

7-1-2011

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Published In

International Journal of Transitional Justice, 5, 2, 262-281.

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Published in final edited form as:

Int J Transit Justice. 2011 July 1; 5(2): 262–281. doi:10.1093/ijtj/ijr013.

The Strengths and Limitations of South Africa's Search for Apartheid-Era Missing Persons

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Abstract

This article examines efforts to account for missing persons from the apartheid era in South Africa by family members, civil society organizations and the current government's Missing Persons Task Team, which emerged out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission process. It focuses on how missing persons have been officially defined in the South African context and the extent to which the South African government is able to address the current needs and desires of relatives of the missing. I make two main arguments: that family members ought to have an active role in shaping the initiatives and institutions that seek to resolve the fate of missing people, and that the South African government ought to take a more holistic 'grave-to-grave' approach to the process of identifying, returning and reburial of the remains of the missing.

Introduction

The past decade has seen the proliferation of literature evaluating the variety of transitional justice initiatives that have emerged since the end of the Second World War. One of the most important findings of this literature is that transitional justice mechanisms have tended to be designed primarily to facilitate political transition and enable the rehabilitation of existing political and social institutions rather than to ameliorate the suffering of ordinary people who were directly exposed to daily violence and deprivation during times of conflict.² A major policy implication of this body of work is that if these mechanisms are to make a positive difference in the lives of survivors of human rights abuse and political violence, survivors must be consulted about what they want to get out of the transitional justice process.³

This article seeks to expand the reach of this stream of scholarship, and to contribute to the existing literature on postconflict exhumations,⁴ by analyzing the search for missing persons in post-apartheid South Africa. I make two major arguments: that family members ought to have an active role in shaping the initiatives and institutions that seek to resolve the fate of missing persons, and that the South African government ought to take a more holistic 'grave-to-grave' approach to the process of identifying, returning and reburial of the remains of the missing, in the sense that all stages of the process should be conceived of as being equally important.

Section 1 examines the question of how relevant actors and organizations define missing persons and how these conceptualizations relate to those in international human rights and humanitarian law. Section 2 describes current efforts to locate, identify, rebury and memorialize the missing in South Africa. Section 3 focuses on what a particular subset of families of the missing in Mamelodi, a township outside Pretoria, expected from the process and what they ultimately received. While not representative of all relatives of the missing in

South Africa, these families are part of a vocal and vibrant social movement that seeks to make the South African transitional justice process more accountable to victims and survivors of apartheid. Section 4 offers some concluding thoughts and policy recommendations for improving future exhumation and identification efforts in South Africa and around the world.

The South African Context

Currently, as many as 2,000 people are missing from the apartheid era in South Africa. Of these, 477 were officially recognized by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Human Rights Violations Committee during its investigations, based on verification of the details of cases submitted to the committee or information provided by perpetrators during amnesty hearings. It should be noted that this figure does not count all disappearances uncovered during amnesty hearings and was assumed to be an undercount by the TRC.⁵ The vast majority of missing South Africans disappeared during the intensification of the government's violent repression of the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s, and from increased fighting among rival political parties in the early 1990s.⁶ This article explores the efforts of family members, civil society organizations and the government's Missing Persons Task Team (MPTT) to account for the missing in the new South Africa.

The MPTT was initiated in 2005 by the National Prosecuting Authority in line with TRC recommendations accepted by government.⁷ To date, the MPTT has exhumed more than 66 individuals, of whom approximately 50 have been positively identified at the individual level using DNA and/or other forensic techniques and returned to their families.⁸ The majority of the investigated and resolved cases have been affiliated to the African National Congress (ANC), but the MPTT has also exhumed eight members of other groups killed by security forces (two from the Azanian National Liberation Army and six from the Pan-African Congress). Thus far, although many disappearances from the 1990–1994 period have been investigated by the MPTT, no exhumations have taken place as a result of lack of information about specific cases.

Categorizing the Missing in South Africa

All efforts to determine the fates of the missing in conflict and postconflict contexts face the foundational problem of how to determine who is officially recognized (usually by some legal or quasilegal sanctioning body) as a legitimate missing person. This designation is immensely important because it influences the extent to which the state must investigate and account for past human rights violations against particular individuals or classes of people. Further, families of the missing depend upon official recognition of this status to receive reparations and social services, ensure return of remains and hopefully achieve some resolution of the acute pain of loss. As such, it is not surprising that differing views of the proper definition of a missing person have generated significant debate in South Africa.⁹

In its deliberations and final report, the TRC recognized the existence of four major categories of missing persons in South Africa.¹⁰ The first category, victims of enforced disappearance, was derived from instruments of international human rights law that seek to prevent states from engaging in behavior that leads to the disappearance of its citizens or subjects. According to Part I, Article 2 of the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance,¹¹ enforced disappearance is

the arrest, detention, abduction or any other form of deprivation of liberty by agents of the state or by persons or groups of persons acting with the authorization, support or acquiescence of the state, followed by a refusal to acknowledge the

deprivation of liberty or by concealment of the fate or whereabouts of the disappeared person, which place such a person outside the protection of the law.

