. Memory is the “concretion of identity” (Assmann and Czaplicka 1995, 128), and as such who and what victims are is both a product of and an input into the contestation over the meaning of the past. Whether a missing relative is a hero or a terrorist, a martyr or a victim, whether he or she is dead or their fate is unknown, determines how the disappeared and their families are perceived and how they perceive themselves. Such narrative “ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of the events recounted” (Barthes 1977, 119) and thus sustains and remakes collective memory. Memory after violence concerns not only the representation of events that led to disappearance or death and construction of narratives that will determine what history will be written and spoken about the missing, but also how those most affected will live.

Victimhood does not emerge naturally from the experience of being harmed, but is constructed socially and subjectively, with individual and familial demands of collective memory being negotiated subject to power relations that marginalise many elements of victims’ narratives, not least because many survivors are disempowered on the basis of gender and ethnicity. The contestation over interpretation of the conflict between Maoists and the traditional political parties has given rise to narratives of worthy and unworthy

victims (Hutt 2006, 382–87). Each side in the conflict maintains its own rhetoric (of “terrorism” or “People’s War”), and as a result – despite the peace – no official memorialisation is ongoing beyond that of the martyrs of the 2006 People’s Movement, a victory (against the now defunct king) shared by both sides. Memorialisation, and its absence at the official level, thus reflects the political balance that exists between the parties to the conflict. In the absence of any national or international support for memorialisation efforts, the struggle over memory is fought by those most invested in it: the war’s combatants and its victims.<sup>4</sup>

At the local level memory politics is vibrant, with victims of the state constructing memorials with Maoist support, and reinforcing narratives of resistance that feed into ongoing political struggles at the national and local levels. The CPN-M claims and recognises those disappeared by the state through public and private memorialisation (see Figures 1 and 2): for the Maoist party the People’s War was fed by sacrifice; the party has encouraged a culture of martyrdom and uses memorialisation as a political tool. The Maoist movement leveraged Nepali traditions of the warrior’s sacrifice, referencing Hindu traditions of martyrs’ blood birthing new warriors (Lecomte-Tilouine 2006), and valorised the families of martyrs in meetings and publications. A 2003 Maoist publication elaborated: “The people who commemorate the martyrs have developed a new culture in which martyrs’ doors and pillars are created, martyrs’ photos are exhibited and villages, hamlets, companies, battalions and brigades are named with martyrs’ names” (cited in Lecomte-Tilouine 2006, 53).<sup>5</sup> The walls of the Kathmandu office of SOFAD, the Maoist association of families of the missing, were entirely covered with photos of the disappeared, thereby creating a secular shrine to the missing and a place where families could come together and remember collectively. Many families of victims of the state welcomed the Maoist celebration of their missing relatives: it valorised the missing and their families, and provided a community around the party that brings family members into contact with others who appreciate the

4 One rare impartial memory project that had the explicit goal of remembering the impacts of the conflict began with the production of a book of photo-

graphs of the war (Dixit 2007), became a touring exhibition and then led to the publication of ordinary Nepalis’ comments on the photographs.

5 The “doors” referred to are the gates at the entrances to villages of the type shown in Figure 2.

family's sacrifice, facilitating the construction of positive meaning as a response to the disappearance: 42 per cent of relatives of victims of the state said that they had received acknowledgement from the CPN-M: "No-one has acknowledged our pain and victimhood. It is only the [Maoist] party that has recognised our pain" (focus group participant, Gorkha, 17 June 2008). However, one result of the Maoist eulogising of martyrdom, particularly since the end of the war, has been that the CPN-M has denied the ambiguity of the fate of the missing, not least to avoid drawing attention to disappearances perpetrated by the Maoists. The missing of the conflict taken by state forces are considered martyrs by the CPN-M, having died gloriously in the struggle, to be celebrated with no ambivalence as to their fate. For families, denying that loved ones are missing blunts their most significant demands, that they be told the truth about their fate and receive their remains.

