

The Time of Mourning: The Politics of Commemorating the Tutsi Genocide in Rwanda

Memories of the genocide in Rwanda are conflicted, fuelling social tensions in the present and raising concerns for the future. The Rwandan government promotes a collective memory through annual genocide commemorations. It presents these as central to its policy of nation-building and genocide prevention, but the commemorations also serve the ruling party's purpose of building legitimacy and suppressing dissent. Critics describe Rwandan official policies as flawed and authoritarian (Reyntjens, 2011; Waldorf, 2006), and discern local resentment beneath the veneer of popular support (Longman and Rutagengwa 2006; Thomson, 2011, Ingelaere, 2007). Commemorations are judged to be among the most divisive of state policies: they have been described as "symbolic violence" (Vidal, 2001) and an "enforced memory" which "helps nurture ethnic enmities" (Lemarchand, 2009: 105). In contrast, in this chapter I argue that the government cannot impose its authority through commemoration, which necessarily is an opportunity for other voices to be heard. Official efforts to cultivate a selective memory are successful only in part. Rwandan political space is circumscribed (Beswick, 2010: 248) but public memory serves as the focus for popular demands for justice and rights and therefore acts as a channel for posing challenges to the regime.

We must expect fractured memory in Rwanda, given its polarizing experiences of violence. From April-June 1994 an extremist regime tried to eliminate the minority Tutsi population. State officials, the military and militia sought to create an exclusive 'Hutu power' nation and killed up to a million people, mainly Tutsis but also Hutu and Twa political opponents. They recruited or forced civilians to kill their former neighbours and friends. Local officials, priests and teachers were among those who led the slaughter of men, women and children in their community, their participation fuelled by a history of divisive identity politics (Mamdani 2001; Prunier 1998) and by fear and loss during a civil war against the Tutsi-led rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (1990-1994) (Straus, 2006). After the genocide, those responsible preferred to avoid remembering, whether in denial or regret, while those who survived cannot forget: the genocide defines their existence (Hatzfeld, 2005a; 2005b).

Conflicted memories are not solely a product of past divisions because memory is always open to review. Individual memories are in constant dialogue with the ways in which the past is represented in the public sphere; memory is social and dynamic (Mitzal, 2003: 69). The memory of mass violence is no exception, although trauma leaves particular scars (Caruth, 2003: 193). What we learn of the past through present discourses, symbols and practices bears on how we each remember it and on our relations with others (Olick and Robbins, 1998). Memory cements social bonds, and shared memories are a foundation for the possibility of creating ethical and just communities (Booth, 2006: 70). As such, the ritual of genocide commemoration, envisaged as a means to express shared grief and solidarity with the victims and to join in a moral condemnation of violence, also has a significant part in constructing the meaning of past atrocities and in creating moral and political communities.

After the rupture of mass violence, commemorations are typically led by states and civil society as part of their efforts to reconstruct political and social order (Edkins, 2003). Public remembrances of atrocities are regarded as a duty (Booth, 2006: 163) and as central to reconciliation (Hamber, 2004). Underpinning this are theories that place memory at the centre of the national imaginary (Anderson, 1993) and show the importance of rituals for sustaining collective identity (Durkheim, 1976 [1915]: 358). Commemorative rituals are potent in forging solidarity through action—"to enact a rite is always, in some sense, to assent to its

meaning” (Connerton, 1989: 44). By identifying who and what ought to be remembered, by whom and how, commemorations indicate what is to be held sacred by a group and contribute to the constitution of an idea and sentiment of political community (Gillis, 1994).

In post-genocide Rwanda, the government has used memory to constitute its vision of political community, but has also faced limitations in this endeavour. Annual national genocide commemorations were established in 1995. This chapter examines these commemorations, identifying the narratives of genocide and of identity articulated, and considering how these are shared or resisted. It argues that although the state projects its ideas and seeks to constitute its legitimacy during the time of mourning, it does not produce a stable singular account. Moreover, survivors’ experiences of suffering and the traumatic legacies of the past are also influential.

Analysing Commemoration

The official time of mourning in Rwanda, from 7-13 April, is an intense period of reflection on the atrocities, organised nationally and locally and dominating public life, including the media. A longer period of 100 days of remembrance is observed by survivors groups locally. A broader culture of genocide memorialisation includes the construction of hundreds of memorials, national and local, as well as testimonies, memoirs, novels, plays and films. The genocide has been recalled in judicial hearings at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and in the *gacaca* community courts. Genocide education is a primary activity of the National Commission for Unity and Reconciliation (NURC) and includes a programme of genocide education camps, *ingando*.