The TRC expanded this definition to include nonstate actors.

According to TRC findings, enforced disappearances were perpetrated by police and military units set up to protect the white state's security and the authority of the National Party (for example, the C1 'Vlakplaas' unit of the South African police's security branch),¹² as well as by political factions involved in the struggle against apartheid.¹³ The exact number of victims of enforced disappearance is difficult to determine because of the secrecy and autonomy with which these units (both state and nonstate) operated, but the TRC's final report notes that 64 of the 477 total disappearance cases reported to the Commission met the criteria of this category. What is clear from testimony at the TRC is that the political murders carried out by all parties were usually gruesome.¹⁴

The remaining 400-plus missing persons fall into three other categories: individuals who are known to have been killed during armed combat but whose bodies have not been recovered; individuals who went into exile (for political reasons) and cannot be located; and those who disappeared under unknown circumstances. These classifications emerge out of international humanitarian law.

According to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), international humanitarian law dictates that the state has a responsibility not just to refrain from disappearing people but also to 'to protect all persons from becoming unaccounted for, without distinction as to the deliberate or incidental character of the events leading to the persons becoming unaccounted for.'¹⁵ This directly implies that the definition of missing persons cannot be limited to those individuals who disappear in an explicitly political context. Rather, according to the ICRC, during periods of unrest, people who become refugees or are internally displaced, are killed under unknown circumstances (whether violent or not) or fail to make contact with relatives or loved ones also count as missing people. In other words, 'missing persons or persons unaccounted for are those whose families are without news of them and/or are reported missing on the basis of reliable information.'¹⁶ The major hurdle that all of these cases had to clear to be officially recognized by the TRC is that the disappearance had to occur in an explicitly political context. For example, a person who left home out of fear or as a result of the financial distress caused by apartheid and never returned would not count as a missing person according to the TRC definition.

According to representatives of Khulumani Support Group and the Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation (CSV), two prominent civil society organizations that work on behalf of the victims and survivors of the apartheid system, this explicitly political orientation means that the TRC and the MPTT have failed to engage with a broader constellation of missing persons. Such a group would include individuals who disappeared in situations that were unusual, meaning that their disappearance would not have occurred in the absence of an apartheid state, but cannot be tied to a particular political movement or event.¹⁷ The limited mission of the MPTT has therefore left a subset of the population not just without any sense of resolution but also with growing anger and bitterness. As such, they are potentially less willing and able to engage with the larger social reconciliation process that the TRC was supposed to have promoted. Khulumani and CSV note that the families of the missing in South Africa bear the same psychological, spiritual, economic and social hardships as relatives whose loved ones, particularly male breadwinners, go missing in times of interstate conflict.¹⁸

Official Efforts to Locate the Missing

Even for many of the families of the 477 missing persons who were officially recognized, the road to resolution and reconciliation has been rocky and incomplete because of incommensurable understandings about what the role of the government ought to be in resolving cases of enforced disappearance. This is not to say that the government does not view this issue as important; indeed, the TRC declared that ‘the resolution of disappearance cases is perhaps the most significant piece of unfinished business for the commission.’¹⁹ Rather, a failure to incorporate the full range of wants and needs of relatives of the missing into the process has left many of them dissatisfied.

As we shall see below, the desire that has been unmet in some South African cases is the families’ need for what they perceive to be adequate public recognition of, and compensation for, the torment caused by having a loved one go missing in the struggle against apartheid. The mismatch between the expectations of the families and the actual capabilities of the MPTT can be seen in the MPTT’s stated goal, namely to provide ‘official recognition and devotion of state time and resources’ to missing persons cases in order to

re-incorporat[e] these ‘lost citizens’ into the body of post-apartheid South Africa. Listening to their stories, recording the events and recovering documentation forms part of the recognition process and the restoration of dignity to the families and the life of the disappeared person.²⁰

While the MPTT does an excellent job of officially acknowledging the private pain of relatives of the missing, it does not have the resources to ensure broader public recognition of the sacrifices of the missing and their families or the mandate to provide special reparations for their suffering. This latter responsibility lies with the Department of Justice’s TRC Unit, which has long been a target of criticism from the victims’ rights movement for failure to deliver the reparations promised by the TRC. If public recognition and reparations are among the major desires of relatives of the missing, real attention to these issues seems crucial to achieving justice in this context.

