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## **Modalities of Forgetting**

### **A Refusal of Memory Among Post-Conflict Samburu and Pokot, Kenya**

Holtzman, Jon, 2023

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University of Bayreuth  
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## Modalities of Forgetting

The Refusal of Memory Among Post-Conflict  
Samburu and Pokot, Kenya



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Holtzman, Jon, 2023

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# Modalities of Forgetting

## The Refusal of Memory Among Post-Conflict Samburu and Pokot, Kenya

Prof Dr Jon Holtzman<sup>1</sup>

### 1 Introduction

*O Stranger, announce to the Lacedaemonians [Spartans] that here we lie, to their words obedient.*

Simonides of Ceos, commemorating for eternity the valor of the Spartans at Thermopylae

*Everyone has agreed to forget. So if my cows were taken, they have been taken. If my child has died, he has died. Even if I went to fight I won't get those back. So it is better to leave this matter completely. If you return to it you will just create another loss, a much bigger loss.*

Pokot elder in northern Kenya, describing how peace has been reached after a war with their Samburu neighbors

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Memory has, in Western societies at least, become an inseparable and unconditionally loved companion of war. At the most sentimental level, “dying a hero” is lauded as an act that shall never be forgotten. Even if more than two millennia might pass, as for the Spartans at Thermopylae, their deeds are still invoked as governments convince soldiers that there is no greater glory than a worthy death, or to console those left behind of the value of their ultimate sacrifice. Monuments are raised and commemorations held to mark past glory and whether through Memorial Day in the U.S. or Victory Day in Russia. In some cases, this memory is ambivalent or ambiguous. In Japan the end of World War II is marked in multiple ways. Events such as Hiroshima Day avoid placing any blame (whether Japanese or American) for the horrors of war but simply exhort the necessity of universal peace, while a few days later the Japanese surrender is marked by honoring with patriotic vigor (albeit more so by right wing groups) those who sacrificed themselves for the emperor. Frequently the suffering of the innocent is similarly immortalized both with the moral imperative to honor the memory of the dead and also as a reminder that without vigilance such acts will be repeated, most visibly exemplified in discourse concerning the Holocaust.

Yet the exhortations that one must “never forget” stand in stark contrast to the insistence among Samburu and Pokot pastoralists in northern Kenya that you *must* forget. As I will describe below—based on extensive ethnographic research before their conflict and after—the two groups fought a bitter, if small-scale war that lasted nearly five years, with significant loss of human life and livestock on both sides. Despite this, within only a few years of its end, the two groups intermingled peacefully, herding their livestock cooperatively and eating and drinking together in the towns that are scattered across their borderlands. The key to peace, members of both sides insist, is to forget. They must not think about the people or the cattle they have lost. If they continue to think about it they must not act, and indeed they cannot act because it is not only their former enemies who would be against them but their own neighbors and friends, because everyone has agreed on both sides that the past must be forgotten and left behind. Heroes, whether fallen or still among us, are not honored. Perhaps if there is one thing that may be remembered is that war is pain, just enough of a reminder that one must forget the past in order to not relive it.

Thus, in exploring how Samburu and Pokot both achieved peace, and so far have maintained it, I consider the process and possibilities of forgetting. This stands in stark contrast to widespread Western discourses regarding remembrance and war, in which remembrance is framed in nearly universally virtuous terms. Remembering past wars is to enshrine heroes, make victims whole by preserving their memories, and inscribe the infamy of adversaries for perpetuity. While to a great degree such memories are construed as inevitable, great deeds that shall never be forgotten, we are nonetheless implored to never forget. Forgetting is not simply a disservice to the dead, but is a danger lest we repeat the mistakes of the past. Why do Samburu and Pokot apparently see it otherwise? Is their insistence on forgetting problematic, and is forgetting even possible? To answer this question, we likely need to explore different modalities of forgetting, for just as remembering is not one simple thing neither is its absence. Indeed, we must recognize that forgetting is always a part of the selective curation of remembrance—if many Americans still “Remember the Alamo!” to commemorate those heroes who died to “keep Texas free” fewer



remember that they died to keep Texas free of Mexicans who wanted to make slavery illegal (see Trouillot 1995). The memories one is implored to have are rarely organic (if they were there would be no need to promote remembrance). Thus, to understand memory we must understand the actors and their motives, and the same is true of forgetting, which like remembering exists in many different modalities, whether organically slipping from consciousness, a cognitive dead end created when certain inconvenient facts do not fit with socially or politically validated memory, or as explored here when forgetting is actually cultivated, even demanded. Through this modality of forgetting found in this East African setting, I aim to problematize both popular and academic assumptions regarding the relationship of war and remembrance.

