



“This Monument Keeps the Truth for Us... This Place Will Still Speak”: The Role of the Atiak Monument in Survivors’ Healing and Emotional Well-Being in Atiak Subcounty, Northern Uganda

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Abstract

This study explored the contribution of memorialization to survivors’ healing and emotional well-being in post-conflict Acholi Land, using the Atiak Monument in Atiak Sub-County, Amuru District, as a case study. The objectives were to examine the role of the Atiak Monument in supporting survivors’ healing and recovery, assess the effectiveness of post-conflict recovery initiatives in promoting psychosocial well-being and social reintegration, and explore the contribution of international actors to memorialization efforts in Atiak Sub-County, Amuru District, Uganda. A phenomenological study design was employed, and data were collected from 46 respondents using interview guides. A phenomenological research design was considered appropriate because the research questions sought to understand the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings that participants attached to the phenomenon under study. The design enabled exploration of participants’ experiences in depth and from their own perspectives. Through this approach, rich insights were generated about how individuals experience and interpret the phenomenon, enabling the study to answer research questions focused on understanding experiences rather than measuring variables or testing relationships. The findings revealed that the Atiak Monument plays a significant role in supporting survivors’ healing by providing a space for remembrance, collective mourning, emotional expression, and community reflection. The study recommends introducing interactive educational and healing-oriented programs at the monument site, involving schools, local organizations, survivors, and community members in activities such as storytelling, dialogue sessions, commemorative events, and history les-

sons—aimed at fostering remembrance, healing, resilience, and emotional well-being among survivors and future generations.

Subject Areas

Culture

Keywords

Memorials, Healing, Psychosocial Support, Atiak, Uganda

1. Introduction

The role of monuments in post-conflict recovery includes: commemoration and remembrance, historical preservation, reconciliation and healing, peacebuilding and conflict prevention, education, symbolism, aesthetics, psychosocial impact, and political and social functions [1].

Social cohesion and reconciliation, psychosocial healing, and trauma recovery can be seen as the long-term spillover effects of monuments if properly planned [2]. Post-conflict interventions are most likely to improve governance and institutional development, enhance peacebuilding and conflict prevention, stimulate infrastructure rehabilitation, and amplify cultural restoration and identity, among other post-conflict recovery initiatives [3].

The study of monuments and post-conflict recovery has been significant in understanding how societies rebuild after periods of violence, trauma, and destruction. Monuments, both as physical structures and symbolic representations, play crucial roles in how societies commemorate the past, reconcile with trauma, and foster collective identity [3]. We provide a historical analogy of conflicts and how monuments were used for healing. Latin America has faced numerous civil conflicts, authoritarian regimes, and human rights abuses, particularly during the Cold War period. Countries such as Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala experienced brutal military dictatorships that left deep scars on their populations. In these countries, monuments served as a tool for remembering the victims of state repression and fostering national healing [4]. The region has experienced numerous civil wars, dictatorships, and human rights violations, particularly during the 20th century. Countries like Argentina, Chile, and Guatemala faced state-sponsored violence, often referred to as the “Dirty War” or similar conflicts [5]. Monuments in these contexts often commemorate victims of violence and serve as sites for collective mourning (Cottbus, 2017). For example, the memorial park in Buenos Aires is dedicated to the victims of the military dictatorship. These sites play crucial roles in collective memory, helping to reconcile national identity with historical injustices [4].

Asia’s post-conflict landscape has been depicted as diverse, encompassing events like the Khmer Rouge genocide in Cambodia, the Vietnam War, and ongoing conflicts in regions like Kashmir and Afghanistan [6]. In Cambodia, the Tuol Sleng

Genocide Museum memorializes the victims of the Khmer Rouge, serving as a reminder of the atrocities committed. Similarly, in Japan, monuments related to World War II, such as the Hiroshima Peace Memorial, symbolize peace and reconciliation. In many cases, these monuments also face challenges related to differing interpretations of history [7]. On the other hand, it has been observed that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent conflicts in the Balkans have left deep scars in Eastern Europe [1]. The region has seen ethnic conflicts, wars of independence, and genocides, notably the Yugoslav wars. In places like Bosnia and Herzegovina, monuments like the Srebrenica memorial serves to honor victims and provide a space for reflection. However, the region also faces challenges regarding the politicization of memory and how different ethnic groups interpret and commemorate their histories [1].