Methodology and Description of Relevant Cases

Methodology

This article examines two cases recently resolved by the MPTT, the Mamelodi Four and the Mamelodi Ten. These cases were chosen for three reasons: they were high profile and reported extensively in the South African media; they were the cases that the MPTT was focusing on when I began this research project; and most surviving relatives of the missing individuals in each case were willing to speak to me at length about their loved ones and their current situations. Two aspects of my research strategy should be explicitly stated here. First, these two cases are not necessarily representative of all missing persons cases in South Africa. Indeed, part of the reason that relatives of the Mamelodi Four and the Mamelodi Ten were willing to speak to me on the record is that they are highly motivated to publicize the issue of missing persons in South Africa and to elicit what they consider to be an appropriate response to their emotional and economic plights from the new government.²¹ Second, although I conducted interviews with most of the relatives of the Mamelodi Four and the Mamelodi Ten, a few did not respond to my requests for interviews over the course of three visits to the area from 2007 to 2009. I made no attempt to follow up with them after my initial contact. As such, the relatives I interviewed represent a convenience sample and not a randomly selected one.

In addition to talking to more than 20 relatives of the missing in South Africa (half of whom were involved the Mamelodi Four and the Mamelodi Ten cases, and almost all of whom

where mothers, sisters or wives of the missing men),²² I conducted interviews with other key informants, including three representatives of the MPTT, two representatives each from Khulumani and CSVR and four South African academics with direct knowledge of the issues. All interviews in this study were conducted using a semistructured interview technique. Most individuals were interviewed two or three times over the three-year period I was in the field.

Interviews were conducted in English, with the assistance of an interpreter when interviewees were not fluent. All discussions were recorded, transcribed and manually analyzed (without the assistance of computer programs) for often-repeated themes and major areas of agreement and disagreement among interviewees. In July 2008, in addition to carrying out individual interviews with relatives of the Mamelodi Four and the Mamelodi Ten I had met in 2007, I met with a subset of them together with MPTT head Madeleine Fullard and MPTT case investigator Tshiamo Moela for approximately three hours. This meeting focused primarily on the ways the family members understood the exhumation, identification and reburial process and included a wide-ranging discussion of the ways the Mamelodi Four families were left unfulfilled by the limited local memorialization of their loved ones and their protracted wait for adequate reparations.

In 2009, I returned to Mamelodi to meet with people I had interviewed over the previous two years, asking them about recent developments in the Mamelodi Ten case and how the exhumation, identification and reburial process had affected them emotionally and materially. I also presented the results of my research to the families at this time. Their suggestions and critiques have been incorporated into this article.

Mamelodi Four

The Mamelodi Four case involves victims from two separate events. In the first incident, three internal *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK, the armed wing of the ANC) operatives from the township of Mamelodi – Jackson Maake, Andrew Makupe and Harold Sefolo, who were involved in shuttling weapons and other supplies in and around Mamelodi – were brought to an isolated spot and interrogated, tortured and electrocuted to death. Once they were dead, security personnel piled their bodies on top of a landmine and blew them to bits in an attempt to make them unrecognizable. The stated justification for the killing was that the identity of the interrogators and the information gained during the interrogation had to be protected.²³

In a second incident, Justice Mbizana, also from Mamelodi and a known member of an MK unit based out of Swaziland, was abducted by security police soon after returning to the country to operate underground.²⁴ He was then taken to an isolated farm, where he was interrogated and tortured for more than a week. He was then drugged and bludgeoned to death with a gardening spade and blown up using landmines to destroy the evidence of wrong-doing and to prevent his comrades from knowing what happened to him. The remains of the four men happened to be buried together in a single casket in a paupers' cemetery at Winterveld because they showed up at the morgue in the same month.²⁵

For relatives of the Mamelodi Four, the TRC amnesty hearings provided the first opportunity to learn what happened to their loved ones. They were also invited to testify at the hearings of the Human Rights Violations Committee in 1996, where they not only told their stories but also demanded information about their missing loved ones and return of the remains so that they could perform appropriate burial rituals.²⁶ They also requested that the perpetrators be punished within the full extent of the TRC even though the Commission lacked the ability to punish anyone who came before it.²⁷ After the TRC hearings, the Mamelodi Four families heard nothing until 2005, when the MPTT located the suspected

remains of the disappeared in the Winterveld cemetery and confirmed their identity with DNA profiling. The relatives received the remains of their loved ones, which consisted mainly of fragmented hip and leg bones, at a ceremony at Freedom Park in Pretoria – built as a monument to all South Africans who died in liberation struggles throughout the country – and reburied them at the local cemetery near their homes in Mamelodi.

