A specialised course for Tangaza in partnership with the FSCIRE.

To offer an online lecture on Wednesday, January the 13th at 2:30 pm on the following:

**Memory and history: Oral history and tradition in East Africa context**

By Julius Gathogo, PhD

Distinguished Professor at ANCCI University &

Senior Lecturer Kenyatta University

**Abstract**

Historians have always erred in ignoring oral histories, as it is always assumed, wrongly that the only reliable and trustworthy way is the written word. Oral history methods include interview methods, questionnaires, participant observations, and archival sources. In Africa, oral history is also seen through myths, riddles, oral narratives, sayings, proverbs, songs, dance, drama, and in the idioms and figurative of the people. The aim of this article is to underscore the nature and importance of on oral histories which rely on the memory of the narrators. Oral history methods can also be in form of autobiographies, festschrifts, memoirs, novels that capture some oral information, playbooks and other literary works that mimic certain oral realities, books and publications that capture some suppressed histories as in the case of gender and colonial realities. In the analysis, the article seeks to demonstrate that oral histories an essential as they do confirm, reaffirm, reinforce, correct, liberate, reconstruct and eventually add to the historical record. In the case of both Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Wole Soyinka’s literary works, their respective childhood experiences are well captured, as they employ both the use of post-colonial theory and the theory of autobiography in their theoretical frameworks. In focusing on memory and history in the East African context, I intend to build from the above literary works to say that the methodology in chronicling East African oral history, church history or in social histories will require us to go beyond post-colonial theory and the theory of autobiography in order to harvest the rich and forward moving historiographies that remain unexplored and/or unpublished.

**Keywords:** Post-colonial theory, theory of autobiography, oral history technique, oral methods in modern scholarship, peoples’ memory, collective memory, ancestral memories, power of memory.

**Introduction**

In Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Wole Soyinka’s literary works (refer to *Dreams in a time of war* and *The years of child hood* respectively), their respective childhood experiences are graphically captured in colonial Kenya and Nigeria. The bottom line, in their literary works, is that childhood memories are critical in individual and societal lives. In the case of Soyinka, he grew up as a privileged child while Ngugi grew up as a deprived child. Both writers share a lot in common: they grew up at around the same historical times when West Africa (Soyinka) and East Africa (Ngugi), and the rest of Africa, were experiencing different historical times. The use of autobiographical and post-colonial theories, which are also evident in theological histories and Church history, is to focus on memory in their respective contexts. The use of recording recollections after interviews, use of archival sources, revisiting historical sites, preserving unique happenings, giving prominence to oral sources and so on will boost our memories as a people. Certainly, people whose memories are blurred or destroyed altogether face the risk of extinction.

While memory can be seen merely as the means to which we draw on our past experiences so as to enrich the present information, it is worthwhile to concede that the age of science and technology drives us to broaden our understanding of the same. This means that memory is not just the term given to the processes and structures dealing with the stowing and the resultant retrieval and/or recovery of data. Considering that memory is crucial to all the pillars of culture (refer to religion, economics, politics, aesthetics, ethics, and kinship), researchers in human and social sciences will continue to rely on oral traditions and storytelling and/or oral narrative as a critical variable, in the East African context and in the rest of the tropical Africa.

From the outset, it is worthwhile to concede that autobiographical memory is something to do with a memory system that consists of episodes recollected from an individual’s life and is based on experiences, events, phenomenon, daily encounters – some of which reshape world’s history and is periodical, timely and captures the whole essence of our being. This understanding of memory as a powerful too in human endeavours is graphically captured by Michelle Obama as she bewailed her father, Fraser C. Robinson (1935-91), and in a speech that was delivered on 9 June 2009, she said thus: “Now, my Dad didn't live to see me in the White House.  He passed away from complications from his illness when I was in my twenties.  And, graduates, let me tell you, he is the hole in my heart.  His loss is my scar.” She went on to say: “But let me tell you something, his memory drives me forward every single day of my life.  Every day, I work to make him proud.  Every day, I stay hungry, not just for myself, but for him and for my mom and for all the kids I grew up with who never had the opportunities that my family provided for me."[[1]](#footnote-1) In light of this, this presentation will attempt to address the view that even if there are many theories and methods in contemporary scholarship, autobiographical memory is critical in the post-colonial scholarship as it will successfully usher in a positive reconstruction of our society.

