

Season 5, Episode 7 (July 2024)

Re-imagining memorialization and documentation in Afghanistan

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Tine: Welcome to this new episode of the Justice Visions podcast. My name is Tine Destrooper, and today's episode is part of our miniseries on memorialization in TJ contexts. Today, we will be zooming in on memorialization and documentation in post-conflict contexts, or actually it is more precise to say also in context of ongoing violence. And joining me today for this episode is my co-host Brigitte Herremans, welcome Brigitte.

Brigitte: Hello, it's nice to join you for another episode on memory practises and actually it's a subject that triggered quite a lot of interest, as we also noticed from the previous two episodes.

Tine: Yes, and I think especially in the last episode where we foregrounded informal practises in the domain of memory, which we did of course, to showcase the diversity of memory practises that is emerging the bottom up, which is interesting because we're seeing all these grassroots initiatives shaping up, often alongside more formal initiatives that are also expanding as we've seen with the formalisation of memory as a fifth pillar of transitional justice.

Brigitte: Actually we also wanted to show how these informal practises, which are often led by civil society, or also artists, are often the only side of memorialization because often formal avenues are not available. And this is, of course, the case for the Syrian refugees in Shatila, which we discussed previously. And of course in so many other conflicts. So this makes these informal practises all the more relevant to consider nowadays.

Tine: That's true, and I think another issue that came across quite clearly is that these informal practises that are rooted in lived experience, they're often very closely linked to other TJ pillars, other TJ practises like truth-seeking, but also other justice-related practises, like documentation for example.

Brigitte: And this makes me think of what you once said when we were working on Syria, that documentation is the kind of spider in the web of transitional justice efforts. And I thought it was really interesting because of the fact that memorialization is seen as a stand-alone TJ pillar with, of course, the report by Fabian Savioli, who also highlighted in this report the centrality of documentation, pointing to the importance of collecting evidence and testimonies after the cessation of violence.

Tine: True, after the cessation of violence. But I think what's also really interesting is that this kind of documenting that we've been touching upon in these last couple of episodes is, that they are means of resisting violence too, no? Trying to stop it in cases of ongoing conflict. And it's also true for memorialization, is that people don't necessarily see it as something that happens only after the conflict, but something

that's really an element in a broader action repertoire of mobilisation against human rights violations, against enforced silences, against forgetting - a forgetting that often even happens as the conflict is still ongoing, no?

Brigitte: Absolutely. And we also see it, of course, in Syria, where we precisely have that waning of the international attention for ongoing violence for human rights violations and crimes. And that is experienced by so many victims as a kind of violence in and of itself. So, this is a case where you really see that a different kind of practice is lying at the intersection between memorialization and documentation.

Tine: I think that also really goes to the topic of innovation and a lot of innovation happening in this domain, no? In terms of counter-archives that are being established to challenge official narratives and that are essential, in that various documentation practices, from forensic documentation to artistic practises are there really being used to acknowledge victims' experiences making sure that their stories are not glossed over.

Brigitte: Yes, and we will discuss several of these issues with our guests today, whom we also had the pleasure of hearing at the Justice Conference. With us today are Sophia Milosevic Bijleveld and Bono Olgado. Sophia, leads the memorialization and transitional justice programme at the Afghanistan Human Rights and Democracy Organisation (AHRDO). She is a memorialization specialist who explores the political use of cultural heritage and the dynamics of memory politics in post-conflict settings. And Bono is a documentalist at the Human Rights Information and Documentation Systems, or HURIDOCS. He is an archivist, a scholar and a community organiser who has been working also at the intersections of documentation, technology and human rights in the Global South. Welcome!

Tine: And maybe for our listeners, Bono and Sophia, I was wondering as a starter to this conversation, if you could tell us a bit more about your joint work and how that ties into the broader questions that we're discussing today in terms of how documenting human rights abuses may contribute to memorialization?

Sophia: So maybe I'll give you a little bit of context about our work. So AHRDO, was founded in 2009 in Kabul in Afghanistan and has worked on promoting human rights in Afghanistan and documenting atrocity crimes and advancing a victim-centred approach to memorialization and transitional justice in Afghanistan. Over the years AHRDO has developed a number of methodologies that are best suited to the local context of conflict survivors and victims' families and grassroots communities across Afghanistan. And we have used art-based approaches, methodologies such as theatre of the oppressed, for example, forum theatre as well as the Memory Box project, which is also an arts-based project. Through that Memory Box Project, AHRDO has collected over 15.000 personal items, including diaries, photographs, clothing items, books, cutlery and personal memorials of war victims. In 2019, AHRDO opened the first museum dedicated to Afghan war victims, the Afghanistan Centre for Memory and Dialogue in Kabul, which was a space for individual as well as collective memorialization in Afghanistan. And with all the documents that we had and the testimonies we had, we felt it was important to continue to share these testimonies and to continue to advocate for victims. And that's how we turned to HURIDOCS with their unique experience of working on

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documentation to be able to continue our work and to be able to launch an online platform.