## 2 Memory: What is it Good for?

While in Western societies at least we are almost universally told that we must remember, the purpose of this remembrance is rarely problematized. Certainly, there are a variety of reasons given for why this remembrance is so important, whether it is to avoid the mistakes of the past, to honor the memory of those who have died, or in order to come to terms with the past in order that we may live in the present (Rieff 2016). Many of these, of course, have strong elements of propaganda by metaphorically connecting a past enemy to a current one, to exhorting new heroes to fight as old ones did, or to use memories of victims of past wars to sanctify policies for the present. Whether this remembrance actually improves the conditions of societies in the way it is claimed is rarely reflected on. Scholarly critiques of memory frequently revolve around the idea that it is misused or appropriated or invented (e.g. Hobsbawn 1983). The implication from this (though less strongly voiced in scholarly discourse) is that the problem lies in getting history wrong and that sometimes we can (or perhaps later we will) do it better, rather than suggesting that the whole enterprise may be a flawed political project. In any case, memory is considered to be unavoidable and recouping it to be essential (Antze and Lambek 1996), as in a context of psychotherapy. Along with the negative connotations attached to forgetting, it is rarely considered a practical option (Rieff 2016).

To properly consider forgetting we must examine not only why societies remember war but also how. Wars are, of course, not simply remembered in the manner that any individual, perhaps myself, might recall where I left my keys or something that happened in childhood. While we may talk about memory as a collective process, a group has no organ for literally remembering so memory at a group or collective memory is always a metaphor (e.g. Wertsch 2002; see Holtzman 2009). Indeed, the things that individuals literally remember from a war or other well-known event may differ from the narrative of those events cultivated and validated by the group. What we label as the collective memory of war are narratives that are commemorated, cultivated and curated, based on cultural and political decisions about what must be usefully remembered—or indeed carry the moral imperative that they never be forgotten—while excluding those things that might hypothetically be remembered but which are unimportant or even inconvenient. Thus, it is not the case of course that everything is inscribed into official memory—many things are forgotten but very rarely is forgetting part of an official discourse of the past (c.f. Anderson 1983) — but rather that there frequently exists a category of events publicly validated as “those things that must not be forgotten”, especially surrounding war.

Actors positioned differently to the same violent events inevitably draw radically different lessons. This is not only because they have been affected differently by the events and their aftermath but because they may operate with entirely different sets of facts since different groups differ in what is deemed important to remember and also those things that should be erased (assuming they were ever noted at all) . Surprisingly, this may occur even with groups who are generally on good terms and whose general assessment of the past may overlap significantly. As an American strolling through Bayreuth, for example, my own eyes have been jolted by the memorials to Sudeten Germans; Relatively close to the Czech border many of the up to 2.5 million