The ubiquity of reminders of the genocide in public life makes it impossible to single out the impact of commemoration itself; instead this chapter concentrates on the ideas expressed in ceremonies and popular engagement in its rituals. Deconstructing discourse, conceived of as “the ways of talking, thinking or representing a particular subject or topic” (Hall, 1992: 295), can provide insight into which identities and experiences are valued and which are excluded in commemorative speeches and testimonies. Not only does discourse contain dominant ideas but it is implicated in shaping the political and social order, since it is the source of the commonsense understandings which determine our social realities (Howarth and Stavrakakis, 2000). Commemorations, however, work both through and “below the level of discourse” and their political meanings and effects depend partly on the extent and nature of participation in the ceremonies. As Catherine Bell explains, social rituals are a strategy for the construction of power relations, making tangible and gaining legitimacy for the existing political order, but this “embodiment of power relations” (1992: 171) can only be achieved where there is the possibility of alternative action or resistance. Drawing on Foucault, Bell understands the workings of power as local and relational, concerned with structuring “the possible field of action of others” (1992: 200) and rather than an expression of consensus or social solidarity, she describes ritualization as characterized by both domination and resistance (1992: 204). In line with this, studies of commemoration often find that is defined by political contestation and negotiation (Olick and Robbins, 1998: 126). This chapter will therefore examine both the ideas shared and the various forms of “consent, resistance and negotiated appropriation” (Bell, 206-207) engendered through participation in commemoration.¹

¹ As well as discourse analysis, this study is based on documentary research, interviews and participant observation of commemoration ceremonies. It draws on ESRC-funded PhD research including fieldwork in Rwanda in 2006 and 2007. The anonymity of interviewees has been preserved here as is common practice due

Imagining the Nation, Legitimising the State

The Rwandan state led commemorations from 1995 onwards. It established the period and events to be remembered publicly and placed genocide memory and education at the centre of a post-genocide strategy. Initially, the Ministry for Youth, Sport and Culture (MIJESPOC) was responsible for coordinating the events, although genocide survivors' organisations, in particular Ibuka, have always had an important role in commemoration and international NGOs and donors have increasingly contributed (Ibreck, 2009). Since 2008, the National Commission for the Fight against Genocide, an independent national institution, established to serve as a framework for all activities related to genocide prevention including coordinating all commemorative activities has been the central organising body (CNLG, 2007).

The week of mourning begins on 7 April, a public holiday, with a national ceremony held at a different location around the country each year. Government officials, dignitaries, representatives of survivors' associations, and local people attend. The ceremony features speeches from the President of Rwanda and other government officials as well as testimony from survivors, reburials and ecumenical prayers. The ceremony is covered extensively in the media. The President speaks at length about the genocide, its consequences and the importance of remembering it. This is the most important official statement, year by year, about all aspects of the genocide, and therefore warrants close analysis.²

On Morality

Each year the commemoration is given a theme. On the fourteenth anniversary it was "let us commemorate genocide while fighting against genocide ideology and render assistance to survivors while working for development." The chosen themes link the commemoration to justice and social transformation and echo transnational practices informed by Holocaust memorialisation and by post conflict reconciliation and forgiveness. The President's speeches are also directed to wider audiences. He calls upon an "international community" and refers to a shared humanity which the genocide violated: "This is a blot on all of us; it should not have been allowed to happen" (Kagame, 2007); and: "never again" (Kagame 2004).

Rwanda's Presidents use the occasion to preach moral behaviour, demand accountability, and contrast themselves with the previous genocidal regime. The commemoration serves as a "constitutive" act for the "new" state (cf. Connerton, 1989: 7). In the 2007 event, President Kagame demanded that those implicated in the genocide come forward: "we must strive to speak the truth and avoid presenting ourselves as untainted when we are not" (2007).³ On another occasion, he demanded that genocide suspects are brought to justice: "The ex-FAR and interahamwe are still at large and those in the international community who are not still

to concerns about freedom of expression in Rwanda (see eg. Beswick, 2010: 226), although it is worth noting that most interviewees were willing to be named.

² I have examined the translated texts of speeches from 2001-2011 as well as secondary sources on earlier speeches. The speeches were originally delivered in Kinyarwanda and although I am using the official translation this may still lose sight of meanings which resonate in a local context; moreover the full content is not always translated, interview data has helped to illuminate this (see below).

³ He is referring particularly to the members of the church. The ceremony was held in Gikongoro and Mgr Augustin Misago was present. Misago was accused of involvement in the genocide by survivors and was tried and acquitted.

supporting them are beginning to forget them” (2004) and he took the international community to task for its conduct during the genocide—foreigners were urged to “admit the crime so that we can all move forward” (2007). The President insisted that remembrance is essential to learn “the lessons” (2006) and that Rwandans must engage in the making of a new society: “Let us make it our culture to resist the circumstances that may lead to a repeat of this” (2001). Rwandans are called upon to reconcile: “In remembering we must also forgive – it is a duty to forgive those who sincerely seek to be forgiven” (2010).

The rights of the Rwandan people are key themes in the speeches. The President emphasises that recovery depends upon restoring the dignity of the victims. He refers repeatedly to the inherent dignity of Rwandan people; the nation as a whole is called upon to “regain the value that they deserve” (Kagame, 2007). Survivors are described as the “real heroes” (2004), meriting support: “it is our duty to give them all the assistance in our power” (2006). Rwandans who saved lives are commended for their “enormous courage” and “act[s] of human kindness” (ibid).