Bono: I'll pick up the story from here, but also start off by a broad introduction about HURIDOCS. We've been established almost 40 years ago with the mission of helping human rights organisations with their documentation and information needs. So, we help through providing consultation services, or providing them infrastructure to be able to make use, organise, analyse their documentation and information, to be utilised for various justice mechanisms. So, we received an inquiry from AHRDO around August of 2022, asking us if we can help set up a database to just organise all of this documentation that we've had, that they were able to bring with them in exile. And so that started an ongoing discussion in terms of not only how to set up a system or a database to manage the information and this data, but also to continue the mission that they had pre-exile. And so, most of our discussions since then really have focused on: how can we utilise online platforms or databases or really lean into digital technologies to be able to preserve, analyse and provide access to this very rich documentation that they have.

Tine: I was wondering how this experience, working with AHRDO is also possibly shaping other projects, or maybe even your general approach at HURIDOCS?

Bono: Interestingly, it was quite a challenge for us at HURIDOCS because the bulk the database initiatives that we have established thus far really focuses on what we call the violations approach, right? Like, who did what to whom, which is primarily shaped by legal norms and mechanisms. There is a certain level of accuracy guided by what is considered to be legible to the court, so to speak, right? But here comes AHRDO with this rich documentation that is, as Sophia mentioned, driven by memorialization initiatives that is victim-centred, that may or may not actually be legible at this current state with regards to the court. So this pushed us to really rethink or rather expand how we'll go about creating databases for AHRDO, because the technologies that we utilise invariably shape how we manage this documentation. As I always put it, documentation shapes not only what we remember but also how we are being made to remember.

Tine: That's super interesting, Bono, and maybe just to give our listeners a better insight of what this looks like in practise, could you speak a bit about what these technologies or these tools that you normally offer, what those look like, but also how, how that has been different in the AHRDO project?

Bono: So when a partner comes to us, we do what we call a discovery phase, wherein we sit down with our partners and ask them how did you actually collect this information in this data? Who are your end users? What are what are your exact goals, right? So for example, if you follow the typical who did what to whom logic, then we'll have data buckets for your victims, for your perpetrators and the acts itself. So we walk them through this process of developing what we call a data schema and then the data schema becomes the basis of the database itself. Here at HURIDOCS, we do a lot of infrastructure work, and infrastructure tends to be invisible unless it is broken. And so a lot of our work is actually hidden from what a lot of human rights defenders or the end users of databases would be engaged in. So there are a number of online databases that we've set up. Currently we are close to 400. That means we have worked with 400 human rights defenders across the globe.

Very few of these databases are available online, for obvious reasons. Once a database is set up, then our partners start populating information or using those tools to actually do their documentation work. So, they either come with us with a rich collection of documents already, or they're looking for a tool to actually guide them with their documentation. Often it happens both, right? Because they come to us with documents and we create a database solution for them and then that database solution reshapes those documentation practises, which will then be used as they move forward.

Brigitte: Sophia, could you maybe tell us a bit more what Bono has just said about how the database connects to your work on the Afghanistan Memory Home project and the work with Afghan war victims?

Sophia: So our online museum, the Afghanistan Memory Home was conceived as a dual platform, as both museum and memorial on one side, to honour the victims, and the stories of survivors, as well as a database to document atrocity crimes that are happening in Afghanistan. And our database captures data both, again, on the memorialization and memorial part, as well as the database part that dates from 1978. So, I think when Bono was talking about complexity of the data, I think that was also one of the things, is the amount of data that we have and the fact, unfortunately, that we are still documenting. Atrocity crimes are happening every day and we are still documenting these and integrating these. So it's an ongoing work. In a way, it's very complex because, our memorial side of it incorporates some art-based methodologies that we developed in Afghanistan and that we worked with victims in Afghanistan, particularly our Memory Box Project, which again is an art-based approach to memorialization, as well as documenting crimes that are happening today. And the number of victims is so immense in Afghanistan that you sort of get lost there and really giving a voice and a face to each of these victims, I think is really an important part of truth-telling.

