

Perpetuating the Single Reality - the Culture of Rwanda's Genocide Memorials

Written by Brandon Dickson

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BRANDON DICKSON, NOV 29 2017

Genocide memorialization in Rwanda takes a variety of forms. On a typical visit to Rwanda however, one would assume the most successful, if not the only, method of memorialization used was the formal government endorsed programs which center around the eight national genocide memorials across the country.[1] Despite differences in appearance and presentation, all the memorials explicitly state three primary goals of government memorialization in descending order of importance; education, commemoration and reconciliation of Rwanda's 1994 genocide. To the Rwandan Government, and NGOs such as Aegis Trust, the national genocide memorials stand to denounce Rwanda's past and encourage further development. To many small communities and grassroots organizations however, these memorials are buildings which overshadow, if not undermine the efforts that are made daily to remember the genocide in an individual fashion. The formal memorials all have strong and well developed missions that started with good intentions. Over time however, a combination of political pressures and refusal to listen to community stakeholders has led to memorials that work against the very goals they were designed to promote. Through a study of the shortcomings of Rwanda's nationalized system of memorialization, and an analysis of the potential successes of grassroots memorialization, it can be determined that national genocide memorials in Rwanda are detrimental to the very objectives they claim to work towards and more resources should be invested in partnerships with grassroots methods of memorialization.

Before analyzing the success or potential of any type of memorialization in Rwanda, it is important to make a distinction between the two types of memorials to be discussed. The first group is the formal memorials, the eight brick and mortar buildings which are directly controlled by the Rwandan Government to remember the genocide. These memorials have undergone gradual changes since their inception that have left them unable to achieve the goals set for them. The second form of memory is the informal, community based memorialization. These methods may have been established by, or may receive funding from the government, but operate largely independent of government regulation. This includes but is not limited to, the hundreds of community based genocide memorials that were not delegated 'national' memorials, often run by locals in small communities[2], Rwanda's hope villages, community groups and reconciliation villages. The former category is easily recognizable and very public in nature, whereas the latter is often much more difficult to access[3], and while it may be public in nature, the scope of its reach is often limited by the fact it receives little formal acknowledgement. Despite this however, the unofficial memorials have great potential to be used to fulfill the stated goals of government memorialization.

The first and most frequently stated goal of government memorials is education and despite good intentions, the government memorials have become ineffective, often hindering the promotion of public education. On any trip to a memorial, one cannot escape without a guide saying half a dozen times that the sites are preserved, or in some cases created, for education. These formal methods of education are directed primarily at the returned Rwandan refugees, the public at large, younger generations and particularly those not directly affected by the genocide in an attempt to ensure everyone witnesses the dangers of ethnic division. The government's goal of education came into place in 1995 when the first memorial went up as a method to demonstrate the dangers of ethnic divisions to a wider audience.[4] This was an important objective to promote, particularly in the initial stages of the government's push to make the "one Rwanda" ideal a reality. However, the government's ideal of one Rwanda has changed to force one story to be accepted and taught at the memorials.

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The memorials' education process began to change in the early 2000s when the Rwandan memorials shifted from being an impartial medium to tell the history, to being an active influencer in what is known as the "Tutsification of the genocide".[5] Talk of the genocide became so regulated in this time period that the memorials become the only safe place to use the terms "Hutu and Tutsi".[6] During this time period the narrative began to change from a genocide targeting Tutsi, moderate Hutu and Twa to be, as banners outside the memorials proclaim, "the genocide against the Tutsi". The boards in Kigali and Murambi Genocide Memorials' museums[7] changed from explicitly discussing the stories of Twa and Hutu victims as well as Hutu moderates who helped Tutsis, to having one small area at the end of each memorial where a handful of individual, moderate Hutus are mentioned, seemingly as an afterthought to the plight of the Tutsi.[8] These boards simultaneously make Hutu synonymous with perpetrator and Tutsi synonymous with survivor all while ignoring that the largely Tutsi RPF killed between 25, 000 and 40, 000 militia and civilians during their push to Kigali.[9] To make matters worse, genocide survivors and locals who were formerly employed at the memorials are actively being phased out and replaced by young people fluent in English who have been trained in genocide and conflict studies in post-secondary school; these are often children of individuals who returned from surrounding countries post-1994 who were not directly impacted by the genocide.[10] Those survivors who remain employed are discouraged from telling their stories or emphasizing parts of the narrative unless it corresponds with the mandated history of the Rwandan Government.[11]