Sub-Saharan Africa has a complex history of colonialism, civil wars, and genocide, such as the Rwandan genocide of 1994 and the prolonged civil wars in countries like Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Monuments often commemorate victims of violence and serves educational purposes. For instance, the Gisozi genocide memorial in Rwanda is a key site for remembering the victims and promoting national unity. These monuments facilitate dialogue about the past and contribute to post-conflict recovery by fostering a culture of remembrance [8]. In Mali, the historic city of Timbuktu was severely affected by a protracted conflict, which resulted in the demolition of its mausoleums in 2012, damage to its manuscripts, and multifaceted attempts to erase the city's identity [9]. The reconstruction process mobilized the international community and centered on people's priorities and needs. It rehabilitated and trained artisans to restore and rebuild historic monuments following ancient practices and using traditional materials. The efforts helped promote solidarity across borders, preserve what's left of the city's manuscripts and relics, and restore community facilities, public spaces, and the functioning of the city [9].

Somalia has experienced civil war since the early 1990s, leading to state collapse, clan warfare, and ongoing violence. The country's monuments often reflect the pre-war period and the aspirations for a unified state. In post-conflict recovery efforts, monuments can symbolize peace and the potential for national healing. However, the ongoing instability poses challenges to effective commemoration and memory work [10]. Uganda has faced significant conflict, including the brutal regime of former President Idi Amin, the civil wars involving the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), and ongoing challenges related to governance and human rights [10]. In Uganda, monuments like the Mausoleum of the Martyrs commemorate the victims of political violence and serve as sites for reflection and healing. The emphasis on reconciliation and memorialization is vital in addressing historical grievances and promoting national identity [10].

1.1. Theoretical Anchoring

Theoretically, this study is informed by Human Needs Theory in Conflict Reso-

lution (Burton, 1990). Human Needs Theory explains violent conflict and recovery through the lens of universal, non-negotiable human needs rather than only material or political interests. Burton argued that conflicts become protracted when fundamental human needs are denied. Sustainable peace and recovery must therefore address those needs structurally and symbolically. The theory assumes that human needs are universal and non-negotiable (identity, recognition, security, participation, justice, and dignity), unmet needs lead to social conflict and trauma, especially in contexts of war and mass violence. Sustainable peace requires structural and psychosocial responses, not merely ceasefires or economic reforms, symbols and social institutions (including monuments), and that help restore recognition, identity, and collective memory. Post-conflict recovery must address psychological, cultural, political, and economic needs simultaneously, and participation and acknowledgement of victims are essential for reconciliation and legitimacy. These assumptions provide a powerful theoretical lens for analyzing how monuments like the Atiak memorial contribute to recovery processes in post-war Northern Uganda.

1.2. The Context: Atiak Memorial

The Atiak memorial commemorates the victims of the 1995 massacre when the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) attacked the Atiak trading center, resulting in numerous deaths and trauma for the local community. Amuru district encompasses various historical, cultural, social, and political dimensions [11]. Memorials are intended to preserve memories of people or events. Many are designed to promote a specific political or spiritual narrative, though individual experiences of them will vary. Memorialization, sometimes conceived as symbolic reparations, is perhaps perceived as a relatively easy entry point into this tangled territory [12]. Monuments serve as important cultural symbols that facilitate collective grieving and commemoration. In Acholi culture, ancestors hold significant spiritual importance [13]. The study in northern Uganda revealed that the Acholi reconciliation ritual, Mato Oput, remains symbolically important in northern Uganda's post-conflict landscape [14].

The Atiak Memorial provides a space for communal mourning and healing, enabling survivors and families of victims to come together to remember their loved ones and share their experiences [15]. Memorials symbolize resilience in the face of adversity and the community's determination to rebuild after violence. It serves as a reminder of the past while promoting hope for a peaceful future [10].

The Atiak memorial in Acholi land, Uganda, is a poignant representation of how monuments can contribute to post-conflict recovery by honouring victims, fostering community healing, and promoting dialogue about the past. Understanding the contextual factors surrounding the memorial helps illuminate its role in shaping collective memory and facilitating resilience in a community deeply affected by violence. Through this lens, the study of monuments and post-conflict recovery in Acholi land can offer valuable insights into broader processes of reconciliation and healing in post-conflict societies [16].

2. Methodology

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach that sought to focus on people's lived experiences of the Atiak massacre of 1995. The goal was to understand how individuals perceived and interpreted their experiences. It sought to understand meaning perception and experience, not to measure or predict, and data were collected through in-depth interviews.