Contestation also takes place between victims and within communities. At the grassroots level, victims are polarised by their efforts to advance their own narratives and in many areas this prevents families of the missing working together across the perpetrator divide. There is a perception that a positive narrative about someone disappeared by the state requires the discrediting of the narrative of someone taken by the Maoists, and this is actively reinforced at the local level by political parties on all sides. Many communities in the districts where the People's War raged now have a "martyrs' gate", erected by the CPN-M and decorated with eulogies to the party and to the dead (see Figure 2). When asked about these, families of the missing said they did not know if the names of their missing relatives were listed, since they are illiterate. This demonstrates that this form of memorialisation is divorced from the families of those being celebrated, and instrumentalises the memory of the missing for political purposes.

Figure 1



A mounted photograph of a teenage girl from Bardiya who was disappeared by the Nepali state. The Maoist party annotation describes the girl as a "martyr" and provides the date and place of her disappearance and her function within the Party. Many families prominently display such photos.

I will not be happy [if the name of the missing husband is on the gate] since he was not a Maoist and the other thing is that he is still missing. If they write the name of my husband then I will cut it off with a knife. If he comes back again he will feel very bad to see his name on a martyrs' gate.

(Wife of missing man, Bardiya, 14 February 2011)

This woman's statement illustrates the importance to families of the identity of the missing as *not dead*, precisely because they still hope they will return alive.

Figure 2



Martyrs' gate in a Bardiya village. Almost all villages in the district have such a memorial.



In some places, families have managed to work with the CPN-M in ways that allow their own needs for memorialisation to be satisfied, while exploiting the resources of the Maoist party. In Janakpur, Dhanusa district, for example, a statue of five young men disappeared by the state during the conflict is being built at a major junction that has been renamed Martyrs' Crossroads. The project has been supported by local Maoist officials as well as by the families of the missing, and demonstrates how more educated and empowered families can co-opt politically driven narratives to serve their own purposes.

##### 5. Memory, Identity and the Social Impacts of Disappearance

Identity is at the heart of victims' needs of memory, and ambiguity over identity is the source of some of the greatest impacts of disappearance on those left behind, particularly the wives of the missing. Memory and collective understandings of the nature of a disappearance construct the identity of survivors, and where such understandings diverge from family members' own understandings, consequences can be extreme. While in rural Nepal identities are primarily constructed locally in family and community, some national discourses, such as that of the Maoists, become more significant where they have local advocates. The global human rights discourse has had a marginal impact on most victims, simply because it is largely inaccessible: rural families are divorced from discussions of transitional justice, for example, and as such judicial processes remain of low priority to them (Robins 2011, 86; 2012, 15).

Collective memory is ahistorical in that it simplifies and seeks to avoid exactly the type of ambiguities which exemplify the situation of the missing and their families: communities equate the missing with the dead, denying the families' ambiguity. As such the relationship between an individual or family memory and the collective has a coercive element; as Maurice Halbwachs puts it (1992, 51): "The mind reconstructs its memories under the pressure of society." In the traditional and highly collective communities studied here, this leads to often extreme social impacts, particularly for women. Traditionally, social meanings are constructed through established rituals around death (such as, for Hindu Nepalis, the ritual of

burning the body) that help families cope with their loss and are considered communal obligations. Families of the missing are unable to perform such rituals as long as the fate of a relative remains ambiguous, which contributes to stigmatisation:

It is necessary for us to perform the rituals for my son because we are still defamed by society since we have not performed the rituals. [...] The people in the community say: "If your son was killed you must perform the ritual." But we don't believe that our son was killed, therefore, we have not performed our rituals.

(Father of missing student, Dhanusa, 9 September 2008)

Traditionally, after a husband's death, older widows take the bangles from the newly widowed woman's arms and the glass beads from her neck, and smash them on a stone. They wash the red *sindhur* powder from her forehead, which has marked her as a married woman: a woman's identity, as a widow, is socially defined at this time. Women whose husbands are missing see an acceptance of widowhood as a betrayal of the missing:

I haven't done any rituals. I still wear the symbols of marriage. I wear them because I haven't seen him dead: maybe he is alive somewhere.

