'I was born in the reign …': Historical orientation in Ugandan students' national narratives

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Abstract

In 2012, Uganda celebrated 50 years as an independent state following more than half a century under colonial rule. Since independence, Uganda has experienced a period of political turmoil and civil war within its constructed colonial borders. Given these historical experiences, what do students find important about their nation's history and what history do they relate to when asked to explain their contemporary society and envisage possible futures? This article argues that Ugandan students' historical orientation is informed by and dependent on these students' local contexts. Furthermore, those students adopting a retrospective approach to history, compared with those applying a prospective approach, made more sophisticated judgements about the past. The study on which this article is based explores 219 narratives written by 73 Ugandan upper secondary students. The narratives were elicited through written responses to three assignments and were designed to capture different approaches to history, specifically *prospective* and *retrospective* approaches. Participants originated from two distinct regions: central and northern Uganda. The empirical results show how different approaches to history influence the students' narratives. For instance, value judgements about past developments were more common among students applying a *retrospective* approach. Students from northern Uganda were generally more inclined to tell a story of decline.

Keywords: history education; school history; historical consciousness; historical orientation; national narrative

Introduction

In 2012, the nation of Uganda celebrated 50 years of independence. The half-century post-colonial era in Uganda since independence in 1962 has been marked by political turmoil and power struggles (Mamdani, 2002: 496–8; Branch, 2010: 25–36; Rolandsen and Anderson, 2015: 8–9; Mazrui, 1999: 6). According to Duara (1995), nation-centred narratives became the basis for national history in European colonies during the nineteenth century (see also Carretero *et al.*, 2012: 153). Very few post-colonial theorists in or outside the African continent would, however, use the concept 'nation' when describing the new states of Africa. This caution stems from the fact that the post-colonial states in Africa today can be described as being neither ethnically nor culturally homogenous entities (Grovogui, 2010: 236). Mamdani summarized the situation: 'Europe did not bring to Africa a tropical version of the late-nineteenth-century European nation state. Instead it created a multicultural and multi-ethnic state' (Mamdani, 1996: 287). For the nations born in the 1960s on the African continent there was a fundamental paradox. While history on a national level could serve the purposes of consolidating power

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in the newly independent states, history on the sub-national level could, on the contrary, be harmful. In Uganda, history in these senses has been used by both ruling elites and those seeking to redistribute power (Reid, 2014: 351; compare Tosh, 1993: 9).

Globally, school history has been seen as a major platform for the construction of collective memory in contemporary societies with a bias towards a national identity (Carretero *et al.,* 2012: 1–10; VanSledright, 2011: 22–4; Barton, 2009: 266; Seixas, 2007: 19; Stearns *et al.*, 2000: 1–2). In recent years, considerable attention has been drawn to the stories that students bring with them to the classroom, and as a result students' views of history have been studied extensively (Conrad *et al.,* 2013: 139; Lévesque *et al.*, 2013; Barca, 2015; Létourneau and Moisan, 2011; Wertsch, 2000). Létourneau noted, in a Canadian school context, that although textbooks in history may be 'good' and many-voiced in terms of presenting several different stories and interpretations, students and teachers tended to stick a socially accepted and legitimized story (Létourneau and Moisan 2011: 110–13). Research on history education in Africa has, to some extent, neglected classroom studies and the stories told by students. Research on a policy level does not elucidate what information students actually receive through their history education and especially their everyday life. However, some studies have focused on the theoretical concepts of historical consciousness and students' temporal orientation. These include, for instance, Van Beeks's longitudinal study on South African youth and the abolition of the apartheid system and Barca's study on identity and temporal orientation among Portuguese-speaking students in Portugal, Cape Verde and Mozambique, which stated that national identities were stronger than global ones (Van Beek, 2000; Barca, 2015: 30–1). In many studies, however, the nation becomes the 'silent frame of reference' (Duara, 1995) and students are seen solely as nationals, which is problematic in a multicultural context.

