



A32 After Atrocity: Why Wouldn't You Investigate?

*Dawnie W. Steadman, PhD**, University of Tennessee, Knoxville, TN 37996; *Hugh H. Tuller, MA*, Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, HI 96853-5530; *Julia Hanebrink, MA*, Rhodes College, Memphis, TN 38112; *Jaymelee Kim, PhD*, University of Findlay, Findlay, OH 45840-3653; *Tricia Hepner, PhD*, University of Tennessee - Dept of Anthropology, Knoxville, TN 37996

Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the underestimated complexity of community needs, aspirations, and perceptions concerning post-conflict humanitarian forensic actions for mass graves.¹

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by exploring the use of ethnography to assess the potential of forensic anthropology to support survivor needs and transitional justice processes in northern Uganda.

The two-decade-long war (1986–2006) between the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) and the Government of Uganda (GoU) resulted in the displacement of 90% of northern Ugandans, the abduction of tens of thousands of children who were killed or forced to become child soldiers, and the murders of possibly tens of thousands of civilians. One enduring legacy of the conflict is the landscape of discarded bodies; some left on the surface to decay, others hastily buried, and more placed in mass graves, often far from their villages, or in Internal Displacement (IDP) camps where they had been forcibly displaced by the government.

The lack of health facilities in the region preclude the use of dental and medical records or fingerprints for identification, leaving DNA as the prime modality for identification. Thus, forensic scientists may quickly deduce the most logical approach to the identification problem in Uganda consists of anthropological intervention and construction of a DNA database for the missing. Often, it is assumed that the use of forensic tools is desired, if not prioritized, and positively viewed by affected communities. However, Northern Ugandans have little experience with DNA or other forensic science fields, no trust in the government, little faith in foreign Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), no evidentiary concerns for the graves, and a long list of apprehensions (e.g., security, education, land rights, daily subsistence) beyond that of the missing. Moreover, survivors remain troubled by the graves as many believe that the spirits of the dead maintain agency among the living, causing maladies and disturbing hauntings, making it possible that forensic exhumations might cause greater psychosocial harm than good.

Since 2012, a team based at the University of Tennessee has been conducting ethnographic work in northern Uganda to assess the various needs of the communities related to forensic intervention. The results in this presentation are centered on more than 160 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with individuals and small focus groups in six villages in northern Uganda, as well as interviews with government personnel, NGOs, and pathologists. While forensic investigation following atrocity is usually portrayed as a binary decision (investigate or not), a cultural anthropological approach demonstrates that the reality on the ground is much more complicated. While many communities are supportive of forensic intervention and do wish to find their loved ones, others may view investigations as unnecessary due to religious beliefs or feel that the presence of mass graves and their associated monuments supports community claims for reparations and view an identification process as potentially disruptive to these claims. Furthermore, as forensic investigation may become a source of secondary traumatization for families, medicolegal evidentiary analysis is sometimes viewed as less desirable than non-invasive, more culturally salient measures such as ceremonial and/or religious remedies. The findings illustrate how the ethnographic research process produces intrinsically valuable and forensically relevant insights, regardless of whether excavations occur.

Reference(s):

¹ Corder S., and M. Tidball-Binz. 2017. Humanitarian Forensic Action—Its Origins and Future. *Forensic Science International*. 279:65-71.

Forensic Anthropology, Human Rights Investigations, Cultural Anthropology