ethnic Germans who were expelled from Czechoslovakia in the aftermath of World War II passed through Bayreuth or resettled in the region. Through this lens, the story of Sudetenland is thus, transparently, the suffering of massive numbers of refugees and for decades the continuing remembrance of this history played a significant role in German politics (Sussner 2004). But this is a story of Sudetenland that Americans simply do not know despite the fact that the Sudeten Crisis is perhaps one of the most poignant symbols in post-World War II foreign policy in the U.S. especially. In American memory, Sudeten is synonymous with “appeasement”—giving an aggressive dictator what he wants based in the false hope that this will avert conflict—most vividly illustrated by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returning from the Munich Conference in 1938, declaring while waiving the pact with Hitler in the air that he had achieved “Peace for our time.” Chamberlain’s decision has (esp. in the U.S.) become perhaps the most widely scorned decision in modern history, the policy of appeasement being the epitome of weakness, foolishness, and cowardice—along with a measure of selfishness for being willing to sacrifice a “far away land” for one’s own very temporary safety. Chamberlain’s perceived failure in the Sudeten Crisis has thus become a symbol of remembrance to justify virtually endless wars and confrontations in the post-World War II era (Nyossen and Humphreys 2016; Schachtman 2013). In the decade that followed Harry Truman explained his intervention in Korea through the trope of Chamberlain’s failure, as did British Prime Minister in his intervention against Nasser in the Suez Crisis. Eisenhower’s initial support for the French in Vietnam and later Lyndon Johnson’s escalation were explicitly framed as not repeating Chamberlain’s mistake. When Kennedy blockaded Cuba he invoked the failure of appeasement while his refusal to bomb Cuba led him to be accused to himself be Chamberlain by his own generals. Chamberlain was invoked in Reagan purportedly not being aggressive enough towards the Soviet Union. Saddam Hussein, and more recently Vladimir Putin have been explicitly painted as Hitler eyeing the Sudetenland, that the world never forgets Chamberlain. Popular culture figures such as Elvis Costello, Robyn Hitchcock, Monty Python and the Marvel’s Iron Man movie series have riffed off of Chamberlain’s failure vis a vis the Sudetenland.

What does one make of this contrast? It is not surprising, of course, that in two cultural and political contexts the same events, which impacted the two very differently and with differing degrees of directness, should be remembered differently. It also points to differences in what is forgotten, and even what must be forgotten. In the U.S. a monument to Sudeten refugees might be pulled down as quickly as a statue of a Confederate general from the American Civil War (which is to say, almost immediately, as soon as someone has noticed that it has been standing there for 100 years). One might also question whether there have been real world consequences to the American insistence to latch onto the Sudetenland as a symbol of the folly of “appeasing dictators” (Nyossen and Humphreys 2016). Without this easy device for manufacturing consent for war (or without the need for politicians to always be Churchill and never Chamberlain) might some number of wars been avoided and lives saved, or would some alternative trope simply arisen to meet the need? One may reasonably ask whether the U.S. declaration to “Never Forget” 9/11 made the world safer. And while the call for “Never Again” may have fostered vigilance that afforded greater safety to the Jewish people, there is little evidence that it has corrected the problem of genocide and other crimes against humanity more generally. Indeed, we might go

beyond the “little history joke” of Michael Herr (1977): Where figures from Santayana to Churchill have told us that “Those who forget the past are condemned to repeat it” Herr quips “Those who remember the past are condemned to repeat it too.” One might, indeed, venture that remembering the past tends to foster future injustices, rather than being a tonic against them.

Whether one believes the outcome of remembrance is positive or negative, it is generally seen as unavoidable. In scholarship, one sees this in the widespread study of the memories of war, often placed in the framework of trauma or testimonial (Antze and Lambek 1996). In the former, recounting war is viewed in a therapeutic light, as in psychotherapy, where coming to terms with the past is construed as an essential step in healing from its wounds. As political project some of the best examples of the imperative to reckon with the past come from Africa, with uncertain results. Most prominent is the post-Apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa. The underlying principle was that documenting the crimes of the Apartheid Era would serve as a kind of restorative justice, whereby individual, group and national healing would occur by making the past known. Perpetrators testified with promises of full or partial amnesty, depending on how completely they confessed their crimes. The process was premised on the assertion that knowledge of crimes for its own sake is a necessary component of healing. However, given that the degree of amnesty was predicated on how fully one confessed, some noted the ironic effect that the clearer it was that someone had committed a crime the less likely one was to be punished for it, perhaps stoking tensions rather than mitigating them (Gade 2014). Of course in the South African case one goal was to avoid the conflict that would be spurred by retributive justice (i.e. trying and punishing criminals for their crimes) though not all have accepted that more truth (i.e. fuller accounts) was a fair trade off for less justice (i.e. not holding perpetrators accountable). It is, of course, impossible to determine whether this process led to higher degrees of reconciliation than would have occurred had the underlying principle been retributive justice, or alternatively if the truth of the past had been less fully pursued, as was the case in many colonial contexts. Elsewhere, in Rwanda the Gacaca courts concerning crimes of the civil war and genocide were framed as a process parallel to the TRC, though these have been widely criticized for corruption and political bias since crimes could only be investigated from one side in the war and influence was easily bought. Thus, while the premise was to create closure in the same sense as the TRC it is widely seen as having been unsuccessful in doing so (Broneus 2004; Longman 2009, 2017).