Ugandan upper secondary schools at Advanced Level (A-Level) follow a set of six general objectives set out by the Uganda National Examinations Board (UNEB), the aim of which are to: 1) provide sound knowledge and understanding of history; 2) encourage historical research and use of a wide variety of source materials; 3) help students to develop ability to relate historical events to the present; 4) encourage students to develop systematic appreciation of the major economic and social issues being tackled by the present-day governments; 5) stimulate thought and discussion by the use of historical case studies; and 6) further the development of students' skills in expressing historical ideas in a more coherent and logical manner (UNEB, 2008: 22). The fourth objective takes the contemporary situation as its point of departure and approaches the past retrospectively: this is a normative approach to history, especially when the objective emphasizes *appreciation* of the efforts of present-day governments. A retrospective approach to history focuses on a usable past. But a question still stands: to whom is this past usable – the nation or the individual? The theoretical concept of historical consciousness focuses on how the dimension of past time is used in order to understand the present and give perspectives on the future. It becomes important to explore what references to the past are made and in what way in order to understand how students orientate themselves using the past.

The study on which this article is based explored historical orientation among 73 Ugandan students in the contemporary post-colonial context of Uganda (Holmberg, 2016). The study explored what historical references Ugandan upper secondary students use in order to understand their contemporary society and whether patterns of historical orientation can be found. Based on the study's findings the present article argues that Ugandan students' historical orientation is informed by and dependent on the students' local context. Furthermore, where students adopt a retrospective approach to history, as opposed to a prospective approach, they express more value judgements about the past.

Before discussing the findings and the arguments made, the theoretical framework and the methodological design of the study will be commented on.

Historical orientation and historical culture – A theoretical framework

Historical consciousness is a theoretical concept that functions as a specific orientation mode occurring through life's experiences. In other words, individuals tend to interpret the present and have expectations of the future based upon a past experience (Rüsen, 2004). Historical orientation is shown through the mobilization of ideas about the past to envisage the present and future possibilities. A historical narrative could be viewed as a site where such a mobilization occurs, and as such a narrative expresses a historical orientation. It is not the extent of knowledge that is important from a historical consciousness perspective, but rather the operating framework used to make sense of the past (Rüsen, 2011: 82). Sociologist Margaret R. Somers considers narrativity both as an ontological and epistemological category: ontological, because of the assumption that identity and meaning are narratively created; epistemological, because we gain knowledge through narrating and narrations (Somers, 2001: 359f.). Somers distinguishes between four different dimensions of narrativity: ontological, public, conceptual and meta-narrativity. According to Somers, narratives become ontological when individuals use stories to make sense of their lives, to define who they are and what preconditions their actions. However, ontological narratives are also interpersonal and social. Hence, ontological narratives are derived from public narratives, adjusted and tailored to fit the individual. Public narratives themselves, on the other hand, are stories attached to cultural and institutional establishments larger than the individual. In a way, all narratives larger than the individual can be perceived as public narratives; Somers states that public narratives range from the narratives of one's own family to those of the workplace, church, government and 'nation' (Somers, 1994: 619).

The distinction between ontological and public narratives is useful for understanding the relationship between an individual's historical consciousness and historical culture. Historical culture should be understood as a category (Rüsen, 2004: 150). Referring to historical culture, one refers both to human-made artefacts and the different ways in which these artefacts are communicated. Historical culture can thus be described as the communicative context in which humans encounter the past; this differs between cultures and peoples, both locally and globally (Nordgren, 2006: 19). Public narratives are encountered in all aspects of historical culture. Public narratives are also altered and tailored to suit the individual, which makes them ontological to the individual, thus instantiating the relationship between historical consciousness and historical culture. It is likely to be revealing to explore students' historical narratives, therefore, because on an ontological level the narratives express historical orientation and at the same time, on an epistemological level, they tell us about the historical culture surrounding the narrator.

Design and method

This article is based on a study that explores the historical orientation of 73 Ugandan upper secondary students studying history at Advanced Level (Holmberg, 2016). Participating students have chosen history as an Advanced Level subject and are hence not representative of Ugandan students more generally. Six different papers are offered for A Level history in Uganda: 1) Africa: national movements and new states; 2) social and economic history of East Africa since 1800; 3) European history, 1789–1970; 4) world affairs since 1939; 5) theory of government and constitutional development and practice in East Africa; and 6) history of Africa, 1855–1914. All students studied one paper on European history and either a paper on African history 1855–1914