As will be demonstrated in this presentation, all the vicissitudes of life, and especially in the world of academia, oral techniques have been used across the disciplines to grow knowledge. This dalliance with memory and/or oral techniques is evidently visible in literary works, in the East African literature, in the study of religion, in autobiographical theory, leaders’ memoirs, postcolonial theory, feminist theory, womanist scholarship, cultural hermeneutics, comparative religions, analytical history, and oikotheology among other areas, so as to enrich the present information, reinforce what is already known in history and/or to build new knowledge altogether. Certainly, memory and its resultant oral techniques will be needed to reinforce existing literature or to clarify issues that have remained ambiguous to the society. For example, the role of Portuguese missionaries in the 15th and 16th century in the East African Coast, will need to be revisited and re-written from the perspective of the locals rather than from the perspectives of the European anthropologists and explorers of the time.[[2]](#footnote-2) For as the saying goes, unless the Lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the Hunter. Put it differently, if the Lion fails to write his or her side of the story, the Hunter will keep telling the story from his or her own perspective. That, his or her medals, expeditions, bravery, and other heroic acts in the jungle are the only good things. In turn, the story of the Lion will continue to be presented as cruel, barbaric, merciless, and as the de-facto enemy of the human well-being – hence the justification to destroy the Lion the moment an opportunity avails itself. Certainly, a court of Hyena will always pronounce a death sentence to a Goat for serious crimes, real or imagined Equally, if our rich oral narratives are not retrieved and subjected to the canons of modern publications, the East African context will continue to be dismissed as the European Anthropologists of the 19th and early 20th century described African Religion as Fetishism and Fetish Worshippers,[[3]](#footnote-3) ancestral worship, the African God as a “*deus remotus*” (a withdrawn God), paganism, animistic, idolatory, heathenism, primitivism and polytheism among others.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The critical roles of outstanding East African church leaders, both Protestants and Catholics, needs to be revisited from an autobiographical perspective and/or through other related methodologies. Equally, colonial and post-colonial discourses in East Africa needs to be recaptured in the twenty-first century so as to clarify on early misunderstandings and ambiguities therein. In my presentation, I will cite several cases that will attempt to underscore the power of memory in academia and in the general vicissitudes of life, and in mitigating the negative factors of globalization. Case studying literary works, and ecclesiastical histories in East Africa will certainly aid in repairing the damage. In any case, theology of reconstruction has something to do with rewriting our own stories in a relevant and constructive fashion that resonates well with our collective memories as a people. Undoubtedly, it is no longer “*cogito ergo sum*” (I think; therefore, I exist), of the French philosopher Rene Descartes, but John Mbiti’s African aphorism “I am because we are,” or “I am related; therefore, I am” (*cognatus ergo sum* oran existential *cognatus sum, ergo sumus*, “I am related; therefore, we are.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In misrepresenting facts and/or distorting facts, we eventually hurt the collective memory of African heritage and the East African context in general, thereby wounding memory and history in our East African context. African Church history is replete with such unfortunate scenarios.

**Oral Techniques as a Methodology**

Oral history technique and/or oral methods in modern scholarship has gained broad acceptance as an authentic model in East Africa, Africa and beyond. Through oral narratives, rooted in African heritage, a person narrates his or her story as he or she knows it. Even though we may poke holes and say that narrators are biased, they speak from their perspectives, oral information wears out or erodes with time, it is worthwhile to also appreciate two things. One, every historian writes or narrates from his or her own perspective, and there is no neutral human communication, hence we must underline this fundamental understanding. Second, any credible academic work has to adhere to the ethics of research, hence an oral researcher has to be very keen when listening to those whose memory are fading due to advancing age or sickness or due to any other reason. In carrying out oral researches or documenting a given oral history, one has to listen to more than one person on the same subject under consideration. Beyond this, every data given must meet logical threshold for it to be within the ethical standards. In other words, one may want to ask: Does it contradict another established theory that relates to the subject under consideration, and if so, where is the logic or illogicality for that matter? In a nutshell, every credible research has to be empirically sensible, hence one cannot enforce a pedestrian stereotype and repackage it as a credible oral historical fact.

African women theologians have used storytelling and/or oral narrative techniques in scholarship to deconstruct patriarchy and eventually reconstruct womanhood and humanity in general. For as Isabel Phiri says,

The construction of womanhood by patriarchy is one of the central issues for feminist theologians globally and particularly in Africa because it has influenced the way women and the roles that women can play in African Church and society are imaged. Patriarchy has defined women as inferior to men thereby perpetuating the oppression of women by religion and culture.[[6]](#footnote-6)

As a tool of healing and reconciliation with a society that has unapologetically remained patriarchal sexist, conflict-prone – as in the case of Somalia, Ethiopia, xenophobic South Africa, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Angola, Rwanda, and even in post December 2007 disputed elections where over one thousand Kenyans lost their lives, as over 400, 000 found themselves homeless, an effective methodology has to be put into consideration. In such contexts that define post-colonial East Africa and Africa at large, story-telling becomes a critical tool of learning, reconciliation, and more importantly a tool of recovery from both locally and foreign induced conflicts. In view of this, oral history technique, and more importantly, story-telling becomes an avenue of healing that creates a forum of confessing sins of commission and omission. The healing confessions seen during the Truth and Reconciliation Committee (TRC) in post-apartheid South Africa is a case in point, that underscores the importance of storytelling.[[7]](#footnote-7) Story-telling thus aids in psycho-social reconstruction of our conflict-prone society, a phenomenon that is largely triggered by the competition for the little resources at our disposal. As a technique, oral history finds itself at home with the rank-and-file of society as it breaks down the dichotomies of learned versus not learned, educated versus not educated, theologians versus non-theologians – as all voices can narrate their experiences for broader analysis and general consideration. To this end, Isabel Phiri shows the justification of engaging in oral theologies among African women theologians, and explains, thus:

Story telling is one of the powerful methodologies that African women have revived. Musa Dube has developed a unique methodology of reading a biblical story in the context of globalisation through story telling technique. Through storytelling, African women are bringing to the attention of the world their spiritual, emotional and physical suffering and the potential they have to transform their situation of oppression. It includes men in its vision and struggle for African liberation from all forms of oppression.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Besides African women theologians, a leading North American Black theologian, James Cone (1938-2018), captures the role of storytelling in aiding our memory when he says:

Every people have a story to tell, something to say to themselves, their children, and to the world about how they think and live, as they determine their reason for being… When people can no longer listen to the other people’s stories, they become enclosed within their own social context… And then they feel they must destroy other people’s stories.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Certainly, African indigenous religion relied heavily on oral techniques as measure of upholding peoples’ memory and eventually preserve peoples’ heritage. These oral approaches of preserving memory remain relevant right into the twenty-first century. In view of this, David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda, Robert Petty, Judy Tobler, and Darrel Wratten have helped us to appreciate this reality by citing Jomo Kenyatta’s book, *Facing Mount Kenya*. They explain, thus:

Consider the example of (Jomo) Kenyatta’s *Facing Mount Kenya*. Note that this “facing” is a metaphor for orientation in space and time as well as for motivation. To face Mount Kenya means to think and do African without any concern for non-African opinion. The first significance of this act of indifference lies in facing towards an African centre. Implied in the act is a facing away from other centres of meaning and power. Now this is not to suggest that these other centres are denied either existence or power within their sphere of influence; it is to stress, however, that Africans recognize a space and a moment in which every other centre can only register as subordinate to an African centre. It is in this space that the core of African identity inheres.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The import of David Chidester et al’s position helps us to see the resilience and nature of African indigenous education, which must necessarily be in dialogue with western education so as to earn its relevance in tropical Africa. Embracing oral skills, that are rooted in African indigenous religion is certainly critical as,

The popular version of African traditional religion is what Africans (including some elites, though mostly the masses) do with no regard for what Westerners, or anyone else, may or may not think about it. It is what Africans do when they are just Africans. Now this does not mean that such a practice is completely untouched by alien influences, be they religious (such as Christianity or Islam) or secular (such as modernity); what it means is that in full cognisance of their historical context Africans do what they do for their own reasons rather than to impress someone else…. [[11]](#footnote-11)

**Songs and dance**

Besides oral narratives, riddles, and drama, songs and dance constitute a very critical method of preserving African oral histories. Bolaji Idowu reminds us that songs and dance “constitute a rich heritage for the whole of Africa. For Africans are always singing and in their singing and poetry, they express themselves. In this way, all their joys and sorrows, their hopes and fears about the future, find an outlet.”[[12]](#footnote-12) For in singing, it always becomes a forum of communicating and/or educating on certain issues of importance to the community. It becomes a more memorable significance when songs and dance are blended with rituals, as it now communicates to the living, and to the ancestors, especially when libations are poured.

In both his book, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction[[13]](#footnote-13)* and *From Liberation to Reconstruction: African Christian Theology after the Cold War*,[[14]](#footnote-14) Jesse Mugambi utilizes Hymn-Biblical text method in order to drive his two themes of liberation and reconstruction home. In particular, he uses four revivalist’s songs, composed in the twentieth century in Europe, as a vehicle of communicating both his theology of liberation and a theology of reconstruction respectively. In particular, he uses Charlotte Elliot’s song” “Just as I am, without one plea But that thy blood was shed for me, And that thou bidd’st me come to Thee, O Lamb of God, I come,” which is quoted in *Christian Praise*.[[15]](#footnote-15) Perhaps, the missing link is the lack African indigenous songs in his schema of liberation and reconstruction.

**Post-colonial theory**

In regard to the African context, anti-colonial movements and anti-slavery recollections and/or memories gave rise to post-colonial theory. Reading from Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s works, he offers sharp critiques to the Christian missions of the 19th and 20th centuries. His novels and playbooks such as *The River Between*, *Petals of Blood*, *I will marry when I want*, *Weep not child*, *Devil on the Cross* and so on, post-colonial theory is clearly evident as he critiques missionary enterprises, as he critiques colonialism, settler-missionary alliances, colonial hegemony, cultural imperialism, religious domination and conquest, and the modern versions of neo-colonialism that includes corruption, and bourgeoisies’ dominance in the socio-economic setups and so on. As he advocates for the decolonization of the mind in his works, and in his use of post-colonial-theory in general, he provides a means of defiance against exploitative, divisive and discriminative practices. In turn, elements that justifies postcolonial theory are largely economic, social, political, religious, feminist, and humanitarian.[[16]](#footnote-16)

