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Senga's Story: The epistemological segmentation of narrative trauma

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Introduction

Senga's story came to me on a very hot summer day in late August, 2014. While doing fieldwork in an Antwerp care centre for -21 children and adolescents with problems at home (or without a home), I accidentally encountered a group of caretakers heavily discussing the case of Senga, a Congolese girl in an acute crisis situation. She had been a client at the centre, which provided her with living accommodation. She had been seen with a somewhat older man, and based on previous 'cases' a general suspicion arose that the guy in question could possibly be an alleged 'lover boy', someone that possibly had ties to a prostitution network. When I passed the group discussing the case in the center's main headquarters, I could visibly notice the panic and asked someone what had happened. After an explanation and a quick lunch break I was invited to the afternoon 'case history discussion group' in which a group of caretakers usually discussed the children and adolescents in their care, together with one or two 'coaches', each of which 'guided' seven or eight caretakers in their daily activities. The centre provided counseling and general care for -21 children and adolescents, among them a large group of immigrant refugees. One of the objectives of the centre for those without a home, as was Senga's case, was to provide a living arrangement in which it was possible to live on one's own, have one's own address, take care of business, and from there on look for a job or get oneself involved in education of some sort (finishing high school for some, embarking on higher education for a small number, and learning particular skills, such as hairdressing or welding for most). The centre worked on the basis of 'tips' from the general Antwerp youth council, which means that some youngsters already had been in conflict with the law for general misbehavior or petty crime (e.g. the so-called GAS-fines, a possibility for

local municipal governments to fine people for behaving a certain way in public spaces, hanging out late in certain squares or drinking beer in public).

As such, the centre was loosely part of a bigger organizational structure, that also included another ‘guided living alone’ centre, a day care centre where children could do homework and activities with peers such as table tennis, arts and crafts and where they were offered a hot meal at lunch. Another part of the structure consisted of a team that occupied itself with family care, and which paid special attention to the parents’ role in the child’s life. The child, or adolescent’s “problem” was then located in particular family structures of e.g. possible physical/mental abuse, substance usage, generational or migrational poverty. Families in care were of very diverse background and included e.g. Flemish, Moroccan, Afghan and Sub-Saharan African families. All structures had moderate waiting lists and it was not speaking for itself that children would move from family care to a place in the day centre to an arrangement for living on their own. In the case of Senga, neither family care (her parents had passed away at home) nor a place in the day centre (she would be amongst the oldest) would have been appropriate. Let us now take a look at what I learnt about Senga through the ‘case history discussion group’ of that August afternoon.

Senga’s Dream

“Senga often dreams of masked men and women, who entrap her when she wants to get out of bed. She keeps an amulet to scare them off”, Jean, Senga’s care provider, said to me when I asked whether something was known about her psychological state, or if she had been given any psychological/psychiatric care since arriving in Belgium. My initial suspicion of her being a war victim turned out to be true, and asking for whether or not she had been receiving such care seemed like a logical thing to ask. I did not get a straight answer from Jean, the caretaker that had been involved with her case since a couple of months. His response indicated that Senga’s vivid dream world, and her keeping particular objects in reality to communicate to/with ‘dreamed’ characters, was not within what one would consider a ‘normal’ psychological state. Mary, Jean’s ‘coach’ then said that Senga had seen a psychologist initially, but that she had broken off the treatment after a couple of times, giving as a reason that she had felt uncomfortable with the lack of knowledge of the (female)

psychologist about 'black people'. Both Jean and Mary then expressed their concern about whether or not they were getting 'through' to Senga, and whether or not she would stay under their care. At the time, she was living on her own apartment, supervised by the centre, but increasingly not showing up for appointments and not returning home some nights. The rumor had started that she was seen with a somewhat 'older man', at least definitely someone older than her, and fears of her being dominated or lured into the arms of an alleged 'lover boy' had set off the morning panic in the centre.

