

How collective memories fuel conflicts

October 12 2023, by Olumba E. Ezenwa



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

When a group of youths [attacked shops and buildings](#) in Tallinn, Estonia, on the evening of April 26, 2007, it sparked two days of civil unrest. This resulted in the death of a young man, injuries to 100 people, including 13 police officers, and the arrest of more than 1,000 people.

The unrest was due to a disagreement between two communities—ethnic Estonians and ethnic Russians—[over how they should remember the](#)

[events](#) of the second world war and the Soviet period. These disagreements stemmed from contentious "collective memories" of events and narratives.

Such [shared recollections](#) of past events can arise among a group or nation—whether factual or fabricated. As I have shown in a paper, [published in Genealogy](#), collective memories among individuals in a community, passed down through generations, are often at the heart of conflicts.

[Collective memory](#) is a social representation of the past. It ultimately explains how people's shared recollections are formed within the [social groups](#) they belong to. But it [also explains](#) how they are formed against the social groups of people they do not consider themselves members of.

This creates a shared, collective past among each group that can be [reignited in the present](#) to retain the [memory](#) of the past.

This may seem to be just another word for history. But memory [is not history](#). Ultimately, history views events with depth and from multiple perspectives.

Collective memory, on the other hand, [simplifies the events](#)—viewing them from a single perspective and reducing them to myths.

This is much like how our individual memories work. They are often faulty and driven by how we want to view ourselves. As such, collective memory [is fundamentally tied to identity](#) in ways that history aspires not to be, even though the latter may drive the former.

[Collective memories](#) can be shared in many ways. This includes family tales, folklore, institutionalized education, social media, sanctioned narratives, propaganda and education.

A glimpse into Nigeria

In my paper, I argue that contentious historical accounts shape collective memories as well as collective behavior. The research is based on [case studies](#) conducted in April 2018 and May 2022 in Benue State, Nigeria, aiming to understand the persistence of conflicts there over time.

The paper explores how [historical events](#) in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial Nigeria resonate today. This has reignited collective memories, influencing collective behavior towards violence. That's because people seek to redress current grievances through the lens of past events.



Fulani herdsman in Togo. Credit: wikipedia, [CC BY-SA](#)

Nigeria's [history](#) is marked by persistent violence, through the eras of European imperialism, independence, the Nigeria-Biafra war (1967–70), military dictatorships and multi-party politics.

One problem is [eco-violence](#)—conflict over water and other agricultural resources between contending groups: nomadic herders and farmers. These conflicts have persisted for decades, from [colonial times](#) to independence and the present day.

Collective memories influence people's collective behavior in several ways. First, they provide [historical contexts to contemporary issues](#). Second, they link a known and collectively [shared past emotion to a current event](#). And third, they associate [current issues with societal contradictions](#) of previous events, such as colonial efforts to divide and conquer.

The convergence of these three factors is shaping the persistence of conflicts between the nomadic herders and farmers. There are [conflicting narratives](#) between the two groups regarding the ownership of communal land. There are also differing opinions on who should have access to it—and how.

Among the farmers in the region, the conflicts [are perceived](#) as a resurgence of the 1804 jihad, a military and religious attack by an Islamic army, aimed at claiming their land. They now feel attacked again.

The nomadic Fulani herders, on the other hand, assert their rights to access agricultural resources [by citing their lineage to the Sokoto Caliphate](#), which was created as a result of the jihad and once governed parts of the north-central region.

These contentious collective memories between the two groups shape

people's perceptions and their collective actions. And this transfer of emotions from past events to new ones complicates the peaceful resolution of conflicts. It ultimately leads to persistent violent disputes.

The ongoing violent conflicts between farmers and nomadic Fulani herders in Nigeria, similar to the 2007 unrest in Tallinn, Estonia, are shaped by differing narratives of the past. The effect of collective memories in intensifying these violent confrontations is undeniable.

Conflict resolution

Embedding [collective memory](#) within conflict resolution strategies is crucial for realizing sustained peace. One way to do this is by using "cognitive reappraisal techniques." Such techniques involve [exposing individuals](#) to emotionally charged situations to change their emotional reactions.

[Temporal distancing](#), for example, is a cognitive reappraisal technique that occurs when you imagine a stressful event from your future self's perspective rather than your current self's.

Another technique, self-distancing, entails stepping back from your immediate reactions to see emotionally charged events from a broader perspective. The [cognitive reappraisal technique](#), when applied to a [conflict](#) situation, aims to lessen group hostility, encourage peaceful responses to past violent incidents, and reduce aggressive behavior in group interactions.

It [could therefore](#) reduce disagreements between two communities. Although adapting this approach to fit the Nigerian context may require additional studies, it holds potential.

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