

# Understanding Conservation Conflicts in Uganda: A Political Ecology of Memory Approach

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## Abstract

Political ecologists have linked conservation conflicts in post-independence Africa to the continuities and legacies of colonial policies that displaced and dispossessed people to create 'wild places'. This paper introduces a political ecology of vernacular memory to discuss the Basongora people's vernacular memories of their historical dispossession to create the Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP) in Uganda. It explores how these events spurred multidirectional memories of resilience, heroism, victimhood, and resistance that the Basongora pastoralists deploy to reclaim social-political autonomy and agency. Using archival data and historical ethnography, I examine how the Basongora mobilise vernacular memory in contemporary contestations with the state and conservation authorities in QENP. Vernacular memory provides a moral authority that helps subordinated groups contest the hegemonic dominance of conservation authorities. A political ecology approach to vernacular memory reveals how people use memory politics to legitimise their claims in contested environments—an essential fact of contemporary conservation conflicts. This paper is the first to conceptualise how vernacular memories can legitimise the decolonisation of conservation narratives and community resistance against conservation.

**Keywords:** Political ecology, Conservation conflicts, Vernacular memory, Colonisation, Basongora, Agency

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary conservation contestations between post-independence African states and local communities are rooted in historical colonial disenfranchisements that created protected areas (Kamau and Sluyter 2018; Kiwango and Mabele 2022). Scholars have critically examined the nature, type, and methods of peasant acts of resistance against the hegemony of conservation and colonial continuities (Neumann 1998; Holmes 2007; Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2014). Yet, such analyses rarely consider how people interact with the past

and mobilise a politics of memory to legitimate their claims in conservation-related conflicts (Moore 1993). In addition to reviewing these historical dimensions, it is essential to explore how subordinated communities leverage historical claims and broader politics of memory against what they consider unjust conservation hegemonies (e.g. displacement from ancestral lands and restricted resource access to create protected areas) (Benjaminsen et al. 2009; Mathevet et al. 2015).

In this paper, I draw on the politics of memory to show how Basongora pastoralists use their vernacular histories to seek legitimacy and visibility against conservation and other actors (i.e. land tenure claims by other ethnic groups) in Queen Elizabeth National Park (QENP). Memory is a powerful ally for disenfranchised people as it offers narratives of resistance and triumph (Osterhoudt 2016; Willems 2022). Vernacular memory allows for bottom-up collective remembering. It imbues a subordinate group's memories with versatile political agency against dominant and opposing narratives in a landscape of social-political and environmental conflicts (Bodnar 1994; Azaryahu 2003; Mwambari 2021b). Present-day memory

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DOI:  
10.4103/cs.cs\_73\_22

construction often reflects prevailing social-political dynamics (Moore 1993: 384). Swedenburg (1991: xxvi) explains that contemporary social-political situations and contestations often overdetermine memories (for example, restricting access to resources may invoke memories of past use and stewardship (Nazarea 2006)). To understand how the politics of memory shapes contemporary contestations, I reflect on the history of QENP and how the Basongora vernacularise their position therein. This paper also examines how the Basongora deploy vernacular memory to make claims and seek legitimacy against (ongoing) colonial conservation hegemony that has long excluded and impoverished their livelihoods.

Bodnar (1994) defines vernacular memories as bottom-up cultural memories personalised to various groups. I use vernacular memory as an entry point to consider the role of memory politics in the production of contested environments. Krauss (2021) and Mabele et al. (2022) have outlined the value of Indigenous knowledge as a bottom-up approach to understanding historically and colonially contested ecologies in conservation. Like Indigenous knowledge, vernacular memory can advance the decolonisation of conservation, especially in the Global South, where conservation rhetoric about protected areas continues to draw from colonial narratives (Kashwan et al. 2021). Dyll-Myklebust (2014: 524) argues that knowledge production has long been mobilised to suit the imperialist agenda; however, alternative research methods based on bottom-up approaches can open meaningful and collaborative partnerships with subordinated communities. This paper also contributes to convivial conservation's call to critically engage with Indigenous knowledge production and narratives in conservation (Büscher and Fletcher 2019, 2020; Krauss 2021).

The Basongora's collective memories of QENP's pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial evolution exist at the nexus of political ecology and vernacular memory. Therefore, I ask: 1) which memories are foregrounded, 2) how do these memories dynamically respond to present contestations, and 3) how do these memories produce ecologies of conflict? The next section grounds the politics of memory literature within political ecology and discusses the value and challenges of using vernacular memory in political ecology research. This is followed by a review of the study methods. In the empirical sections, I analyse how the Basongora vernacularise and politicise the historical and contemporary production of QENP. They deploy memories of belonging and ancestry, victimhood, resilience, heroism, and resistance to legitimise their struggle against (post-)colonial conservation actors.