In my article on the“Genesis, Methodologies, and Concerns of African Theology of Reconstruction,” I have outlined the five stages of African Christianity and African theological thinking as follows: Christianity as propagated by the early Church fathers and the Apologists before the fourth Century CE, the Portuguese Christianity of the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the brand of Christianity that was propagated by the early missionaries of the 19th and 20th centuries, the theologies of adaptation, indigenisation or inculturation and liberation - which was indeed experienced after the Bible was translated into the indigenous languages of the diverse peoples of Africa, and the emergence of theologies of reconstruction in the early 1990s.[[17]](#footnote-17) In the post-colonial theology of reconstruction, for example, emphasis on inclusivity as opposed to exclusivity, bottom-up forms of development rather than top-bottom approach, “proactive rather than reactive; complementary rather than competitive; integrative rather than disintegrative; programme-driven rather than project-driven; people centred rather than institution-centred; deed-oriented rather than word-oriented; participatory rather than autocratic; regenerative rather than degenerative; future-sensitive rather than past-sensitive; co-operative rather than confrontational; consultative rather than impositional.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

As a post-colonial enterprise, theology of reconstruction is seen as a strong advocate for a free postcolonial African worldview that remains buoyant for a better future, and builds on afro-optimist trend. It advocates the end of neo-colonialism just as colonialism was conquered. Although neo-colonialism is largely seen as another form of imperialism where the industrialised world interfere socio-politically in the affairs of post-independent countries, it also includes dictatorship, mismanagement of national resources and corrupt practices amongst postcolonial African nations.[[19]](#footnote-19) African theology of reconstruction is oriented towards the construction of a democratic and socio-economically empowering Africa that seeks to actualise the dreams of Pan-Africanists of the 19th and 20th century such as Marcus Garvey, George Padmore, CLR James, Léopold Senghor, Aimé Césaire, William duBois, Edward Blyden, Jomo Kenyatta, and Kwame Nkrumah among others. Hence, reconstruction theologies appeal strongly to the ancestral memories of the dreams of African renaissance and socio-cultural rebirth which is spiced by “calls for rebuilding, renewal, development and theo-ethical rebirth.”[[20]](#footnote-20) It is no wonder that the sources of African theology of reconstruction appeal to the memory and/or to oral and technological sources. In this case, science and technology is only critical insofar as modernity and relevance is concerned. The sources therefore are: the Bible, Science and technology, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD), All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC), African Cultural and Religious Heritage, the history of the Christian missions in Africa, and the Pan-Africanist movement of the twentieth century, among others. Certainly, the above five stages of African Christianity and African theological thinking proceeds from pre-colonial to post-colonial Africa.

**Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s Wizard of the Crow**

In this book, Ngugi wa Thiong’o nurtures our collective memory by using his novel to remind people of East Africa and Kenya in particular by taking us through a memory lane, a phenomenon where he mimics the oppressive rule of 1980s and 1990s where one person determined the destiny of masses of people who were subjected to being hewers of wood and drawers of water, a phenomenon where the Gibeonites were condemned to servitude under the Israelites (Joshuah 9:21). As single-party dictatorship reigned in Kenya with an iron fist, trumped-up trials, kangaroo courts, and detention without trials became Kenya’s defining characteristic till fearless clergymen like Archbishops Bishops David Gitari, Raphael S. Ndingi Mwana a’Nzeki, and Zacchaeus Okoth; Bishops Henry Okullu, Alexander Muge, Rev Timothy Njoya and other notable clergy hit back at the seemingly intolerant governing system. Equally, other members of the civil society and lawyers such as Paul Muite, Gitobu Imanyara, Martha Karua and veteran politicians such as Oginga Odinga, Kenneth Matiba, Charles Rubia, Martin Shikuku, Raila Odinga, Koigi wa Wamwere, Mukhisa Kituyi and Prof Wangari Maathai dared the system and called for a laissez-faire society for all. In appealing to the gallant fighters of Kenya’s independence, the Mau-Mau rebels of the 1950s and 60s who dared a conventional and stronger colonial army, the so-called second liberation heroes of 1980s and 90s were enthused by Kenya’s collective memory; hence they were able to appreciate their unique positioning in history. In the global context, our collective memories of Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, Charles Nyamiti, John Mbiti, Kwame Bediako, Pope John Paul II, and Mother Theresa among others “drives [us] forward every single day of [our lives]” and motivates us to swing into action and deliver the world from a hotchpotch of issues that befogs it. Further, recollections put the African context in the position where Moses was as he confronted the Egyptian Pharaoh with the dictum, “Let My People Go” (Exodus 5:1). It is during this oppressive moment under Pharaoh that Moses and Aaron went in, and told Pharaoh, “Thus saith the LORD God of Israel, Let my people go, that they may hold a feast unto me in the wilderness” (Exodus 5:1).

In his bid to decolonize the mind, Ngugi wa Thiong’o first wrote his novel, *Wizard of the Crow* (2006), in his indigenous Kikuyu (African) language, which in my view demonstrates that all languages are tongues of God; and no language speaker should be subjected to being hewers of wood and drawers of water metaphorically or in any other way. The book which was first called *Murogi wa Kagogo* was later translated to the *Wizard of the Crow*. He brings out this imaginary Free Republic of Aburiria to prick our collective memory.

In Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s novel, thus, *Wizard of the Crow* (*Murogi wa Kagogo*), one character (Nyawira) in the country of Aburiria “seems to apotheosize Wangari Maathai.”[[21]](#footnote-21) This is a reminiscent of the case where Prof. Wangari Maathai fought bravely in late 1980s and early 1990s to stop the construction of what is being famed, in the novel, as the highest building ever to be built on earth, a building that was planned along the biblical story of the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). Wangari Maathai fought this ecologically insensitive building that the government of president Moi intended to build till the Nairobi’s public recreation park was spared of destruction. In Ngugi’s novel, Nyawira (meaning the hardworking woman) risked her life and fought what was described by the government of Aburiria as that which will be an “out-wonder [of] all the existing wonders of the world: the pyramid of Egypt, Taj Mahal, the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the Great Wall of China etc.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Wangari Maathai went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004 for her crusade against human rights violation and environmental conservation.

Wa Thiong’o appeals to the politics of language to show how historical factors have played a negative role in disfiguring the African memory. As noted in Julius Gathogo,

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the well-known Kenyan novelist, dramatist and essayist, in his Something Torn and New: An African Renaissance, traces Africa’s fragmentation and restoration amidst the global history of colonialism and modernity. For him, Africans in Africa and in the diaspora were subjected to the same erasure of all that preceded European conquest and colonisation. He sees similar patterns among other cultures, with the Irish and Native Americans being just two examples. Language therefore becomes critical in reconnecting conquered people to their respective cultures. In his quest for a revitalised Africa, he argues that a renaissance of African languages is an essential step in the restoration of African wholeness. He stopped writing in English in the 1970s in favour of African languages, specifically Kikuyu and Kiswahili, and ponders whether an African renaissance, following the dark ages of colonialism and apartheid, would be expressed in European languages. His foremost concern has therefore been the critical importance of language to culture. As he explores Africa’s historical, economic and cultural fragmentation by slavery, colonialism and globalisation, Europhonism, the replacement of indigenous names, languages, and identities with European ones, reveals itself as a constant and irrepressible force the result of which he envisages to be the dismemberment of African memory.[[23]](#footnote-23)

**Autobiography theory**

Wole Soyinka’s book, *The Years of Childhood*, like Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Dreams in Time of War*, is another treatise that appraises the power of autobiographical theory. As in other theory discussed in this presentation, the power and essence of memory runs concurrently. In *The Years of childhood*, Akinwade Oluwole Babatunde Soyinka popularly called Wole Soyinka gives his autobiographical account about events in his childhood ranging from 1934, the year of his birth, through to 1945 as he grew in the Town of Ake, in Nigeria. In the Town of Ake, Soyinka spent 12 years of his lifetimes before he moved to Ibadan to attend a Government College. His starting point is a parsonage compound, within the Yoruba family in Abeokuta. Such memories are forward moving as they inspire his readers to appreciate the humble starting point for top achievers as the ideal preparations for a major take-off. Soyinka, the Nigerian playwright, poet and essayist, went on to become the awardee of the Nobel Prize in Literature, in 1986, and is certainly the first sub-Saharan African to be honoured in that category.

In Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Dreams in a Time of War,* he demonstrates the power of memory when he takes his readers on a journey right into the colonial era, which was characterized by cultural subjugation, ‘modernity’ conflicts, war, tension and the troubled relationship that emerged when Christianity created a middle class versus the rural poor. In attempting to prick our collective memories, Ngugi in his *Dreams in a Time of War* makes recollections on the Mau Mau war of independence, where tens of thousands lost their lives, in 1950s and 60s, to demonstrate that we can dare dream even in the worst of times. Hence, in his childhood and youthful moments, he could dare dream of a better world despite facing all sorts of danger. In employing autobiographical theory and/or method, Ngugi shows that human right is sacrosanct and translates to the fact that complexities and socio-political vicissitudes of life under colonialism, war and/or neocolonialism cannot bar the way for dreamers with a collective memory.

In Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s novel, *Decolonising the Mind*, he reminisces the dark days of Kenya’s colonial history where in 1952, African instituted schools, which allowed the use of vernacular, were closed down following the Mau Mau (freedom fighters) skirmishes. This also went hand-in-hand with the declaration of the state of emergency on 20th October 1952 till 12 January 1960 when it was lifted by the British colonial government.[[24]](#footnote-24) This banning of patriotic schools went hand-in-hand with the idea of making English as the "Only Language" of instruction in schools and using it as a measure of intelligence. In other words, the more you spoke good English, the more intelligent you were seen, as other languages were treated as inferior. Such recollections are critical in formulating and/or planning for a better future.

**Church historians and autobiographical approach**

Church history and historians of theological and religious studies have also employed critical autobiographical theory in addressing cutting-edge issues facing society and in employing memory to move the society forward. A simple web search will show several social-ecclesiastical publications that have employed autobiographical approach to communicate critical matters. Such includes: *Nelson Mandela’s No Easy Walk to Freedom* – which is a vivid biography that takes its title from a 1953 speech where Mandela reminded his audience that the dismantling of apartheid would not be a smooth sailing exercise. Authored by Barry Denenberg, in 2014, it utilizes autobiographical approach and demonstrates the power of memory in moving humanity forward.