This method of education is problematic for a variety of reasons. Firstly, single stories about Rwandan history, particularly that of the relationship between Hutu and Tutsi, are what led the country to the genocide in the first place, clearly making this an issue for modern education. Moreover, imposing this single story has begun to stifle the individual nature of the way people experience the genocide and harms the learning experience at the memorials. As was determined with genocide memorials in Cambodia, when people are denied access to new testimonies and hear the same story repeatedly, they become apathetic and do not learn or understand as deeply.[12]

Possibly most importantly, the refusal to acknowledge multiple experiences at the memorials prevents grassroots methods of memorials from thriving in their attempts to educate people about their experiences with the genocide. While they may not meet the formal definition of 'memorial', many reconciliation villages in Rwanda provide places for survivors and perpetrators alike to work together towards a more nuanced memory of the genocide. On a recent trip to Rweru Hope Village in Rwanda, the eagerness of villagers to meet with those who want to learn about the genocide is inspiring. Despite a last-minute change of schedule and having received a group of Canadians the week before, the room was overflowing with villagers, all there to share their experiences or support their peers. Similar stories have been noted by researchers on similar trips to other communities.[13] The issue however is that the official single story embodied by the memorials has led to an emerging trend of individuals and communities becoming noticeably, either unwilling or unable to share their individual stories, instead perpetuating the governments' version. Dr. Erin Jessee discussed how, in multiple interviews with Rwandans, many were unwilling to discuss their experience unless it corresponded closely with the government narrative.[14] This trend towards filtering their stories is not only damaging to Rwanda, it stifles an opportunity for development. The opportunity for visitors to hear individuals' stories has been proven to have a greater impact on how meaningful visitors find their experience of learning about mass violence.[15] This means that small communities with a willingness to share their stories could lead an education program that would resonate with Rwandans and outsiders more than any preserved building ever could. This type of education is the stated mission of the current memorials. With the current damage formal memorials are doing to the education efforts of grassroots initiatives, and the potential for such an excellent education campaign, the Rwandan government must adjust the interaction between formal and grassroots memorials to better achieve their own objectives.

The second objective the memorials claim to work towards is commemoration of the genocide, giving a place for victims remains to be buried and for survivors and victims' families to come and remember in peace. This commemoration takes place in a variety of ways. Some memorials, such as Kigali's, have a wall with the names of the victims buried at the site. Most memorials have mass graves where thousands of bodies are unanimously buried and covered in concrete. At Murambi, many of the mass graves are areas where perpetrators threw victims' bodies; the majority have filled in naturally with sediment and have covered over with grass. In contrast, Ntarama, with its recent upgrade, is one of the few memorials where the public can see into the mass grave through glass, exposing individual coffins laid out on racks. The Rwandan government encourages survivors to come to the memorials to

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commemorate and hosts yearly days of commemoration where participation at a local genocide memorial is expected.[16] At the memorials however, access to the remains and mass graves is often limited to very public displays during certain hours of the day.