### **TOWARDS A POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF CONSERVATION CONFLICTS AND VERNACULAR MEMORY**

The creation of protected areas in Uganda and elsewhere in Africa was influenced by colonialism, the enclosure of the commons in eighteenth-century England, and the subsequent formation of wilderness places like Yellowstone and Yosemite in North America (Brockington 2002; Igoe 2004). A key feature

of national parks (during and after colonialism) has been fortress conservation—the exclusion of people and their livelihood activities from parks. Such policies are premised on the colonial belief that Africans do not value wildlife and that human activities are incompatible with wildlife conservation (Brockington 2002; Salleh 2016). To achieve 'wilderness', people were removed from their ancestral lands and separated from their subsistence-based means of production—conservation through primitive accumulation (Cavanagh and Himmelfarb 2015; Asiyanbi and Lund 2020). Conservation through primitive accumulation, or green grabbing, generally entails the violent/militaristic removal of people and unfair compensation for their land (Cavanagh and Benjaminsen 2014; Büscher and Fletcher 2015).

People dispossessed or displaced by colonial and post-colonial conservation have enacted much resistance. Local communities respond with often subtle, though sometimes direct and confrontational "weapons of the weak, everyday forms of peasant resistance" (cf. Scott 1985). Political ecologists have examined these different forms of resistance in and around conservation areas from contemporary and historical perspectives (Peluso 1992; Mariki et al. 2015; see Holmes 2007 for a comprehensive review of these studies).

Historical analyses including the politics of memory are crucial in understanding contemporary political ecology contestations, and more specifically, in tracing local people's claims to geographical and ancestral areas from which they have been excluded (Neumann 1992: 87; Benjaminsen et al. 2009; Osterhoudt 2016). These impulses date back to Alexander von Humboldt (often considered the first political ecologist), who advocated attending to non-western and specifically Indigenous viewpoints to inform sustainable environmental management (Eibach and Haller 2021). Von Humboldt recognised the importance of Indigenous ecological knowledge in explaining and understanding colonial dispossession and resulting environmental degradation (Eibach and Haller 2021). Political ecologists and geographers have continued to underscore the importance of historical and bottom-up analyses, especially when studying social-political and economic contestations stemming from exclusionary conservation and environmental management (Swyngedouw 2015).

Environmental historians and anthropologists engage with the politics of memory to understand how memory influences belonging and social-environmental conflicts (Moore 1993; Poole 2009). For example, Moore's (1993) study of Zimbabwe uses a Gramscian perspective to align current struggles over resources and land with historical analyses and peasants' memories of struggles against colonial land grabbing. The politics of memory shapes how people relate to social-political changes in their environments. The peasant/subordinate class's identity is shaped by the future they envisage and their memories of using local landscapes and environments (Moore 1993). Thus, struggles over land and environmental resources are also struggles for identity; past experiences condition present actions by legitimising historical use and cultural attachment (Moore 1993; Poole 2009).

Osterhoudt (2016) was likely the first scholar to explicitly bridge memory studies and political ecology with her “political ecology of memory” concept. She examined how smallholder farmers in Madagascar articulate and embody political and economic histories through their everyday interactions with the commodities cultivated in their fields and forests (Osterhoudt 2016). Respondents’ histories were embedded in the diverse meanings of their daily activities and crops; they centred the landscape as a protagonist in their painful past (Osterhoudt 2016: 265). Similarly, Popartan and Ungureanu (2022) combined memory studies and critical discourse analysis to study how water management conflicts play out in the public sphere. They used the political ecology of memory framework to understand how entanglements of space and historical memory are mobilised in conflicts over environmental resources.

Osterhoudt (2016) and Popartan and Ungureanu (2022) articulate how a political ecology of memory framework helps us understand how people centre the environment, landscapes, and resources in their histories. However, these studies do not actively consider the social-political agency of respondents’ collective memories. Therefore, this paper’s analysis introduces how vernacular memory-making is integrated with the Basongora’s agentic social-political and cultural narratives. The Basongora deploy bottom-up vernacular narratives of belonging, victimhood, heroism, and resistance to dynamically locate themselves within the memory of QENP’s social-political production. This vernacular memory framework foregrounds collective memory’s agentic and political utility in mobilising communities and knowledge production.

This paper draws on the concept of multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009) within the political ecology of vernacular memory framework to unpack nature-society power relations in QENP. Multidirectional memory examines “how different histories of violent pasts interact, borrow from each other and complement each other in the public sphere” (Rothberg 2009: 5). Hence, the Basongora’s vernacular memories are dynamic and can be reappropriated, reproduced, and adapted through negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing. One memory can be retold in multiple ways to suit different contestations. Depending on the community’s changing needs and agency, memories may also be appropriated (Rothberg 2009; Willems 2022).

For many subordinated communities, vernacular memories represent struggles against prevailing hegemonic narratives and for identity (Rothberg 2009; Boerma 2012). Vernacular memories allow communities to mobilise the past on their own terms and in accordance with their needs and aspirations. Such acts go beyond simply remembering; they represent people’s resilience, resistance, and hope (Mwambari 2021b) and reconstruct the past to secure the present and future. Vernacular memories also more precisely illustrate subtle socio-political realities in contested environments like QENP (Khalili 2007). Groups’ histories and presents are intricately linked to historical access to and control over a changing environment (Moore 1993: 323).

Understanding vernacular memory involves unpacking collective community oral histories. Like with storytelling, the aim is not simply the production of knowledge but also self-determination, decolonisation, rebalancing power, and healing (Makomenaw 2012; Brewer et al. 2014; Christensen 2012). Studies of vernacular memory should go beyond simply documenting remembered stories—scholars should ask why, when, and how political and social agencies are constructed during vernacularisation. The process seeks meaning and recognition of communities’ collective memories (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997: 18). In this case, context is crucial (and offers more answers than dwelling on the memories’ factuality).