As researchers we should reasonably question not only if memories of war do what political and popular accounts say they do, but even if they actually organically exist in the forms that they are commonly assumed to. Notably, scholars of war and memory frequently (Daniel 1996; Das et al 2000; Hollander and Gil 2014; Kimayer 2010 ) uncover testimonials of suffering from violence, which are often construed as fostering an awareness that works towards a more just and peaceful future. This is not, however, clear evidence that these kinds of memories always have an organic salience prior to the researcher uncovering them. On one hand, the fact that a testimonial may be produced when prompted by a researcher may mean that the memory existed, and likely had some impact in shaping an informant’s consciousness in some way, but how important it was an informant’s consciousness may oftentimes be exaggerated by the process of research itself. The

fact that an informant can tell the researcher, when asked on a particular occasion, about the trauma of a war does not mean that this memory is particularly meaningful to them on all other occasions, or at least does not tell us in what ways it impacts everyday experience. Moreover, as with any phenomenon it is much easier (and to one's colleague's more interesting) to study things that do exist rather than those that don't. How much easier is it to obtain funding to study how people remember war, than to study how people don't? The absence of memory (or at least salient memory) might seem a phenomenon not even worthy of "filing cabinet results"—the null results that are deemed uninteresting and hence unpublishable—but more so as an absence, that no researcher in pursuit of a degree or professional achievement would endeavor to find. No researcher goes to the field in the hopes of finding "nothing" and no one earns accolades for confirming a non-existence.

I suggest here, however, that forgetting may be as important as remembering, and just as remembrance exists in a variety of modalities for various (if often overlapping) reasons, so does forgetting. I turn now to the case study of Samburu and Pokot in northern Kenya, which I suggest illustrates not only that forgetting is an important phenomenon as worthy of study as its opposite, but perhaps one that deserves to command more attention as an actual social good.

### **3 Samburu and Pokot in War and Peace**

Samburu and Pokot are both pastoralists groups, in and around Kenya's northern Rift Valley, relying on their herds of cattle, goats and sheep. Both groups continue to live by and large as subsistence pastoralists, though integrated loosely within the economics and politics of the broader Kenyan society and state. These groups fought a small-scale but bloody war between early 2006 and 2010, but have now returned to peaceful co-existence. For many years prior to the war the two groups were on generally good terms, having been bonded since before living memory by an oath that ended a particularly horrific war (perhaps in the 1830s). This oath prohibited violence against one another, and they occasionally joined forces to fight common enemies, especially Turkana pastoralists to the northwest of their areas. Samburu and Pokot would sometimes herd together and share pasture, and recently intermingled most significantly in areas of Laikipia District, which they gained access to in the 1990s with the departure of many European settlers whose colonial era 99 year leases on government owned land began to expire. The Samburu-Pokot relationship, thus, was peaceful, though both sides expressed animosity and disdain towards members of the other group, mainly because they claimed that the prohibition against violence—the power of the oath was such that killing someone from the other group, even accidentally, would lead to death or insanity—allowed each to exercise their "natural" tendencies to steal without consequences.

Tensions began to heighten between the two groups over the several years leading to the conflict (see Holtzman 2016). At first there were only occasional low scale clashes between isolated groups or individuals along with the theft of livestock. In March 2006 these small scale mutual provocations escalated and led to killings on both sides. After a particularly brutal act of retaliation by Samburu—two Pokot men were pulled from public transport, killed and castrated and dumped over the Rift Valley escarpment—Pokot declared that their longstanding oath had

been broken and attacked en masse (an act that Samburu viewed as Pokot breaking the oath). The first major raids were by Pokot, mainly in Samburu District itself, then spreading farther south into some areas of jointly occupied areas in Laikipia District. Initial Pokot raids involved as many as several hundred fighters, armed mainly with AK 47s, and resulted in the capture of large numbers of livestock. Samburu launched raids of their own, and Pokot suffered heavy casualties when they attacked Samburu in an area where—owing to its more central location—a quick Samburu and government response could be organized. Following this defeat, Pokot changed their tactics to rely mostly on smaller raids undertaken with greater stealth. Samburu carried out both small-scale raids (though usually with less effectiveness) as well as major attacks that varied from qualified successes to dismal failures. Conflict continued well after the most intense warfare, though usually in low-grade hostility, such as fighting that occurred between groups of scouts meeting in advance of grazing cattle in border zones.