(18 students) or a paper on national movements and the new states of Africa (55 students). All participants were in their final year (senior 6) before going to university. The study could be viewed as a reception study of school history, but it was designed to explore what references the students used in order to understand their contemporary society and not simply to assess received historical knowledge acquired in school. The students originated from two different regions in Uganda: the central and the northern regions, represented respectively by 36 and 37 students. The case can hence be perceived as threefold: it explores historical orientation among Ugandan students as a whole, central Ugandan students and northern Ugandan students. Central Uganda was chosen because of its association with the Buganda Kingdom and its historical and contemporary significance to Uganda, while the northern region was chosen because of the recently ended civil war there between government forces and the Lord's Resistance Army. It was anticipated that originating from a war-torn area would affect the students' historical experiences and narrativity.

It was important from a historical consciousness perspective to study two distinct regions, in order to consider differences deriving from the two local historical cultures and so as to problematize 'nation' as a presupposed category (Somers, 1994: 9–11). The two regions also corresponded with two ethnic groups, Baganda and Acholi. Two schools were selected from the central region and six from the northern: this asymmetry reflected the smaller classes in the northern region. All schools were either government schools or government-aided schools (former missionary schools). The sampling format employed was a convenient sampling, with an element of snowball sampling.

The analytical units of the study were 219 narratives elicited through written responses to three assignments. The researcher handed out the assignments to the students who were allocated 40 minutes per assignment to complete the set of three. A questionnaire was handed out along with the first assignment to collect students' basic information regarding age, sex, languages spoken and tribal affinity. Both genders were equally represented, with 38 female and 35 male students.

The assignments aimed at capturing two different approaches to history: a prospective or a retrospective approach. These approaches to history have been described, in Scandinavian history didactics, as either *genetic* or *genealogical* (Karlsson, 2011: 133–4; see also Rüsen, 2004: 121–2); that is, they either start from the beginning and narrate history *prospectively*, or depart from the present and use the past to explain the present situation (a *retrospective* approach). The narrations were elicited through the following three assignments given to the students:

- Narrate or present the history of Uganda since its beginnings, as you perceive it, remember it or know about it
- What from history do you think affects contemporary life in Uganda? Motivate [i.e. 'explain your thinking']
- What from the past do you find important to you and your family and to be worth retelling?

All narratives were perceived as public narratives, using Somers' terminology, and derived from the historical cultures of the students. However, while two of the assignments focused on the national story the last assignment explored what public stories would be invoked if the students freely chose past events important to themselves and their family. The first assignment was inspired by the research of Létourneau (Létourneau and Moisan, 2011; Lévesque *et al.*, 2013). The assignment had a prospective approach to history and was framed by national history. The second assignment, in contrast, had a retrospective approach since it departed from the contemporary situation of Uganda looking to the past for explanations. The third

assignment was also designed to work retrospectively, but was not framed by Uganda as a nation. Assignments two and three were designed from a historical consciousness perspective stating that history stems from everyday life through personal connotations. The assignments hence rendered three kinds of narratives: prospective public narratives, retrospective public narratives and retrospective personal narratives.

Narrative analysis was used to explore both what the students regarded as historically significant and what patterns among them pointed to particular historical orientations. Both thematic and structural approaches were used. The thematic analysis focused on the content, or *what* was being said, while structural analysis focused on the structure of the narrative, or *how* the story was being told (Riessman, 2008: 105). The approach to the responses was hence both descriptive and analytical. The analysis of the prospective public narratives involved identifying categories of chronology, i.e. episodes, among the data, based on the references that students made in their narratives. The references made were also categorized according to the content that characterized each of the episodes. The episodes were lastly compared with a narrative plot with episodes, as suggested by Létourneau and Moisan (2011): i.e. an initial state, a state of change, a state of liberation and a state of uncertainty. When analysing the retrospective public narratives the chronological categories were used as analytical tools, as the episodes became points of reference that explained the contemporary situation. With two nodes in time, the contemporary situation and the invoked episode, the narratives could be assessed as stories of either progress or decline. The structural approach can therefore be connected to the concept of historical orientation, which focuses on the plot of the narrative. The concept of historical significance also proved important in the analysis as it explores simultaneously *what* is perceived as important and *to whom*. As such, the concept includes both an epistemological and an ontological dimension. The concept could hence be used to explore what public stories were invoked among the retrospective personal narratives. In the following sections the empirical body elicited through the three assignments will be presented; this consists of public prospective narratives, public retrospective narratives and personal retrospective narratives.