The memorials methods of commemoration raise many issues about the ways in which it regulates and mandates how Rwandans remember the genocide. When the memorials opened, the Rwandan government was good about consulting with locals about the physical presentation of the memorial, but neglected to ask what should be done with the remains. Instead the national government determined that the remains were best suited to stay at the memorial to help prevent genocide denial and give one unified place in which to commemorate.[17] This is directly in contrast to the fact that many survivors do not want the genocide to be publicly commemorated, often expressing that they wish for their murdered relatives to be buried in a local cemetery or on family land.[18] Moreover, many survivors claim the memorials reawaken deep negative emotional responses, such as sorrow and anguish[19] in what one survivor called "museums of horror"[20]. As a result, many survivors refuse to go to the national memorials to commemorate in such an open and public manner.[21] This is problematic in that yearly commemoration services are hosted where survivors are expected to go to a memorial to remember. Many survivors will fake an illness to avoid going to such services feeling it unnecessary to observe anonymous remains.[22]

In addition to damage done to survivors through this forced commemoration, there has also been much research conducted proving a negative impact on the ability to meaningfully remember when confronted with mass graves. Sara Guyer noted that that when people are able to see and smell remains, it does not require us to imagine the violence committed or attempt to comprehend the impact of this violence,[23] with Philip Gourevitch adding that, after an initial shock, the impact of such masses of bodies is minimal.[24] Further to this, Annalisa Bolin says that when masses of bodies are presented without any identity being given to each victim, genocide is being commemorated as genocide; that is masses of faceless and nameless victims all who fall into the same category. This form of commemoration makes looking at bodies a form of "soft violence" whereby the observer takes the same view of the victim as did the perpetrator.[25] Some argue allowing commemoration in this form is in fact, the biggest victory for the perpetrators.[26] With one goal of the mass remains being to positively impact the ability of survivors to commemorate and evidence so obviously pointing in the opposite direction, genocide memorials must shift their operations to be more effective.

Further to the point of the harms of mandated commemoration, the negative impact of national memorials on grassroots attempts at commemoration comes in two forms. Firstly, and most obviously, the memorials refuse to return the bodies of victims to their families. Rwanda is a culture which values burying and respect for the dead, particularly burying family members close to one's community so that they can be remembered at any hour of the day, any day of the week without being observed or interfered with.[27] This is difficult to do when a national memorial refuses to give someone their relative.[28] The second way national memorials stifle grassroots memorialization is through the forced days of commemoration. Every year, the Rwandan government has a week of commemoration, introduced with a speech by Paul Kagame and visits to the national memorials. This is then followed by a week of government promoted commemoration events put on by community groups. While participation is demanded, many stay in their homes to avoid participation in the entire week because they do not wish to endure a weeks' worth of commemorating in any way other than their own.[29] This mandated commemoration inflicts pain on survivors, either by forcing survivors to remember when they do not want to, or forcing them to remove themselves from the situation, defeating the purpose of commemoration. These issues could easily be remedied through greater partnership of memorials with local communities, and including them in the decision-making process, thereby ensuring engagement and voluntary dedication to commemoration. Partnerships would provide a more realistic alternative to identifying and completely turning over the remains to families, while still ensuring that local communities had the opportunity to express how they want to commemorate rather than following a hierarchical system.

The third and final goal stated by the national memorials is to promote and actively participate in reconciliation. In the years immediately following the genocide, with such an uncertain future, the earliest genocide memorials had no discussion about where the country was going or how it was going to heal. In recent years however, the Rwandan government has put a much greater emphasis on looking at Rwanda post genocide in the museum portion of the

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memorials at Kigali and Murambi. The Rwandan government has bought into the popular idea in memory studies that, "remembrance of the past must be accompanied by remembrance of future"[30]. Guides walk visitors through the way in which the "good governance of President Kagame" has led to national unity and the end of ethnic divisions. They speak of a Rwanda more united and economically prosperous than ever and promote the idea of "one Rwanda" to all visitors. Additionally, the memorials have great potential to be areas where survivors and perpetrators interact and learn their similarities rather than promote differences.