The President invariably gives an account of the origins of the genocide, identifies those responsible and names the victims. He refers to previous massacres in 1959 (2004) but describes the genocide as “unprecedented” (2007). Responsibility for the killings, Kagame asserts, lies with the “elites ... who held the highest offices in the land” and the “machete-wielding neighbours, soldiers and militiamen” who followed them out of “hate or hope of profit” (2004). The causes were “bad politics” (2006) and “a distorted ideology” (2004) with its origins in colonialism. Increasingly the blame is allocated to foreign interventions or failures. In 1997, President Pasteur Bizimungu denounced the colonists for their part in spreading ethnic sentiment: “Ethnic division, after centuries of national unity, is the undeniable work of colonisation.” (cited in Vidal, 2001: 30). In 1998, in Bisesero, he argued that the Europeans and the United Nations were “principally responsible” (Vidal, 2001: 32). In 2001, President Kagame spoke of the failure of the international community to intervene: the genocide “occurred before the very eyes of the world, and they did nothing about it” (2001). In 2004, the French were singled out for condemnation, when Kagame stated: “they deliberately designed a strategy to protect the killers, not to save the victims.”

Overall, the genocide is described as a “deliberate, calculated, premeditated” act, whose victims were “all innocent civilians, unarmed and defenceless.” The official narrative divorces the genocide from any connection with the civil war. However, the speeches do not directly promote the idea of Tutsi victimhood and Hutu responsibility for which commemoration has been criticized (Buckley-Zistel, 2008: 16; Vidal, 2001). Instead, the focus is on Rwandans as simultaneously the audience, the perpetrators and the victims. At times they are portrayed as having shared responsibility for the atrocities. The blame, Kagame suggests, lies with: “us Rwandans for subscribing to the destructive politics”, indeed with “the entire Rwandan community” (2007). “We denied ourselves this dignity when we engaged in the internecine slaughter” (2006). The President apologises for the crime: “we Rwandans take primary responsibility for what happened 10 years ago. And I stand here in the name of the Rwandan government and the people of this country and apologise in their name.” (BBC News, 07/04/2004b). At other times, Rwandans appear to be collectively victims or saviours. It was “our people who perished” (2006). But Rwandans’ “resilience and courage” is celebrated; they are described as “forgiving and asking for forgiveness” (2001). This ambivalent account of the “people of Rwanda” stems from the attempt to cultivate a collective memory of the genocide as the foundation for national unity and to suppress

“divisionist” references to Hutu and Tutsi identity. The speeches exemplify the difficulty in composing such a national account of loss and recovery.

In 2008, the discourse shifted and the emphasis on national unity diminished as Parliament supported a legal amendment to references to “Rwandan genocide”, renaming it the “Tutsi genocide” or “genocide against the Tutsis” in the constitution and in commemorations—despite the enduring constitutional ban on references to ethnicity. This alters the context in which the commemorations take place and means that Tutsi victimhood is now securely established in public discourse. Nevertheless, some ambiguity persists in the President’s speeches on commemoration which still centre on the nation, whether depicted as Rwandans who are still “grieving” (Kagame, 2011) or as a people engaged in rebuilding, in a spirit of “courage, resilience and wisdom” (Kagame, 2009). The President sometimes singles out survivors or *génocidaires* as distinct groups and, on one occasion, he appealed to Tutsis who were refugees at the time of the genocide: “for those of us who... were not directly targeted, it is imperative that we find the courage to empathise with our people” (2006). Notably, during the 1997 commemoration President Bizimungu, himself a Hutu, is said to have publicly castigated the people of Muhororo, “By your acts, by your cruelty, you have shown that we all, Hutus, are animals” (cited in Kagabo, 2004). But with very few exceptions, ethnic labels are not used in commemoration speeches, even since the renaming of the Tutsi genocide.

On the National Interest

The official discourse of commemoration does not appear ethnically divisive although, as we shall see, commemorative rituals and practices subvert this image of unity. However, the speeches serve to construct the moral legitimacy of the RPF regime, to justify its policies through reference to the genocide, and to defend it against its critics. As noted by Claudine Vidal (2001) the President’s speech was designed to “legitimate the current dominance of the RPF in the name of the victims of the genocide” (2001: 44).⁴

The President also denounces the regime’s critics. When accusations of economic exploitation and human rights abuses in the DRC intensified in 2001, Kagame used the 7th anniversary speech, to deny these and defend Rwanda’s involvement in the war: (2001). In 2002, he warned former President Bizimungu, now a political opponent, that he would act against him (two weeks later Bizimungu was arrested) (Reyntjens, 2011: 9). In 2006, Kagame said: “people accusing us of divisionism have no moral right to sing to us about divisionism” (2006). He had harsh words for Paul Rusesebagina, a genocide hero⁵ (Kagame 2006; 2007) and critic of the government. In 2007, faced with accusations of war crimes,⁶ the President stated: “had the RPF killed, millions of killers who fled would not have escaped” (2007). The following year, he argued: “Some people claim that the Government is trading in genocide for political gains. Those who say so probably need to have genocide in their own countries so that they too can enjoy those profits” (Kagame, 2008).⁷ In 2010, he railed against criticisms of the lack of political space in Rwanda, then denounced his political rival, Victoire Ingabire, as “some lady with a deputy who is a genocide criminal – saying that there is ‘one genocide but then there is another’”.