The case of the Mamelodi Ten – Rooibaard Geldenhuis, Jeremiah Magagula, Steve Makena, Abram Makolane, Samuel Masilela, Morris Nkabinde, Jeremiah Ntuli, Thomas Phiri, Elliot Sathège and Siphò Sibanyoni, also known as the Nietverdiend Ten after the site where they were killed – involved politically active teenagers from Mamelodi who were ‘recruited’ in June 1986 by Joe Mamasela, a black security police officer posing as an MK agent, to go into exile with the MK in Botswana to receive military training. En route, the minibus they were being transported in was ambushed by security forces at a prearranged spot. The young men were ordered off the bus by the security forces, who injected them with a drug to incapacitate them. They were then loaded back onto the bus, along with several liters of gasoline, a limpet mine and an AK-47. The bus was then run into a tree and set alight to make it appear as if there had been a road accident.²⁸ The heavily fragmented remains of the 10 young men were discovered by local villagers and taken by the local police to a mortuary. An undertaker subsequently buried them in paupers’ graves at the Winterveld cemetery, along with four other bodies. In 2005, the MPTT was able to exhume 10 bodies believed to be those of the Mamelodi Ten. The remains were too badly damaged to carry out DNA testing, but forensic anthropologists were able to confirm that nine of the 10 bodies fit the demographic and trauma profiles of the Mamelodi Ten. These remains have been interred at a collective burial site, with a spot remaining for the 10th member of the group if he is ever found.²⁹

Civil Society Responses to the Missing Persons Task Team

One major concern of civil society organizations is that the MPTT only investigates cases that are explicitly political in nature. In recent years, Khulumani and CSVR claim to have collected the names of approximately 1,500 missing people who are not among the 477 officially recognized by the TRC, many of whom cannot be placed into one of the TRC’s four categories of missing persons because of no explicit political connection or no proof that the individual was involved in political activities.³⁰ Khulumani and CSVR feel strongly that these cases deserve to be investigated by the government just as much as the 477 official ones, both to honor the dignity of the missing persons and to provide comfort and resolution to their families.³¹ In their view, a family’s right to know the fate of a loved one and to obtain necessary psychosocial services from the government should not depend on the exact circumstances of the disappearance. According to Khulumani’s Marjorie Jobson, ‘In a country where a fundamental principle is equality, the value of human life must be treated equally.’³²

Representatives of civil society suspect that this situation exists because non-political civilian cases do not generate the same kind of political capital and legitimacy for the ANC-led government. As Hugo van der Merwe, Transitional Justice Programme manager at CSVR,³³ told me,

With the MPTT, there is a sense that most of the cases that they investigate will further implicate the apartheid security structures, [and] will provide media images and opportunities for them to celebrate ANC heroes.³⁴

In the case of the MPTT’s recovery of the body of famous MK operative Looksmart Ngudle, the first person to be killed under the 90-day detention law in 1963, the Johannesburg-based *Star* newspaper ran an extensive four-part story that spanned a total of seven full-size, full-

color newspaper pages.³⁵ Although no other single case has received such extensive coverage, most major identifications have been covered in the national newspapers. These stories tend to be framed in terms of heroism, both of the missing, who are said to have died in service to their country, and of justice finally being served after decades without any resolution. Headlines like ‘Heroes “Return” to Motherland,’³⁶ ‘ANC Hero Saved from an Unmarked Grave’³⁷ and ‘Former MK Cadres to Get a Hero’s Welcome’³⁸ illustrate this narrative device well. Occasionally, more critical comments, such as complaints about the limited mandate of the MPTT, make it into these stories, but they are the exception rather than the rule.

Madeleine Fullard, head of the MPTT, openly acknowledges that the exhumations carried out by her team tend to be weighted in favor of ANC and MK figures (and, more recently, guerrilla fighters from other organizations), but she strongly denies the political explanation for this situation. She notes that the vast majority of the MPTT’s investigations (as opposed to actual exhumations) focus on searching for information about victims who never served as guerrilla fighters for any political organization. These cases, however, are almost impossible to turn into exhumations because there is little or no official documentary record on them, which makes it difficult to distinguish them from ordinary murders and criminal cases, which cannot be investigated by the MPTT. With respect to the heroism framework that surrounds the work of the MPTT, Fullard argues that this has emerged largely as a result of the families’ desire to have their loved ones remembered as military heroes, rather than some well-thought-out scheme by the ANC government to exploit the MPTT’s work for political gain.³⁹

What Families Want and What They Receive

Recent social science research on missing persons situations around the world suggests that the successful resolution of a disappearance case requires more than recovering, identifying and handing over mortal remains to families.⁴⁰ Relatives also want to learn more about the circumstances that led to the deaths of their loved ones and to place their lives in historical, cultural and religious context.⁴¹ Further, many families, especially those headed by economically challenged wives, demand reparations and other forms of social support to ameliorate the economic suffering they have felt since losing their household’s primary breadwinner.⁴² What is most interesting about the South African context is that relatives of the disappeared seek collective (social or public) recognition not just of their victimhood but also of their sacrifice for the freedom of all South Africans, primarily through acknowledgment of the missing as military heroes by the state. While the MPTT does its best to facilitate this recognition, its efforts have fallen short for many families, including those of the Mamelodi Four and the Mamelodi Ten.