There are however, many issues with the memorials being the places to promote reconciliation. The first issue is that the Rwandan government, through the memorials has created a conflict of political power to replace the issues of ethnicity. This issue arises from the fact that the Rwandan government has unilaterally imposed on the population the way the memorials will be used. One example of this came from a series of interview conducted by Erin Jessee, in which she discovered that a church was designated as a genocide memorial without the government funding or designating another place of worship for those living in the area. To add to this, the government decided to lay out victims' remains at different stages of decomposition in the church, which locals considered sacred. This created animosity between residents and the government resulting in many people in surrounding communities, the primary target of such a memorial, refusing to interact with it.[31] Another aspect of the memorials inhibiting effective promotion of reconciliation is, as was discussed earlier, the anger of many locals about their relative's remains. As was noted, many locals refuse to engage with their local memorials because they do not agree with the anonymous way their loved ones have been disposed of, creating tension between a government that claims unity and a population disillusioned with how this comes about. In one study of the ways human remains can be effectively used in museums, it was determined that the best way to encourage reconciliation is to respect the wishes of individuals and their families, saying to respect the individual is to respect the unity of the entire society, showing the divisions created by making decisions about human remains without the families input. [32] In addition to this point, the very way the bones are laid out is thought to have a negative impact on promoting reconciliation. Many survivors and foreign NGOs have noted concern for the fact that not only is the exposure of bones violent in its own right, but the corpses, "make such a violent... claim on the living"[33], that it is nearly impossible to continue with the reconciliation process.[34]

This is not to say that the formal memorials do not have great potential to promote reconciliation in Rwanda that could be tapped into through partnerships with local grassroots initiatives. One big method the Rwanda government has promoted to encourage reconciliation are the villages inhabited by both survivors and perpetrators. Similar to hope villages, these villages were funded by the Rwandan government early, in order to get them started, giving homes to survivors, but since their inception, there has been minimal government intervention.[35] They have been incredible successes. Through giving survivors places to live, conditional on them sharing community spaces with the people who killed their friends and family, it forces people to interact and deal with day-to-day challenges together rather than dwell on the past.[36] It has been noted that "reconciliation is not an inevitable product of truth telling"[37] but that interaction is a requirement for those who wish to move past trauma to be able to do so.[38] National memorials should be used to supplement the successes these villages have already achieved. The national memorials can provide a space for reconciliation to be symbolized and a place where victims and survivors can go to remember in an effort to develop reconciliation. The memorials must however ensure that they are not acting in a way that actively undermines reconciliation.

In summation, despite a variety of forms of genocide memorials in Rwanda, the most prominent form is the formal government methods of memorialization embodied by the eight brick-and-mortar national memorials that litter the countryside. Despite their differences all the memorials state the same three goals they wish to achieve; education, commemoration and reconciliation of the 1994 genocide. Despite such strong ideological goals and the desire of the Rwandan government and multinational NGOs to make the memorials succeed, they often serve to undermine the daily efforts made by Rwandan survivors, be they former Hutu, Tutsi or Twa, to memorialize the genocide on their own terms. The national memorials started with a strong purpose and potential to be an excellent method to promote all three of their stated missions. However, due to political pressures and the refusal of the memorials to interact with and listen to locals, the memorials ended up working against the goals they claim to promote. Through a study of the shortcomings of Rwanda's nationalized system of memorialization, and an analysis of the potential successes of grassroots memorialization, it can be determined that national genocide memorials in Rwanda are detrimental to the

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very objectives they claim to work towards and more resources should be invested in partnerships with grassroots memorialization.

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Notes

[1] These original six memorials are Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre, Murambi, Nyamata, Ntarama, Bisesero and Nyarubuye with Nyange and Rebero being upgraded to national status in April, 2017. Found at: Michel Nkurunziza, "Two Genocide Memorial Sites Upgraded to National Level," *The New Times*, April 11, 2017, accessed May 26, 2017. <http://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/article/2017-04-11/210491/>.

[2] Rachel Ibreck, "International Constructions of National Memories: The Aims and Effects of Foreign Donors' Support for Genocide Remembrance in Rwanda" *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 7(2) (2013): 153, accessed May 20, 2017, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2012.714242>.

[3] Both physically, in terms of getting to these sites, but also in terms of gaining entry to communities which are not promoted to outsiders.

[4] Erin Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda: The Politics of History*, (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 46.

[5] Rachel Ibreck, "The Politics of Mourning: Survivor Contributions to Memorials in Post-Genocide Rwanda," *Memory Studies*, 3(4) (2010): 331, accessed May 20, 2017, doi: 10.1177/1750698010374921.