Vernacular memories—even ones that are not strictly accurate—provide alternative narratives about social-political and environmental changes. They cater to a community’s collective concerns and interests (Moore 1993; Boerma 2012; Mwambari 2021b) and are imbued with collective political and social agency (Willems 2022). This sets vernacular memories apart from individual memories, which lack the collective agency needed for political change and social recognition (Green 2004). Individual memories may offer more in-depth memorisation and factuality; however, vernacular memory’s collective political and social agency certainly warrants further analysis (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997).

When studying contemporary contestations between communities and conservation authorities, scholars should remain mindful of cultural notions of morality, criminality, subjugation, and subversion (Peluso 1992). This allows us to better understand the various undertones and connotations of memories (beyond their face value). The Basongora’s vernacular memories are based on shifting environmental and political contestations. Collective memories are transformed to suit the changing political economy of the park and to address past, present, and future threats to Basongora lifeways (Moore 1993; Rothberg 2009). This paper brings these adaptable and versatile vernacular memories into broader political ecology frameworks of knowledge production to advance a historical analysis of nature-society relations. Conservation conflicts hinge on power imbalances—less powerful actors like the Basongora cannot control official (dominant) narratives about QENP’s past and present. However, vernacular memories can be weaponised to advance Basongora’s political and social goals, perceptions of justice and rights, and offer dignity, legitimacy, and hope.

## METHODS

This article is based on 10 non-consecutive months (from July 2018 to October 2020) of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Hamukungu, a fishing village on the shores of Lake George in western Uganda. Hamukungu is one of the few villages that was allowed to remain within QENP after the area was gazetted into a national park by the British colonial government in 1951 (Blomley 2000; UWA 2011). The colonial government imposed restrictions (on farming,

resources, and land), as the village is inside the protected area. The post-colonial state maintained the restrictions and boundaries demarcated by the British. The villagers' resistance and pushback against these restrictions continuously reproduce conflicts with conservation authorities (Blomley 2000; UWA 2011).

I initially set out to understand the nature, origins, and dynamics of these conservation contestations in Hamukungu but quickly noticed that most discussions invoked historical analogies and stories. I began to follow these Basongora vernacular voices to understand how memory is used in everyday contestations against official conservation and other opposing narratives (for example, ethnic and land discourses). I conducted 86 interviews with Basongora pastoralists in Hamukungu. I first conducted interviews ( $n = 39$ ) with elders between the ages of 60 and 80. I also conducted four focus group discussions, two with elders over 60 and two with respondents below the age of 60. The interviews were conducted in Runyakitara, in which I am fluent.

I soon realised that younger people (below 40) also mobilised vernacular memories to discredit conservation policies in QENP. The two age groups invoked the same memories, for the same goals, and even justified similar claims. However, they differed in their delivery of the memories, attention to detail, and in explaining each memory's significance. For example, the older group was more detailed, less animated, and more calculated (particularly when comparing colonial subjugation to contemporary times) than the younger people. These nuances between the different ages show the value of vernacular memory in creating alternative reconstructions without changing the meaning and purpose of memorisations (Mwambari 2021a). Understanding the differences in how memories were vernacularised was a critical turning point for me. It helped me to move beyond the factuality and consistency of memories and focus on the context and political and social agency being legitimised and claimed.

During interviews, elders often recommended that I visit other elders to hear additional important stories. Consent was always sought before the interviews, and personal and institutional ethical guidelines were adhered to. The interviews and focus groups were complemented by informal discussions and observations of other community interactions (e.g. meetings, funerals, and other social gatherings) during my stay in Hamukungu. In addition to the historical ethnography, I found information about Basongora history and culture on their Kingdom website (<http://www.busongora-chwezi.org>). I also utilised archival documents from the London Colonial Office records (CO series) and received permission to analyse Alexander Lee Risby's transcribed interviews with the 1950s–1980s-era QENP wardens and his historical notes. Finally, I consulted the warden and management reports from the Uganda Wildlife Authority library in Kampala.

Reviewing official narratives (e.g. wildlife reports, colonial reports, and interviews with former colonial game wardens) alongside the vernacular memories helped me position myself within the vernacular memories of the Basongora. I became

more responsive and aware of the collective subtleties and innuendos of their narratives, which helped me build rapport with the community. I also interrogated my positionality and subjectivity as a conservation practitioner and reflected on my training and subsequent practice in the field. I began to tease out the coloniality of conservation in Uganda. For instance, the colonial history of dispossession and displacement for conservation is not taught in Ugandan schools, even at the undergraduate level (Author observation). The education curriculum and rhetoric associated with protected areas has yet to be decolonised. In hindsight, these experiences gave me a more proactive understanding of vernacular memories as a form of knowledge production in conservation contestation and identity struggles.

## VERNACULAR MEMORIES OF BELONGING AND IDENTITY

The following section illustrates how the Basongora mobilise vernacular stories to associate their ancestry and origins with the Chewzi dynasty through the appropriation of memories and their attachment to historically important landscapes in QENP.