The final major incident in the conflict was a large-scale raid by Pokot on a large Samburu settlement at Kanampiu in September of 2009. Prior to this raid fighting had cooled significantly, and Samburu aimed to reoccupy areas closer to the border with Pokot (though not as far west as the lands they had vacated towards the beginning of the war). Samburu allegedly were in part spurred by a *loibon* (seer/prophet) from the famous line of Mbatian. He assured them that his talismans would ensure their safety, and a *lorrora* (a large, usually ritual settlement) was built that housed upwards of a thousand people. However, within weeks of its completion Pokot launched a major attack on the settlement. The number of warriors who attacked the settlement is not precisely known; by some accounts it was up to 500, though a Samburu I interviewed who was present and aided in defending the settlement suggested that it was roughly 300 in total, with perhaps 80 armed with guns with the remainder being unarmed in order to be able to move quickly in driving off cattle. According to official figures 42 people, mainly Samburu died, including about a dozen women and children. The number of Pokot killed is less precisely known, as many may have died while Samburu pursued the stolen cattle into the bush, or retreated with fatal wounds. The *loibon* who claimed to have afforded protection to the settlement disappeared at the time of the raid, leading some Samburu to believe that he has involved in a conspiracy to help Pokot. It is certainly possible, however, that he simply fled when the raid began, out of fear of both the attacking Pokot and of Samburu who had been deceived by his promises of safety.

The precise means through which peace was reached is not completely clear, though informants (interviewed in the course of research in 2021) agree on some general aspects of the process. Notably, all are quick to dismiss any government assistance. While there were many government initiated peace meetings during the course of the conflict, none were effective in stopping the conflict and both parties viewed the government as either indifferent to the fighting or actually in favor of it to the extent that it might drive pastoralists off of the land in favor of Kikuyu agriculturists. There is no evidence to support the conspiracy theory that the government wanted the two groups to fight but there was also little in the government's haphazard and intermittent response to suggest that they were serious about encouraging or enforcing peace (Holtzman 2016). Both sides had cause to feel bitterness during the course of the war—and each side claimed frequently that the government was favoring the other side—such that dismissing the idea that

there was government assistance is as much a statement on their negative views of the government as it is touting their own achievements.

Both Samburu and Pokot informants describe the general form of the peace process as a series of meetings between them over a series of months, mainly in 2010, held in various locations along lines of conflict ranging from Laikipia in the south to area of the Rift Valley escarpment to the north. Frequent mentions are made of an NGO called the “Peace Caravan”, though primarily in respect to providing some funding and logistics for meetings rather than persuading the groups to seek peace. Some informants give a degree of credit to women in pushing for peace, because they are said to have felt exceptional bitterness because their sons were mainly the ones being killed in conflict. By and large, however, members of both groups—male and female, young and old—emphasize the role of male elders, given that in these patriarchal societies they are in an integral position to demand peace. Nonetheless, at the organized peace meetings youth (who were the main combatants) from both groups would caucus in order to discuss peace, as would women, even if ultimately the edicts of male elders were most determinative.

Notably, both sides agree that the deadly raid on Kanampiu was the key event in pushing both sides to peace. In this light, Pokot are unambiguous in their assertions that the raid was intended to make Samburu feel pain so that they would retreat and never return. Indeed, the raid is explicitly described as not simply being aimed at seizing cattle (as most raids are) but designed to kill women and children. As one Pokot replied to my question of whether the death of children was an inadvertent consequence of the raid: “It was not an accident (laughing)! It was planned! We wanted them to feel pain and return to the place they came from,” though he also noted that since the raid began predawn those raiders who were shooting in or around houses did not have a clear idea of who might be hit. The raid garnered attention across Kenyan media and among political figures and large numbers of police and military were deployed to Kanampiu in the aftermath. Samburu note that there was no momentum to attack Pokot in response, to repay or avenge the raid, but rather looked to the government to secure the immediate area in the aftermath. The explicit Pokot goal—to make Samburu feel pain in order to make them want to stop fighting—appears to have largely met its intended purpose. For their part, Pokot do not gloat in their success, suggesting, for instance, that through this raid they “won the war”. Rather they assert that they also were tired of their people being killed particularly since a significant (though unknown) number of warriors died in this raid and certainly in many others.