When I heard about Senga for the very first time that afternoon, she was a 16-year old Congolese girl that had come to Belgium nine months before via Ivory Coast, where her uncle had a shop in fishing equipment and was well placed and connected in the local community. He was the one that had taken care of her paperwork and that had prepared her for the immigration questions. Both of her parents had died in atrocities in South-Eastern Congo (Kivu), and the official story to tell would be that she had suffered intimidation and physical violence because her father had been politically active with Hutu groups ('Banyamulenge') from Ruanda. However, Banyamulenge was originally only used for relatively long-term Ruandan immigrants (some tracing their immigration back to the early 20th century), and only very few people would refer to new Ruandan immigrants as being Banyamulenge. In any case, Senga used this term for a very specific sub-group of Ruandan immigrants: those that had recently migrated to Congo and that were active in Hutu politics. Her father had then been active, as a Congolese citizen himself, with people belonging to this group and wanting to gain a political voice in Kivu for the Ruandan population. The motives of the father for doing so remained unknown. The story, or at least the story as it came to the asylum commission (as Senga had applied for and was granted permission to stay in Belgium, at least temporarily) and by extension to the care centre, was fabricated and inspected many times in Ivory Coast before Senga's departure to Europe. Senga's mother, who was a primary school teacher, had not been given a role in the political story of her father, who was 'without a job for many years'. Later on it became clear that Senga's dad had trained, or at least wanted to train himself as a carpenter. Both parents were very young when giving birth to Senga, probably neither of them older than sixteen, the age when I met Senga and when she herself, according to the case history discussions in the care centre, had become possibly sexually active in a non-desired environment (when caretakers were hinting at the prostitution circuit). When Senga arrived in Belgium and was placed in a specialized centre in attendance of her asylum interviews, she actively sought out books from the library concerning the political

situation in central Africa. When she was transferred to special youth services in Antwerp, and subsequently offered guidance from an Antwerp care centre, she had not been in contact with the police neither had she committed or been involved in any illegal activities. The reason for her transfer was simply that she was deemed ‘adult enough’ to try and facilitate her independence by making her live on her own, offering guidance and educational options. The trajectory she was offered by the care centre was exactly that: an apartment with counseling sessions concerning all the administrative perils that come with living on one’s own as well as options for education in Antwerp. The primary educational choice (and in fact also the default one) would be to finish high school. Meanwhile Senga had received a temporary permit and had been living successfully on her own for a couple of months. A couple of weeks before I heard about Senga, she had been ‘scaled in’ at the third year of high school (although her real educational level was late primary school), to not let the age difference be too big and because the school principal as well as the caretakers were convinced of Senga’s ‘adult-like’ behavior.

At the same time, to the mind of the care providers, during the case history discussion, arose a picture of Senga as fairly mentally unstable, and ‘it was such a pity she had quit psychological sessions as she would really benefit from them’ (Mary). Not being a therapeutically trained person myself, I inquired why it was not possible to ‘force’ Senga to seek psychological help. Jean and Mary had tried many times to convince her, but they said it would be almost impossible to make such a claim if there wasn’t a record of ‘punishable’ behavior. It was unclear to me at the time why it was deemed necessary or even good should Senga see a therapist. I convinced myself that they were right, as someone coming from such a crisis situation would obviously benefit from talking about such trauma. Secondly, Senga was also seen as someone who ‘never shows up on time’, lives ‘on African time’ or ‘who thinks the OCMW (social welfare centre) is open on Saturdays’ (Jean). By saying this, caretakers were outing their frustration concerning Senga’s slow apprehension of local institutional networks and frameworks, some of which are fairly complicated to most native Belgian citizens. Both of these elements (Senga as a fairly mentally instable, passive girl) resonated well with the possibility that, as the rumour was going, she was about to fall prey to prostitution, or that she has already been recruited for such purposes, allegedly by the ‘older man’ with which she has been seen a couple of times. In this context, both Jean and Mary decided that it would be a good thing to involve me in analysing a conversation with her.

Meeting Senga

Exactly one week after the case history discussion sketched above, Jean and I went to Senga's apartment in order to talk with her as part of the guidance trajectory offered by the centre. Jean had contacted Senga before to make an appointment, and had asked her if she would mind that a researcher would come along in order to understand a few things better. She did not mind and so I accompanied Jean one morning to her apartment. A tall young lady opened the door, one would indeed not estimate her anywhere near 16, but rather someone in her early 20s. After we were seated across from her, Jean (J in the following transcripts 1-2) took out a map with what seemed to be paperwork. Senga (S hereafter in transcripts 1-2) sighed and smiled. The conversation between Jean and Senga took place in French, one of the national languages of the Congo, and of Ivory Coast. Next to French, Senga spoke Swahili and knew a bit of English, a bit of Dutch, and some Djula (a language mainly spoken in Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso). Jean was a native Dutch speaker, but also spoke French quite fluently, and mastered bits of English and German. French would therefore be the default code of communication. There was no insistence on Jean's part to speak in Dutch.