Episodes of Ugandan history – A prospective approach to history

Overall, it was less common for those students producing prospective narratives to pass judgement on past developments than for those taking a retrospective approach to do so. However, some differences between the two regions, central and northern Uganda, were discernible. Before exploring this we will consider the structure of the narratives being presented. The content of the *prospective public narratives* demonstrates that the history of Uganda can be categorized into four main episodes: pre-colonial, colonial, independence and post-colonial (see Table 1). All references made to the past were categorized in terms of these four distinct episodes. These categories were derived from the references used by the student narrators. Even though not all narrators included all episodes, this formed the basic structure of the narratives.

Table 1: Episodes within prospective public narratives

Episodes	Central Uganda	Northern Uganda	Uganda (all)
Pre-colonial	58% (21)	39% (14)	48% (35)
Colonial	89% (32)	92% (34)	90% (66)
Independence	86% (31)	87% (32)	86% (63)
Post-colonial	78% (28)	92% (34)	85% (62)
Total narrators	36	37	73

References categorized as pre-colonial were the least common, included in 48 per cent of the narratives. However, while 58 per cent of the central Ugandan students included this type of episode only 39 per cent of the northern Ugandan students did so. References to this period concerned either migration to the land that was to become Uganda and/or the fact that the area was controlled and organized politically, economically and socially into a series of kingdoms before the colonialists appeared in the late nineteenth century. Two content themes were hence apparent: a theme on migration and a theme on the reign of kings; both referred to what occurred before the arrival of colonialists. The references to this period often occurred in relation to the subsequent episode – colonialism – and the episode can hence be interpreted as being dependent on the colonial episode. Consequently, the episode can be seen to have been characterized as *an initial state* that was to be interrupted by the next episode, the colonial episode. Consider, for instance, the opening sentence in the following narrative, concerning a pre-colonial episode themed in terms of migration. Throughout the paper, narrative extracts cite the identifier codes used for each narrator in Holmberg, 2016, in which the full data corpus is reproduced for reference:

> Before the British draw the international (national) boundary (border line) to establish Uganda, people lived in this area. The Luo people who migrated from Barhel Gazel in Sudan. The Bantu Luo Amids, Luo Nilotics among others. In 1900 through the signing of Buganda agreement the British imperialist took control of Uganda and rose their flag (Union Jack).
> (Female student, northern region (4BNU4): 1–18)

References to a colonial episode appeared in almost all of the narratives (90 per cent), unlike its precursor, the pre-colonial episode, which was less frequently mentioned. Some narratives judged the episode in negative terms, for example referring to harsh rule, but most of the narratives mentioned the episode only briefly. The colonial era can hence be viewed as a *state of change* – made to the *initial state* – and sometimes as a *state of crisis*. However, this interruption was settled through the next episode, independence. Both episodes are acknowledged in the following narration:

> The history of Uganda has not been good at all since the British came and colonized it and began using oppressive policies such as forced labour. And the civil wars that took place during the time Museveni took over power, which led to displacement of people and Idi Amini dada who chased the Asians out of Uganda. Although later on the British granted Uganda Independence where by the union jack was lowered down and there was rising of the Uganda National flag.
> (Female student, central region (1BCU30))

Worth noticing in the narration above was that both Museveni and Idi Amin can be interpreted as having been placed before independence. Idi Amin was often described as a dictator, which appeared to place him in colonial times (see Holmberg, 2016: 1BCU6, 2BCU6, 3BNU2, 5BNU3, 5BNU10). The researcher Wills argues that misremembering represents the use of a schematic narrative template or a narrative plot rather than a simple mistake in the retelling of specific narratives (Wills, 2011: 122). This suggests that both the colonialists' and Idi Amin's abuse of Ugandans caused the narrator to place Amin during colonial times instead of after independence. Nevertheless, independence was referred to in a similar way to the colonial episode and was included in 86 per cent of the narratives, despite being the episode with the shortest time span. The presence of references to independence at the beginning, middle and end of narratives tells us how significant the event was. A few narrators ended their story on Ugandan history with independence, concluding that Uganda now was free and democratic:

> Ugandan elites later challenged the colonial masters and the country attained the independence in 1962 09 October and till now the country is under democratic rule.
> (Female student, northern region (4BNU13): 38–41)

> However, after a long struggle in 1962, on Oct 9th Uganda became an independent state up to date.
>
> (Female student, central region (1BCU35): 26–7)

To others, however, history continued into the post-colonial episode. But for all, independence could be described as a *state of liberation*: the end of colonial rule.