Phenomenological research was used as follows: we began by selecting a specific experience or phenomenon to study, including the lived experiences of survivors, witnesses, and their relatives during the massacre, as well as the role of the Atiak monument in post-conflict recovery. We formulated open-ended research questions that focused on meaning and experience. Next was the selection of participants, who were purposively (not randomly) chosen because they had direct experience with the phenomenon, with a sample size of 5 - 25 participants. Data collection was done; We were able to gather rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences. Methods included: 20 In-depth interviews with survivors, 6 focus group discussions with 8 participants per group, and 10 key informant interviews.

Personal biases, including assumptions and prior knowledge about the phenomenon, were set aside. This was followed by data analysis, and the goal was to identify essential meanings and themes. Validation of findings was conducted to ensure credibility through member checking (participants reviewing the findings) and peer review. It has rich characteristics of focusing on lived experience, use of small, purposive samples, relies heavily on qualitative data and seeks deep understanding, not generalization which supports in giving an in-depth of occurrences.

In a nutshell, the use of a phenomenological design had more advantages because it focused on lived experiences, collected detailed personal accounts, set aside personal bias, identified themes and meanings, and described the essence of the experience.

Target Population

The targeted study population consisted of former Survivors, former witnesses of the massacre, former students of Atiak Technical Institute, Ker Kwaro Acholi, Religious Leaders, Relatives of Atiak Massacre victims, and the chairperson of the Atiak massacre survivors' association. A total of 46 respondents in this category were targeted for the interviews.

Participants in the study population were selected based on their knowledge of or connection to the Atiak Monument. Survivors and relatives of victims were included if they had experienced or were affected by the 1995 Atiak massacre. Community members were included if they were adults (18 years and above) residing in Atiak and familiar with the monument. Local leaders and cultural/historical resource persons were included if they had knowledge of the monument's history, management, or significance.

Purposive sampling was used to select survivors, local leaders, and resource per-

sons because of their specific knowledge and experiences. Snowball sampling was applied by asking initial participants to identify other survivors or knowledgeable individuals relevant to the study. Random sampling was used to select general community members from eligible residents to ensure diverse community perspectives and reduce selection bias.

Human Needs Theory guided the analysis by examining how the Atiak Monument addresses fundamental human needs arising from conflict and collective trauma. The study focused on recognition, dignity, justice, identity, and remembrance. These needs informed both the interview guide and thematic analysis. Interview questions explored participants' views on whether the monument honors victims, preserves community history, promotes justice, and strengthens community identity. During analysis, responses were coded under themes such as recognition of victims, restoration of dignity, pursuit of justice, preservation of identity, and collective memory, enabling interpretation of the monument's role in meeting these human needs (Table 1).

Table 1. Distribution of the sample by category and sampling method.

S/N	Population Category	Freq.	Data Collection Method/Tool	Sampling Method
1	Survivors of the Atiak Massacre	12	FGD	Purposive Sampling
2	Relatives of Atiak Massacre Victims	12	FGD	Purposive Sampling
3	Chairperson of the Atiak Massacre Survivors' Association	1	Interview	Purposive Sampling
4	Former Students of Atiak Technical Institute	8	Key Informant Interviews	Purposive Sampling
5	Witnesses of the Atiak Massacre	4	Key Informant Interview	Snowball Sampling
6	Religious Leaders	1	Interview	Simple Random Sampling
7	Political Leaders & Local Gov't Leaders	4	Key Informant Interview	Purposive Sampling
8	Ker Kal Kwaro Acholi (Cultural Leaders)	3	Interview	Random Sampling
9	Annual Commemoration Prayers	1	Interview	Participatory Study
Total		46		

Note: Source: Field data (2025).

3. Findings

To align the findings with the study objectives, the results were presented under three separate themes.

3.1. Examining Post-Conflict Recovery Initiatives in Atiak

Findings described the recovery measures implemented after the conflict, including community reconciliation efforts, psychosocial support, livelihood recovery programs, resettlement initiatives, and memorialization activities. Participants' views on the effectiveness and limitations of these initiatives should be reported.

3.2. Assessing the Role of Actors in Post-Conflict Recovery

Findings highlighted the contributions of international organizations, NGOs, donors, and development partners in supporting recovery efforts. Evidence from interviews showed how these actors contributed to peacebuilding, humanitarian assistance, reconstruction, trauma healing, and support for memorial projects such as the Atiak Monument.