### Origins in the Chewzi Dynasty

Basongora vernacular history traces the group's origins to the Chewzi<sup>1</sup> dynasty. At its height, between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Chewzi dynasty ruled over most of the African Great Lakes region (including parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Karagwe in northern Tanzania). The Bachwezi were supernatural, mythical humans who introduced iron smelting, agriculture, and pastoralism (Ronald 1953; Chrétien 2003; Heusch 2013). Some have referred to the Chewzi as a cult, spirit, or even deity with one leg in heaven and the other on earth (Cohen 1968; Heusch 2013). The word OmuChwezi is still widely used in western Uganda to refer to a mythical being. Many groups throughout Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi (e.g. the Bahima, Batoro, Banyoro, Banyakore, Banyanbindi, and Tusi) claim to have originated from the Bachwezi (Ronald 1953; Cohen 1968).

The Basongora's link to the Bachwezi stems from two kings: Kogyere and Ndahura I Kya Rubumbi. King Ndahura presided over the Bachwezi glory days when they ruled most of the Great Lakes region (Kashagama 2016). According to the vernacular histories, the Busongora kingdom was born from the collapse of the Chewzi empire in the 1300s. Between the late 1800s and 1900s, the Busongora kingdom collapsed after the Buganda, Bunyoro, and Toro invasions. Eventually, Busongora came under the control of Toro after Toro broke away from Bunyoro Kitara Kingdom (Ephraim 2006).

The Basongora have also appropriated the Chewzi norms of cattle rearing and living harmoniously with wildlife; for e.g. the Basongora coat of arms includes various regalia symbolising cattle rearing, wildlife, and other traditional items like drums

<sup>1</sup>Chwezi can be used interchangeably with Bachwezi



and clothing associated with the Chewzi (Ronald 1953; Cohen 1968). The Basongora's ancestral ties to the Chwezi assert a continuous social-cultural link to QENP. An old man in Hamukungu explained that the Basongora co-existed with wildlife before QENP was created in 1951:

My father was born in 1925, and he never migrated anywhere. I was born in 1946. My father was born here, and we buried him in this village. And the same will happen to me. Since the days of the Bachwezi, long before the park was created, we lived peacefully with wildlife. We have no problems with wildlife. If we were in the habit of killing wildlife, we would have finished these animals by now.

(Interview with an elder at Hamukungu, August 2019).

### Negotiating and Appropriating Vernacular Memories of Belonging

Oral histories are negotiated and appropriated to associate the Basongora's origins with the Chwezi culture. Such appropriation of histories gives vernacular memory its strength as a form of knowledge production. Subordinate communities can remember the past in ways that speak to their envisioned present and future (Forest et al. 2004; Willems 2022). By associating with the ancestral memories of the Chwezi, the Basongora establish their roots, identity, and belonging within the QENP landscape—the ancestral homeland of the renowned Chwezi. They mobilise “first comer, later comer and Indigenous” rhetoric that allows one ethnic group to seek land tenure rights and political legitimacy against competing actors (e.g. conservation) and other ethnic groups (Benjaminsen et al. 2009: 439). The Chwezi and the Basongora (by association) are considered some of the first inhabitants of the Great Lakes region. These vernacular memories of their origins have been used by the Basongora to lobby the government of Uganda for recognition as an Indigenous and minority ethnic group (alongside the Ike and Batwa).<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, these efforts have not yet been successful. Similarly, Li (2000) writes about how ethnic groups in Indonesia mobilise and articulate their Indigenous identity and rights to their ancestral land against state-sponsored development projects attempting to displace and resettle them.

### Living Memories—Different Generations (Tales of Irangara Island)

One often-told Basongora story is about an island called Irangara in Lake George. Almost every person—old, young, and even immigrants in Hamukungu and other Basongora settlements around QENP—has something to say about the island. Historians claim that the Bunyoro Kitara kingdom conducted spiritual rituals, including the coronation of kings, on Irangara Island (Ephraim 2006). In the late 1990s,

Alexander Lee Risby found evidence of human settlement on the island (Ribsy 2002), including artefacts from kraals and pottery dating back to the eighteenth century. Basongora vernacular histories consider the island one of their ancestral homes, a refuge where they fortified themselves against raids from other kingdoms. This reveals the value of the politics of memories—different groups can mix, share, and reproduce the same memory for different purposes. Vernacular memory is not competitive (Rothberg 2009)—the Basongora appropriate and share memories with other ethnic groups in the region. Their vernacular histories about the island as their fortress do not compete with (for example) the Banyoro, who have different histories and memories tied to the same island. The same vernacular memories may also be used to contest land tenure claims against other ethnic groups such as the Bakonzo.

After hearing so much about this island during my fieldwork, I set out to visit it. I received the necessary permission from Uganda Wildlife Authority (UWA) (the island is now a strictly protected area), but unfortunately, my guide fell ill and could not make the trip. However, he told me that the place I wanted to go was more than 5 kilometres from the shore and held artefacts from past Basongora settlements (e.g. pieces of clay pots and signs of past kraals). He explained, “we used to see them (artefacts) while hunting; I tell you it was tiresome carrying a buffalo from there back to the boat and consequently to the village” (Conversation with elderly Musongora man, September 2019).

