



# Building Voice Upon Voice: Truth, Memory, and Activism in The Gambia's Transitional Justice Process

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## Abstract

This article examines The Gambia's Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC), assessing its achievements, challenges, and impact on transitional justice. Established in 2018 to investigate human rights abuses under Yahya Jammeh's regime, the TRRC documented testimonies of torture, enforced disappearances, and systemic violence, creating a historical record and recommending reparative measures. However, its lack of prosecutorial power, political resistance, and structural limitations raise concerns about justice and accountability. Based on ethnographic research at the Women's Association for Victims' Empowerment (WAVE), this study explores how families of the disappeared navigate mourning and memory in the absence of closure. Drawing on Derrida, Ricœur, Foucault, and Arendt, it analyzes truth, power, and collective memory in shaping post-TRRC reconciliation efforts. While the TRRC provided a crucial platform for truth-telling, its legacy depends on sustained civil society advocacy and structural reform. This article argues that effective transitional justice requires grassroots activism, victim-centered approaches, and community-led initiatives beyond formal commissions.

**Keywords:** Transitional justice; TRRC; Gambia; human rights violations; grassroots activism.

## Introduction

I find myself sitting on the ground in a round hut at the Women's Association for Victims' Empowerment (WAVE) in January 2023, surrounded by a group of women of all ages. The cool concrete floor contrasts with the heat outside, and a fan slowly whirs in the ceiling, its gentle breeze offering some relief. I am here to investigate how families of victims of enforced disappearance navigate mourning and memory in the absence of bodies or formal closure. Together with WAVE, we organized this gathering to create a space for women to share their experiences, stories of loss, resilience, and the enduring search for justice. This research is part of a broader ethnographic study on mourning, memory, and justice among the relatives of enforced disappearance victims. During this fieldwork, I conducted semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and participant observation with family members, activists, and civil society actors engaged in transitional justice efforts. The goal was to document personal narratives of loss, explore how families cope with the absence of their loved ones, and examine their engagement with the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission's (TRRC) findings and recommendations.

Among those gathered are women whose husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers disappeared during Yahya Jammeh's regime (1994–2017). The circular arrangement of our seating creates an intimate space, conducive to sharing and listening. The meeting begins with a quiet murmur, gradually building as more women lend their voices to discussion. Halima, who lost her brother to Jammeh's Junglers, takes the lead. Her presence is commanding, her voice strong despite the underlying pain. As she speaks, the weight of her words fills the room, revealing not only the personal toll of disappearance but also its wider emotional and



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social impact on entire communities. She questions the future of transitional justice in a tone that reflects both urgency and disillusionment:

‘The TRRC is finished. There are lots of victims out there. What is the Government going to do about these victims?’ TRRC moo jeex na [is finished].<sup>1</sup> What next? What body is going to be there to take up the leftovers of what the TRRC has done? ... If the victims do not take the forefront, the Government will not take it for us. (Halima, personal communication, 2023)

Halima’s words resonate deeply within the circle, evident in the subtle shifts in posture — some women straighten, others lean in, elbows resting on their knees, as if drawn closer by a shared urgency. A murmur of agreement ripples through the group, punctuated by quiet but firm “bilai, naa true” [I swear, that’s true]. Some women press their hands into the cool concrete floor, steadying themselves, while others glance at one another knowingly, their expressions heavy with the weight of lived experience. A few let out deep sighs, shaking their heads, their eyes fixed on the ground. The energy in the room shifts, no longer just a space of recollection but one of collective reckoning. The fan above us continues its slow, steady rotation, a gentle reminder of the relentless passage of time. “They really exclude the victims,” another woman adds, her voice filled with resignation. “They do. I think it’s human nature,” Halima responds, her tone reflecting a weary acceptance of the harsh realities they face.

As I listen to their voices, I am reminded of a passage from Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), a novel that explores the haunting legacies of slavery in the United States. Sethe, the novel’s protagonist, is a formerly enslaved woman who struggles with the trauma of her past and the loss of her daughter. In one scene, she experiences an overwhelming moment of collective power:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison, 1987, p. 261)

Here, Sethe is engulfed in a collective expression of grief, healing, and transformation, an experience mirrored here in this hut at WAVE. The voices of these women build upon one another, searching for that combination, the key, the code to break through the silence and inaction. Their collective sound is powerful, a swell of determination and resilience. It is a moment of solidarity and strength that envelops us all, much like the wave that broke over Sethe, leaving us trembling in its wake. Back at WAVE, Halima speaks again, her voice weaving through the shared experiences like a thread pulling together a patchwork quilt. She reminds the women of the importance of their unity, of continuing the fight for recognition and justice. The TRRC may have concluded its hearings, but their struggle is far from over. The conversation ebbs and flows, punctuated by shared memories, grievances, and sporadic silences. Each woman’s voice adds another layer to the collective narrative, a tapestry woven with threads of loss, anger, and resilience.