(Wife of missing man, Banke, 4 August 2008)

This creates tension with community members who cannot understand why these women refuse to identify as widows. While the dependence of the making of national identity upon collective memory has been widely discussed (Smith 1996), it is seen here that how the past is represented, in terms of the fate of the missing, impacts upon the perceived identity of individual wives and families. In a society where a woman's identity is defined through her connection to a man, her identity as a wife is socially affirmed by the clothes and jewellery she wears. The wives of the missing, however, confound the categories of wife and widow, by being women without men who persist in dressing as wives. In some cases women had acknowledged that their husband was likely dead, but persisted in wearing the symbols of marriage with two aims: to establish their right in the community to wear such symbols as long as death was unproven, and to demonstrate to the authorities that they were still awaiting an answer. This appears to be a way for women to reclaim the symbols that most demon-

strate their need for closure from being used against them: a move from despair to protest using symbols of attachment to, and memory of, the disappeared, and creating very specific meanings around disappearance that advance their cause.

In most Nepali cultures wives move to their husband's home on marriage, and the ambiguity over the fate of a missing man leads to ambiguity over the wife's relationship to her in-laws. Younger women missing husbands have an ambivalent relationship to the family, and are often treated as strangers within the home. Leaving the family home or remarrying is seen as a betrayal of her in-laws' family and her husband: a wife may be trapped within a family that resents her presence, but does not want her to leave due to the ensuing social stigma. Similar issues of stigmatisation are seen in the community:

Relations with the villagers are not good. When I go to ask for something from somebody, others say that they may be having an inappropriate relationship with me and so nobody comes to help me anymore because I am still young.

(Wife of disappeared man, Siraha, 17 September 2008)

Nepali cultures have great respect for widows; the wives of the disappeared are stigmatised because they are women without men whose identity is unclear. The ambiguity over a woman's marital status and her persistence in wearing the symbols of marriage permit a perception that the wives of the disappeared are somehow predatory in their search for a new husband. The vulnerability of being a single woman combined with the perceived reputation of the wives of the disappeared has led to extreme problems in some cases, including sexual assault:

Drunks used to come at night and tried to scare, beat, and rape me. Many times I had to run away with my crying babies. Many times I went to sleep in other people's houses.

(Wife of disappeared man, Bardiya, 29 July 2008)

Such issues can be resolved by ending ambiguity through giving women answers about the fate of their husbands; but in the absence of such a resolution, memorialisation can aid the social construction of more positive identities and other meanings for women, families and communities.

## 6. Memorialisation and the Needs of Families of the Missing

Ambiguous loss refers not to a single, traumatising event of the past, but is chronic and ongoing. The anxiety expressed by families centres on the absence of the missing person, rather than the event of his or her disappearance: the impact of ambiguous loss is precisely that it cannot be put into the past, into memory.

How long should we remember the missing? It's a fact that we need to forget them, we cannot remember them forever while we are trying to live.

(Wife of missing man, Bardiya, 11 February 2011)

Truth for families of the missing is most immediately the truth about their loved ones that ends ambiguity and allows families to retrieve remains and perform rituals. It is however also a shared understanding that disappearance has indeed occurred and affirmation of the families' understanding of their experience of disappearance. In the theory and practice of transitional justice, truth is something that emerges primarily from state-sanctioned processes, such as trials and truth commissions, whereas in a rural society the truths from which collective memory emerges are necessarily constructed locally and from shared understandings. For families, remembering the disappeared is an act of resistance against perpetrators that redeems the humanity of the missing: to memorialise is to challenge invisibility. While meanings emerge largely locally, there is also a need for the state to acknowledge victims: families seek to have their understandings officially confirmed, but in ways that are accessible and useful to them, and link this to the addressing of poverty that results from the absence of breadwinners:

There should be a statue of the missing people, or our other children should receive economic support for their future and their studies. The government can give us land in our missing person's name, because a statue can be destroyed, a photo or a signboard can get old, but land will take care of us like parents.