The narrators referred frequently to the post-colonial episode, which appeared in 85 per cent of the narratives. Fewer students in central Uganda referred to the episode than those from northern Uganda (78 per cent and 92 per cent respectively). References to this episode were characterized by a sharp increase in the number of references to named individual persons. This was to a lesser extent true also of references to the episode of independence. In post-colonial narratives, references to named persons in the narratives were typically accompanied by judgements about those persons. As such, the post-colonial episode was the era that elicited the most disparate judgements: this episode can thus be seen to correspond to a *state of uncertainty*. Narratives addressing this episode assessed the heritage of independence and considered a time of uncertainty about the future.

As part of the analysis, the narrations were interpreted as either *descriptive* stories, *progress* stories or stories of *decline*. Table 2 accounts for the different views – progress, decline or descriptive – the students held towards the post-colonial episode.

Table 2: Stories of progress and decline concerning post-colonial episodes

Story type	Central Uganda	Northern Uganda	Total
Progress	29% (8)	24% (8)	26% (16)
Decline	25% (7)	50% (17)	39% (24)
Descriptive	46% (13)	26% (9)	35% (22)
Total	28	34	62

Note: Numbers total from left to right; percentages total from top to bottom

A line of succession of presidents often characterized descriptive stories (35 per cent). These typically interpreted the independence episode to have achieved its ultimate goal of freedom and self-rule, and referred simply to a succession of leaders who had led the country ever since. Below, the narrator *remembered* leaders to whom he referred simply as 'presidents'; no differentiation between military rule and elected presidents, or any account of the '9 presidents', was made:

> I remember it has been governed/ruled by 9 presidents since it's [sic] independence in 1962 like Idi Amin, Obote, Muteesa, Museven and others.
>
> (Male student, central region (1BCU5): 30–4)

The progress stories were, on the other hand, more or less tribute stories that praised the achievements of a president, most often the current president, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni.

> I was born in the reign of President Yoweri Kaguta Museveni who has developed it from a war filled country to a sustainably peaceful country.
>
> (Male student, central region (1BCU23): 23–4)

Further, stories of decline judged the post-colonial era either by describing Ugandan history as a story of continuous decline since the era of colonialism or by judging the achievements of certain people, i.e. presidents. Both points are exemplified by the following two sentences:

> […] In 1996, Uganda Conducted Her 1st General Presidential Elections. From that time, Uganda has been experiencing Elections who I don't know whether their [sic] Free and fair or their [sic] are b'se [because] a not yet of voting age. Uganda is trying wake up from the colonial framework structure.
>
> (Male student, central region (2BCU22): 24–30)

> […] It still important to note that up to date Museveni is still the president of Uganda. And his government has been characterized with dictatorship, tribalism, despotism.
>
> (Female student, northern region (3BNU2): 37–41)

Looking at the post-colonial episode as a state of uncertainty showed that while progress stories were common across the two regions (29 per cent of the narratives in central Uganda and 24 per cent in northern Uganda), stories of decline were more common in the northern region (50 per cent as opposed to 25 per cent in central Uganda). A plausible explanation for this might be that the northern regions were war-torn parts of the country, thus the northern Ugandan students were preoccupied with the post-colonial episode and inclined to tell a story of decline (50 per cent of the narrators):

> […] In northern Uganda there was rampant war caused by LRA in the northern part of Uganda and also one of the part of northern eastern part. War took twenty years in this region. There were serious suffering of northern and north eastern part of Uganda. People loss there lifes [sic] and people were also displaced from their original place. […]
>
> (Female student, northern region (6BNU5): 21–9)

Certain historical orientations were discernible among the prospective public narratives; these could be seen either in the expression of pride and hope for the future informed by development since colonialism and more recently during Museveni's reign, or in pessimism regarding the present and probably the future with reference made to political turmoil and corruption. However, orientations of both types were more obvious among the retrospective public narratives.