In a comparative context it is worth noting the contrast between these Kenyan accounts and Western discourses regarding civilian deaths. In “modern warfare” inflicting pain on non-combatants is now widely viewed as only steeling the resolve of one’s opponent, rather than driving them towards peace. The bombing of cities in World War II is cited as the quintessential example (e.g. Jones 2004; Schreiter 2017), for instance the widely touted “blitz spirit” during the Battle of Britain. In such examples, however, it is government leaders rather than civilians themselves who decide whether to continue to fight. In Samburu and Pokot there is no distinction between combatants, decision-makers and civilians. The fact that they cite pain they inflicted and suffered as an impetus for peace suggests that when people are empowered with their own agency to seek peace or continue war they may be more responsive to suffering than when governments

have the decision-making power (as well as the propaganda tools to implore their citizens and others that “being bombed only makes us stronger”).

Only a few years after the peace agreement Samburu and Pokot had returned to intermingling in all manner of contexts. Upon an open plain where some of the fiercest fighting had occurred a new town had sprung up at the end of a freshly paved road. In the town the two groups shared a livestock market, and with the earnings from livestock sales ate together in the same small restaurants, and drank together in the same bars. Shocked at this sight, I asked my closest Pokot informant if people didn't still have grudges and he said that everything was completely peaceful now. And anyway, he continued, even if someone had bad feelings they were powerless to act upon it as the groups had chosen peace and each group would silence their own members if they felt otherwise. Now, the two groups also began to herd livestock together, and when a terrible drought seized the area the groups cooperated in forcefully entering white owned ranches, which were the only areas where grass still remained. The ranch incursions escalated—a few herders were killed, which resulted in retaliations by Pokot who killed guards at one ranch, and a white ranch manager who attempted to intervene when Pokot were burning the grass on the ranch where he worked. On the land of the well-known rancher Kuki Gallman, who had a history of friction with Pokot in particular, the Kenyan army killed large numbers of Pokot and Samburu cows. This was a rather blunt means to end the ranch incursions, the rationale being that if Pokot and Samburu livestock were dead they would have no further motivation to invade white owned ranches. This began a government operation against Pokot (particularly after Gallman was shot and wounded, though by whom and why is unclear) and they and their livestock were targeted by police and military, including aerial attacks from helicopters. During this time Samburu offered shelter and assistance to Pokot in order to protect them from this operation or to help those who were wounded. Notably, while returning to peaceful conditions so quickly was surprising, this is actually quite common in interethnic conflict in northern Kenya among Samburu and other groups, exemplified best with the Samburu relationship with the Turkana, who are both arch enemies and a group with whom intermarriage and close personal friendships are most common.



Both sides insist that there is now peace between the two sides, which they attribute to forgetting and setting aside the past. Pokot informants were particularly strident about this claim, as one informant noted, emphasizing the social prescription to forget:

...they are forced to forget. They are forced to forget. Because if someone feels bitter they will just be told "Go try to do whatever you want to do. You will be hurt. Try. You will be hurt. You will just be killed again. Try what you want and we won't see you again" Because it isn't the will of one person. Everyone has agreed.

In a similar vein another Pokot elder implored:

You will forget because you have seen many things. It isn't just you who has lost someone. It is many people. And also from both sides. So if a Pokot looks at someone and sees "Ah, that Samburu killed my child" and then a Samburu looks and says "Ah, that Pokot killed my child," this thing can never finish. So we say to not talk about that. Forget about it and leave it completely. And God alone can follow it and we will leave it at that.