The memories invoked by the Basongora linking them to QENP show how memorial landscapes are (re)appropriated and influenced by intergenerational vernacular memories and prevailing social-political dynamics (Boerma 2012). For example, I believe many of Hamukungu's inhabitants have never visited Irangara Island. However, many vividly recall the artefacts, bountiful wildlife, and huge trees. The stories about Irangara are a collective, symbolic reminder of what was and what could be; they unconsciously act as a memorial site for the Basongora, keeping the history and significance of the island alive (Malkki 1992). The Basongora understand that the state would never really allow them to resettle on the island. Yet, according to Malkki (1992: 27), the linking of people to place is not about physical territorialisation but the metaphysical attachments that give legitimacy and bind them to places seen to be their homeland and refuge. The island is a perfect example of nature as a social construction (Redclift 1987).

### VERNACULAR MEMORIES OF VICTIMHOOD, RESILIENCE, HEROISM, AND RESISTANCE

In the previous section, I examined how the Basongora establish their ancestry, belonging, and identity in QENP. I now show how they use their memories of wars, civil unrest, and pandemics in QENP to exert present-day political and social agency. In doing so, they evoke memories of victimhood, resilience, resistance, and heroism (often simultaneously) to reinforce their legitimacy within the park.

<sup>2</sup>International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs. ‘The Indigenous World 2022: Uganda’. Accessed at: <https://www.iwgia.org/en/uganda/4645-iw-2022-uganda.html>, on June 21, 2021.

## The Civil Wars Between the Toro and Bunyoro Kingdoms, 1800-1900

Europeans found the already-established kingdoms of Buganda, Bunyoro, Toro, and Ankole while travelling through Uganda in the 1800s in search of the source of the Nile. Toro had been part of the Bunyoro Kitara kingdom until the early 1800s when it broke away, taking Busongora with it (Ephraim 2006). The Bunyoro kingdom did not accept Toro's independence and constantly raided and attacked the new polity (Ephraim 2006).

The arrival of Captain Frederick Lugard changed Toro's fortunes. In 1890, the Imperial British East Africa Company sent Lugard to Uganda to form a protectorate and safeguard the Company and the British government's interests. When Lugard arrived in Toro around 1891, the Bunyoro king (Omukama Kabalega) had overrun much of Toro, including Busongora. Lugard helped the Toro king, Omukama Kasagama, to recapture Busongora and other large swaths of his kingdom (Lugard 1893; Ephraim 2006). In return, Kasagama signed an 1891 agreement giving the Imperial British East Africa Company rights to the lucrative salt trade in Katwe and Kasenyi, the wildlife and ivory trade, and land, including some parts of present-day QENP (Kasagama and Lugard 1891; Good 1972). Lugard subsequently built Fort George to secure the salt and ivory trade for the Company and the protectorate government (Good 1972). In 1906, King Kasagama signed another agreement with Governor Johnstone giving further wildlife and land rights to the British in exchange for support against the Bunyoro. In fact, this agreement officially ceded the Toro kingdom to British colonial control (Johnstone and Kasagama 1906).

In many cases, British colonial territorialisation in Uganda did not directly engage with local kingdoms. Rather, it exploited rivalries between kingdoms or chiefdoms to destabilise and weaken the political and social-economic systems (e.g. the British used Buganda officials to subjugate the Bagisu of Mountain Elgon (Cavanagh and Himmelfarb 2015)). On the one hand, Lugard (1893) claimed that the Bunyoro, Buganda, and Ankole raids had already weakened the Busongora's social-political integrity. On the other hand, the Basongora argued that the British colonial government helped Toro reclaim Busongora from the Bunyoro (this land would later be ceded to the British protectorate with hardly any resistance).

In one of my first encounters with Basongora memories, an elder recalled how King Kasagama had asked them to emigrate and cede certain wildlife-rich areas to the white man. He explained how post-colonial boundary updates (between 1996 and 2000) maintained the 1951 colonial borders and even took more of their land for wildlife:

Just like the white man took our land, President Museveni's government came and took the little that was left. First, we couldn't cultivate, and now we can't even graze our livestock. All the land was taken. We are now in a much worse situation than the white man left us.

(Interview with Musongora elder at Hamukungu, July 2019)

After triangulating different versions of this story, I realised that they all described how the white man used their king to chase them off their land. People felt the current government was doing the same by taking land for tourism and conservation to serve the interests of the state, tourists, and a few elites (Focus Group Discussion in Hamukungu, June 2019). The different versions of this memory show how Basongora vernacular memories carve out their own narrative alongside official histories promoted by historians and the British colonial records. Their vernacular memories speak to how these wars disenfranchised them and resulted in their displacement.

The Basongora's narratives of displacement draw on collective memories of victimisation to leverage (present) political agency against opposing actors (e.g. conservation) who question their claims to QENP. Seoighe (2016: 366) notes the value of victim narratives in post-conflict memorisation: "Memories of victimisation inform contemporary events just as meaning is imparted on the past by contemporary needs and desires." The memorisation and publicisation of the victim narrative can help subordinate groups seek recognition, solidarity, justice, and progressive political change (Pennebaker and Banasik 1997; Seoighe 2016; Willems 2022), as is the case in the QENP landscape.