Remains

The Mamelodi Four and Mamelodi Ten relatives with whom I spoke were happy and relieved that they were finally able to offer their loved ones a proper and dignified burial.⁴³ This provided them with some measure of emotional resolution, in the sense that they no longer constantly wondered and worried about what happened to their loved ones. They also reported that it relieved many of the physical ailments they said were caused by the stress of living without knowledge of the fate of their loved ones, including heart problems, high blood pressure, ulcers and dizziness.⁴⁴ Further, the proper burial of their loved ones satisfied their obligation to enact culturally appropriate rituals that serve the needs of both the living and the dead, who have a direct relationship in most South African communities, even those like Mamelodi that are heavily Christianized. The proper burial made it possible for the women I interviewed to ‘speak’ to their loved ones at their graves, in line with a long tradition of communication, guidance and effect of the dead on the living in African

cultures.⁴⁵ It also allowed them to teach their children and future generations about the ancestors who came before them.

Involvement and Information

In the June 2008 interviews, mothers and siblings of the Mamelodi Ten uniformly stated that they were deeply disappointed that the remains of their loved ones could not be individually identified. They all understood, however, the difficulty of extracting DNA from bones that had been subjected to the intense heat of the minibus fire and then buried in South Africa's highly acidic soil. Although collective burial was not ideal for the relatives, it was at least a major improvement over the previous state of affairs for both family members and the deceased. Thus, their overarching goal for the process shifted from securing individual identification to ensuring that the located remains were those of the Mamelodi Ten as a collective. As Maria Ntuli, mother of Jeremiah, stated,

They have been burned and from that they went to their grave, and in the grave there was no more coffin, they were just lying in the ground there. Now, how can the DNA be there? At my side, I am very satisfied with what they have done for us. Really, I am satisfied. Even my children, I told them that the DNA doesn't come out. It doesn't match to any remains, so the only thing we can do is to bury those remains and get over with it.⁴⁶

For Katherine Magagula, mother of Jeremiah Magagula, what was critical for the mothers in the absence of positive DNA results was the fact that the MPTT shared with relatives a tremendous amount of relevant information recovered during its investigations. The MPTT made sure that the women had access to photographs of the crime scene it had recovered from security police records, the opportunity to examine the mortuary records and a detailed understanding of the investigation process from start to finish. At the mothers' request, Fullard also arranged for a forensic anthropologist to give them a presentation on why he felt confident declaring that the remains were those of their children.⁴⁷

Lizzie Sefolo, wife of Harold Sefolo of the Mamelodi Four, said that actually witnessing the exhumation was a kind of validation of the process of identification, that they were a part of the investigation rather than just being passive recipients of information. She said that the relatives were able to follow the entire process through to see exactly how investigators 'prove or disprove of the identity.' Sefolo concluded that watching gave the families a sense that exhumations are long, involved processes and 'not just digging.'⁴⁸ Elizabeth Maake, mother of Jackson, went further, suggesting that had they not gone to the grave site to witness the exhumation, they would have had serious doubts about the veracity of the MPTT's findings.⁴⁹

Thus, we can see that, at least in the case of the women from Mamelodi, being present at the exhumation and gaining access to all relevant information about the events leading to the deaths of their loved ones fulfilled two important purposes. The first was to help them bring the period of uncertainty in their lives to a close by giving them the knowledge they lacked for so long. This, of course, is not a new phenomenon. The presence of families at exhumations has long been a key component of the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team's protocol and, as a result, has been widely adopted by forensic teams in subsequent investigations throughout Latin America.⁵⁰

The second was recognizing the burnt and degraded remains as those of their loved ones. Through exchanges of information with the MPTT, the families came to understand the process used to confirm identity and to trust the scientists and investigators doing the work. While the outcome was obviously not as satisfying as it would have been had individual

identifications been made, the fact that the bodies were recovered seems to have gone a long way toward ameliorating the pain and uncertainty they felt.

Economic Redress

Although the overwhelming majority of the disappeared in South Africa are men, female relatives are generally the ones left behind to deal with the range of challenges associated with the act.⁵¹ In addition to coping with psychosocial and health issues brought on by the disappearance, wives of the missing in particular face the added burden of simultaneously searching for their husbands, raising their families in the absence of a male partner and breadwinner and figuring out a way to obtain the money and other resources necessary to maintain the house-hold. Indeed, the two Mamelodi Four wives, Mabel Makope and Lizze Sefolo, complained about not having enough money to survive and send their children to school. As Mabel Mapoke, wife of Andrew, told me,

It was difficult because when my husband disappeared I had little kids and I was not well. I started to be sick the moment he started out [on his political work]. He [told me] one day they would kill him. I wished they could kill me with my family because we were going to suffer with the kids I had – my last one was three weeks old then. So from there, I was very sick. For many years I was very sick. I don't know how those kids grew up. Fortunately, my mother-in-law was there, my father-in-law was there and my mother was still alive. So, they were the people who were taking care of me and the kids because [Andrew] was a breadwinner. Now the children have grown and they have passed their matric [matriculation exam], but there is no money for [technical training] or university. I'm not working still. I'm getting a pension for sick people ... [But] the parents now are gone. There is no more – his mother died. The father died. My son also died and left me with two daughters who are still going to school. It's very difficult at home. I'm not working. The pension cannot maintain kids at school and everything. It's difficult. I can't work because of severe depression.⁵²