(Mother of missing man, Bardiya, 19 July 2008)

Acknowledgement is seen as recognition of both the missing and their families, confirming that their loved one is valued and played a role in the transformation of the nation. Few families have seen any formal acknowledgement from the government. In Bardiya photographs of the

missing received from the district Maoist party (see Figure 1) are widely displayed. This implies not that all these families are necessarily Maoist supporters (although many are, not least as a result of the disappearance), but that they appreciate the only recognition they have received. Some seek an official declaration of the missing as martyrs, even while maintaining ambiguity over their fate, because such a status can be a route to financial compensation. The public sanctioning of the status of the victims demands that the government commit itself to commemorating the missing and other victims of the conflict.

The fact that dominant narratives around disappearance are locally rather than nationally driven, was reflected in demands that any memorial be accessible: 68 per cent of family members I met sought local memorialisation:

We want to build [the memorial] near the high school in the village where there are four to five thousand students. Either we can make a small building for the school or a type of *chautara* [covered resting place, typically on a path or road] where people can rest when it is hot. We could also renovate the *chautara* in front of the school and put his photo and name on the sign-board. [...] This would give us solace in our heart and soul. People would remember him in days to come. Future generations will know that this was built in memory of that person. [...] He was disappeared while working with the intention to contribute something to society, therefore, we want to build something in his name that commemorates his social nature.

(Brother of missing man, Gorkha, 16 June 2008)

The localism of memorialisation is at its most extreme where the body itself becomes a physical memorial to the missing, inscribed with the trauma of the past and making absence visible. More than a quarter of family members I met, the vast majority of them women, complained of chronic physical symptoms that they ascribed to the disappearance, most often as a result of constant tension and anxiety, and understood as somatic.

Whenever I go to have my health checked, the doctor tells me that I am suffering from *chinte rog* [my worries are my disease]. [...] My son suffers from the same disease, the disease created by worry. The doctor said that his worry was the source of his disease.

(Wife of missing man, Gorkha, 17 June 2008)

While clearly unconscious, this can be seen as demonstrating a continued attachment to the disappeared. Somatisation may also be a way for women whose pain is poorly understood to manifest the impact of disappearance in a way that renders their suffering socially meaningful.

The collective memory of violence centres on a recognition of what has happened to whom. Victims seek to use existing power relations to legitimise their own narratives, through their confirmation by authorities in ways that are accessible to their communities; this simultaneously socio-political and psychological process constructs meanings that aid well-being. Memorialisation can acknowledge the *fact* of disappearance that families seek recognised and remembered, but not the particular *truth* that is constituted from the location, retrieval and identification of remains. In Nepal, the particular truth that emerges from exhumation remains untold for most: the data suggests however that memorialisation can contribute, albeit partially, to the “restoration of personhood” (Wagner 2008, 15) of the missing, even in the absence of identified human remains. The truths that help families live with ambiguity are those that can confirm positive meanings around the disappearance.

## 7. Local Memorialisation and Ambiguous Loss

### 7.1. A Victim-driven Memorialisation

In the following, I discuss the impact of memorialisation on the psychosocial well-being of the families of the missing in the context of an intervention where groups of wives and mothers of the missing in Nepal were invited to create their own commemorations of the missing, and given modest financial support (US\$150) to do so. The most popular choice of remembrance was a physical object that would both serve as a memorial and provide a service to the community. These included *chautara* and hand-pumps; in both cases an integral component was that the names of the missing be recorded on these objects.

We will build a *chautara* in Duddha as a symbol of the missing families and write on it the names of all missing family members.