[6] Jennie Burnet, "Whose Genocide? Whose Truth?," in *Genocide: Truth, Memory, and Representation* ed. Alexander Hinton et al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 89.

[7] These are the only memorials with formal museum components that allow guests a documented history prior to entering the memorial.

[8] Susan Thomson, "Whispering Truth To Power: The Everyday Resistance Of Rwandan Peasants To Post-Genocide Reconciliation," *African Affairs*, 110(440) (2011): 445, accessed May 20, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy1.lib.uwo.ca/stable/41240214>.

[9] Gerard Prunier, *Africa's World War: Congo, The Rwandan Genocide and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.

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[10] Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda*, 69.

[11] Ibid, 82.

[12] Rachael Hughes, "Dutiful Tourism: Encountering the Cambodian Genocide," *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 49(3) (2008): 327, accessed May 20, 2017, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8373.2008.00380.x.

[13] Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda*, 87.

[14] Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda*, 82.

[15] Hughes, "Dutiful Tourism," 327.

[16] Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda*, 82.

[17] Hughes, "Dutiful Tourism," 106.

[18] Nigel Eltringham, "Bodies of Evidence," in *Remembering the Genocide* ed. Nigel Eltringham et al. (London: Routledge, 2014), 208.

[19] Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda*, 106.

[20] Ibid, 107.

[21] Ibid, 108.

[22] Ibid 106.

[23] Sara Guyer, "Rwanda's Bones," *Boundary 2*, 36(2) (2009): 171, accessed May 20, 2017, doi: 10.1215/01903659-2009-009.

[24] Ibid, 163.

[25] Annalisa Bolin, "On the Side of Light: Performing Morality at Rwanda's Genocide Memorials," *Journals of Conflict Archaeology*, 7(3) (2012): 201, accessed May 20, 2017, doi: 10.1179/1574077312Z.00000000012.

[26] Nigel Eltringham, "Bodies of Evidence," in *Remembering the Genocide* ed. Nigel Eltringham et al. (London: Routledge, 2014), 200.

[27] Emmanuel Karake, "New Law Allows Burial Outside Public Cemeteries," *The New Times*, November 16, 2012, accessed May 22, 2017, <http://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/article/2012-11-16/59777/>. And Nigel Eltringham, "Bodies of Evidence," in *Remembering the Genocide* ed. Nigel Eltringham et al. (London: Routledge, 2014), 208.

[28] Pat Caplan, "Never Again: Genocide Memorials in Rwanda," *Anthropology Today*, 23(1) (2009): 21, accessed May 20, 2017, stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4620332>.

[29] Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda*, 106.

[30] Rick Crownshaw, "Memory," in *The Future of Memory* ed. Rick Crownshaw et al. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 4.

[31] Jessee, *Negotiating Genocide in Rwanda*, 106.

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[32] Lynn Teague, "Respect for the Dead, Respect for the Living," in *Human Remains: Guide for Museums and Academic Institutions* ed. Vicki Cassman et al. (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 245.

[33] Guyer, "Rwanda's Bones," 150.

[34] Ibid.

[35] They vary from hope villages in a lack of official designation and government regulation. "Abaharanira Amahoro Association," Genocide Archive of Rwanda, accessed May 21, 2017, http://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php?title=Abaharanira_Amahoro_Association&gsearch=.

[36] Phil Clark, "When the Killers Go Home," *Dissent*, 52(3), (2005): 18, accessed May 20, 2017.

[37] Mark Amstutz, "Is Reconciliation Possible After Genocide?: The Case of Rwanda," *Journal of Church and State*, 48(3), (2006): 560, accessed May 20, 2017, doi: 10.1093/jcs/48.3.541.

[38] Faustin Mafeza, "Restoring Relationship Between Former Genocide Perpetrators and Survivors of Genocide Against Tutsi in Rwanda Through Reconciliation Villages," *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, 2(2), (2013): 795, accessed May 20, 2017.

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