## Defenders of QENP: Amin's Reign (1970s to 1980s) and ADF Attacks (1998, 2001)

In the late 1970s, state control over many national parks collapsed during Idi Amin's rule. The civil unrest profoundly affected wildlife numbers and park management, with the war to oust Amin's government only worsening the situation (Ashaba 2021). The elders at Hamukungu remember Amin's soldiers abandoning their weapons as they retreated through the park to DRC in the late 1970s. The Busongora vernacular narrative claims that the guns were picked up by ethnic groups from the mountains (Rwenzori) and others south of Lake George. Soon thereafter, a hunting spree lasting more than two months occurred. The park management had fled, so there was no one on the ground to protect the wildlife. The Basongora intervened to protect the animals:

We couldn't take it anymore. We had grown up seeing these animals, we had some form of attachment to them, and we felt bad when we would hear gunfire in the park, and we were also scared the guns would soon be turned onto us. We mobilised our resources from fish and cattle sales and went to Mbarara, where the 3rd Battalion of the Tanzanian forces was. We pleaded with them to come back with us and fight off the poachers. In the end, we paid them to come, and they managed to kill some of the hunters and scare off the others. We, the people UWA treats like criminals, saved this park even before anyone thought of creating UWA. The problem with government workers in the wildlife sector is that they pretend to care about wildlife, but whenever a war breaks out, they run away, like in the 1970s and even more recently in 2000 when

ADF attacked. We have always stayed here to protect the park because it's our home, and we have nowhere else to go like the rest.

(Musongora elder at Hamukungu, June 2019)

Another memory of war often cited by the Basongora in Hamukungu involved fighting the Allied Democratic Forces (ADF). In the late 1990s, the rebel group, based out of Eastern DRC, terrorised many parts of western Uganda, including Kasese, QENP, Bundibugyo, Rwenzori, and as far as Bwindi in the southwest. According to the *New Vision* newspaper,<sup>3</sup> on March 28, 2001, an ADF attack on Hamukungu left three people dead and four abducted. In the Basongora narrative, more people were abducted, and others drowned as they attempted to swim across the lake to flee the rebels.

People at Hamukungu say that ADF was in the park for a few days hunting hippos, elephants, and other bushmeat before attacking the village. The Basongora tried to alert UWA, but all the nearby ranger posts had been abandoned (the UWA staff fortified themselves at the park headquarters in Mweya). After the attack, Major General Kazini of Uganda's People's Defence Forces (UPDF) recruited Basongora men and women as guides and scouts to help push the ADF back. Women were often used as UPDF scouts and spies since "they would look out for rebel hunting camps during their firewood collection" (Focus Group Discussion in Hamukungu, June 2019).

These vernacular memories position the Basongora in a powerful moral position vis-à-vis the wildlife authority. The stories of defending the park during civil unrest prove that the Basongora care about the park (perhaps more than the wildlife custodians). The stories establish QENP as the Basongora's home—a place they will not abandon, despite uncertainties. The wildlife and conservation reports I read during this period do not mention the attacks or the Basongora's role in protecting the wildlife. It is unclear whether the memory is unique to the Basongora or has been silenced in official documents.

When the Basongora vernacularise past civil unrest, they emphasise their role as heroes and defenders of wildlife in QENP. This contrasts with narratives of earlier wars in the 1890s, where they sought recognition as victims. While they could also have portrayed themselves as victims who suffered under the various armed groups that overran the park, they chose to present themselves as defenders of wildlife. The collective memories of defending the park are more valuable, as they demonstrate political and social agency and deal a major moral blow to the conservation actors who ran away. Here, vernacular memory is dynamic and enables subordinate communities like the Basongora to alter their agency and tell stories in ways that best suit the particular context (cf. Willems 2020).

At an April 2019 meeting between UWA and Hamukungu residents, an old man emphatically rejected UWA's claims that Hamukungu villagers had poisoned wildlife and attacked UWA staff, stating, "you UWA try to paint a very negative

picture of Hamukungu to the outside world, which is a pity." He reiterated how the Basongora defended the park during the 1970s civil war and against the ADF, yet UWA "portrayed them as poachers and criminals." These memories are meant to illustrate that the Basongora deserve to remain in QENP—their homeland—and are ready to die for the land and its wildlife. This aligns with Moore's (1993: 395) findings from Zimbabwe, where people invoke "Kutambudzikira nyika" (suffering for the land), a reference to women's protests in the 1970s independence struggles. The memory was invoked again in the late 1980s to protest conservation regulations preventing people from utilising the land in and near Nyanga National Park. The Basongora's perseverance and attachment to the QENP landscape is shaped by their collective vernacular memories, which centre their agency in the social-political and environmental transformations of QENP.