Given these hardships,⁵³ it is unsurprising that the wives of the Mamelodi Four victims wanted some form of economic support from the government, and almost all the women I spoke to felt that they deserved some form of compensation for their loss.⁵⁴ Although a one-time reparation payment of R30,000 was awarded to those 22,000 victims who had the opportunity to give statements to the TRC, this amount was less than half of what the TRC suggested and came several years after statements were given. Further, while the government did create a mechanism for providing 'special pensions' to those who participated in the struggle against apartheid, including payouts for direct relatives whose family member met the definition of enforced disappearance as well as other requirements, it is extremely difficult to qualify for this benefit, particularly for lower-level operatives like those in the Mamelodi Four and the Mamelodi Ten. According to Special Pensions Amendment Act 13/2008, which was more liberal than the original Special Pensions Act 96/1996, the petitioning individual would have to have been directly involved in the liberation movement, either as a member of a recognized organization or as a full-time activist, for at least five years and to have been born in 1964 or earlier. Further, the individual in question would have had to find credible witnesses to attest to his or her activities during the period in question. Given the fragmented nature of the ANC and MK – whose lower-level operatives worked in small cells and knew very little about the overall operations of the organizations – it can be exceedingly difficult to find someone who can provide this testimony.⁵⁵

As of the end of 2010, none of the relatives of the Mamelodi victims had received additional compensation, military veterans' benefits, guarantees of education for their children or jobs

that would pay them enough to raise their families in relative comfort. In early 2011, however, they did receive a payment of R17,000 each from the President's Fund as a contribution toward the costs of receiving and burying the exhumed remains. This money was promised to them at the time of the exhumation but it required Cabinet to pass special regulations allowing the President's Fund to be used in that way, which took almost two years.⁵⁶

Although the government is handicapped by limited resources and a long list of demands made by the public, as well as the normative question of what families of the missing deserve in relation to those who suffered in other ways under apartheid, this situation contrasts with the immediate amnesty given to perpetrators who testified about their activities, despite the fact that there was no way to ensure that they were telling the truth and no provision that perpetrators of disappearance lead investigators to the sites where remains could be recovered. Thus, while perpetrators were immediately rewarded for their admissions through irrevocable public absolution for, and legal forgiveness of, their actions, the Mamelodi families have had to wait more than 10 years for an incomplete sense of justice. They received the remains of their loved ones, but not punishment for the killers or what they perceive to be adequate compensation for their suffering.⁵⁷

Ultimately, the wives' claims for reparation are a means of fighting for recognition by the state, as well as a way to improve marginally their socioeconomic status and reinsert their loved ones into the history of the new South Africa.⁵⁸ They do not wish to be paid off or bought off by the government. Rather, they believe that the ultimate sacrifice made by their loved ones, and the everyday sacrifices they made trying to cope with the disappearance, entitle them to special compensation by the state that now exists because of their loss – in the very same way that benefits accrue to the family members of officially sanctioned military personnel who are killed in the line of duty. This situation is similar to the one that Paul Sant Cassia describes in his work on the missing in Cyprus⁵⁹ and Simon Robins describes in his work on Nepal and Timor-Leste.⁶⁰

Collective Recognition

When I arrived in Mamelodi in May 2007 for my first meeting with relatives of the Mamelodi Four, I assumed the women would be relieved and generally happy after having recovered and reburied the remains of their loved ones more than 20 years after they were brutally murdered. Instead, I was greeted by women who were bitter and angry. The relatives I spoke with said they were elated when they heard that the MPTT was able to identify individual remains and that they would finally be able to give their loved ones a culturally appropriate burial. But, they said, the happiness they felt had subsided because of the failure of the local ANC branch to provide what they considered to be an acceptable funeral and commemoration for their loved ones.

Their perception of proper funereal rights was in large measure political and based on what they had seen in the first reburial to take place in Mamelodi, that of the well-known ANC/MK figure, Reginald Kekana, which the Department of Justice used as the national launch of the MPTT.⁶¹ The Kekana handover ceremony at Freedom Park was an all-star affair, with full military honors accorded to Kekana and three other MK operatives whose bodies were recovered at the same time. The guest list included prominent politicians, military officials and famous leaders of the struggle. Kekana was praised as a military hero who died to make his people and his country free from colonial rule.⁶² For Mabel Makepe, the honors he received 'showed everybody that this guy has fought.'⁶³

The women told me that they expected a similar ceremony for their loved ones. In the end, however, there was no significant military presence, no pomp and circumstance – not even the mayor of Mamelodi bothered to show up to the funeral ceremony. Makope told me,