This metaphor of weaving, of voices entwining like threads in a quilt, connects to a long history of conflict textiles as acts of memory, resistance, and justice. From the *arpilleristas* of Chile under Pinochet (1973–1990) to the Mampuján weavers of Colombia following the paramilitary incursion of 2000 in the Montés de María area of the Chocó region in northern Colombia, expression using fabric and needlework have become an extension of women’s bodies. Through this practice, they have documented violence and asserted presence in histories that sought to erase them.<sup>2</sup> The act of piercing soft material with hard metal transforms into a mode of testimony, a way of stitching together fragmented truths and making injustice visible. As Christine Andrä et al. (2020) discuss, these textile-making practices function as embodied knowledge, tangible records of suffering, resilience, and resistance. Much like the *arpilleristas* who embroidered resistance into fabric, the voices of these women layer upon one another like the dyed patterns on batik cloth, refusing to be silenced. Their collective speech, their acts of remembrance and defiance, ensure that neither their grief nor their demand for justice will fade. While the TRRC provided a platform for their voices, the struggle for recognition and reparations continues beyond its hearings. In this space, these women, like so many before them, stitch their truths into history, one word, one story, one act of resilience at a time.

The TRRC marked a pivotal moment in The Gambia’s pursuit of justice after 22 years of Yahya Jammeh’s dictatorship. Established in 2018, the TRRC investigated extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture, and sexual violence, documenting over 400 cases of enforced disappearances and 200 instances of torture (Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission [TRRC], 2021). While it provided a platform for victims and survivors, the struggle for accountability and reparations remains ongoing, with justice contingent on political will and sustained civil society advocacy. The TRRC functioned as a mechanism for truth-telling, exposing state-sanctioned violence and shaping national memory. However, its lack of prosecutorial power, resistance from political factions, and resource constraints limited its ability to enforce accountability. While public hearings and outreach efforts aimed to bridge societal divides, the implementation of institutional

reforms, reparations, and criminal accountability remains uncertain (TRRC, 2021). Civil society organizations, including WAVE, played a crucial role in documenting abuses, advocating for justice, and supporting victims through community-led memory initiatives (McEvoy & McGregor, 2008).

This article draws on ethnographic research at WAVE, examining how families of the disappeared navigate mourning and justice. Engaging with Jacques Derrida's concept of "archive fever" (1998), Paul Ricœur's narrative identity (1991), Michel Foucault's theories on power and knowledge (1980), and Hannah Arendt's reflections on forgiveness and justice (1958), this study explores how memory, storytelling, and grassroots activism shape transitional justice in The Gambia. While the TRRC provided a vital space for truth-seeking, its legacy depends on whether its findings translate into meaningful reform. By situating the TRRC within global transitional justice debates (Millar, 2011; Sieder, 2001), this article emphasizes the role of victim-led movements and community-based initiatives in sustaining justice beyond formal commissions. It highlights the challenges of implementing truth commission recommendations, underscoring the necessity of ongoing civic engagement to ensure long-term accountability and reconciliation (Burgess, 2006; Roht-Arriaza & Mariezcurrena, 2012).

### **Yahya Jammeh's Regime and the Path to Transition**

On the morning of July 22, 1994, a small group of armed soldiers, identified as junior officers of the Gambian National Army, stormed the State House and overthrew the government. This coup marked the beginning of Yahya Jammeh's regime. At 29 years old, Jammeh, then a lieutenant, declared himself head of state, ushering in an era characterized by severe repression, authoritarian governance, and widespread fear (Dwyer, 2017; Kandeh, 2004; Wiseman, 1996). Over the next two decades, Jammeh's regime became notorious for systemic human rights abuses. Political opponents, journalists, and perceived dissenters were frequently arrested, tortured, and killed (Amnesty International, 2008; Freedom House, 2015; Human Rights Watch, 2016). The National Intelligence Agency (NIA, part of Jammeh's security apparatus), alongside paramilitary units like the Junglers, carried out arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and extrajudicial killings, fostering a climate of terror (Davidheiser & Hultin, 2012; Saine, 2003). High-profile cases exemplified the regime's brutality, including the 2004 assassination of journalist Deyda Hydara, a vocal critic of Jammeh and co-founder of *The Point* newspaper. Hydara was shot and killed by unidentified gunmen, later linked to the Junglers, following years of threats and intimidation (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2005; Reporters Without Borders, 2004; TRRC, 2021). Similarly, the arbitrary detention and torture of opposition leaders, such as United Democratic Party (UDP) leader Ousainou Darboe and members of his party, demonstrated the regime's systematic repression (Amnesty International, 2016). The pervasive culture of impunity and lack of independent judicial oversight allowed these abuses to continue unchecked (Davidheiser & Hultin, 2012; Saine, 2003).

In December 2016, Jammeh lost the presidential election to Adama Barrow.<sup>3</sup> Although he initially conceded defeat, Jammeh later contested the results, citing irregularities and refusing to step down, leading to a significant political crisis (Hultin et al., 2017; Kora & Darboe, 2017). The Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) played a pivotal role in mediating the crisis. Leaders, including Nigeria's President Muhammadu Buhari and Senegal's President Macky Sall, engaged in intensive diplomatic efforts to persuade Jammeh to transfer power peacefully. ECOWAS also imposed economic sanctions, freezing assets and restricting travel for Jammeh and his associates. As the situation escalated, ECOWAS authorized the deployment of a standby military force to intervene if Jammeh did not comply with regional and international demands by the end of his term in January 2017. International support from the African Union, United Nations (UN), and various Western countries further bolstered ECOWAS's efforts, supporting the deployment of regional troops as a last resort. On January 21, 2017, Jammeh agreed to relinquish power and went into exile in Equatorial Guinea. The coordinated efforts of ECOWAS and international actors were crucial in averting a potential humanitarian crisis and upholding democratic governance in The Gambia. The successful resolution of the political standoff underscored the importance of regional cooperation and collective action in addressing political challenges across Africa, setting a precedent for peaceful transitions of power and stability in the region.