Tine: Thank you, Sophia. And I was wondering in that context, if you could maybe elaborate on what you see as the added value of arts and art-based approaches for memorialization in this specific context, or maybe even beyond the specific context. What art-based approaches could bring to the domain of memorialization and then documentation as a as a nexus of memorialization?

Sophia: So as you mentioned before, memorialization lends itself particularly well to informal transitional justice mechanisms, to serve the needs of the victims and the victims' families. What I think is quite powerful with memorialization initiatives being art-based, is that it really helps the victims shape their perception of traumatic past and for them to also imagine a better future. For us, it's also been a way to engage groups from diverse communities, from diverse perspectives or backgrounds and allow them to engage in a non-threatening space, and to allow them to engage in dialogue around issues of truth, issues of justice and reconciliation. And I think for us, in the Afghan context, memorialization can be really considered as a form of symbolic reparation and a way of acknowledging the stories of the victims.

Brigitte: Maybe I wanted to go back to Bono to touch on these art-based approaches, and also on the tension that you already alluded to, the tension between a more kind of forensic evidence and the way that this memorialization project works with testimonies of victims and other forms of truth. So, how do you address that

tension between different forms of documentation and truth-telling as HURIDOCS more broadly?

Bono: So Sophia pointed out, these two different logics that seems to exist in transitional justice documentation practises right? So the first one that we mentioned already, which is legal norms and legal approaches of documentation. On the other hand, Sophia also pointed to this more contemporary move towards quantification. Working with AHRDO challenges us by introducing this new set of epistemologies or approaches driven by artists and also being victim-centred. It questions really our existing approaches to how to go about the databases that we develop. What I've seen through the years of developing databases is, it matters who we work with in terms of developing these databases. So you can have a statistician in the room. You can have lawyers in the room. You can have database professionals. But when we are talking about creating a platform or a database that would reflect these art-based approaches, then we would need a different form of expertise, which is quite challenging because we're technically creating counter-epistemologies to existing practises of documentation. It would be tricky for us to fall into standardised forms of remembering or standardised forms of documentation. And so our database initiatives then change based on how our partners approach their documentation initiatives. Invariably, of course this reshapes us at HURIDOCS.

Tine: And this is interesting because it also goes to the question of what is the role of documentation, or what is the role of memorialization in transitional justice processes, no?

Bono: We are at the privileged point or at a privileged vantage point to see how documentation has changed throughout the last four decades and I have to say we are getting more and more of these memorialization art-based victim-centred requests for databases and platforms as opposed to, say maybe five years ago when most of the data-basing initiatives focused on: how can we create a database for legal mechanisms? So we have always been preoccupied with chain of custody, with provenance, with authenticity. Not to say that these three things are no longer needed in art-based approaches or memorialization initiatives, but the focus is different or rather to be more precise, the conceptualization of what authenticity is, is different. At HURIDOCS because we work through databases and standardised practises, to keep things open, to have pluralism is constantly a challenge. And again, having more experts, different forms of expertise is key to figuring these all out.

Sophia: If I can just add one little thing to what Bono was saying, because I think it's also really important for us and from our experience, with the takeover of the Taliban and our very difficult experience of having to close our brick and mortar structure that we had in Afghanistan, our museum, for which we had worked many years to open it, and that was an important place for victims to come and rally and to gather. For us, we also understand that the material that we collect and the documents and documentation work that we collect is really unique, but it's also at risk. And to put it on a digital platform was also for us an important way of archiving and safekeeping the work that we have done in the past. So I think that's also an important aspect that I wanted to add to what Bono had said in terms of also the importance of that work and why we also decided to work with HURIDOCS on that.

Tine: I had a small and very practical follow up question on that because at Justice Visions, we're always very interested in hearing more about these new methods and I wanted to ask if you could speak a bit more about what that brings to the project.

Sophia: So in the past, we worked with the Memory Box initiative that is now digitalized and online. And recently we worked with a new approach, also again an art-based approach which is called body mapping. And that is a storytelling and truth-telling approach, that is both a therapeutic tool for self-expression, but also for community-building. And we worked with the participants during a five-day workshop and participants are guided through a series of exercises that start by tracing the outline of their bodies. They use collage, sort of mixed media to embellish their bodies with symbol images and representations of different aspects of their lives, of identity, their memories, and their emotions. And it creates a quite powerful tool for exploring their own experience. I think what is important, is for them to be able to also place their individual story in a longer perspective, in a longer sort of historical context and perspective. And that's also what that process allows them to do. And then what happens, both with the body mapping as well as with the memory box, is that we organise physical exhibitions. And that enables the victims to share their testimonies with their community and then address some of the stigma that, for example, there might be, and have a broader discussion about a number of issues that they might be facing as victims.