### Pandemics From the 1800s to the 1940s

Pandemics that hit Basongora before 1900 weakened their political-social structure and exposed them to attacks by other kingdoms, sleeping sickness, and eventual colonial dispossession (Lugard 1893; Ephraim 2006). Stanley (1890) and Lugard (1893) described large swaths of savannah and Basongora grazing pastures during their journeys from Buganda to the Rwenzori Mountains. Both travellers noted that this area had already been ravaged by rinderpest and smallpox epidemics by the time they passed through (see also Ephraim 2006). However, another account by a student of Captain Charles Pitman—one of the first game wardens in Uganda—mentions that sleeping sickness did not enter Uganda until the early twentieth century. The earliest reports were made between Karagawe and Ankole around 1906, while areas around Lakes George and Edward were devastated between 1910 and 1913.<sup>4</sup>

The British tried to control the spread of sleeping sickness by relocating people to areas without fields and wildlife (Good 1972; Hoppe 1997). Several ordinances to prevent and suppress sleeping sickness were enacted from 1913<sup>5</sup> through the 1960s. The ordinances provided for the killing of cattle and wildlife, which was thought to facilitate transmission to humans (Langlands 1967; Soff 1971). However, the relocations did not achieve the desired results, and "the consequence of this large population movement and resettlement increased man-tsetse contact, [turning] the pre-existing endemic... into a rampant epidemic" (Good 1972: 31). This resulted in the death of more than 20% of the Basongora inhabiting areas around Lakes Edward and George (Langlands 1967).

Sleeping sickness was a thoroughly colonial disease (Lyons 2002)—colonial government tactics contributed to

<sup>4</sup>A paper on tsetse control in Uganda submitted to Captain Charles Pittman. 1964 PRO, Z.MSS PIT/C93. Accessed at the London Natural History Museum, Library and Archives, May 2022.

<sup>5</sup>Introducing new Bill, "Ordinance to enable better measures to be taken for the prevention, arrest and suppression of sleeping sickness." The Uganda Herald December 7, 1928, PRO, GB 0809 carpenter. Accessed at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine Archives, May 2022.

<sup>3</sup>New Vision. 2001. ADF attack park village. [https://www.newvision.co.ug/new\\_vision/news/1037311/adf-attack-park-village](https://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1037311/adf-attack-park-village). Accessed on May 27, 2020.



the epidemic and weakened the social and political fabric of African societies. In Uganda, the British used sleeping sickness to displace local people from their land and strategically control labour (Hoppe 1997). The colonial government declared areas around Lakes George and Edward to be sleeping sickness-restricted zones and drew on sleeping sickness ordinances to prohibit humans and livestock from entering. The activist Eslanda G. Robeson (while travelling through Congo and Uganda) noted that more than 2,000 Africans had been removed from an island in Lake George by the protectorate government in 1912 to contain sleeping sickness. Elders at Hamukungu confirmed that this was Irangara Island.

While other sleeping sickness zones around major lakes were eventually repopulated, this never occurred around Lakes George and Edward (Soff 1971; Risby 2002). Instead, they were declared game reserves in 1925 and 1930 by the protectorate administration under the 1926 Game Ordinance after an edict from the Colonial Office in London (Uganda Game Department reports 1923–1961). This process dismantled local people's centuries-old ancestral, cosmological, and political relations (Marijnen 2022).

It is unsurprising that many Basongora believe sleeping sickness was a British ploy to dispossess their land. Basongora vernacular histories claim that more than 90% of Basongora and their cattle were killed by sleeping sickness and forced displacements (an estimated 250,000 people died in one year).<sup>6</sup> In contrast, British colonial records documented only a few thousand displacements and deaths from areas around Lakes George and Edward between 1913 and 1920. According to these reports, displacements were intended to reduce the number of human deaths by separating humans from wildlife disease carriers, specifically buffalo (Soff 1971; Hoppe 1997). The post-independent state of Uganda and its parastatals continue to rely on the colonial version of events (see UWA 2011). Yet, the Basongora maintain that the extent of the sleeping sickness and rinderpest was exaggerated and blame the colonial government for these pandemics' impacts on their social and political structure.

Here, we might prioritise the context of vernacular memories over strict factuality. In vernacularising the history of pandemics, the Basongora centre how the colonial government manipulated the disease to remove them from QENP and diminish their livestock. These memories are overdetermined by current struggles. References to sleeping sickness displacements are compared to contemporary conservation and political tribulations. Memories of overcoming the turmoil of the pandemics highlight Basongora's resilience and give the community a sense of hope and perseverance in the face of unfair treatment by past and present conservation-related displacements. For example, current livestock predation by carnivores and struggles with neighbouring ethnic groups are framed as intentionally orchestrated to stifle Basongora livelihoods (just like the colonial machine's manipulation of sleeping sickness, which forced them to leave QENP (Emmanuel and Marijnen, in review)).

<sup>6</sup>Minority Rights. 2018. Basongora. <https://minorityrights.org/minorities/basongora>. Accessed on May 11, 2022.

The political and social agency gained from such vernacular memories may motivate subtle opposition to park policies, for example, grazing within the park, firewood harvest, and retaliation against carnivores (Author reference; UWA 2011). It also contributes to more direct and open approaches. In 2006, a group of Basongora who had migrated to Virunga Park in the DRC in the 1940s, 1970s, and 1999 migrated back and forcefully settled in QENP, claiming it as their ancestral land (Mapesa 2007). The government, against the advice of UWA and other conservation actors, allowed them to temporarily remain in the park while it found alternative land for them. Neighbouring ethnic groups like the Bankozo claimed the government favoured these migrants in an act of patronage (Focus Group Discussion in Hamukungu, June 2019). The Basongora retorted that they were taking back their land which had been appropriated through the colonial government's manipulation of sleeping sickness (Informal discussion with Basongora elders at Hamukungu, June 2019).