3.3. Examining the Role of the Atiak Monument in Healing and Recovery

Findings focused on the monument's role in remembrance, honoring victims, preserving collective memory, promoting recognition and dignity, supporting emotional healing, and strengthening community identity. Participants' perceptions of the monument as a symbol of healing and reconciliation were presented under this section [17].

This structure ensures that the findings directly address all three study objectives rather than concentrating primarily on healing through the monument.

The findings suggest that participants generally perceived the Atiak Monument and related recovery interventions as effective in supporting healing and remembrance. This view was expressed by most survivors, community members, and local leaders interviewed. However, these assessments reflect participant perceptions rather than objective measures of effectiveness. A smaller number of respondents, particularly among community members and survivors, expressed reservations, noting that memorialization alone could not fully address persistent needs related to justice, compensation, and socioeconomic recovery [15]. Therefore, while positive views were common across respondent groups, opinions were not uniform, highlighting variations in how different individuals experienced and evaluated post-conflict recovery efforts.

3.4. Survivors Healing

Monuments and war memorials can play a significant role in fostering survivor healing in post-conflict contexts by providing spaces for remembrance, mourning, and collective reflection. They acknowledge the suffering and losses experienced by individuals and communities, helping survivors feel that their experiences are recognized and valued. Through commemorating victims and preserving historical memory, memorials can promote emotional healing, support reconciliation processes, and strengthen a shared commitment to peace. Additionally, they serve as educational and symbolic sites that encourage dialogue, understanding, and the prevention of future violence. Respondents in Atiak had varying views as depicted below.

All respondents acknowledged that monuments acted as historical archives, ensuring the preservation of the massacre's narrative. One participant noted, "*this monument keeps the truth for us, it is like a record that cannot be destroyed.*" Another relative of a victim in Atiak explained the archival importance of the me-

monial saying. *“This monument keeps the truth for us. Even when those who witnessed are no longer here, this place will still speak. Our children and their children will come and learn what happened in Atiak. It is like a record that cannot be destroyed, reminding everyone of our history.”*

Another respondent emphasized inter-generational knowledge: *“Not all of us can tell the story forever, but the monument tells it for us. When young people come here, they ask questions, they listen, and they understand. It is our way of making sure the massacre is never forgotten”*. This demonstrates how the memorial site functions as an enduring repository of collective memory, bridging generational gaps and safeguarding historical knowledge.

Survivors and relatives of the deceased in the Atiak massacre consistently recognized that memorials were an instrument that encouraged healing, reconciliation, and coexistence. As one respondent explained, *“the monument helps us to grieve together and to teach our children what happened so that it never divides us again.”* This highlights how memorialization not only preserves memory but also fosters dialogue and collective recovery. Respondents unanimously emphasized the preventive role of monuments. They are seen as reminders of the painful consequences of war, instilling in the community a collective commitment to peace and non-violence.

A survivor in Atiak highlighted how the memorial will help prevent future violence:

“This monument is a warning to all of us. When people come here and see what happened, they understand the pain that violence brings. It teaches our children that such things should never happen again, and it reminds the community to live in peace.”

Another respondent stressed its role in shaping future behavior: *“We do not keep this place only to remember the past, but to protect the future. When leaders, visitors, and the young generation see this, they learn the consequences of hatred and war. It helps stop such violence from repeating.”*

3.5. Monuments as Fostering Emotional Well-Being of Survivors of the Atiak Massacre

A large proportion of survivors and relatives recognized that monuments provided psychosocial benefits, offering emotional relief, a space for grief, and collective healing. However, the fact that not all respondents agreed suggests that psychosocial recovery is complex and may require additional interventions beyond monuments. Participants shared several psychological benefits of the monument as highlighted below:

A survivor expressed how the memorial supports emotional healing:

“Before this monument, many of us suffered quietly with our pain. But now we have a place where we come together, remember, and release that pain. When we gather here, we cry, we pray, and somehow the burden becomes lighter.” Monuments allow survivors to honour and remember loved ones who died during the

war. This can help people process grief and maintain a connection with those they lost.

Another respondent emphasized the importance of shared grief: *“This place allows us to mourn as one community. We lost our people in different ways, but here we grieve together. It helps us feel that we are not alone in our suffering, and that gives us strength to continue.”* Monuments ensure that the experiences of survivors are not forgotten; knowing that society remembers and values their experiences can reduce feelings of isolation.

A relative of a victim highlighted its role in ongoing healing: *“Healing is not something that happens once, it takes time. The monument helps us in that process. Each time we come here, we remember, but we also find some peace in our hearts.”* Visiting a monument can give survivors a sense of peace and closure by acknowledging the suffering they experienced and recognizing the sacrifices made during the conflict.