(Mother of two missing men, Bardiya, 9 February 2011)

These objects assert the importance of social recognition that those commemorated are missing, and ensure that the

missing and their families are not forgotten. The goal of such remembrance is to record the fact of disappearance, assert the ambiguity of the fate of the missing, and give the missing and their families the value that was refuted by the act of disappearance. The other remembrance activity encountered was that of a *puja*, a prayer ceremony, which brought together the whole community, including authority figures such as the Brahmin priest, traditional Tharu spiritual healers and local politicians. The *puja* sought to appease the gods and ensure the well-being of the missing, whether alive or dead.

We don't know if they are alive or dead. If we knew they were dead then we could have a funeral service according to our Tharu ritual practice. He comes in our dreams and makes noise; if we have a *puja* then maybe he won't come and ask for food.

(Wife of missing man, Bardiya, 18 February 2011)

This demonstrates how very local meanings are constructed by such ceremonies, including the addressing of manifestations in dreams of the spirit of the missing which can very powerfully influence the meaning given to disappearance. Such ritual serves the living by bringing peace to families and aids the social and individual construction of meaning and identity.

Such efforts emphasise the ambivalence about the role of such memorialisation: families seek to see loved ones honoured and indeed publicly confirmed as missing, rather than dead, but understand that this has to be done in ways that create this meaning in the broader community. These memorials and commemorations address families' psychosocial needs by confirming their identity as families of the missing, while simultaneously serving the community:

It's very important to make a *chautara* so that people can remember the missing and that they have done a great thing. Additionally, people can rest and wait for vehicles or shelter from the rain and sun.

(Wife of missing man, Bardiya, 14 February 2011)

Both the physical memorials and the *puja* ceremonies also send social messages, since the community will necessarily engage with them. Providing a service to the community enhances the social relevance of the memorial and acts to reintegrate families of the missing, challenging exclusion and stigma. The rituals create meanings and identity for families, through a very public act with social implications, affirmed by the presence of local authorities. In contrast to the instrumentalising memorials constructed by the CPN-M, victim-driven memorialisation focuses on both the missing and the community.

## 7.2. Memorialisation as Therapy to Address the Impacts of Ambiguous Loss

The choices made in terms of memorialisation by families of the missing – in particular wives and mothers – and the social and therapeutic roles they play, can be understood through the ambiguous loss model. In any context, ambiguous loss provokes anxiety about the roles of those left behind (Carroll et al. 2007), but in traditional cultures, the very strict understandings of an individual's place in family and community provoke greater challenges. The problems are not just psychological and emotional, but deeply social in nature, as illustrated by the identity challenges the women of this study faced. Identity becomes a stressor psychologically, because it is a relational concept, and like memory defined through social interaction. Public memorialisation can assert in a social context that men folk are missing not dead; it can *construct identities* that better coincide with women's own perceptions, and serves to legitimise those identities.

An important component of coping with ambiguous loss is revising attachment to the missing and learning to live with the ambiguous loss of a close attachment: one effective means is through memorials, which honour the missing without necessarily formalising the acceptance of death, “a tribute not a memorial” (Boss 2008). Jay Winter describes “normal” mourning as leading to recovery, which he sees as synonymous with forgetting.<sup>6</sup> This is one way of understanding the trauma of disappearance, since “normal grief”

<sup>6</sup> Winter (1998, 115) defines “normal” mourning in contrast to Freud's “melancholic mourning”, in which the mourner cannot “isolate the loss, and establish its limits”. The implication may be that mourning the missing is necessarily melancholic.

is interrupted and forgetting is impossible, given the need to keep the memory of the disappeared alive. Memorials and other rituals offer one way of doing this:

Ritual here is a means of forgetting, as much as of commemoration, and war memorials, with their material representation of names and losses, are there to help in the necessary art of forgetting.

(Winter 1998, 115)

Ironically, this may explain why families need to see the name of their loved ones memorialised; this is a step towards the forgetting that is a part of the normal mourning denied by disappearance. Revising attachment means learning to live with the ambiguous loss of a close attachment, avoiding an obsessive concern with the missing. Addressing the overwhelming anxiety around the missing, to the point where little else in life is of any importance, allows families to find hope.