Other critical publications that utilizes autobiographical theory include: “A Brave One Legged General: The Story of Mau-Mau General Kassam Gichimu Njogu,”[[25]](#footnote-25) “Karubiu wa Munyi and the Making of Modern Kirinyaga, Kenya,”[[26]](#footnote-26) “Steve de Gruchy’s Theology and Development Model: Any dialogue with the African theology of reconstruction?”[[27]](#footnote-27) “Mwendoni-ire Z K”: Reconstructing the Memory of Z. K. Matthews in Southern Africa (1901-68),”[[28]](#footnote-28) “Theological Education in the Tropical Africa: An Essay in Honor of Christina Landman and a Kenyan Perspective,”[[29]](#footnote-29) “The Use of Indigenous Resources in Environmental Conservation in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Murogi wa Kagogo:* a religio-cultural perspective,”[[30]](#footnote-30) “Nahashon Ngare Rukenya and the Moral Re-Armament in Kenya: The Turning Point and the Resettlement of Post War Victims (1959-1970),”[[31]](#footnote-31) and “Nursing a Bullet in the Human Body: Mau-Mau Rebels’ General Magoto (1927 -) and Kenya’s Quest for Independence.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Other publications include: “Mau-Mau Rebels’ Doctor in Mount Kenya East Forest (1952-60): Retrieving the Revolutionary History of Milton Munene Gachau,”[[33]](#footnote-33) “Bilingualism in Albert Schweitzer’s Works and its Relevance for Africa,”[[34]](#footnote-34) “Ecclesiastical and Political Leaderships in One Armpit: Reconstructing the Memory of Thomas Kalume,”[[35]](#footnote-35) “Extremist or an inculturationist? Retrieving Milkah Muthoni’s (1948-2009) afro-Pentecostalism,”[[36]](#footnote-36) “Women, Come and Roast Your Own Ram!” Recollections On Mau-Mau General Chui Wa Mararo (1927 - 1956)," “Women, Come and Roast Your Own Ram!” Recollections On Mau-Mau General Chui Wa Mararo (1927 - 1956),[[37]](#footnote-37) “Johana Njumbi (1886-1991): the pioneer African Leader in Mutira Mission,”[[38]](#footnote-38) “Unsung heroes and heroines at Mutira Mission, Kenya (1907-2012),”[[39]](#footnote-39) “Mercy Oduyoye as the Mother of African Women’s Theology,”[[40]](#footnote-40) “The birth of Protestant education in East Africa: Sampling Johannes Ludwig Krapf (1810 – 1881),”[[41]](#footnote-41) “Reading John Calvin in African Context: Any relevance for social reconstruction of Africa?”[[42]](#footnote-42) “The History and Nature of Gitari’s Leadership Prowess, 1986-91,”[[43]](#footnote-43) and Jesse Mugambi’s Pedigree: Formative Factors”[[44]](#footnote-44)among others.

**The Case of Men battering in Kenya** – an oral technique perspective

In most of my published works, I have relied on oral history technique in order to gather data and have eventually demonstrated the power of people’s collective memory in moving the society forward. Take for example my research on “Men’s battering in Kenya,” which was carried out in 2012, I set out to establish whether men’s battering has been there in African society since time immemorial. How was it handled whenever it occurred? What causes it? Is there anything that can be done to stop it now that it had come in the open by February 2012? Are we sitting on an explosional time bomb? Are we sitting on a volcano that is ready to erupt? I started collecting my data, from 26 counties out of the 47 counties that makes up Kenya, after newspapers became awash with cases of men’s battering by women, a phenomenon which was in contrast with the established trends in domestic violence. In particular, it came out crystal-clearly, one Friday on the 10th February 2012, when the headlines of the local Kenyan dailies shocked the entire nation when a photo of a disfigured man in his mid-life was displayed.[[45]](#footnote-45)

Later it became clear that Mr Simon Kiguta, a 40-year-old man, was brutally attacked by his wife of 12 years with a panga (machete). As Ms Julliana Wairimu fled their matrimonial home for fear of retaliation from the villagers, Mr. Kiguta was taken to Nyeri Provincial hospital, in the Intensive Care Unit, where he miraculously survived. Shortly after, newspapers and the social media splashed photos of another disfigured man, Mr Francis Muchiri, 34, confessed openly while at Mukurweini District Hospital, of Nyeri County, on February 12, 2012 that he had been battered by his wife.

In a succession of events, Kenyan men started speaking up, and narrated bizarre stories countrywide, about their encounters with murders spouses. In Taita Taveta County, Taita district, Daniel Mulonzi, the area Gender and Social Development Officer, admitted that indeed gender based violence was rampant in the region – and called for urgent attention.[[46]](#footnote-46) In Western Kenya, Kisumu, West Kolwa location, Chief Otieno Kabisae reported that he had a number of cases of violence against men by their spouses but regretted that most men prefer to treat their injuries silently so as to avoid being mocked by their fellow men and the society at large.[[47]](#footnote-47) This drove me to appeal to our collective memory, as oral techniques guided the research in attempting to understand the cultural approaches in addressing men’s battering throughout the generations. What were the African indigenous ways of addressing men’s battering in a patriarchal society? Listening from the about 200 representatives from about 26 counties, out of the 47 that constitutes Kenya, brought interesting approaches which were authentic and creative. The oral narrative technique is certainly essential across the social and human sciences, to which church history is a part. It is certainly significant in moving East Africa and the rest of the tropical Africa forward.