A retrospective approach to history

The fact that the prospective public narratives became more and more 'political', with disparity in views on the historical situation increasing the closer the narrators came to contemporary times, might imply that the same phenomenon would appear even more pronouncedly in a retrospective approach to history. The second assignment the students wrote was to describe contemporary life in Uganda and to explain what from history had affected it in becoming that way.

In departing from the contemporary situation in Uganda and searching the past for an explanation, the narratives became either stories of progress or stories of decline. The former type was much less common than the latter, numbering 31 per cent and 66 per cent respectively. (The remaining 3 per cent relates to two stories described as incomplete and hence not included in the Table 3 classification.) The historically significant past events identified as affecting the contemporary society all concerned either a colonial episode or a post-colonial episode. The episodes identified in the prospective public narratives were hence used as analytical categories. These are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Stories of progress and decline, by region and referred episode

Story	Central Uganda		Northern Uganda		
	Colonial	*Post-colonial*	*Colonial*	*Post-colonial*	*Total*
Progress	28 % (10)	22% (8)	3% (1)	11% (4)	31% (23)
Decline	14% (5)	36% (13)	16% (6)	65% (24)	66% (48)
Total	15	21	7	28	71

Note: Numbers total from left to right; percentages total from top to bottom

References to a colonial past were as common among the stories of progress as among the stories of decline (11 narratives each). Stories of progress that referred to a colonial episode generally referred to infrastructure in terms of hospitals and schools introduced by the missionaries. This can hence be interpreted as a theme of continuous development since the advent of colonialism. The following narrative exemplifies the stories of progress:

> The introduction of Western education in Uganda had a positive impact in that many Ugandans today can read write and speak foreign languages like English, Belgian or French. […] Western people had introduced better methods of farming like crop rotation, agricultural modernization which has produced self-sufficiency in Uganda today. Ugandans today have access to medical services and this was because the Western European introduced hospitals in Uganda like Mengo hospitals in Buganda.
>
> (Male student, northern region (6CNU6): 1–4; 18–26)

The colonial stories of decline referred to the deterioration of development since the intrusion of colonialists, as the following story of decline illustrates:

> With the coming of the whites into Uganda during the time of colonialism a lot of things have changed in Uganda. With them came Christianity, the western culture for example their dressing, their language which is English. All these were slowly being adopted by Ugandans. When we look at Uganda today, one can actually tell how colonialism has affected it. If one acts the way Ugandan culture prescribes one is referred to be backward and uncivilized. The whites and Ugandans believe that for one to be civilized he/she has to treat himself like a white. […] Uganda is known to be one of the most corrupt countries in the world and there is no hope of it ending The big posts in the government who would end it are the very ones who embezzle the poor people's money. It was recent when he heard of the office of the Prime minister scandal. But do you know where it ended, before everyone could know the scandal was closed and no one was actually punished and you say that corruption will end. I as a person, I have already lost hope that corruption will ever end in Uganda and it is thanks to colonialism.
>
> (Female student, central region (1CCU17): 1–10; 20–30)

A reference to a post-colonial episode was nevertheless the most common feature of the retrospective narratives, occurring in 66 per cent of the 71 narratives. However, while only 16 per cent of these narratives featuring post-colonial episodes were stories of progress, as much as 51 per cent were stories of decline. Consequently, half of the total number of students narrated stories of decline referring to a post-colonial episode. These stories resembled the progress and decline stories encountered in the prospective public narratives: progress stories that were tributes to Museveni and spoke of the relative peace since he rose to power, and decline stories that indicated the presence of war, corruption and imbalance between regions. The following narrative is an example of a progress story referring to a post-colonial episode:

> The Uganda I live in today is peaceful and has gone through great political, economic and social changes under the rule of a democratic government under the leadership of the National Resistance movement and all these changes have affected contemporary life in this country.