### **The Establishment and Role of the TRRC in The Gambia**

The TRRC was established in 2018 as part of The Gambia's effort to confront the legacy of Jammeh's 22-year dictatorship. The Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission Act (2017), passed in December 2017, provided a framework for investigating human rights abuses, giving victims a platform to testify, and recommending reparative measures. Grounded in international legal frameworks, including the UN's Set of Principles to Combat Impunity (1997; see also Orentlicher, 2005) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)'s guidelines on truth commissions (2006), the TRRC emphasized the right to truth as a cornerstone of transitional justice (TRRC, 2021). Public hearings began on January 7, 2019, and concluded on May 28, 2021. A total of 392 witnesses testified about arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, torture, and sexual violence (TRRC, 2021). These testimonies formed a comprehensive historical record, reconstructing the systemic repression under Jammeh's rule. The hearings were broadcast publicly, ensuring transparency,

while the TRRC's investigative units worked to verify testimonies, cross-check evidence, and uncover new leads. The TRRC preserved archival records, documents, and witness accounts, ensuring that information about human rights violations remained accessible for future research and legal proceedings (Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission Act, 2017).

Beyond truth-telling, the TRRC prioritized reparations and reconciliation. A reparations committee recommended financial compensation, psychological support, and community rehabilitation programs to help victims rebuild their lives. However, the TRRC faced significant challenges in evidence gathering, securing participation, and ensuring the safety of witnesses, as many feared reprisals or social stigma. To address these issues, the TRRC implemented confidentiality measures, provided psychological support, and worked closely with civil society organizations to encourage engagement (Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission Act, 2017; TRRC, 2020). Grassroots engagement played a critical role in the TRRC's success. Civil society organizations, such as WAVE, the African Network against Extrajudicial Killings and Enforced Disappearances (ANEKED), Women in Liberation and Leadership (WILL), and The Solo Sandeng Foundation, were instrumental in documenting abuses, advocating for justice, and ensuring reconciliation efforts were community driven. These organizations ensured that victims' voices remained central to the transitional justice process, reinforcing the role of civil society in shaping The Gambia's post-TRRC landscape. Traditional reconciliation methods were also integrated into the TRRC's outreach efforts, making the process more accessible and culturally relevant. *Bantaba* (community gatherings), religious mediation, and griot-led storytelling<sup>4</sup> provided platforms for public dialogue, conflict resolution, and intergenerational knowledge-sharing (International Center for Transitional Justice [ICTJ], 2022; TRRC, 2021). *Bantabas* enabled community members to discuss grievances and foster reconciliation in a familiar setting, while religious leaders played a critical role in framing justice through Islamic and Christian principles of forgiveness and accountability. Griots, as oral historians, helped preserve and transmit the narratives of survivors and victims' families, reinforcing The Gambia's tradition of truth-telling through storytelling.

Yet, despite its achievements, the TRRC faced significant challenges that exposed the limitations of its mandate and raised concerns about the effectiveness of transitional justice in The Gambia. One of the primary concerns was its lack of prosecutorial power. While the TRRC could recommend prosecutions, it lacked the authority to enforce them, raising doubts about whether perpetrators of grave human rights violations would ever face true accountability. Additionally, despite the TRRC's extensive investigations, resource and time constraints left some cases inadequately addressed, creating gaps in justice for many victims. Political and societal obstacles further complicated the TRRC's work. The Gambian political landscape, marked by lingering loyalties to Jammeh and deep divisions over the transitional justice process, created barriers to implementation. Some political factions and former regime loyalists resisted the TRRC's findings, undermining its credibility and blocking meaningful action on its recommendations. Moreover, societal mistrust, a significant legacy of Jammeh's rule, made it difficult to foster genuine reconciliation and collective acknowledgment of past atrocities. Beyond these practical challenges, the TRRC's approach has been critiqued for its risk of depoliticizing violence and failing to address structural injustices. By focusing heavily on individual testimonies and specific cases, the TRRC at times overlooked the broader political, social, and economic conditions that enabled systemic repression. This approach risked reducing the violence of the Jammeh era to personal wrongdoing, rather than confronting the institutional complicity of state actors, political elites, and international partners. These challenges underscore the complexity of transitional justice efforts.

Upon concluding its investigations, the TRRC released a final report detailing its findings and recommending legal and institutional reforms aimed at preventing future human rights violations and strengthening democratic governance. However, the implementation of these recommendations remains uncertain, and their impact on long-term accountability and justice depends on political will and sustained civil society advocacy. While the TRRC provided a vital space for truth-telling, its legacy will be determined by how effectively its findings are translated into meaningful change. The TRRC laid the foundation for a more just and inclusive society but ensuring that justice and reconciliation endure requires persistent engagement beyond its hearings and final report. Addressing individual culpability is essential, but so too is tackling the broader political and social structures that enabled these violations. Without meaningful structural reform, transitional justice risks becoming a symbolic exercise rather than a mechanism for lasting institutional transformation.