They emphasize, moreover, then, that not only will holding onto these memories disturb the future, but it will not change the past. As one man added: "If my child has died he has died and even if I went to fight I won't get him back." Samburu largely agree with this discourse, and provide accounts of peace with the same basic contours. As one man Samburu elder exhorted:

Even if a person was killed, leave it because it is everyone. Even if you see someone who killed someone...do nothing. Because it was both Samburu and Pokot. Even if the cows could be found, even if your cow is there, don't ask! Don't ask! Even, if you see your cow, no! Don't ask. Leave it with him. Because when we made peace we said even if you see your own cow...[you see that] it is just exactly that cow of yours in someone else's corral...don't ask about it. If even you see your cow that was taken during the war, don't ask anything. Leave it, it has gone. Even someone who was killed, just leave it. If you see someone and you know they killed a particular person don't say anything. If you talk the problems will return! If you see your cow, just leave it, look for another cow because you were defeated on that day and if you pursue it the problems will return.

Samburu were more prone, however, to express some reticence about Pokot sincerity in this peace. For instance, when I traveled from Samburu to Pokot in December 2021 my long-time Samburu host urged caution, and urged that I should stay in the town of Mowuarak on the main road because of possible dangers from Pokot. I had no real concerns, given that I had spent considerable time with Pokot on previous occasions, but a Samburu assistant who had accompanied me to this interethnic town became quite agitated not only because he thought I might want him to accompany me during planned visits to Pokot settlements away from town (which I, of course, did not because of the bias it would introduce into interviews) but acted as though I was naïve and reckless for intending to go to Pokot settlements. "He [Lekeren] has stayed with those people for years. Don't you think he knows what they are like?" he demanded to me. This echoed a widespread Samburu belief, if somewhat muted, that despite Pokot claims of being committed to peace they could not be trusted. As one Samburu man explained:

You will never fail to find people who feel bitter. Because if you see a person, and you know he has killed one of your people, you can't feel very happy. But you just don't do anything. You say "Peace," but you don't like each other. In your heart you can't really like them...Even if you live closely among each other, every person keeps their guard up. Because you just know, that person is not a good person...[Pokot say everything is forgotten but] they are hiding their feelings. They are just hiding it...With their mouth they say "Peace" but inside they don't feel peace. But Samburu can make peace completely. This thing of having secrets doesn't exist [for us]. We might feel bitterness too, but [begins laughing]it isn't a secret. But those Pokot are really secretive. They really have secrets. They hide completely. And this peace, there isn't any peace for those people. But us Samburu can really make peace. But you know those people, because their hearts are bad, you need to keep your wits. Because you know those people don't really have peace. Use your intelligence you stay extremely careful. Because they aren't good people. They aren't people who can really make peace. Their hearts are of a different kind, like the heart of an animal. They can't stay without stealing. I can just stay well with them. But they can't stay well with me, because they are bad people.

It is unclear why Samburu informants were somewhat more equivocal than Pokot ones on the question of forgetting and of their current sentiments. It is entirely possible that to an unknown degree Pokot were presenting their views and sentiments in a more virtuous manner than what they actually felt or thought. One element of this is that I had greater rapport with my Samburu informants, as some were people who I had known for years, while I did not know the Pokot I interviewed as well--my closest Pokot informant from previous research having been assassinated in the aftermath of the conflict with the white ranches. Thus, my Samburu informants might be less guarded about their true feelings or try to portray themselves as excessively virtuous. Pokot may have been more guarded with me, not only because they did not know me as well (though some were at least familiar with me from my past research, and knew of my close relationship with my Pokot friend who had been killed) but also because they were more nervous about their current situation. Apart from the open government actions that had been taken against them, and concerns of a resurgence of conflict with Samburu, they were well aware of the series of assassinations of prominent Pokot and some speculated that Pokot informants feared that someone (such as myself) circulating among them doing research could be a front for someone finding out who should be killed next.