It was like we were burying an old person. We are not happy at all. There were no flags. There were no MKs to march for them to show people that these people have fought for this country. It was like a normal funeral.⁶⁴

For Lizzie Sefolo, the ‘sickness was removed [when the bodies were initially recovered], but now it’s coming back. Because it’s like they were not really people who fought for this country, it was just remains.’ She continued,

It was not proper. No matter, they put some stones, the headstones. That doesn’t interest us. We wanted these people to be buried as soldiers and respected as people who fought for this country. We are here now, we are free, because of the people like them. Why [are they] not being respected like others? ... So the truth must be said. And then you keep quiet and say ‘you mustn’t talk about that’ and at the end of the day you – it’s you who is getting the pain, and you are suffering alone. So they must know that we are not happy at all.⁶⁵

During the course of the discussion, they explained that the desire to have their sons and husbands memorialized as military heroes in the armed struggle against apartheid was as important as locating their physical remains and reburying them in a proper grave. Simply finding the bones was not enough; they wished for public acknowledgment that the lives and deaths of their loved ones were integral to the struggle. They did not want the public to perceive their loved ones as individuals who just happened to die during the years that the struggle was taking place. Ultimately, the relatives of the Mamelodi Four with whom I spoke were deeply disappointed that the exhumation and identification process did not provide their loved ones with the historical importance they felt was deserved.

A major problem for the relatives of the Mamelodi Four was that the memorialization and reburial of their loved ones was not the responsibility of the MPTT or another government agency but of the local ANC branch, which they felt had very little investment in the missing persons issue. The women told me that the local ANC branch did not even bother to inform the community that a reburial of formerly missing MK comrades would be taking place at the cemetery. While they did pay for proper headstones, they did not arrange for any kind of military presence or offer the relatives enough money to buy food for family members and friends who were taking part in the ceremony.⁶⁶

For the relatives of the Mamelodi Four, resolution had not yet come when I initially spoke to them in May 2007. They had begun to go to ANC meetings, despite not all being members, to demand an explanation for what they perceived as ill-treatment. For them, this process was yet another necessary part of the healing process. As Lizzie Sefolo told me, ‘Closure must be there in a proper way ... We are still waiting.’ When I returned to Mamelodi in 2008 and 2009, it was clear to me that although their anger had mellowed somewhat, they still felt that the government had not met its obligations toward them as relatives of fallen military veterans. Thus, for Sefolo and most of her peers, closure is seen as much more than achieving resolution in the private, emotional sphere, as it is often conceived of in western psychology.⁶⁷ It is also about achieving the recognition they feel their loved ones deserve in the public sphere, which is an overtly political understanding of the concept of closure.⁶⁸

When I asked the MPTT’s Fullard what went wrong with the Mamelodi Four handover and reburial, she suggested that the women were perhaps reading too much into the differences between the two funerals that they had witnessed. She explained that the Kekana ceremony was meant to be a singular event to raise public awareness about the MPTT and the issue of

disappearances more generally. She noted that the TRC Unit was responsible for the handover and the local political party for the reburial, so the MPTT was not heavily involved in the planning of the events. In retrospect, she laments that the false expectation of such a grand proceeding was created for the Mamelodi families because it is impossible to provide each and every identified person with such an extravagant ceremony, however appropriate it would be to do so. 'A whole series of acknowledgments should take place,' she told me, 'but it's going to be a faulty process because it's government, and government generally doesn't fulfill peoples' fantasies at any level.'⁶⁹

When I spoke to relatives of the Mamelodi Ten in 2008, they were adamant that they wanted to have a better experience than the Mamelodi Four families, one that was dignified and in accordance with the sacrifice their children and siblings had made for the country. The Mamelodi Four relatives felt the same way. Lizzie Sefolo declared that the families of the Four were going to work with the Mamelodi Ten mothers to ensure they had a better experience.⁷⁰

Their efforts were on the surface quite successful, as the Mamelodi Ten reburial was far more reminiscent of Reginald Kekana's than that of the Mamelodi Four. Along with speeches by religious figures and MK Military Veterans Association (MKMVA) officials, the ceremony included appearances by the mayor of Tshwane (the administrative district including Pretoria and its former townships) and the premier of Guateng state, as well as a tribute from Kgalema Motlanthe, the interim president of the country.⁷¹ Thus, the Mamelodi Ten succeeded in using the occasion of the burial to insert their loved ones into the history of the new South Africa in a way that the Mamelodi Four families had not.