### **Philosophical Underpinnings of Truth-Seeking in Transitional Justice: Centering The Gambia**

The philosophical foundations of truth-seeking in transitional justice are enriched by the perspectives of Jacques Derrida, Paul Ricœur, Michel Foucault, and Hannah Arendt. Engaging with these philosophical frameworks is crucial for understanding the complexities of uncovering truth, addressing past injustices, and fostering reconciliation. These thinkers provide essential insights into truth, memory, justice, and power, all of which are central to the functioning of truth commissions. However, transitional justice is not a universal process; it is deeply embedded within historical, political, and cultural contexts. The Gambia's TRRC emerged from a unique post-dictatorship setting, shaped by colonial legacies, Indigenous knowledge systems, and shifting political landscapes. While Derrida, Ricœur, Foucault, and Arendt offer valuable theoretical tools, their

applicability must be critically examined in relation to The Gambia's own intellectual traditions and justice practices. To this end, local perspectives on truth and justice, including the work of Gambian scholars and historians, provide complementary insights that contextualize truth-seeking, memory-making, and justice in post-Jammeh Gambia. Yet, the scarcity of Gambian academic engagement with transitional justice, due in part to historically underdeveloped research infrastructure and a limited focus on critical justice studies, raises questions about knowledge production and accessibility. Examining why certain theoretical frameworks dominate transitional justice discourse, and how they intersect with local epistemologies and cultural practices, is essential for a more grounded and inclusive approach. Understanding the limited visibility of Gambian scholars in global transitional justice debates, and how their perspectives can enrich the field, is crucial to developing a more contextually relevant and representative examination of truth-seeking in The Gambia.

### ***Jacques Derrida and Paul Ricœur on Truth, Memory, and Justice***

Derrida's philosophy, characterized by deconstruction, interrogates and critiques the foundations of philosophical discourses. Deconstruction reveals inherent contradictions within conceptual structures, showing that these contradictions are fundamental to Western metaphysical thought. Derrida's assertion that "deconstruction is justice" encapsulates his view of justice not as fixed principles but as an ongoing process that must question and exceed established norms (1992, p. 14–15). This perspective is particularly relevant to The Gambia's post-Jammeh context, where uncovering state-sponsored atrocities demands continuous re-evaluation of power structures and dominant narratives. The TRRC's role in breaking through years of state-imposed silence aligns with Derrida's notion of justice as an "always deferred" process (1994, p. 19). This is especially pertinent in cases of enforced disappearances, where the truth remains incomplete, and the spectres of past crimes continue to shape the present. The haunting of Jammeh-era violence, as experienced by families of the disappeared, resonates with Derrida's idea that past atrocities persist in the present, making justice an ongoing ethical responsibility rather than a fully realizable state. This aporetic dimension of justice, which remains inherently to come, includes the radical possibility of reconfiguring the present into a more just order. Engaging with this understanding of justice requires keeping the future open within the present, ensuring that justice remains perfectible and never fully settled. This responsibility entails the practice of deconstruction, allowing theoretical activity and democratic institutions to remain critical of their foundations, mitigating their violences, and staying open to transformation (Derrida, 2005). In transitional justice, where truth commissions often operate within rigid legal and institutional frameworks, Derrida's insights highlight the importance of questioning and re-evaluating mechanisms to ensure they remain dynamic and responsive to each unique historical and cultural context (1994). Derrida also warns against power mechanisms that close off the future by imposing presence, particularly through technological and media apparatuses that reduce time to a pseudo-substantial present. In *Echographies of Television* (2002), Derrida reflects on how media retransmissions of real-time events reduce their complexity and the suffering of victims to mere sensationalism. In The Gambia, the TRRC's widely broadcast hearings shaped how trauma and testimony were consumed by the public. While this created unprecedented visibility, it also risked flattening victims' experiences into spectacles of suffering, reinforcing Derrida's concern that justice mediated through technology requires critical engagement with how narratives are framed and disseminated.

Paul Ricœur (1991) emphasizes the narrative dimension of memory and its role in shaping historical truth. His concept of "narrative identity" highlights how individuals and communities construct their understanding of the past through storytelling. This is essential in The Gambia, where oral traditions have long played a central role in historical preservation. The TRRC's reliance on survivor testimonies and public retellings of atrocities mirrors Ricœur's view that truth emerges through the interplay of personal and collective memory. However, this raises a critical question: whose narratives were centered, and whose were marginalized, in the TRRC's official record? While Ricœur's ideas on historical memory align with truth commissions' emphasis on storytelling, it is crucial to examine how Gambian oral traditions and Indigenous knowledge systems complement or challenge his framework. Scholars, such as Boubacar Barry (1998) and Hassoum Ceesay (2016), have explored how colonial archives and state narratives have shaped Gambian history, emphasizing the need to interrogate official memory production in transitional justice. The TRRC's final report, while extensive, reflects a curated version of history that may not fully capture the complexity of local memory practices.

