



Refugees' diasporic memories and the politics of democratisation

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Wolfson College, University of Oxford
Linton Road, Oxford OX2 6UD

This report¹ analyses the main themes arising from the presentations and discussions at the 'Refugees' diasporic memories and the politics of democratisation' workshop organised by the International Migration Institute and Refugee Studies Centre on 18 February 2011.

The workshop provided a space for academics to critically engage with the different forms that memories take and the various actors involved in the process of remembering and memory creation in contexts of displacement. Issues that participants discussed included the embeddedness of diasporic memories, memories as homelands, and forgetting or remaining silent about past lives in countries of origin. The workshop consisted of three panels. The first discussed the ways in which refugees process their memories of 'home' in exile. The second explored how refugees transfer their memories of home between generations in exile and back to their countries of origin. The final panel examined the political impacts of refugee memories.

¹ Written by Ayla Bonfiglio. Thanks are owed to Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and Jacqueline Smith for their feedback and comments.

The embedded nature of memories

The first key theme present throughout the workshop discussions was the embedded nature of diasporic memories. In particular, presenters focused on three levels of embeddedness: the migrant who forms a memory, the ideology or belief that positions a memory, and the place that shapes a memory.

In her presentation on the memories of South Vietnamese female veterans, Natalie Nguyen explained that memories are defined by their subjectivity and the functions they serve their possessors. Dr Nguyen interviewed two sisters during her fieldwork and found that each had remembered the same past in very different ways. She accepted both accounts as 'reality' because the sisters had remembered the past in purposeful ways according to their unique impressions, identities, and ways of coping with and processing reality.

Workshop presenters also explored memories in relation to their political positions and objectives. In this way, the memory of a refugee represents one side of a conflict or highly politicised issue. During her research on young Lhotshampa refugees growing up in exile in Nepal, Rosalind Evans observed conflicting memories of the same political period from the perspectives of the Bhutanese government, adult refugees, and refugee youth. In particular, refugee youth who had adopted the memories of camp elders – some of whom had been anti-monarchy activists – had highly politicised memories because of the partial histories they had received.

Also focusing on the inter-generational transmission of memories among protracted refugees, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh examined the ways in which Sahrawi refugees developed a shared memory of national struggle for independence that they publicly expressed to international audiences. The Sahrawi refugees' political representative, the Polisario Front, protects and promulgates this national memory because of its perceived role in securing political recognition from international state and non-state actors. Evelyn Ribert also observed Spanish migrants and refugees in France promoting a uniform, public memory. She explained that Spanish migrants and refugees formed an organisation around such memories to secure economic and political rights in France. Furthermore, J. Olaf Kleist explored how Australians remembered the 2001 Tampa Affair (when the Australian government had refused entry to a boat carrying asylum seekers) according to their political beliefs and objectives. In one instance, a group of Australians remembered the failure to protect Tampa passengers by fusing their plight with the country's founding myth and likening the asylum seekers to original Australian settlers. In a second instance, a group called Refugee Action Collective remembered the failure to protect Tampa passengers as part of a more general failing of the Conservative governing party. In both cases, the memories were formed by political beliefs and objectives.

In her presentation about Cubans living in Spain and Cubans living in the United States, Mette Louise Berg discussed how memories form in relation to the environment, and in particular to places of exile. She observed that a new territory plays a significant role in memory formation because it impacts a migrant's sense of belonging. In the United States, migrants referred to Cuba as their 'homeland', whereas in Spain, Cuba was their 'home'. Dr Berg explained that the memories of Cuban migrants living in the United States revealed a more distant relationship with Cuba and attributed this to the United States' more economically and politically diverse Cuban diaspora. Contrastingly, Spain's Cuban diaspora community was less powerful, both economically and politically. This could explain Cuban migrants feeling more closely connected to Cuba and referring to the country as their 'home'.