In what follows, I offer two bits of transcription that sprung from the conversation between Jean and Senga, and that indicate or show some of the frames that were used by Jean to make sense of the situation. It is useful to identify these frames to understand the speaking conditions and speaking infrastructure in which Senga's story was located, constructed, modified and ultimately (mis)understood. In the first excerpt from the beginning of the conversation, Jean needed Senga to fill out a form to give the social welfare office more precise information concerning her school activities.

Excerpt 1

J: On doit remplir ce formulaire la. On a besoin de quelque chose. Les extraits de banque, c'est ca...

(We have to fill out that form there. We need something. Bank extracts, that's it...)

S: Je mmmm, je les ai, ca va aller

(I mmm, I have them, it will be okay)

J: Ok, tu le remplis...ammene-le a l'OCMW, CPAS, ok, c'est ouvert cet apres-midi

(Ok, you fill them out...take them to social welfare DUTCH NAME/FRENCH NAME, ok, it's open this afternoon)

S: J'ai la danse apres, a Luchtbal. Je ne sais pas si je peux aller maintenant.

(I have dance later, in Luchtbal (an Antwerp quarter). I don't know if I can go now)

J: Ok, mais demain matin tu dois y aller. Ca ne va pas [autrement xxx

(Ok, but tomorrow you have to go there. It will not be ok [if not xxx

S: [j'aime la danse

([I like dancing

Ok je vais aller, je comprends

(Ok I will go, I understand)

J: La danse ne te donne pas l'argent...On va continuer ce trajet la, tu sais

(Dancing won't give you money...We will continue this trajectory there, you know)

S: Oui, oui.

(Yes, yes.)

J: Ok, enfin, ca sera tout juste, le treize ca vient normalement, ok, ca sera encore a temps.

(Ok, in the end, you can make it, the thirteenth will be okay normally, ok, that will be in time)

[...]

In the excerpt above, we see Jean trying to take care of a particular set of 'pressing' paperwork: the urgently needed information concerning Senga's school activities in order not to interrupt her social welfare payments from OCMW (the Flemish branch, CPAS being the French one). Jean asked Senga to fill out the form and bring it physically to the office. Senga replied that she has a dance class to either follow or teach, which clearly reveals something

about her personal life, something about her personal network and such. This dancing being a fairly new element in her ‘story’ (so Jean told me afterwards). Jean accepted the dancing taking priority over the immediacy of the paperwork, however he insisted on the paperwork being done early the next day. The pressing tone of the OCMW letter carried a pressing frame that was adopted by Jean, placing all other activities and utterances of Senga’s world lower on the hierarchy. The importance of dancing is shown also formally by repeating this activity in a very strong affective manner: “I love dancing”. In the next turn, Jean places dancing in the OCMW frame by measuring it against the fact that filling out the form will bring in money, and dancing does not. The frame also prevents Jean and Senga from getting into a deeper conversation about dancing, and about the role and function of dancing in Senga’s life, something that will prove to be quite crucial in understanding her migration trajectory.

In a second excerpt, we take a look at what happened when Jean wanted to talk to Senga about the alleged boyfriend who appears to be older than her and of which it was feared that he may have had ties to the prostitution circuit. Given the long and tedious history of the centre’s experience with girls indeed being lured into sex work, it is very normal that such suspicions arose. However, according to Jean, Senga’s intake story did not mention any sex work activities, so he had to go careful about it and decided to ‘embed’ the question into another frame: the feedback form which tested client satisfaction, developed at the care centre. This form was periodically ‘filled out’ and asked clients about several aspects of the counseling and guidance sessions as well as the quality of housing. The form did not function as a paper form to be filled out by the client, but more as a physical reminder of feedback questions that were then integrated into the conversation, and on which caretakers reported in the client’s file. One of the questions was the following: “Are you satisfied with the progress made in terms of employment/education”. This is where excerpt 2 begins.

Excerpt 2

J: Alors (.) Je ne sais pas si tu (.)

(So (.) I don’t know if you (.)

S: Mmm

J: Allez, si tu es confortable maintenant, l’école qui vient de commencer (1.0)

(Well, if you are comfortable now, school that has just started (1.0))

S: Oui, oui (.) ca va

(Yeah, yeah (.) it's okay.

J: Et l'argent que tu as, ca te suffira, allez (.) l'OCMW va donner plus comme tu vas a l'ecole...et on applique pour la bourse scolaire de la communaute

(And the money that you have, is it enough, well (.), the OCMW will give more since you go to school... and we will apply for the scholarship of the community)

S: Ca sera combien?

(How much will that be?)

J: Tu peux voir sur leur site. Je vais regarder pour toi. Ca va?