Yet, they were still deeply unhappy with the burial process for many of the same reasons as the Mamelodi Four, namely the failure of the local ANC to follow through on their obligations to the fallen military veterans. Specifically, the ANC did not provide the women with the food they are required to serve to relatives at a funeral, nor did they provide the coffins used to bury the remains of the Mamelodi Ten, both of which were understood at the time to be the obligation of the political party to which the individual had belonged while alive.⁷² Instead, the MKMVA had to arrange donations of coffins from local undertakers. While such complaints may seem trivial, it is important to remember that the women I spoke with care deeply about the symbolic actions of the ANC government that is supposed to represent them. Thus, their satisfaction with the entire recovery, identification and reburial process is contingent on experiencing what they believe to be the proper governmental response to their situation. This once again demonstrates the complex emotionally and politically charged view of closure for the Mamelodi families, and the reason why these needs and desires need to be understood – and potentially negotiated – from the outset.

Conclusion

The work of the MPTT has had a substantial impact on the relatives of the missing with whom I spoke, even if it has not brought a complete sense of private or public resolution. All of the families were grateful for the work of the MPTT and felt that their lives were at least marginally better now that they had their loved ones' remains back. Further, the South African government is to be applauded for taking on the issue at all, given that it was not legally obliged to do so. Yet, its failure to address the full range of desires and needs of these families at the end of the recovery, identification and reburial procedure has left many relatives of the disappeared unsatisfied. Starting from the assumption that transitional justice demands that at least some of the needs and desires of victims of human rights abuse are met, I will conclude by offering two policy recommendations and highlighting important lessons that can be learned from the research detailed in this article.

Policy Recommendations

As much as possible, the MPTT and the government agencies it works with should adopt the 'grave-to-grave' approach articulated by the International Commission on Missing Persons. This approach conceptualizes each stage in the recovery, identification, reburial and commemoration process, from the point where remains are located for the first time in a clandestine or hidden grave to the point at which they are reburied in a culturally appropriate manner with commemoration and memorialization worthy of official attention and family satisfaction.⁷³ As things stand now, each step of the process in South Africa is handled by a different governmental agency with only loose coordination among them.⁷⁴

Families and their advocates ought to be officially recognized at the decision-making table in the context of exhumation policy making and priority setting. While some needs and desires of family members will probably be exceedingly difficult to fulfill (for example, reparations on a level that families find adequate or full South African National Defence Force burials), others can be dealt with more easily (for example, working with local political parties and community officials to ensure a dignified reburial ceremony that addresses the expectations of the families as much as possible, including a military presence). By addressing these needs, the government will ensure that the significant investment it has made in the MPTT will not be squandered at the very end of the process. Further, if families are brought into the decision-making process, they will be able to help craft the inevitable compromises that will have to be made and may be more likely to accept the inevitable shortcomings and imperfections of the system.

A Final Thought

An important lesson emerging from the South African context, and one that is confirmed by other case studies, is that biological identification of the remains of the missing through DNA profiling and other techniques is not enough to resolve the psychosocial, economic and spiritual wounds that result from years or decades of not knowing the fate of a loved one. In order to create real and lasting change in a survivor's life, investigators and institutions involved in postconflict identification must also reattach the social, historical and political identity of the missing persons to his or her remains through appropriate memorials, ceremonies and proclamations, which must be determined through direct dialogue with families and their representatives.

A final lesson is that the cases of disappearance that get investigated in South Africa represent just the very tip of the iceberg in terms of the damage that apartheid did to the citizenry. For each in-mandate missing persons case investigated by the MPTT, there are several that will probably never be resolved and several dozen more that do not even qualify for attention. While it is crucial to address properly the cases of the missing that can be investigated, transitional justice efforts must be careful not to preclude helping the families of missing persons whose cases may never be resolved.

Acknowledgments

¹ This work has been supported by a grant from the US National Institutes of Health's Ethical, Legal and Social Implications of Human Genomic Research (ELSI) Program, R03 HG004655, 'DNA Identification in the Aftermath of Genocide and Mass Violence.' The human subjects protection procedures practiced by the author have been reviewed and approved by Carnegie Mellon University's IRB (project ID: HS09-076; date: 20 February 2009). The author wishes to thank the South African Missing Persons Task Team and Khulumani Support Group for logistical assistance, and, most important, the relatives of the missing and disappeared who welcomed me into their community and their homes and shared their stories with me. Thanks also go to Simon Robins, Lara Nettlefield, Harvey Weinstein, relatives of the Mamelodi Four and Mamelodi Ten and several anonymous reviewers for their

excellent feedback and advice on various drafts of this article. Finally, a special thanks to Madeleine Fullard for her critical comments and also for correcting various errors of fact and interpretation.

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20. MPTT. p. 20-21.supra n 7 at
21. In almost all instances in this article, I quote relatives of the missing by name rather than anonymizing them. Many of them have already been directly quoted in TRC hearing transcripts and press accounts and regularly speak out in public both locally and nationally on the issue of missing persons.
22. During my discussions with relatives, there were occasionally additional people in the room whom I never interviewed directly but who occasionally intervened to correct details or to add their own impressions of the issue. If I did not get consent to interview the person, I did not transcribe the comments or use any of his or her thoughts in my work.
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