Brigitte: Thank you so much for making this really clear. And I was wondering, Bono, while we're into methodologies: you started a project on datafication of memory politics in transitional justice mechanisms. Could you maybe give us a bit of background on what it is and also what it brings to the field of memory politics?

Bono: So, for the past two years I've been intrigued by this emergence of databases or the use of data, specifically for memorialization. So I've been studying how different human rights groups engaged in data-driven approaches and methodologies and how it shapes, not only what we remember but how we are being made to remember. So I'm particularly interested in how we go about the design of these technologies and how the design of these technologies invariably shapes memory politics. And what I found in my research, is that there is this push and pull and this tension between being challenged by a new set of methodologies, but at the same time resisting the claims of datafication, because datafication in different fields has this particular logic that says more data will XYZ, right? And we don't want to fall into the same trap in terms of memory. Just because we're collecting more data does not necessarily mean that it will actually lead to justice. The processes of how we go about these documentation practices are key in really figuring out how we can actually pursue justice in new set of forms, right? Or reconceptualizing what data means within this particular field. For a very long time, when we think about data and transitional justice, we're probably thinking about the counts of the number of victims, right? Or in more recent years, we'll see, like geospatial mapping of where the victimisation is happening, we'll see data visualisations that are really an extension of how we see data work in other fields and other domains. But initiatives such as AHRDO's Memory Box and their current body mapping initiative really reconfigures what we mean by documentation and what we mean by data. The challenge is to design technologies that actually support this new set of methodologies as opposed to flattening them. Which is the challenge because archives by default, we're not even thinking about datafication, but archives by default have this flattening mechanism of

classification and organisation, of creating categories that would neatly fall into our boxes or our folders or our data schemas, right? But the nuances and the richness of memory of victims... It deserves more than mere mechanisms of classification and categorization. It would be very easy for us to coopt memorialization and documentation, and do what we're comfortable in doing, right? But that's the purpose of art, right? That's the purpose of a victim-centred approach. It really dismantles questions and reforms us and the transitional justice in a broader human rights space do our practise norms. So it's an exciting space and exciting time, but also we need to be worried in terms of where we're going

Tine: Thank you so much Bono. And I'm afraid we're nearing the end of this episode and the last question that we always ask about our interviewees on this podcast, is what kind of evolutions or events you're observing that make you hopeful and you've given us a lot to think about already. And I think that a lot of people will be inspired by the initiatives that you're describing, but if there is one last thing that you would like to highlight in terms of what inspires you, then this is your moment to do so. And maybe Sophia, I'm going to start with you.

Sophia: I have to say that it's quite difficult to be hopeful in the Afghan context. I find hope in the resilience of the Afghan victims. They're determined to share their stories. They're determined to do so, despite the very limited avenues for justice. So their engagement in different spaces is really inspiring and reinforces my belief in their strength and in their determination. Another thing that brings me hope, is increased recognition for the importance of memorialization, both in formal or informal transitional justice processes. And digital platforms, as the one that we developed; the Afghanistan Memory Home is a vital space for victims to advocate for their rights, especially in Afghanistan, but also beyond. And I am hopeful that these platforms will enable them to continue to share their stories and to continue fighting for justice and recognition.

Bono: For us HURIDOCS we're constantly inspired and we draw hope from our partners. We're there to support the initiatives of the partners that approach us for assistance and constantly with every single inquiry that we receive, we are both humbled and moved by the documentation that people on the ground do day in and day out with very limited resources in highly precarious situations. And so we do our best to live up to those standards. It is easy not to be hopeful in this space, but every time that we hear the stories of both the victims and those who fight for justice and those people who do the documentation work that enables the pursuit of these various forms of justice, that inspires us, that challenges us. And we look forward to continuing being there for our partners as we help them reshape what justice could mean, and what justice could look like.

Tine: Thank you. And I think you're both doing that in a very inspiring way. So we'll definitely make sure to link to these various projects and initiatives in the show notes, which can be found on justicevisions.org. We will be back with a new episode after the summer, but for now, Sophia and Bono, thank you so much.