⁴ My translation.

⁵ His role in saving lives during the genocide was depicted in the film *Hotel Rwanda*.

⁶ See Robinson and Ghahraman, 2008, for a discussion of the allegations brought in the Bruguière and Merelles investigations.

⁷ The 2008 commemoration took place in Nyamata, Bugesera.

The President's reference to "another genocide" in his critique of Ingabire is a dismissal of the most extreme, and generally discredited, accusation levelled at the RPF. But his speeches are silent on the abuses in Rwanda and acts of genocide in the region which followed directly on and are linked to the 1994 genocide. No mention is made of killings during and since the 1990-1994 civil war, despite evidence that up to 45,000 died in RPA abuses (Gersony report cited in Lemarchand 2009: 104). There is another amnesia concerning Rwandan refugees killed in the DRC during the 1996 RPA invasion and Congolese victims of war, including Tutsis killed by the ex-FAR and *interahamwe*.⁸ Congo is mentioned only as a terrain for a war to protect Rwandan lives. Similarly victims of acts of genocide in Burundi, go unacknowledged.⁹ Although the genocidal targeting of Tutsis is a regional phenomenon, this shared memory is not officially promoted. These silences define the official account as politically instrumental and morally deficient (Vidal 2001; Lemarchand, 2009 104-106) and they illustrate how this memory can distract from other episodes of past and present violence. They also confirm a national, rather than ethnic, emphasis.

Like other states, Rwanda commemorates to construct legitimacy and political community, promoting the idea of a secure present, and offering its own account of the violence (Edkins, 2003). Rwanda's official discourse emphasises the construction of the state as representative of a new moral order and defends the RPF against its critics. It presents the genocide as a discrete event and justice and an opposition to genocide as the founding ideals for a new nation. It locates part of the blame for the genocide outside Rwanda. This bolsters the legitimacy of the RPF, and shapes international attitudes towards the Rwandan regime¹⁰, but it is more than what some have seen as a tactic to employ a "genocide credit" (Reyntjens, 2004: 117; Cameron, 2003). The misconduct of the international community over Rwanda is well-documented (Melvern, 2004; Krosiak, 2008) and the idea of national renewal is more than rhetoric. Above all, the President sets a tone of Rwandan unity. His messages for the international and domestic audiences differ in substance and tone.

Imposing Moral Community

Local officials echo the official national discourse, but recall the genocide as an immediate and persistent event and convey an image of a hierarchical political order, fraught with tensions. For instance the Governor of Southern Province speaking at Murambi in 2007, following the President, "emphasised the need to promote unity and reconciliation and to halt the spread of the "genocide ideology" and spoke directly to the local community, criticising those who "misuse resources for survivors" urging people to "testify and confess"; to participate in *gacaca*, commemoration and in the maintenance of memorial sites (Murambi commemoration, 2007). Local officials use commemoration to communicate their authority and the requirements of citizenship.

Local commemorations differ according to location, history and the extent to which they are organised by survivors alone or together with local officials. These events offer insight into the distinctive character of local governance and reflect local tensions. Describing a commemoration in Kanombe, Kigali, a local teacher and survivor explained: "Survivors get

⁸ Congolese refugees living in camps in Rwanda commemorate these losses themselves in May (personal communication, December 2008).

⁹ See United Nations Security Council, 1996 on 1993 killings and Lemarchand 1994 on the 1972 'selective genocide'.

¹⁰Loir argues it encourages "postponed guilt" and "repentance" which leads donors to overlook the abuses of the Kigali regime (Loir, 2005: 416-419). My translation.

together themselves to prepare the days. Authorities are not always there. Other people also attend, people from cellule and Ibuka people, even people who committed crimes.” (July 2006). She emphasised diversity, cooperation and community spirit. The guardian of the memorial site in rural Ntarama gave a different picture of an event mainly attended by survivors and of their sense of isolation at this time (August 2006).

Local officials took a prominent role in a sector level commemoration in 2007 in Southern Province, and employed it to impose their authority on a divided community. The local police chief and army commander each gave lengthy speeches alongside the local mayor, the official responsible for the sector, and survivors. Although officials briefly mentioned the genocide, they mainly dwelled on current problems of security and justice. Overwhelmingly, they lectured on the need for participation in commemoration and vigilance against the “genocide ideology”. One official castigated people for not turning up in sufficient numbers to the previous nights’ reburial and vigil for victims of the genocide. Each in turn referred to a recent discovery of 500 bodies in pit latrines nearby and demanded why this had not been revealed by local people until now. Another speaker noted that recently residents in nearby sector had been found “collecting funds for opposition forces”. The army commander suggested that the only reason people were attending the commemoration that day was because it followed directly on from a Catholic mass. He recalled the historical role of the church in dividing Hutus from Tutsis and complained that people “give more importance to mass than to commemoration.” Later, the mayor warned that: “no one doubts that there is still genocide ideology in the sector” and called on people to identify those responsible for the genocide and to take part in commemoration as a way of asking “pardon”.