Because ambiguity exists over the fate of the missing and the relationship of women to the family and the broader community, ambivalence can arise in attitudes toward the disappeared and in the conflicted feelings towards the wife of a missing man. Sadness and anxiety are symptoms of the stress of this ambivalence. Commemoration is an explicit effort to give meaning to the experience of having a missing relative, while acknowledging the ambiguity over their fate. The construction of commemorations and acts of tribute revise attachment to the missing and normalise the ambivalence that families and communities feel. In a culture where convention made formal death rituals impossible, memorials honour the missing while allowing hope for their return to remain. This is an effort to socially construct a positive meaning to their absence, and give value to the experience of both families and the missing themselves, in a social way, that is shared with, and ideally affirmed by, the community through their acknowledgment of and participation in commemorations.

#### 8. Transitional Justice, the Missing and Memorialisation

This ethnographic exploration challenges many of the assumptions that underlie transitional justice processes and understandings of collective memory. While families seek the sanction of the authorities in remembering the

missing, they also want memorialisation to reshape the social spaces in which they live and in which many of the most extreme impacts of disappearance occur. This leads me to the concept of a therapeutic memorialisation, one which serves not the interests of power or a party to the conflict, but enhances the well-being of victims. Rather than an institutional process in an elite space in the capital, the most valuable memorialisation in the rural and dispersed societies of Nepal is a highly local one that can reshape local understandings of the violence to which families and communities have been subject. Memorialisation as a part of the practice of transitional justice has largely focused on national narratives consolidated through sites of memory. This study suggests that such understandings, built on perceptions of modernity peculiar to the global north, may be far less relevant in cultural contexts where collective memory serves and is sustained by *local* identities. Victims' demands of collective memory in the rural Nepali context are constructed far less from national narratives than from social understandings that emerge from everyday interactions. Communities of memory are performatively defined, emerging from practices that are enacted and re-enacted in local spaces; for an intervention to impact on collective memory it must engage with and seek to transform such practices.

Rather than approaching memory after conflict through the trope of trauma, in which truth is something provided by an institutional process, such as a truth commission, that reconciles across the divide of the conflict, victims seek to reconcile themselves to what has happened and to their community, creating positive meanings that can provide hope for the future (Robins 2012, 19–21). Memorialisation is a social process that can create meanings and reconstruct identities and, when performed locally, can collectively reconfigure the social space in which survivors live. Processes of transitional justice are decontextualised and acultural; they are created in a vacuum where the only social context is an atomised individualism that flows directly from the discourse of rights that drives it. Seeing the impact of conflict and disappearance in the highly collective society examined here demonstrates that many of the impacts arise from the social dimension of violations, and memorialisation can represent a social response to them.

Letting the therapeutic needs of the families of the missing drive processes of commemoration permits a victim-centred memorialisation that actively addresses the individual and collective impact of disappearance, and helps victims to live with the ambiguity of their loss. Much work on memorialisation in transitional justice processes neglects the power relations that drive collective memory, in the sense of who remembers and how. The intervention described here sought to explicitly enable the agency of victims, engaging with their subjectivity and identity.

Memorialisation can boost psychological and emotional resilience and well-being: commemorations and acts of tribute give a positive meaning to families' experience, affirming the value of the missing and of the family in the

light of the devaluing impact of violations, and reinforce the identity of the families as families of the missing. Memorialisation allows families to revise attachment to a missing person by valuing his or her memory while distancing the missing person from their everyday lives; it normalises the ambivalence that families feel. Learning to live with the ambiguous loss of a close attachment has a significant social element and this is addressed by the public nature of the tributes: local memorials and ceremonies engage village leaders and the community and the desire of families that memorials serve the community emphasises the importance of this integrative, social aspect. The data presented in this paper demonstrate that memorialisation can be at the heart of a therapeutic approach to the ambiguous loss of having a missing relative.

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