Along with recent local political developments that over the past decade or so have put Pokot in a somewhat more vulnerable position than Samburu there has long been a cultural difference between Samburu and Pokot in some aspects of openness in their attitudes and behavior (Holtzman 2016). For instance, Samburu place their settlements on hilltops or open plains for all to see, while Pokot settlements are often hidden in thick bush, accessible only through a maze of winding paths. Pokot war songs extoll the virtue of being evasive and see what might be regarded as cowardice as actually intelligence. During their war with Samburu, Pokot would marvel at what they saw as Samburu bravery that seemed to them like insanity or plain stupidity, though also regarding them as overly emotional swinging from extreme bravery to wild panic. Thus, it is

entirely possible that for various reasons Pokot were more guarded about their current sentiments, while Samburu were more inclined, with some degree of bravado, to openly pronounce them. On the other hand, during their war there was also a tendency for Pokot to assert a greater tendency for Samburu to hang onto petty meanness, while Pokot could compartmentalize hostility to the field of conflict. This was supported to some extent by observations I made during that time period (2006-2009). For instance, Samburu were allowed to safely visit towns where Pokot were dominant (or had become dominant due to Samburu fleeing the conflict). So long as a Samburu was in town where they were no threat to Pokot cattle, they were not targeted or harassed. In contrast, Samburu expressed a willingness to kill any Pokot anywhere, and in fact one Pokot child who lived with my Samburu host for many years for the purposes of attending school was returned to his family out of fear that his life was in danger. Generally speaking, Pokot during the war criticized Samburu for childishly hanging onto grievances, whereas they held that when real men fought they should and did accept the consequences. One vivid example of this was an incident in which Pokot were killed at a trading center in the latter stages of the war while selling a gun to Samburu that Samburu claimed to have recognized as having belonged to a friend who had been killed fighting Pokot. While Samburu interpreted this as a brazen act that prompted revenge—trying to sell Samburu gun of their dead friend who was killed by Pokot—Pokot informants maintained that it might well have been the gun of a dead Samburu but that Samburu were nonetheless in the wrong because they refused to accept the outcome of the battle and that the gun now rightfully belonged to the Pokot who had won it (Holtzman 2016). Consequently, it is possible that Pokot attitudes about the appropriateness of leaving the past in the past (which they criticized Samburu for failing to do) might also account to some extent for the present tendency to insist that (at least for them) everything is—or MUST—be forgotten completely.

## 4 Conclusion

The experiences of Pokot and Samburu in achieving peace confounds much of what is taken for granted regarding war and remembrance, both in popular culture and in academic analyses of collective and individual memory of violence. In popular culture there are various strains of the imperative to remember: Some towards bellicose ends, some with the intention of avoiding future tragedy, and some oscillating between multiple modalities. Thus, American calls to “Never Forget” the September 11 attacks became the banner for endless war. The “Never Again” attached to the Shoah is a watchword to forever banish the genocide towards Jews in particular and humanity in general, yet has also been criticized for justifying further inhumanity (esp. towards Palestinians). Where in America the Sudetenland retains fame as a simple morality tale that justifies a foreign policy where every adversary as a *nouveau* Hitler, necessitating total victory rather than negotiation and dialogue, in Germany it forms the basis for complex narratives and contestations regarding victimhood, guilt, identity and memory. Academic treatments lean heavily towards these humanitarian threads, where suffering is documented in what may be construed as giving voice to the downtrodden. Moreover, since remembrance is assumed to be inevitable, memories of war and suffering are presumed to exist and be vital, simply awaiting to be unearthed by the historian or anthropologist as a psychotherapist might with a damaged patient. In all these cases remembrance is understood to be virtuous and largely unavoidable, though at times we must actively strive to not forget the past while in other instances it is seen as having left scars that must in some manner be resolved.

Yet in contrast, Pokot and Samburu advocate for refusing memory. One *must* forget; Remembering is the continuation of war by other means and can ultimately result only in a return to violence, to more death and to more economic loss. This is not a passive forgetting, where the details or the power of the memory fades across time (the type of forgetting that we are warned against when implored to “Never forget”). Rather, forgetting is an active process. The seed of memory is acknowledged as existing inside of every individual, for everyone is acknowledged as having experienced the pain of loss, whether of a child or a brother or the livestock that are the basis for their well-being. The pain is there, but the imperative is to refuse it and to forget its basis. The group has determined that the individual pain must be set aside (whether literally forgotten, or functionally forgotten given the command to not act) for the collective good. And should they refuse to forget they will suffer the consequences, whether left alone against their former enemies or acted upon by their own people. Yet this imperative to forget is nonetheless predicted on a kernel of memory, which is suffering. One must forget the people one lost and the livestock one lost, but one does so because they remember that war is not about vengeance nor about glory, but simply a form of pain.

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