(You can look on their website. I will look for you. Is that ok?)

S: Ca va, ca va...

(It's ok, it's ok...)

J: Tu fais pas d'autre travail au moment? Tu peux payer les comptes, ton gsm, [je veux dire

(Do you do any other work at the moment? Can you pay the bills, your cell, [I want to say)

S: [mon copin va me donner un nouveau, ainsi je vais aussi avoir BASE, tous mes copines elles ont BASE, moins cher, mmm

([my boyfriend will give me a new one, then I will also have BASE (a Belgian phone operator), all my girlfriends have BASE, less expensive, mmm)

J: Aha, c'est bien. C'est quelqu'un du quartier?

(Aha, that's good. Is it someone from the neighbourhood?)

S: (serious tone) Oui, il travaille au boucher, je suis pas sorciere, salope quoi.

(Yes, he works at the butcher, I'm not a witch, slut 'quoi' (something like 'duh')

J: Boucher? C'est un boulot lourd. (1.0)

(Butcher? It's a heavy job (1.0))

S: Oui.

(Yes.)

[...]

In excerpt 2, Jean started off by using a question from the satisfaction feedback template by inquiring about Senga's school and financial situation. His ulterior motive was to also find out whether Senga is perhaps not involved in other, illegal activities that generate income. The OCMW payment in Belgium is relatively low compared to the European average. Of course the sex work suspicion played a role here. He proposed another source of funding (the scholarship) and inquired whether Senga had enough money to pay for everything she needed. Then they arrived at the point where the alleged 'boyfriend' came on the scene. It did indeed appear to be a somewhat older guy, at least older than Senga since he worked, but instead of being involved in illegal activities, he turned out to be a butcher's assistant. This was proven to be true later on. Because of Jean's question 'Is he from the neighbourhood', where Jean understandably (there was a bonafide and well-meant suspicion/concern that Senga was involved in illegal activities) inquired about the situation with the new boyfriend, Senga felt threatened as Jean was in a way overstepping his boundary. One could assume that, once again in general, boyfriends and girlfriends belong to the private sphere. Senga sensed the hint at the boyfriend being not bonafide, and responded by saying that she was not a 'slut', but accidentally said 'witch' first. But instead of inquiring into what that meant exactly, Jean goes on to say something about the boyfriend's profession. The frame, in which Jean felt he had overstepped a boundary, needs to be carried forward.

When Senga used the word 'sorciere' or witch, we can argue together with Freud, based on my later interview with Senga, that, "there was a certain intellectual mechanism in which the sound of a word or a sentence, or the words themselves, show typical connections and interrelationships" (2002:53). In that way alliteration can explain how Senga possibly interchanged ' salope' ('slut') for 'sorciere' ('witch'), a Freudian slip which can only make sense when one knows the actual history behind Senga's African departure. By letting this

slip pass, and by tightly (and in some ethical context rightly so) holding on to the frame at hand, Jean missed an important opportunity to dig deeper into Senga's traumatic past, a past much needed to make sense of present experience, and a means of pinpointing and catering to more specific psychological-therapeutic needs that Senga may have had.

In sum, in the whole of the conversation I counted seven frames that influenced the line of questioning, and that created a particular epistemological frame in which Senga needed to construct a segmented truth which were governed by microhegemonic structures: Senga, in other words, needed to make sense and give meaningful answers in each of these structures (Blommaert & Varis 2011:2). Senga needed to talk about her personal life along a certain logic, yet she could not delve into the real issues which she struggled with, and which caused the Freudian slip among other things. The normativity of performing an authentic self in each of these microhegemonic frames is taxing: being a good student, paying your bills on time, dating an acceptable boyfriend, putting hobbies such as dancing aside for more important 'integrational' things (as the Flemish government wishes to successfully 'integrate' newcomers) and so on. I finish this part by showing a table of the different frames. There are external frames, not created by the care centre, but ones which they need to follow either for societal reasons or for funding reasons. Other external frames are not mandatory, but are adopted into the care program. Finally, there are also internally developed frames, aimed at general quality assurance, and a progressive desire to work 'interculturally' or 'culturally sensitive'.

Table 1: Frames

A. External, mandatory:

1. Administrative: OCMW (social welfare), RKW (child support), RVA (The bad work control agency), VDAB (The good work control agency), ...
2. Flemish Government care system official records

B. External, non mandatory:

1. FFT (Functional Family Therapy), an American program that is bought aiming at reporting 'evidence based' integral family care

2. reporting and measuring tools: SDQ, IZIKA

C. Internal:

1. Checklist Intercultural Work, recently integrated as the Cultural Interview
2. Feedback from client about reaching goals in a satisfactory manner
3. Competence Profiles for the caretakers, asking clients e.g. ‘do you think I have done a good job in providing you with the right school’, focused on the caretakers.