A community elder further reflected: *“This is where we bring our sorrow, but also where we begin to find comfort. The monument gives us a place to face our past together instead of carrying it alone.”* Many war memorials serve as gathering places where communities come together to reflect, mourn, and promote peace, helping rebuild social bonds after conflict. For example, the Kigali genocide memorial is a major remembrance site in Kigali, Rwanda, commemorating the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi. It serves as both a burial place for more than 250,000 victims and an educational centre promoting peace, unity, and genocide prevention worldwide. A video that we watched on our visit to the centre in June 2026 revealed that the survivors were healed emotionally when they visited the centre.

A younger participant stressed its broader societal meaning saying: *“The monument connects our village to the rest of the country. It makes people understand our history and respect what we went through, it gives our community a voice.”*

3.6. Remembrance as a Hallmark of Emotional Healing for Survivors

Remembrance serves as a vital hallmark of emotional healing for survivors of the Atiak massacre, which occurred in 1995 in northern Uganda. Through commemorative activities, memorial services, and collective reflection, survivors are provided with opportunities to acknowledge their painful experiences and honor the lives of those who were lost. Remembering the victims helps preserve the historical truth of the tragedy while creating a supportive environment where survivors can share their grief and emotions. This process reduces feelings of isolation and validates their suffering, which is an important step toward psychological recovery and emotional resilience [16].

Furthermore, remembrance contributes to healing by fostering reconciliation, community solidarity, and hope for the future. Annual commemorations of the Atiak massacre bring together survivors, families, leaders, and community members to reflect on the past and reaffirm a collective commitment to peace. Such

remembrance activities transform painful memories into sources of strength, enabling survivors to find meaning in their experiences and rebuild their lives. By ensuring that the events of the massacre are neither forgotten nor denied, remembrance supports both individual healing and the broader restoration of social cohesion within the community.

4. Ethics and Limitations

Ethical Considerations: Informed consent was obtained from all participants before data collection. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing participant identities and securely handling all collected data. Given the sensitive nature of discussing the Atiak massacre, trauma-sensitive interviewing techniques were used, including conducting interviews respectfully, allowing participants to decline questions, and minimizing the risk of emotional distress.

Limitations: The study was conducted in Atiak only and employed a qualitative design; therefore, the findings reflect the experiences and perceptions of participants within this specific context and may not be generalized to other post-conflict settings. Additionally, reliance on participants' recollections may have introduced recall bias, particularly when discussing events that occurred many years ago.

5. Conclusions

The findings demonstrate that monuments and memorials in Atiak play a crucial role in preserving the historical memory of the massacre. Respondents consistently viewed the monument as a permanent archive that safeguards the truth about the events that occurred, ensuring that future generations can access and learn from this history. By serving as a tangible record of the past, the memorial helps prevent the erasure or distortion of collective experiences and reinforces the importance of remembering the victims and their suffering [17]. The study further reveals that the memorial serves as an important tool for intergenerational transmission of knowledge. Participants emphasized that while eyewitnesses and survivors may not always be present to recount their experiences, the monument continues to communicate the story of the massacre to younger generations. This enduring educational function strengthens community awareness and ensures that the lessons derived from the conflict remain relevant and accessible over time.

In addition, the findings indicate that monuments contribute significantly to survivor healing, reconciliation, and social cohesion. Respondents recognized the memorial as a space where individuals and families can collectively mourn, reflect, and find comfort in shared remembrance. Through these processes, the monument fosters dialogue and understanding among community members, helping to rebuild relationships and promote peaceful coexistence in the aftermath of violence.

Finally, the study highlights the preventive role of memorialization in post-conflict societies. The monument stands as a powerful reminder of the devastating consequences of war and violence, encouraging community members to embrace peace and reject actions that could lead to renewed conflict. By preserving memory, promoting healing, and reinforcing commitments to non-violence, the Atiak memorial contributes not only to honoring the past but also to building a more peaceful and resilient future.

Author Contributions

Josephine Anek: Conceived the study, developed the research design, conducted fieldwork in Atiak, collected and analyzed qualitative data, interpreted findings, and led the writing of the manuscript. **Dr. Stella Laloyo Apecu:** Provided academic supervision, validated the findings, reviewed and edited successive drafts, and approved the final manuscript. All authors contributed to the development of the article, reviewed and approved the final version prior to submission, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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