### ***Michel Foucault's Perspective on Power and Truth***

Michel Foucault's analysis of power and truth offers crucial insights into truth-seeking in transitional justice, particularly in The Gambia's TRRC. He argues that truth is not an objective reality but is shaped by power relations and discourses, influencing what is heard, what is silenced, and how historical narratives are constructed. Foucault's concept of "power/knowledge" highlights how those in control determine what is considered truth, shaping transitional justice processes (1980). At the TRRC, this underscores the importance of examining whose voices were privileged during hearings and whether testimonies led to meaningful systemic change, especially amid political negotiations over prosecutions. The TRRC's role in validating marginalized voices and exposing historical injustices must be understood within this broader power dynamic: who defines truth and whose suffering is acknowledged or erased. Foucault's concept of "governmentality" further explains how societies

govern themselves through norms, institutions, and practices (1991). In The Gambia, colonial and post-colonial governance structures have long shaped legal and social institutions, influencing how truth and justice are understood. Although the TRRC presented itself as a neutral arbiter of historical truth, it operated within a broader network of power dynamics, from international donors shaping funding priorities to political constraints imposed by the state. This meant that some narratives were inevitably emphasized over others, reinforcing Foucault's argument that truth commissions are shaped by the forces that create and sustain them. To be effective, truth commissions must navigate these power dynamics to ensure inclusivity and fairness. Without critically assessing how dominant narratives perpetuate injustice, truth-seeking efforts risk further marginalizing certain groups (Foucault, 1980). The TRRC faced this challenge while various political and institutional actors sought to control how past injustices were framed, who was held responsible, and what forms of accountability would follow. A major challenge for the TRRC was disrupting dominant narratives that perpetuate injustice. In post-colonial societies, where historical narratives have long been state-controlled, constructing an inclusive historical truth remains contested. The TRRC aimed to create space for alternative voices, allowing survivors and marginalized communities to challenge state-controlled histories. However, this process was hindered by political interference, resistance from entrenched power structures, and difficulties in implementing its recommendations. Applying Foucault's insights to The Gambia's TRRC highlights how transitional justice is deeply embedded in power structures and requires continuous scrutiny. While the TRRC sought to amplify marginalized voices, its long-term impact depends on whether its findings lead to genuine reform or remain co-opted by the same political structures it sought to dismantle.

### ***Hannah Arendt's Conception of the Political in Transitional Justice***

Hannah Arendt's conception of the political offers a compelling lens for understanding the TRRC's role in The Gambia's transitional justice process. Arendt views politics as an active space where individuals engage in public discourse, shaping collective memory and defining justice and reconciliation (1958). Truth commissions serve as arenas where survivors, perpetrators, and the broader public confront past injustices and reconstruct historical narratives. The TRRC exemplified this by making public testimony central, allowing Gambians to engage in a national dialogue about human rights violations under Jammeh. For Arendt, public space is defined by speech and action, and justice is possible only when individuals step forward to articulate experiences and challenge dominant narratives. The TRRC, through its hearings, created such a space, enabling victims to voice suffering, perpetrators to confess, and the nation to collectively reckon with its past. However, as Arendt notes, action is unpredictable and irreversible, meaning truth commissions cannot fully control how narratives are received. The TRRC's truth-telling process was shaped by political contestation, as different factions framed its findings to suit their interests. Some viewed it as a step toward healing, while others saw it as political maneuvering, reinforcing Arendt's argument that politics is always subject to competing interpretations. Arendt also emphasizes the importance of promises in mitigating political uncertainty. Truth commissions often come with state commitments to institutional reform, reparations, and guarantees of non-recurrence, but, as Arendt warns, promises are fragile. The TRRC recommended prosecutions, reparations, and security sector reforms, yet implementation has been slow and uneven. This raises a critical question: what happens when transitional justice promises remain unfulfilled? The Gambia's experience reflects the challenge of ensuring political will extends beyond truth-seeking. Irreversibility, another key Arendtian concept, is mitigated by forgiveness. While she does not advocate unconditional amnesty, Arendt sees forgiveness as essential in breaking cycles of vengeance and enabling political renewal. The TRRC's emphasis on reconciliation, particularly through religious and community-based mechanisms, aligns with this perspective. Many perpetrators publicly apologized during hearings, seeking forgiveness, but not all victims were willing or able to forgive. Arendt's framework suggests that reconciliation cannot be imposed: it must emerge through public engagement and mutual recognition. New beginnings are central to Arendt's vision of political life. She argues that political rupture creates opportunities for renewal, but realizing this potential depends on human action. The TRRC sought to lay the foundation for a new Gambia by fostering dialogue and accountability, yet its success is not guaranteed. Persistent political instability and resistance to accountability suggest that the TRRC alone cannot transform society. Arendt's perspective helps us understand that transitional justice is an ongoing process requiring sustained civic engagement. While the TRRC created a moment of collective reckoning, its long-term impact will depend on whether Gambians build on this foundation for a more just and democratic society. Arendt's insights reinforce that transitional justice is not simply about legal or institutional outcomes but about creating spaces where justice is actively pursued through speech, action, and political engagement. Without structural change, truth-telling alone is insufficient. The TRRC opened the door to a new political reality in The Gambia, but whether it leads to transformation will depend on how Gambians navigate the interplay of justice, power, and political will in the years to come.