In the discourse of these local authorities, the community is seen to remain divided and resistant to justice and memory. The state is envisaged as strong, capable of imposing order and keeping the people under surveillance. One local official spoke of his discovery that a Hutu woman in his sector had refused to go to the reburials the night before, saying “it doesn’t concern me” and suggested this woman should be pursued by the police. This was a reminder that the dominance of the official narrative both nationally and locally is partly secured through constraints on free speech, under a law prohibiting revisionism and the expression of ‘genocide ideology’. Yet the official also spoke of the anguish such comments cause for survivors and of the government’s appreciation that they live side by side with people they “should consider enemies”.

Survivor Voices

Commemorations give survivors a unique opportunity to speak. Their testimonies, alongside the reburials, are focal points for the ceremonies. Survivors communicate the magnitude of the violations and their enduring consequences. They demand justice; action against genocide denial and an end to attacks upon survivors. Survivors recite poetry or sing together about their losses in all night vigils. They list the names of loved ones killed in the slaughter and denounce the perpetrators. They condemn the role of local people or of foreigners in the genocide. They also bring into question government policy or speak directly of its failings.¹¹

In contrast to the official discourse, survivors recount the genocide as the culmination of successive attacks on Tutsis, openly referring to ethnicity suppressed in the official narrative. In their testimonies, survivors recall that their loved ones were killed simply for “being

¹¹ See for instance Kalisa, 2008.

Tutsis.” “In 1963, the Tutsis began to be attacked in primary school. There were jobs Tutsis couldn’t get.” (Survivor A, April 2007); “Genocide started in 1973... the gendarmes persecuted Tutsi”; “whoever was called Tutsi was attacked” (Survivor B, April 2007). They describe the atrocities they endured or witnessed, naming the victims individually or collectively, as Tutsis. The killers “used machetes to kill Tutsi” (survivor poem, April 2007); French soldiers “beat up Tutsis” (Survivor C, April 2007).

Survivors have a privileged position in the commemorations. They use the opportunity to draw attention to their suffering and loss and their present social and economic predicament, and to criticize the government—while also professing loyalty and gratitude. During a local commemoration in 2007 survivors pleaded with neighbours to speak openly about the killings: “people don’t want to talk. Imagine if your people were killed!” (Survivor A, April 2007); they denounced those who: “use *gacaca* in the wrong way (Survivor C, Murambi, 2007) or “threaten survivors” (Survivor A, Mata, 2007). In the national ceremony a survivor pointed out that “when survivors go back home after testimony they have nothing” (Murambi, 2007). A representative of Ibuka, the survivors’ association, criticised the *gacaca* trials: “survivors are not comfortable with the reduction of sentencing”. He also pressed for the maintenance of memorial sites; efforts to widen participation in commemoration and pressed for the formulation of a policy on commemoration, arguing that the government should urgently review the results of the study it commissioned into the question and that cabinet must “make a decision” (ibid). Although survivors organisations have been subject to RPF manipulation (Reyntjens, 2011: 13) and civil society appears to be suffering from “a fear of politics” informed by threats, disappearances and attacks on political opponents of the RPF and the speculation that surrounds them (Beswick, 2011: 241-244), survivors are given a place in the public sphere and gain leverage during the time of mourning.

The Power of Ritual

The rituals of genocide commemoration are potent as acts of memory which are performed and invite participation.¹² But the symbolic forms and practices do not simply reinforce the discourse; instead they constitute another layer of meaning and reveal contrasts between ceremonies and contradictions within them.

In its purpose and content, the annual genocide commemoration subverts the postcolonial tradition of nation-building rituals (see Werbner 1998)—it is not state elites that are remembered, but ordinary victims of state-led violence and this distinction alters the character of commemoration. The tone is sombre and the event is unostentatious. The national flag flies at half mast. The official ceremony on 7 April includes a visit to a genocide memorial at a massacre or burial site, and moves around the country each year. There are no celebrations of victory and rare mentions of heroism. During the national ceremony, survivors address the audience before the President. These elements hint at symbolic change in the relationship between the governed and their leaders.

Other aspects of the national ceremony are more traditional, referencing established rituals (cf Connerton, 1989: 40). The commemoration is a choreographed, formal occasion designed to symbolise the return of order. It brings together the national elite, foreign dignitaries, genocide survivors and people from the surrounding area. The ceremony displays a familiar

¹² This section is based on participant observation of commemoration in 2004 and 2007 as well as on interviews in 2006 and academic and media sources. For a wider discussion of the importance of rituals in Rwandan history see de Lame (2004).

image of a ruling authority, imitating state-led ceremonies elsewhere in Africa (see Werbner, 1998). It also reproduces practices of the previous Rwandan regime—the former President Juvénal Habyarimana regularly outlined the moral terms of belonging within the nation in lengthy speeches to public gatherings at national anniversaries and celebrations (Verwimp, 2000), while local officials held obligatory political meetings to preach to their communities (Uvin, 1998: 130).¹³ Rwandans are called to listen and learn the lessons of the genocide in a didactic style reminiscent of previous national political rituals.