**Conclusion**

The article has strived to show the power of memory in academia and in social discourses with particular reference to the African context. With scholars employing diverse theories in their discourses, appeal to the memory remains a critical starting point. In any case, even Isaac Newton (1643-1727) had to appeal to the memory in rejecting flatteries and/or praise for his role in formulating the laws of motion and universal gravitation, and where he said: “If I can see this far, I must have stood on the shoulders of other giants,” where he was referring to his predecessors in scientific discoveries of the 17th century such as Galileo Galilei (1564-1642).[[48]](#footnote-48)

Considering that memory is the origin of everything, our methodology in the modern forms of learning has to factor on the oral techniques as equally credible. The tendency to fight Corona Virus Disease 2019 (Covid-19) is a good point of reference as we see many Africans appealing to African indigenous resources in its combat, and are successful to a large extent. With playbooks, novels, church history text books, and academic journals appealing to oral techniques, memory as the origin of everything becomes the major driving force in academic discourses. Similarly, several theses and dissertations have employed autobiographical methods and/or theory to unveil critical cutting=edge issues facing the society. In all this, it demonstrates the power of memory in moving humanity to the next progressive level. As noted in our introduction, autobiographical memory is something to do with a memory system that consists of episodes recollected from an individual’s life and is based on experiences, events that took place at a particular time in history, and general facts about history. This method is critical in unveiling the concerns of our contemporary world. Church historians cannot escape it in their scholarly discourses.

1. Michelle Obama, “Transcript of Michelle Obama commencement address,” <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-michelle-obama-commencement-address-transcript-20150609-story.html> (accessed 12 January 2029).

   # .

   [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Julius Gathogo, “The birth of Protestant education in East Africa: Sampling Johannes Ludwig Krapf 1810 – 1881),” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 35(1), pp.167 – 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bolaji Idowu, *African Traditional Religion: A Definition* (London: S.C.M. Press Ltd, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Geoffrey Parrinder, *African Traditional Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1962). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Julius Gathogo, *The Truth about African Hospitality: Is There Hope for Africa?* (Mombasa: The Salt, 2001), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Isabel Apawo Phiri,. “Doing Theology in Community: The case of African Women Theologians in The 1990’s”. *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa 99 (68-76)* (November.

   1997), 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Julius Gathogo, “Reconciliation Paradigm in the Post-Colonial Africa: A Critical Analysis,” *Journal of Religion & Theology,* 19 (2012), 74-91. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Isabel Phiri, “Southern Africa,” in John Parratt ed. 2004. *An introduction to Third World Theologies*, 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. James H. Cone, J.H. *God of the oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975), 102-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda, Robert Petty, Judy Tobler, and Darrel Wratten, *African Traditional Religion in South Africa: An Annotated Bibliography* (London: Greenwood Press, 1997), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. David Chidester, Chirevo Kwenda, Robert Petty, Judy Tobler, and Darrel Wratten, *African Traditional Religion in South Africa:* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Bolaji Idowu, *African traditional religion: An introduction* (London: S.C.M Press), p.84. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jesse Mugambi, *African Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Nairobi: EAEP, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Jesse Mugambi, *From liberation to reconstruction: African Christian theology after cold war* (Nairobi: EAEP, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Charlotte Elliot, *Christian Praise* (London: Tyndale Press, 1957). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. John Mugo Muhia & Julius Gathogo, “The Use of Indigenous Resources in Environmental Conservation in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Murogi wa Kagogo:* a religio-cultural perspective,” *Jumuga Journal of Education, Oral Studies, and Human Sciences* (JJEOSHS), 2018 (1)1, pp.1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Julius Gathogo, “Genesis, Methodologies, and Concerns of African Theology of Reconstruction,” *Theologia Viatorum,* South Africa, 32 (1), (2008): 23-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Jesse Mugambi, *From Liberation to reconstruction*, xv). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Julius Gathogo, “Story-telling as a methodology in developing a theology of reconstruction,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, South Africa, 2007 (33)1, pp., 155-186. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Julius Gathogo, “Genesis, Methodologies, and Concerns of African Theology of Reconstruction,”p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. John Mugo Muhia & Julius Gathogo, “The Use of Indigenous Resources in Environmental Conservation in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Murogi wa Kagogo:* a religio-cultural perspective,” *Jumuga Journal of Education, Oral Studies, and Human Sciences* (JJEOSHS), 2018 (1)1, pp.1-16 (p.7). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. John Mugo Muhia & Julius Gathogo, “The Use of Indigenous Resources in Environmental Conservation in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Murogi wa Kagogo:* a religio-cultural perspective,” *Jumuga Journal of Education, Oral Studies, and Human Sciences* (JJEOSHS), 2018 (1)1, pp.1-16 (p.8). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ### Julius Gathogo, “Bilingualism in Albert Schweitzer’s Works and its Relevance for Africa,” *The Oral History Journal of South Africa*, OHJSA, Vol 4, No 1 (2016), pp.46-58, p.54.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Julius Gathogo and Cyrus Njogu, *Chui wa Mararo: Mau-Mau General Who Was Burnt into Ashes* (Nairobi: Kairos, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Julius Gathogo, “A Brave One Legged General: The Story of Mau-Mau General Kassam Gichimu Njogu,” HTS Teologiese Studies, 2020, 76(4), 1-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Julius Gathogo, “Karubiu wa Munyi and the Making of Modern Kirinyaga, Kenya,” HTS Teologiese Studies, 2020, 76(4), 1-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Julius Gathogo, “Steve de Gruchy’s Theology and Development Model: Any dialogue with the African theology of reconstruction?” STJ 2019, Vol. 5, No. 3, 2019, pp. 307-328. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Julius Gathogo, “Mwendoni-ire Z K: Reconstructing the Memory of Z. K. Matthews in Southern Africa (1901-68),” *Jumuga Journal of Education, Oral Studies, and Human Sciences* (JJEOSHS), Volume 2, No. 1, 2019, pp.1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Julius Gathogo, “Theological Education in the Tropical Africa: An Essay in Honor of Christina Landman and a Kenyan Perspective,” HTS Teologiese Studies, 2019 (75)1, pp.1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. John Mugo Muhia and Julius Gathogo, “The Use of Indigenous Resources in Environmental Conservation in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Murogi wa Kagogo:* a religio-cultural perspective,” *Jumuga Journal of Education, Oral Studies, and Human Sciences* (JJEOSHS), 2018 (1)1, 1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Julius Gathogo, “Nahashon Ngare Rukenya and the Moral Re-Armament in Kenya: The Turning Point and the Resettlement of Post War Victims (1959-1970),” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 2018 (44)2, pp.1-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Julius Gathogo, “Nursing a Bullet in the Human Body: Mau-Mau Rebels’ General Magoto (1927 -) and Kenya’s Quest for Independence,” *The Oral History Journal of South Africa*, 2017, 5(1), 1-15. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. ### Julius Gathogo, “Mau-Mau Rebels’ Doctor in Mount Kenya East Forest (1952-60): Retrieving the Revolutionary History of Milton Munene Gachau,” *The Oral History Journal of South Africa*, OHJSA, Vol 5,