### ***Expanding the Theoretical Scope of Transitional Justice in The Gambia***

While Derrida, Ricœur, Foucault, and Arendt provide valuable philosophical insights into truth-seeking, memory, and justice, an over-reliance on Western theoretical frameworks risks marginalizing Gambian intellectual traditions and Indigenous reconciliation practices. Scholars, such as Lamin Sanneh (1997), Ceesay (2016), and Barry (1998), have written extensively on

historical memory, oral traditions, and colonial legacies in The Gambia, yet their work remains underutilized in global transitional justice debates. Sanneh's 1997 work on Islam and Indigenous African religious traditions provides critical insights into how Gambian society has historically navigated justice and reconciliation through local spiritual and communal frameworks. His scholarship underscores the role of religious institutions in shaping historical memory and social cohesion, which is crucial for understanding how the TRRC's engagement with religious leaders impacted national healing processes. Ceesay's research on Gambian history and oral traditions highlights the importance of griots in preserving collective memory and shaping historical narratives (2016). His work provides a framework for analyzing how testimony, whether before the TRRC or within informal community spaces, functions as a means of resistance and justice-seeking. By integrating his scholarship, transitional justice discourse in The Gambia can more effectively examine how oral histories challenge dominant state-controlled narratives and contribute to a more inclusive record of past atrocities. Barry's scholarship on colonial and post-colonial power structures in West Africa contextualizes how legacies of European rule continue to shape governance and legal institutions in The Gambia (1998). His work is essential for understanding the colonial origins of legal systems and their impact on contemporary justice mechanisms, shedding light on the structural barriers to achieving true post-authoritarian accountability. Future research should seek to bridge the gap between Western theory and Gambian knowledge systems, ensuring that The Gambia's transitional justice discourse reflects both global insights and local epistemologies. By critically engaging with both Western and African knowledge traditions, transitional justice mechanisms in The Gambia can evolve beyond rigid institutional models and embrace a more holistic, culturally relevant approach to justice, truth-seeking, and reconciliation. This requires rethinking dominant frameworks and foregrounding Gambian intellectual contributions in transitional justice scholarship, ensuring that the voices shaping the nation's historical memory are not just those of international experts, but also of Gambians themselves.

### Enduring Grief and the Unfinished Struggle for Justice

The TRRC achieved notable accomplishments in uncovering human rights violations that occurred during Jammeh's regime. Through rigorous public hearings involving testimonies from over 1,000 witnesses, the TRRC shed light on numerous cases of torture, extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, and sexual violence. These testimonies provided a comprehensive account of the abuses and helped identify perpetrators and the systemic nature of the violations. The TRRC's efforts in documenting these testimonies created an invaluable historical record, crucial for both national and international understanding of Jammeh's human rights abuses. One poignant example is the case of Alhaji Mamut Ceesay, whose mother, Ya Mamie Ceesay, has been a vocal advocate for justice. Ya Mamie, the Chairwoman of WAVE, lost her son to the Junglers, who confessed to killing him and one of his friends in front of the TRRC. Her advocacy and testimony highlighted the emotional and psychological toll on families who still seek closure. During a gathering at WAVE, Ya Mamie articulated the pain of not knowing the final resting place of loved ones and the government's responsibility in providing answers:

Salaam alaikum. I am greeting everyone who is here. We know that this is a difficult gathering. Every time you talk about it, it comes back .... There will be no forgetting. There is no possibility for forgetting, but we live with it. We pretend it is not happening, put it in the back of your mind. We all know that we'll die, but God who created us, created death. He laid something down for us, that when a person dies, this is how we should act: we wash him, bury him, we know that this is where his grave is. His family, they will know he is laid here, he died, but this is where he is. That, too, is very important. So, if your person died and you don't know where they are, it is something that is truly heartbreaking. Like I said, we know we will all die, but God who created us knows that death is not pleasant. That's why He decided that whoever dies needs to be buried; a grave is important. Today, when I get up, I can say my father's grave is over there, I am going to visit him. My mother's grave is over there. My child's grave is over there. But your son died, they said he died. You know they said that's what you say. What makes it clear that he's dead is seeing the body lying there. But we don't have that. So, what I say is, to keep it short, it is the government's responsibility to, you know, they inherited Yahya Jammeh's Government. Each person that inherits something, you have to show your stance. It seems like it's the sitting Government's responsibility to do it, but they didn't do it. It's something that they know is on them. But what I say is, I know myself! But I believe that anybody who has somebody who died but you don't see their body. What's in my heart is something that is in your heart. The Government should stand up. When they don't have the strength, they go to other countries. The way they beg for money to take care of their own needs. They should know that people who die are also citizens of this country and it's their responsibility to take action until they see where those people are buried. Understand, what I cannot accept is, the Jungler stands there saying, 'I killed so-and-so. Where did you bury him/her?' And you say, 'I don't know.' That is hiding something. For me, they are hiding something. The government is helping them in that hiding, is helping them. If they come and say they killed him/her, you would say, where did you put him? Me, I was picked. I forced myself to go to Kanilai on my own. Three times. We went there. We went, they said: we think it's here; we think it's here, we think it's here. Since we left there until now, I have not sat with any official of the government for them to tell me which steps we will take. We went anyway to dig, we didn't see anything here, we didn't see anything there, we didn't see anything there. We left it there and that's it. It's not going to be easy in that manner. It's not going to be easy. And until they have done so, the responsibility

will still be on them whether they know it or not. I personally think that they know, they do it on purpose. (Ya Mamie Ceesay, personal communication, 2023)