> As known in history, Uganda has had a past full of dictators and undemocratic leaders who oppressed the peoples wills such as Idi Amin Dada, Milton Obote etc. but all this, to me that is changed after the 1980–1986 Bush war […] and hence put an end to the dictatorial and oppressive rule ushering into a new era of peace, democracy and freedom of expression in my country after the rise and current rule of President Museveni to power.
>
> (Male student, central region (1CCU34): 1–9; 14–17)

In contrast, the following narrative refers to war and corruption and is an example of decline:

> Wars and corruption in Uganda affect the contemporary life in Uganda. The war that affected the country was started in 1986 and it lasted up to 20 years or more. The effects such as the following are still felt. Mostly in the northern part and at least in other parts of Uganda the increased number of orphans, people lost various parts of their bodies ie ears, lips, breasts, arms, legs and so on. These body parts were either cut by the rebels or lost as a result of landmines. They have made victims unable to support the lives and families for the case of survivors and live under very poor condition (total poverty). They are not able to access education, medical facilities, clean water supply and many other in mostly affected places in the Northern region. People lost their lives, livestock, wealth and above all lost of the traditional African cultural value which were completely eroded during the course of the war. […] The money meant to improve on the livelihood of the people through projects which would make them to be self reliant are swindled making it difficult for the poor people to get rich hence the poor people remain poor and rich people richer.
>
> (Female student, central region (1CNU3): 1–17; 31–6)

The judgements made concerning the past were hence more apparent in the retrospective public narratives than they had been in the prospective public narratives. Both stories of progress and stories of decline were increasingly visible when a retrospective approach was used. But while stories of progress increased the most among central Ugandan students there came a corresponding substantial increase among the stories of decline related by the northern Ugandan students. In total 36 per cent of the central Ugandan students and no less than 65 per cent of the northern Ugandans told a story of decline. Yet, both of the assignments that elicited these narratives were framed by Uganda as a nation. Those aspects of the past that were important to the narrator and his or her family became the focus in the retrospective personal narratives.

History: What is important to me and my family, Uganda or Africa?

The recognition that all meaningful history stems from life-practice, and hence is used in everyday life from a historical consciousness perspective, informed the inclusion of an assignment designed to elicit more personal narratives from the students. This was posed as the following question: What from the past do you find important to you and your family and worth retelling? The narratives elicited by this assignment were each categorized into one of four different levels: a supra-national level, national level, societal level and lastly, a family-related level (see Table 4).

Table 4: Levels addressed in retrospective personal narratives

Level	Central Uganda	Northern Uganda	Total
Supra-national	3% (1)	11% (4)	7% (5)
National	14% (5)	13% (5)	14% (10)
Societal	39% (14)	46% (17)	42% (31)
Family-related	44% (16)	30% (11)	37% (27)
Total	36	37	73

Note: Numbers total from left to right; percentages total from top to bottom

Narratives on a family-related level (37 per cent of the narratives) were either about hardship or a fond memory. Stories on hardship included those reminding the narrator of poor conditions or how to overcome them. Stories about a fond or a happy memory on the other hand focused on memories of the family unit. The family-related level did, however, exclude all non-members, i.e. non-family. A few narratives nevertheless connected to national history by discussing important events relating to themselves and their family, referring for instance to an abducted sister (male student, northern region; 6FNU7), being a relative of the LRA commander Joseph Kony (male student, central region; 1FCU13) or a family's migration due to the Rwandan Civil War (male student, central region; 1FCU23).

The three other levels, besides the family-related level, were the supra-national level (occurring in 7 per cent of the narratives), the national level (14 per cent of the narratives) and the societal level (42 per cent of the narratives). The supra-national level referred to history, such as colonialism, the slave trade and independence: this was African, not specifically Ugandan, history and thus was significant to the narrator as an African. In contrast, a narrative on a national level was significant to the narrator as being Ugandan. Finally, some of the narratives were categorized as concerning the societal level. The references made were not exclusively political, as mentioned for the levels above, but included a social dimension. The main bulk of the narratives here contained aspects critical of foreign influence on African traditions and culture, and their declining status. But references to missionaries affecting the community positively through their introduction of healthcare and education were also apparent. Narratives addressing the societal level thus focused on a social rather than a political dimension, but at the same time appeared to extend beyond national boundaries.

Reviewing these levels of response to the question concerning to *whom* history was significant demonstrated that the narratives included either Ugandans or Africans (see Table 5). Disregarding the family-related level and two narratives on the societal level about tribal origin (all in all 29 narratives, and hence 40 per cent of the total of 73) showed that the story told was typically significant to the narrator/reader as either a Ugandan or an African (60 per cent of the narratives).