The arrangement of mourners within the commemoration site reproduces the same order. In the 2007 event in Murambi, elite guests sat on a platform in chairs, above the masses who were mainly seated on the ground, a clear symbol of hierarchy. The differences between survivors and other ordinary Rwandans was evident from the purple scarves or armbands survivors wear, and many travelled to the ceremony from elsewhere in Rwanda, arriving and sitting together. Local residents walked to the site and were mostly packed closely together; some were forced to sit outside listening to the speeches on the radio. Security officers searched participants as they entered the site and maintained surveillance.

The state employs ritual as a means to restore order and to distance the present from the past, but in so doing it is drawn into negotiation with the traces of the past. Firstly, as illustrated above, the residue of social memory shapes the forms of commemoration (Connerton, 1989: 13) but secondly the literal remains of the past need to be managed. Reburial ceremonies are one means by which the state seeks to gain mastery over the legacies of the genocide. After the killings, the remains of the victims lay either in mass graves, hastily dug by the perpetrators, or exposed where they died at massacre sites or on hillsides. Subsequently, graves have been disinterred in order to give the bodies a dignified burial during commemoration events (CNLG: 2011).¹⁴ Coffins are brought to the memorial site and placed in the ground; religious blessings are given and local officials and survivors place wreaths and flowers at their graves. Through the reburials, the state lays claim to the body of the genocide victims while revoking the actions of the genocidal state: it treats the dead with care and respect, applies the conventions of burial and mourning and demands collective recognition of the victims' humanity. With this act, the past is symbolically laid to rest.

The potential for the rituals to contribute to forging security and order is disrupted by the legacy of trauma which permeates the commemorations. At the massacre sites where ceremonies are held, the unclaimed bones of the dead are on view. These bones are the most shocking feature of the memorials.¹⁵ The effect is to confront us with the true horror of the massacres, and to represent the loss and suffering which endures. Moreover, survivors themselves bear the scars of the genocide, to the extent that they are sometimes referred to as *bapfuye buhagazi*, the 'walking dead' (Hatzfeld, 2005b: 83). As Christopher Colvin finds in South Africa, the past is not "prior" for the victims of atrocities; its effects pervade the

¹³ These meetings were designed to educate the peasantry on the development agenda. Also see de Lame (2004). Note that local officials used similar meetings to incite genocide (see African Rights 1995).

¹⁴ The desire to find and rebury the dead was a stimulus for the construction of memorials by survivors and the state (Ibreck, 2009). A state edict that the victims of the genocide should be buried together was initially resisted by some survivors who wanted to be able to lay their loved ones to rest privately (Vidal, 2001), but for others their central concern, was simply for the remains to be buried with dignity. In 2004, visiting a women's group based near Butare one of its members showed me a house filled with remains, including those of her husband, recently disinterred and willingly kept for reburial at commemoration.

¹⁵ Although critics accuse the RPF of displaying the bones against the wishes of survivors, often it was the latter who were involved in displaying them and some survivors wish them to remain there as evidence of the atrocities (Ibreck, 2009).

present: “the suffering and the struggling continues” (Colvin, 2006: 165). The commemorative rituals established by survivors, including long marches to memorial sites and all night vigils, replicate aspects of their traumatic experiences during the genocide and indeed frequently commemorations trigger traumatic crises (see below). As such, the past seeps into commemoration, disrupting the notion of the genocide as discrete historic event, and interrupting the symbolic construction of political order.

The Meaning of Participation

The significance of commemoration is also influenced by the responses of ordinary Rwandans. Commemoration requires interaction, not just attendance, creating opportunities to challenge the dominant public memory. Large crowds attend ceremonies. While some attend in mourning and from a commitment to the dead, others come because they have felt pressured by the government. As member of the NURC explained, earlier on mainly the authorities and survivors took part, but people are now told to go by local officials. Commemoration is: “obligatory for survivors, Hutus, those whose families were involved in the genocide... This is one activity of memorialisation in which the whole population participates” (August 2006). While the ‘duty to remember’ “is very easy to verify” in rural areas it is less so in town. Consequently, urban participants are “convinced” and “open commemorate, they talk,” in rural areas many “come against their will” (Ibuka representative, August 2006).

Over time, voluntary participation appears to have risen and survivors say they feel less isolated. For instance, survivors organising the commemoration at the University of Butare spoke of “resistance among students and workers at the beginning”, but a new willingness to take part, both among Tutsi returnees¹⁶ and Hutus: “It’s a different generation now. Some of the students here were in primary school. They want to know what happened. Maybe their brother or father is in prison” (AERG Butare, July 2006). This participation is also leading to new revelations: “People invite testimony about what happened and you know the truth... Even at the last commemoration, we found a mass grave, the remains of 100 people. If we hadn’t had ceremonies, we wouldn’t know” (NUR student, July 2006). In particular there is growing youth participation: “I have noticed a lot of young Hutu who participate voluntarily; they ask us how can we join you in the commemoration. This is positive; it began around the tenth anniversary” (Ibuka representative, July 2006).