Memories as homelands

The second key theme present during the workshop discussions was the notion of diasporic memories as homelands. Often refugees' homes or homelands no longer exist and remain only in their memories. Rosalind Evans spoke about a clear homeland existing in the memories of Lhotshampa refugee youth, evidenced by their perception of direct participation in the revolutionary struggle and their adopted memories of Bhutan from camp elders. In this way, the youth's homeland recalled a time and a place, rather than simply a place. She explained that the unwillingness of some Lhotshampa to be resettled abroad illustrated a commitment to and belief in their homeland-memory.

In contrast to the case of Lhotshampa refugee youth, Abbas Shiblak discussed memories as homelands for Palestinians experiencing exile. He explained that as a result of oppression experienced in Arab host countries, Palestinians were prompted to form coherent communities in exile based on their collective memories. Moreover, Mr Shiblak said that for some Palestinians, return was not an option because it would mean facing the reality that one's home was being lived in by someone else. Thus, he argued that returning to one's homeland does not necessarily mean a return to one's physical home, but a return to one's self.

Forgetting the past

The third key theme running through the day's discussions was that of forgotten or silenced memories. Workshop speakers and participants explored the notion that gaps in memories or the complete silencing of memories can be as telling of refugees' past experiences and homelands as intact and uncensored memories. Their discussions examined 'forgotten' memories on a variety of levels, including who or what is choosing to forget, who or what is being forgotten, and the reasons for forgetting. The three cases that speakers examined illustrated the strong relationship between memory loss and suppression and the conditions of forced displacement and political and social marginalisation.

At the level of the state, Dr Nguyen explained how governments can forget or remain silent in her presentation about the South Vietnamese diaspora. The Vietnamese government does not include South Vietnam in its national heroic narrative of resistance to foreign invasion and does not remember the losses that South Vietnamese sustained during the Vietnam War. Dr Nguyen held that remembering such a history would threaten the dominant Vietnamese society of the present day. In this way, state memories reflect the outcome of competing memories.

Former female soldiers from South Vietnam have also chosen to forget or remain silent about their memories of the war. These members of the Vietnamese diaspora have experienced pressure to suppress their memories because of the tension between their past responsibilities as soldiers and as women, the tension between their past roles as soldiers and their present lives, and the trauma they experienced during and following the war. Dr Nguyen explained that all of these elements of tension and trauma represent possible or perceived sources of shame regarding the past and present lives of these women, for memories are evidence of a failure to uphold maternal responsibilities, require men to share their military history, and are evidence of engaging in a social female-taboo of serving in the military. While some former female soldiers do participate in commemorative marches in their adopted countries, showing a desire to be remembered, their problematic role in the war has excluded women from war histories and statistics and from the memories of their past enemies and allies alike.

Mr Shiblak explored the forgotten or silenced memories of Palestinians in exile. Unlike the South Vietnamese case, Mr Shiblak discussed the action of forgetting or suppressing memories of their homelands as a political and economic survival strategy. Many Palestinians experienced imprisonment because of their beliefs and identity, or had to make the choice between staying politically active and migrating to the Gulf to find work and maintain their livelihoods. In this way, Mr Shiblak associated remembering with active protest.

In her research on Berbers living in Algeria, Judith Sheele observed that Berbers attribute their memory loss about culture and tradition to Arabs' taking their historical records and interfering with their songs, cultural practices, and religious institutions. Moreover, she explained that Algerian Berbers believe that archives of their culture exist in France, perceiving France as a powerful gatekeeper to their memories.

Lastly, Dr Fiddian-Qasmiyeh analysed Sahrawi refugee youth's memory loss as both a coping mechanism while they lived and studied outside of their 'home-refugee-camps', and as a result of political oppression in the camps. She argued that remembering their separation from parents, families, and home-camps while they completed their studies abroad was overwhelming for youth. Moreover, she explained that for the sake of international recognition, 'official national' Sahrawi memories – transmitted by the Polisario Front – replaced 'private tribal' memories originally held by Sahrawi families – transmitted by kin in the refugee camps and in their homeland prior to displacement. Dr Fiddian-Qasmiyeh held that forgetting the 'home-tribe' memories may challenge the long-term survival of the camps, for it risks obscuring crucial local dynamics.