Table 5: Identification among retrospective personal narratives

Identification	Central Uganda	Northern Uganda	Total
African	6% (2)	48% (18)	27% (20)
Ugandan	47% (17)	19% (7)	33% (24)
Tribal	3% (1)	3% (1)	3% (2)
Descriptive	44% (16)	30% (11)	37% (27)
Total narrators	36	37	73

Note: Numbers total from left to right; percentages total from top to bottom

Out of 44 narratives, 24 were regarded as significant to Ugandans (33 per cent of the 73 narratives). Specifically, three developments in these narratives were important to Ugandans: independence, the arrival of the missionaries and the progression of leadership in Uganda. The two former were positive and can be viewed as progress stories; the latter, leadership, included both views that were positive and those that were critical. It is worth noting that 71 per cent of the narrators in this subset were from central Uganda (17 narratives out of 24 significant to Ugandans).

Narratives significant to Africans numbered 20 out of 44 (27 per cent of the 73 narratives). The narratives categorized at the supra-national level invoked an African experience of history,

referring to Pan-Africanism and the slave trade era as important histories worth retelling. The other narratives mainly concerned the societal level and addressed themes on African tradition and culture. These narratives mobilized Africans rather than Ugandans. The narratives were critical of the impact of modernity and foreign influence on African culture and traditions. Modern changes were described in terms of western permissiveness and claimed that old systems needed to be revived in order to combat neo-colonialism. As was stated by one narrator, it would be 'an act of a fool not to reduce the wide spread of neo-colonialism' (Male student, northern region; 5FNU10).

   In total, 20 of 44 students recounted a story significant to Africans, while 24 told stories that were significant to Ugandans. However, 90 per cent of the narratives focused on Africa originated from northern Uganda and, as has been noted, 71 per cent of the narratives focused on Uganda originated from central Uganda.

Past, present and future in Uganda

The narratives of the 73 participating students from the two different regions included in the study demonstrated patterns specific to region of origin. The northern Ugandan students were generally more critical towards development and invoked a post-colonial episode to express this. This finding suggests that it is not only school history that informs Ugandan students' historical orientation, but also the local context. Four different episodes structured the prospective public narratives: a pre-colonial-, colonial-, independence and post-colonial episode. The episodes should be seen not only as four different chapters of Ugandan history, but also as four distinct episodes within a narrative plot that corresponds to Létourneau's four states: an initial state, a state of change, a state of liberation and, finally, a state of uncertainty. The fourth state, post-colonial uncertainty, was where the greatest disparity among the prospective public narratives was evident: in central Uganda 22 per cent told a story of progress and 19 per cent a story of decline; in northern Uganda the percentages were 22 per cent and 46 per cent respectively. However, when asked to narrate the history of Uganda retrospectively, the students produced almost twice as many stories of decline, referring both to a colonial and a post-colonial episode, than they did when writing prospective narrations of national history. Among the retrospective narratives there were also differences between the regions. Northern Ugandan students told decline stories more often (81 per cent of the narrators compared with 50 per cent) than central Ugandan students, who more often narrated a story of progress (50 per cent compared with 14 per cent). This suggests that a retrospective approach to history yields a more judgemental assessment of the past than a prospective approach. This finding suggests that the local context matters and supports the assumption from a historical consciousness perspective that history is connected to everyday life through personal connotations. Historical orientations were hence discernible through either progress or decline stories, referring to either a colonial episode or a post-colonial episode.

   The retrospective personal narratives also showed that northern Ugandan students explicitly identified themselves as Africans to a higher degree than did central Ugandan students (48 per cent and 6 per cent respectively). Central Ugandan students instead identified themselves mainly as Ugandans (47 per cent compared with 19 per cent among the northern Ugandan students). This finding, together with the sequential plot of the prospective public narratives, suggests that an African meta-narrative about handling a colonial past is strong. A meta-narrative was used to express both stories of progress and stories of decline. Why and in what way factors like region and/or ethnic group affected the narratives is an area that requires further investigation of the respective historical cultures. Nevertheless, narratives on national history written by the

Ugandan students prompt one conclusion: that the view of the nation differs depending on the student's local context.

Notes on the contributor

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