Ya Mamie Ceesay's speech captures in great depth the enduring pain and frustration experienced by the families of the disappeared in The Gambia. Her words offer a powerful lens through which to analyze the complexities of justice, memory, and power in the context of transitional justice, drawing on the theories of Derrida, Ricœur, Foucault, and Arendt. For Derrida, justice is always deferred and never fully attainable (1992). This resonates strongly with the persistent uncertainty in Ya Mamie's plea for government action and accountability. The absence of her son's body and the lack of clear answers from the authorities illustrate Derrida's idea of justice being forever out of reach. This state of uncertainty also aligns with Gabriel Gatti's notion of "living deaths," where disappearance is not just the loss of a person but the creation of a liminal existence—neither fully dead nor alive but suspended in absence (2022). In his 2022 work, Gatti explores how the families of the disappeared are forced to navigate a world of unresolved grief, in which they remain trapped between mourning and waiting, remembering and forgetting. This perpetual state of ambiguity reinforces Derrida's concept of hauntology, in which the disappeared continue to exist as specters in the present, shaping both memory and demands for justice. In The Gambia, where enforced disappearances under Jammeh's regime left families searching for decades, this suspended state of mourning complicates both personal healing and national reconciliation. Ya Mamie's continuous demand for the truth and her distrust of the government's intentions underscores the aporetic nature of justice, where closure remains elusive and the quest for truth is an unending endeavor. Ricœur's concept of narrative identity (1991) emphasizes the importance of testimonies in shaping collective memory and identity. Ya Mamie's recounting of her son's disappearance and the authorities' inaction contribute to a collective narrative of suffering and resilience. This narrative identity is essential in constructing a shared history, fostering a sense of solidarity among the victims, and influencing broader societal memory. Her story becomes part of the collective identity, reminding society of the past while shaping future understandings and actions. In analyzing the dynamics of truth-seeking, Foucault's ideas on power and truth are particularly relevant. Foucault argues that truth is produced through power relations and discourses. Ya Mamie's speech highlights the power dynamics at play, where the government and the Junglers control the narrative and information about the disappearances. Foucault's "power/knowledge" theory (1980) encapsulates how those in power can control the production and dissemination of knowledge. Ya Mamie's call for transparency and accountability challenges these power structures, seeking to democratize the truth-seeking process and validate the experiences of the victims. By demanding answers and questioning the authorities, she disrupts established power dynamics and insists on a more inclusive and truthful account of events. Arendt's interpretation of the political (1958) underscores the importance of public space and dialogue in achieving justice and reconciliation. Ya Mamie's speech, delivered in a communal setting, embodies Arendt's idea of the public realm as a space for collective action and discourse. Her emphasis on the government's responsibility and the need for accountability highlights Arendt's position on the banality of evil, where ordinary people can become complicit in atrocities through passivity or adherence to orders (1963). The exclusion of victims from the process and the government's inaction reflects broader societal tendencies to ignore or sideline those who suffer, a critical issue that Arendt examines in her work. By turning her private grief into public political action, Ya Mamie reinforces the importance of visibility and collective memory in the healing process. In her speech, Ya Mamie articulates the deep emotional pain of not knowing her son's final resting place, underscoring the human need for closure and the societal duty to provide it. Her narrative highlights the failings of the state and the continuing struggle for justice, resonating with the theoretical frameworks of Derrida, Ricœur, Foucault, and Arendt. Each perspective illuminates different facets of Ya Mamie's struggle, from the perpetual quest for justice and the shaping of collective memory to the dynamics of power and the significance of public dialogue. Together, they offer a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and the ongoing journey toward truth and reconciliation in The Gambia.

### **Broader Implications for Transitional Justice**

The TRRC's experience offers valuable insights for transitional justice processes worldwide, particularly in relation to grassroots engagement and localized approaches to truth-seeking. Comparative analysis reveals that successful truth commissions share common features, including robust civil society participation, public testimony, and integration of traditional justice mechanisms (Kelsall, 2005; Laplante & Theidon, 2007; Millar, 2011; Ross, 2003; Shaw, 2007; Sieder, 2001; Wilson, 2001; Yezer, 2008). While the TRRC shared goals with other commissions, such as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and Argentina's National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), it also faced unique challenges. South Africa's TRC focused on public hearings and an amnesty process, while CONADEP in Argentina prioritized forensic documentation of disappearances. The Gambian TRRC had to navigate a more expansive transitional justice mandate, addressing not only enforced disappearances and killings but also widespread sexual violence and economic crimes. The TRRC's reliance on grassroots memory projects and civil society activism provided a more inclusive model of truth-seeking, ensuring that reconciliation efforts extended beyond state-led mechanisms. This engagement underscores the importance of integrating local traditions and participatory justice initiatives into transitional justice processes. Insights from The Gambia's TRRC highlight the necessity of bottom-up approaches in fostering sustainable peace. The active