The ultimate effects of all these measuring tools, even though some are qualitative (but most are not) is obscuring trauma at a personal level and giving a wrong image at sociological level. An image, of course, that is used to base policy on.

Senga’s voice: breakthrough into performance

Senga’s experience and knowledge, her epistemological understanding of the world, was unable to weigh on the elicitation that was spurred by the institutional frames to which she was subjected (see also Blommaert 2004:49). Her narrative, and that of many others, operates in a different epistemology, which is irrational rather than rational, affective rather than factual, and perhaps more involved than detached (see Van der Aa & Blommaert frth. about similarities to an African asylum seeker’s arrival story). The narrative is a necessary one because it is oriented to and caters to particular emotional needs that, given traumatic experiences, may have (or should have) a therapeutic sequel. In Senga’s case, the reference to her positioning herself as an ‘authentic’ person who ‘loves to dance’ didn’t have any effect on the frame in which it was launched. Senga lacked a ‘breakthrough into performance’. This notion reflects a discourse phenomenon identified by Dell Hymes (1981) in which speakers step unexpectedly out of a usual, everyday use of language into skilled verbal expression for the sake of its effect. Hymes (1981:81) writes: “The concern is with performance, not as something mechanical or inferior, as in some linguistic discussion, but with performance as creative, realized, achieved, even transcendent of the ordinary course of events.” How then

can one create such a possibility in which one is in ‘epistemic solidarity’ (Van der Aa 2012) with one’s subject, in other words: how can a subjective epistemology develop itself narratively in structured and patterned ways that are meaningful and telling? And how can a researcher support that unfolding in meaningful ways?

One such way I think, is by reframing the ethnographic interview in such a way that it is not only paying attention to form and content in semi-structured or associative interviews, in which meaning is created across turns and in which the co-construction of knowledge takes place in interaction between researcher and subject. I propose a reframing towards a narrative space in which there is as little segmentation as possible (whether that segmentation be thematic, e.g. “let’s talk about your parents” or formal-institutional, e.g. “what is your name, how old are you”). Epistemic solidarity means that one creates a space in which one is open to a particular type of story, the story that the subject wants to tell. By creating such a space, the subject is ‘given voice’. This does not mean that from this open epistemic space there is no interaction. Once large chunks of narrative are available, the researcher can then consider the particular text as a ‘change’ in the social environment from which it emerged. In other words, a narrative produced in such a way is an epistemological contribution to a particular situation, surely a personal situation but possibly also a societal one. In the last case, such ‘qualitative data’ can be used to make a case for ‘evidence based’ reporting: the knowledge in the narrative is factual and evidential within its proper frame. Considering narratives in such a way, enables the researcher to intervene by proposing a particular structure in what is told. Stories that have difficulties to ‘get told’ or ‘get heard’ often have been boiling up in someone’s mind for a very long time. Hence it is not surprising that these stories often have a surprisingly solid and robust structure. Bringing out such a structure, and sharing it with both the subject and its caretakers, can be a possible contribution of this type of work.

Such was the case in the lengthy interview I conducted with Senga, two days after I went to her apartment together with Jean. We had invited her to the centre in an effort to conduct an interview in which I proposed to hear Senga’s story. What followed was an almost five hour long narrative in which Senga carefully described the real reason why she had fled the country: since both her parents had passed away, she had been declared a ‘witch’ and some sort of curse had been put on her. A couple of times she was offered a ‘relief’ from the curse by sleeping with particular men. To my knowledge, these types of events have occurred also in Nigeria and Ghana (reference needed). It also explains why an amulet was used to ‘guard off’ masked men, the use of the word ‘sorciere’ when thinking about sex work, and so on. The

projection of possible fear of involvement with prostitution awakened in Senga the real story of her escape, a story she never told. It also means that as long as that day, Senga had been telling the fabricated story with all its consequences: no relief, no adjusted therapeutic help, and a pretty serious misunderstanding of her epistemological commitments altogether.

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Transcription Conventions

=	for latched utterances
(.)	for pauses less than one second
(1.5)	pauses in seconds, up to 0.5 seconds precise
: & ::	for sound lengthening
___ or CAPS	for emphasis/stress louder than the environment
(word)	for indicating laughter, stance, other actions
[for overlapping speech in two speech turns