In the early days in Nyamasheke, only survivors and the government took part and “People didn’t understand”, “were afraid” or worried about vengeance. By 2006, however, “participation was numerous and people began to understand” (elderly returnee, August 2006). Some also choose these rituals to publicly reveal details about the crimes which they have kept hidden for years. Some of those involved in memorialisation take heart from the growing numbers of people now attending:

There is some comfort; people are not threatened by the commemoration. They are mixing up. Many are married to survivors. They have to commemorate with you... Those not involved, who were detached from the killers, are now able to come, which would not happen at the beginning (memory expert, July 2006).

¹⁶ Note that Tutsis returnees did not generally attend in the early years (Hatzfeld, 2005b: 82).

Participation also brings a sense of community: some survivors feel they are forging new bonds:

When we commemorate properly we really feel that we are with the dead. All the survivors come together, rich or poor. The rich sit down on the ground with the poor. They are like one single person – rich or poor they are real survivors. Those from the diaspora and Hutus, those who have nothing to reproach themselves for also join us. This is a way towards reconciliation. When you see someone wants to help you commemorate, it is as if they were with you during the genocide. You really open up to them. That educates their children who have nothing to do with this (Ibuka spokesperson, August 2006).

However, there are also people who resent or fear commemoration. Sentiments are heightened at the time of mourning which can be a time of anxiety or repression. Criticism of the rituals is voiced with caution and cannot be properly gauged. Nevertheless some people feel distressed, excluded or resent the rituals, seeing them as intended to “humiliate Hutus” (human rights researcher, July 2006). Fear, coloured by either anxiety or shame, affects popular attitudes towards commemoration. Such resistance is usually expressed in silence or withdrawal but at its most serious, it has included violence.

While survivors often say they feel an obligation to remember (Ibreck, 2010), they do not always welcome official commemorative rituals. Some contend that the state is intruding upon the grief of survivors (Vidal, 2001).

Politics has its way, but do we know that this is good for everyone? During the commemoration period some people lose themselves during the ceremonies. On the macro scale it is important that there is a time to remember, but it must be organised so that we don’t distress people. Even within families there are no agreements about this. There are some people who say that is the past; we need to look to the future (NGO director, August 2006).

For some the reminders are unbearable. There are cases of traumatic crises during commemorative ceremonies. While some participants are provoked to tears and distress as survivors recount their testimony, others appear to be transported back to the moment of the genocide and begin crying or trying to flee. On 7 April 2005 at the ceremony in Kiziguro, the panic spread so quickly that within thirty minutes fourteen people were being treated for “pronounced crises” in a room set aside for counselling, while others were in Red Cross tents or taken to hospital. That same year, nationally the Ministry of Health recorded 627 incidences of trauma at different commemoration sites (Gishoma and Brackelaire, 2008: 167-8).

In 2010, the commemoration was dedicated to the theme “Let us all join efforts in fighting trauma,” but the following year, there seemed little improvement. The national ceremony was punctuated by the “haunting cries” from traumatized members of the crowd (Zimpapers, 2011). Two district commemorations alone recorded 58 cases of trauma (*The New Times*, 2011). In a clinical analysis, Gishoma and Brackelaire explain that during commemoration survivors “no longer know how to avoid thinking”; their suffering “breaks out” and they re-inhabit bodies from which they have psychically detached (2008: 166). This might seem like a working through of trauma needed for the restoration of normality, an argument sometimes made for commemoration as a therapeutic process (Alexander, 2004: 7), but its social and

political effect is disturbing. As Jenny Edkins (2003) argues, trauma shatters the very illusion of stability in the present, which political leaders seek to cultivate through commemoration.

In Rwanda, this illusion of unity and reconciliation is further undermined by threats and violence during the time of commemoration. “Genocide ideology” and attacks on survivors are reported to increase during this period (*The New Times*, 10/07/2008). Notorious examples of mockery and threats, include a man who dressed his dog in purple scarves, telling people he was in mourning for the “dogs that ‘perished’ during the genocide” (*The New Times*, 11/04/2007)¹⁷ and a caller who phoned in to a local radio station during a programme dedicated to remembering the genocide, and warned listeners: “we shall kill you again” (*The New Times*, 19/04/2006). Survivors often face less public threats and taunts (Ibuka representative, July 2006). Actual violence is rare, but not unknown. On 8 April 2004, there was an attempted attack on a village in the northwest of Rwanda by rebels based in the DRC that seemed to be “timed to coincide with commemorations marking the 10th anniversary of the genocide” (BBC News, 11/04/2004). On 22 March 2007, there was a grenade attack upon Cyimbogo Genocide Memorial Site in Nyakarenzo sector, in Western Province, where some 2000 genocide victims are buried, apparently by militia groups from the DRC seeking to cause “instability in the area especially during the 13th Genocide Memorial Week” (*The New Times*, 26/03/2007). On 10 April 2008, a grenade was thrown into the gatehouse at the Kigali Memorial Centre, killing one policeman and injuring another. That same day, a car rammed into a crowd of survivors who were walking together to the memorial site at Nyanza (*The New Times*, 12/04/2008). That year, attacks upon survivors intensified in the run up to and aftermath of the ceremonies, claiming twelve victims (*The Guardian*, 15/05/2008).¹⁸