role of civil society, grassroots organizations, and memory initiatives ensured that transitional justice was deeply embedded within Gambian communities rather than dictated solely by the state. Comparisons with other truth commissions reveal that effective transitional justice requires adaptability, balancing institutional mechanisms with community-led processes to ensure long-term impact (Burgess, 2006; Clark, 2010). By learning from the TRRC's experience, future research and policy development in transitional justice can better incorporate community participation, address the socio-economic dimensions of justice, and build more inclusive memory practices. The TRRC's legacy ultimately underscores that true reconciliation and accountability require more than institutional reforms; they demand sustained civic engagement, continuous reflection, and a commitment to ensuring that the voices of victims remain central to justice efforts.

## Conclusion

I am back in The Gambia, sitting in the same room at WAVE where, two years ago, I gathered with women who had lost husbands, sons, brothers, and fathers to enforced disappearance. The air is thick with heat, the ceiling fan above me whirring at its steady pace, now just as it did then. However, on this occasion I am alone, rewriting the conclusion to this article, tracing the echoes of that conversation, their words still present in the stillness of the room. The heat presses in, the fan's hum a quiet reminder of time passing. The voices of those women, layered with pain and resilience, still resonate, much like the testimonies recorded by the TRRC. Fragmented yet forming a whole, each story is interwoven into the fabric of national memory. The gathering at WAVE, like the TRRC hearings, was more than a space for recollection: it was a reckoning. The past refuses to remain buried, its weight pressing forward, demanding recognition, justice, and redress. But, as Halima asked, what comes next? The TRRC may have concluded its hearings, but the struggle does not end with its final report. Truth-telling is not an endpoint but part of an ongoing process, where justice remains deferred, elusive, and contingent upon political will and sustained civic engagement. The TRRC exposed the depths of state-sanctioned violence, created a historical record, and provided a platform for victims to speak, but truth alone does not ensure justice. The gap between acknowledgment and action, between memory and meaningful reform, remains wide.

The Gambia's transitional justice process underscores both the possibilities and limits of state-led initiatives. The TRRC was a significant step toward accountability, yet its impact will ultimately be determined by the implementation of its recommendations and the ability of civil society, victim-led movements, and grassroots activists to sustain momentum. Organizations that have long been at the forefront of advocacy and truth-seeking continue to push for justice, ensuring that the TRRC's legacy is not diminished amid political inertia. Transitional justice does not reside solely in legal frameworks and commissions; it is embedded in everyday resistance, in the work of those who refuse to let injustice be forgotten. Their efforts embody what Ricœur calls narrative identity, where memory becomes the foundation of a people's sense of self and moral agency. As I listen to the echoes of that conversation, I am again reminded of Sethe's moment in Morrison's *Beloved*, where the weight of history breaks open, carried on a wave of collective power. Here, too, voices rise, refusing silence, refusing erasure. In their testimonies, in their acts of remembrance and defiance, they stitch themselves into history, ensuring that neither their grief nor their demand for justice will fade. While the TRRC provided an institutional framework for truth-seeking, it is within these spaces—within communities, within the gathering of women, within the narratives passed from survivor to survivor—that the real work of reconciliation endures. The lessons from The Gambia's TRRC extend beyond its borders, offering insights into the necessity of victim-centered justice, the power of memory activism, and the role of grassroots movements in ensuring that transitional justice remains dynamic and transformative. What comes next is uncertain, but one thing remains clear: as long as voices continue to rise, as long as stories continue to be told, the struggle for truth and justice will persist, unfinished but unrelenting.

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<sup>1</sup> All translations are my own, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> The *arpilleristas* of Chile used hand-sewn quilts (*arpilleras*) to document enforced disappearances and state violence under Pinochet's dictatorship. These quilts, often made from discarded fabric, served as both a form of protest and a means of truth-telling, smuggled abroad to raise awareness of repression. Similarly, the Mampuján weavers in Colombia, survivors of a 2000 paramilitary massacre, created tapestries depicting displacement and resilience, later integrated into Colombia's transitional justice processes. In both cases, textile-making transformed personal grief into political testimony, ensuring women's voices were embedded in historical memory (Andrä et al., 2020; Bacic, 2015; Cole & House, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> While The Gambia held regular elections under Yahya Jammeh's rule (1996, 2001, 2006, and 2011), these elections were widely criticized for lacking fairness and transparency. Jammeh controlled key state institutions, including the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC), and

frequently used intimidation tactics, arrests, and media suppression to weaken the opposition. The African Union (AU), Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), and various international observers repeatedly condemned electoral irregularities, including the exclusion of opposition candidates, voter suppression, and state-sponsored violence (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Perfect, 2017; Saine, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Griot storytelling is a type of narration which originated in Mali in which stories are set to music, using traditional instruments. The standalone term “griot,” as used in this article, is used to refer to an oral storyteller.

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