Interestingly, UWA has never explicitly disputed the Basongora's ancestral links to QENP. In fact, the 2001 and 2011 management plans for QENP offer brief histories of the park, including its association with the Basongora (UWA 2001; UWA 2011). However, UWA opposes any degazettement of the park to restore the land lost by the Basongora and continues to uphold the boundaries demarcated by the colonial government in 1951 (Mapesa 2007).

## CONCLUSION

This article introduced a vernacular memory framework to the political ecology of conservation conflicts and resistance. It explored how vernacular memory can situate oral histories and provide political and social agency for the Basongora's contemporary claims against conservation. The Basongora invoke memories of victimhood, heroism, resistance, and resilience to legitimise their claims to QENP. These claims can force the state into negotiation. For example, the government found alternative land for the Basongora who migrated from DRC in 2006 and forcefully settled in the park.

This paper has advanced the role of vernacular memory as an alternative way of understanding the production of protected areas and social-political discourses within the field of political ecology. Recent studies on the political ecology of memory (e.g. Osterhoudt 2016; Popartan and Ungureanu 2022) have underscored memory's significance in how people find meaning in their everyday activities vis-à-vis their histories of subjugation and contestations and claim over resource management. This paper goes further to understand contemporary nature-society contestations through vernacular memories. It embraces the multidirectional nature of vernacular memory politics as productive and transformative for political ecology. Following Rothberg's (2009) multidirectional memory, I illustrated 1) the memories foregrounded, 2) how memories dynamically respond to present contestations, and 3) how memories produce ecologies of conflict within past and present social-political and environmental dynamics of QENP.



The multidirectional vernacularised memories go beyond the Basongora's claim to QENP—they are agentic tools to gain political and cultural recognition from the state and neighbouring ethnic groups. For the last 20 years, the Basongora struggled to gain official recognition as one of Uganda's traditional kingdoms. They persisted and restored their kingdom with no support from the government and strong opposition from the Rwenzururu Kingdom of the Bakonzo. In addition, violent exchanges between the two ethnic groups have escalated over land (beyond QENP) the Basongora claim was taken from them by the colonial government and Bakonzo between 1920 and the 1970s (Reuss and Titeca 2017).<sup>7</sup> The Basongora have also used these versatile vernacular histories of dispossession and displacement to unsuccessfully claim recognition as a threatened minority and Indigenous tribe of Uganda (alongside the Ika of Kidepo and Batwa of Bwindi, who were also displaced by colonial and post-colonial governments to create conservation areas).<sup>8</sup>

As a political ecology approach, vernacular memory goes beyond analysing contestations in conservation landscapes; it offers alternative pasts for historical events that may be repressed or silenced within the violent histories of nature preservation and conservation. In this way, vernacular memory may contribute to convivial conservation's calls for reparations and justice regarding historical and neo-colonial dispossessions (Büscher and Fletcher 2015: 291). In addition, future research can employ vernacular memory to understand alternative local knowledge perspectives of historical and current partners in combating climate and biodiversity loss. This can contribute to Western scientific knowledge structures but also counter hegemonic capitalist and neoprotectionism nature conservation ideologies.

### Acknowledgements

I am very grateful to the communities of Hamukungu who participated in the research and shared their stories with me. I am indebted to Clovis Ahimbisibwe and Olivia Nalule for their tremendous work in organising interviews in QENP and collecting archival data in Kampala, respectively. I wish to thank my supervisors, Esther Marijnen, Koen Vlassenroot, and Dennis Babaasa, for their constructive feedback. I also thank Esther Marijnen for comments on earlier versions of the manuscript and thinking with me through the conceptualisation and writing process. I also wish to thank David Mwambari for navigating me through the literature on the politics of memory. I am also grateful to Alexander Lee Risby for allowing me to use his transcribed interviews and sharing a few anecdotes of his experience in QENP in the late 1990s. I am also grateful to Uganda Wildlife Authority and the Uganda National Council for Science and Technology for permission to conduct research at Queen Elizabeth National Park.

<sup>7</sup>Monitor. 2012. Basongora-Bakonzo wrangle: A looming tribal bloodbath?. <https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/basongora-bakonzo-wrangle-a-looming-tribal-bloodbath--1520132>. Accessed on May 15, 2022.

<sup>8</sup>Minority Rights. 2018. (see Note 2)

### Declaration of competing/conflicting interests

The author declares no competing interests in the conduct of this research.

### Financial Disclosures

This research is part of a PhD study supported by the grant (NICHE-GLR-264), Netherlands Initiative for Capacity Development in Higher Education (NICHE) project for Enhancing Capacity in NRM Conflict Resolution for Stability and Inclusive Growth in the Greater Virunga Landscape (3CProject) and Global Minds Operation Fund For PhD candidates, Ghent University 2020. Archival data collection in London was supported by the Erasmus Mundus scholarship and hosted by the London School of Economics and Political Science.

### Research and Ethics Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by Mbarara University of Science and Technology REF MUREC 1/7.

### Data Availability

Data are available on request and in accordance with Ghent University's data policy and ethical approval guidelines of Mbarara University of Science and Technology.

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Received: 27-Jun-2022; Revised: 17-May-2023; Accepted: 12-Jun-2023; Published: 26-Sep-2023