    ### No 1 (2017), pp.32-48.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. ### Julius Gathogo, “Bilingualism in Albert Schweitzer’s Works and its Relevance for Africa,” *The Oral History Journal of South Africa*, OHJSA, Vol 4, No 1 (2016), pp.46-58.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Julius Gathogo, “Ecclesiastical and Political Leaderships in One Armpit: Reconstructing the Memory of Thomas Kalume,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* Vol 41, No 3 (2015), 92-110. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Julius Gathogo, “Extremist or an inculturationist? Retrieving Milkah Muthoni’s (1948-2009) afro-Pentecostalism,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae,* 2014, 40(1), 191-214. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Julius Gathogo, “Women, Come and Roast Your Own Ram!” Recollections On Mau-Mau General Chui Wa Mararo (1927 - 1956), *The Oral History Journal of South Africa*, OHJSA 2(1) 2014, pp. 102-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Julius Gathogo, “Johana Njumbi (1886-1991): the pioneer African Leader in Mutira Mission,” *The Oral History Journal of South Africa (*OHJSA), Vol. 1, No. 1, 2013, pp. 74 -95. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Julius Gathogo, “Unsung heroes and heroines at Mutira Mission, Kenya (1907-2012),*Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 2013, Vol 39, No 1, pp.107-127. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Julius Gathogo, “Mercy Oduyoye as the Mother of African Women’s Theology,” *Thelogia Viatorum:*

    *Journal of Theology and Religion in Africa*, 2010, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp.1-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Julius Gathogo, “The birth of Protestant education in East Africa: Sampling Johannes Ludwig Krapf (1810 – 1881),” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 2009, XXXV, Supplement), 167 – 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Julius Gathogo, “Reading John Calvin in African Context: Any relevance for social reconstruction of Africa?” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 2009, XXXV), 219-235. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Julius Gathogo, “The History and Nature of Gitari’s Leadership Prowess, 1986-91,” *Churchman,* UK, 121 (4), (2007), 333-347. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Julius Gathogo, Jesse Mugambi’s Pedigree: Formative Factors,” *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, XXXII (2), South Africa, (September 2006), 173-205. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Julius Gathogo, “Men battering as the new form of domestic violence? A pastoral care perspective from the Kenyan context,” *Practical Theology [Journal] in South Africa*, *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 71(3), 1-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. # Renson Mnyamwezi, “Husband battering also widespread at the Coast,” *The Standard*, <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?articleID=2000052359&story_title=Husband-battering-also-widespread-at-the-Coast> (accessed July 8, 2012).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. # Nicholas Anyuor, “Unreported cases of male battering in Nyanza” *The Standard* <http://www.standardmedia.co.ke/?articleID=2000052337&story_title=Unreported-cases-of-male-battering-in-Nyanza> (accessed July 8, 2012.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Julius Gathogo, *Beyond Mount Kenya Region: 40 Years of Theological & Practical Education at St. Andrew’s College, Kabare (1977-2017)*, 2017, (Nairobi: Evangel), p. xix-xx. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)