Commemoration can, in the words of one survivor “bring back to life hatreds” (Longman and Rutagengwa, 2006: 251). Moreover, all Rwandans, not just survivors, may feel heightened anxiety and become very sensitive to the behaviour of other people they meet; in the words of a Tutsi returnee it can “develop a very negative attitude in the hearts of some people.” Insensitive or negative comments can be felt as injuries at this sensitive time. The bereaved feel distressed by any indication that people do not share their concern for the victims. One survivor spoke of his anger at the comments of a neighbour who used to switch off her radio during the commemoration: “The woman told her husband (a survivor), I’m tired of hearing your memory songs, will you always be crying?” (August 2006).

Because commemorations sometimes lead to arrests or repression under the ‘genocide ideology’ legislation, and because they evoke past divisions, they also give rise to fear among Hutus and resentment of their overwhelming and compulsory nature. Many Hutus stay away: “They feel humiliated. Even if they didn’t participate in the genocide, it was their brothers who did so... They lack the will to come. Everyone knows the dates for commemoration but they aren’t interested.” (Ntarama guardian, August 2006). The pressure to participate can give rise to anger as a recent study found: “Some respondents expressed their anger that people had been forced to participate in the gathering at the stadium on 6 April (sic); ‘it was all orchestrated.’”

Vidal (2001) finds that commemoration also provokes anger and a sense of injustice, mainly focused on the failure of the government to acknowledge victims of RPF massacres, or

¹⁷ Note that purple scarves are worn by survivors during the mourning period.

¹⁸ The point here is not that such instances are a consequence of commemoration, but merely that they intensify around this time; for instance attacks on survivors are often aimed at preventing their testimony at *gacaca* trials.

revenge killings: the “July dead.” This view was expressed forcefully by a Hutu participant in a conference on reconciliation: “as long as one sector of the population of Rwanda is authorised to cry for its dead, to shout its distress, without the other part being able to mourn, reconciliation will have to wait” (Vidal, 2001: 46). When Longman and Rutagengwa carried out extensive research into attitudes towards reconciliation in Rwanda, they also uncovered opposition to memorialisation. In particular, they identified anger among those from Byumba,¹⁹ where memories are dominated by experience of war rather than genocide. The call from these victims was not so much against genocide commemoration, but rather for public acknowledgement of the suffering of Hutus (2006: 251).

Feelings of injustice are especially acute in Kibeho, the site of an RPF massacre on 22 April 1995 (*Médecins Sans Frontières*, 1995). Bereaved relatives have no opportunity to vent their feelings publicly. They perceive commemoration as marginalising their experiences, and express their sorrow and resentment among themselves, or in confidence to outsiders. Some also refuse to participate in the genocide commemorations. A survivor of the Kibeho massacre commented: “At the time of commemoration I shut off the radio and TV. If it’s an obligation I go to commemoration but I remain silent.” She described people in her community there as “furious to have a government who commemorates for only one side of the population even though they know that they committed crimes of vengeance”. Another resident of Kibeho agreed, arguing that “the others who died should also be remembered in the same way” (August, 2006).

Conclusion

This chapter has found that the government employs commemoration to construct both its own legitimacy and a national identity, and that it presents a selective account of the genocide, while marginalising other²⁰ atrocities. But it does not have a monopoly over commemoration and the practice is not solely driven by its interests. The official discourse does not construct a shared “memory” of the genocide or even produce a consistent account, and the commemorations are also shaped by survivors and by the participation or resistance of all Rwandans. The state sets the parameters for remembrance, but does not always hold sway within these.

The ceremonies are marked by contradictions. They involve the display, and sometimes the imposition, of state authority, but include expressions of concern for the ordinary victims of violence, demands for accountability, and a promise of justice and rights. They are a unique public time when survivors gain a hearing and an opportunity to demand assistance and change even as the commemorations reproduce old hierarchies and divisions in their ritual forms and practices. They are part of the survivors’ mourning process and forge bonds between them and other mourners, while they also reflect the horror of the genocide, sometimes triggering traumatic crises. The tragic past influences the practices and forms of commemoration, limiting the possibilities for it to serve the present political interest. Moreover, the order of commemorative ceremonies is disrupted by challenges, including trauma and violence, since the public remembrance of genocide victims calls attention to silences about other abuses and breeds resentment. Commemoration, is not a means of governing or promoting social healing, instead it is a site of contestation and negotiation

¹⁹ The Byumba region was least affected by the genocide because it was the first to come under RPF control.

²⁰ This finding supports Bell’s theory that ritualization “can empower agents, in limited and highly negotiated ways” (1992: 222). More generally in Rwanda, Thomson (2011) finds that the policy of reconciliation is met with “everyday resistance”.

(Misztal, 2003: 127) even in Rwanda, where there are strict limits on who and what can be remembered publicly.

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