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De Boeck Supérieur | « Afrique contemporaine »

2011/2 No 238 | pages 11 - 27
ISSN 0002-0478
ISBN 9782804166694

This document is the English version of:

DOI 10.3917/afco.238.0011

Translated from the French by JPD Systems

Available online at :


How to cite this article :

DOI 10.3917/afco.238.0011

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Memorial Spaces for the Tutsi Genocide in Rwanda

Hélène Dumas
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Too often presented from the vantage point of a political tool only, there is in fact a complex history behind the memory of the Tutsi genocide. This paper revisits the history of memories of the genocide through its memorial spaces, using Rwandan archival records and interviews. Rwanda's memorials rise in a landscape hybridized by deliberately mixed memories. The authors attempt to reconstitute the archeology of Rwanda's memorials, and show how difficult it is to articulate both personal and collective grief in a country where national reconciliation policy tends to conceal the violence of the past.

Keywords: Rwanda, Tutsi genocide, memorial spaces, state, refugees, memorials, grieving

When the Tutsi genocide ended in July 1994, observers were assailed by the silence and acrid stench of death (Khan 2000, Keane 1995). Descriptions of the event found their way into Kinyarwanda songs. In less than three months, from April to July 1994, nearly a million victims had been murdered. Although Tutsis were the main targets of these massacres, moderate Hutus who opposed the murderous orders also suffered the same fate. As a result, the country was strewn with massacre sites, which quickly turned into memorial spaces (Nora 1997). Seventeen years later, Rwanda still has not finished burying its dead. Confessions obtained through legal proceedings and landslides caused by torrential rains have both resulted in new discoveries of bodies. The grieving process is therefore far from over.

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All of this should be borne in mind when dealing with the issue of memorial sites in Rwanda. Far from remaining sacrosanct, these sites have proved particularly susceptible to vacillations in a memorial policy whose history can be traced back to 1994. With the gradual sorting of genocide-related archival records, it has become easier to identify the challenges relating to the choice of memorial sites and the meanings various actors have conferred upon them. These sites, which were built to honor various “desires to remember,” are perfectly consistent with Pierre Nora’s definition. They combine, at various times and in various spaces, the material, functional, and symbolic dimensions essential to their inclusion in this type of analysis. It is in the twists and turns of these “objects containing representations of themselves” (Nora 1997, 39) that history, memory, and the history of memory are reflected. Simultaneously, their diversity and uniqueness complicate all efforts to establish a classification that would, in any case, impoverish descriptions of them. Their roots in local history, the meanings and symbols conferred upon them, and the tensions they may generate create a set of complex phenomena that defies all classificatory logic.

Such spaces are also unique because they bear testimony to an unprecedented event, namely the large-scale and cruel death of a human group. The radical nature of the event constructs a unique memory in whose name memorials appear as symbols. In fact, the very novelty of genocide memorials triggered an unfamiliar practice in Rwanda, a country where no commemorative monuments existed before the genocide. Except for a small mausoleum in honor of Dominique Mbonyumutwa, who heralded the “social revolution” in 1959, the tragic and glorious memories of earlier regimes were rarely translated into physical commemorations. Genocide memorials therefore represent an essential part of the country’s historical heritage, at least in its material dimension.

The presence of such a violent past has left its mark in various spaces. Firstly, it is visible in the topography, where relatively small institutional and non-institutional memorials with a variety of functions dot the urban and rural landscapes. Next, memories of the past influence the survivors’ relationship with a landscape devoid of commemorative fixtures of any kind (Becker 2004, Audoin-Rouzeau 2000, Schama 1999). Lastly, another topos in which the memory of genocide is embodied is the body, belonging primarily to the dead and the survivors. Genocide memorials are the most visible mark of the spatial inclusion of this “desire to remember,” and they are many in number. The manner in which they are built, their architectural form, and their history are all influenced by the various desires that have led to their creation.

National memorials have not covered all the “intentions to remember” (Nora 1997, 38). In fact, links to the past based on family memories were formed...
prior to official initiatives. Such memories have also been enshrined in unusual sites, for which the connections have to be explained. Other spaces are born out of a subtle compromise between the survivors and state and church institutions. Due to political and social issues surrounding these sites, they have turned into special vantage points for studying the types of links forged with a past that is barely compatible with the demands of national reconciliation. It is important therefore to examine what these sites reveal about the violence of the past. By whom and in what form were they designed and built? What do these memorial spaces contain? How do they depict violence? How can this presence of violent memories be reconciled with policies of national reconciliation? Have these policies had an influence on the development of these memorials?

The “Desire to Remember”: Historical Sociology of Participants in Memories

The State and its commissions. The Government of National Unity set up on July 19, 1994 faced a volatile situation in the country following the genocide and did not consider the question of memory to be paramount. Despite major political and security issues, the new authorities decided to organize dignified burials for genocide victims as soon as possible, primarily for health reasons. Although the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs and some NGOs provided support in performing this task, it was carried out mostly on the initiative of survivors and their families who had returned from exile. As government institutions began to be set up, a number of projects related to preserving the memory of the genocide arose in ministries dealing with social and cultural issues.

The first government initiative came from the Ministry of Social Affairs, Pio Mugabo, himself a survivor. Mugabo organized the first national commemoration on April 7, 1995 at Rebero and provided logistical support for mass burials commensurate with the very modest means available to Rwanda at the time, judging by the extreme simplicity of the commemorative decorum. A few coffins—wrapped in purple sheets, buried in graves dug directly into the ground and topped with a simple Catholic wooden cross—held the remains of politicians killed during the initial days of the genocide. The solemnity of the tribute was in contrast with the modest means provided for its implementation (Memorial Commission 1996). Although Rebero was a dual symbol of fallen power and of the military victory of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (Front Patriotique Rwandais—FPR), no massacre ever took place at this site during the genocide. By contrast, the selection of sites for subsequent national commemorations was based on the scale of the massacres that had been perpetrated there. How does one account for such a shift?

In this context, the work undertaken by the Memorial Commission on Genocide and Massacres in Rwanda seems to have played an important role in the genealogical analysis of memorial policies in Rwanda. Created in October 1995 under the Ministry for Higher Education, Scientific Research, and Culture,
it consisted of six members from various ministries. Its aim was to identify as many massacre sites across the country as possible. The international scope of the Commission was not limited to funding from the German international cooperation agency, but was in fact partly instigated and set up by Eric Rousseau, a young Belgian who represented the Ministry for Rehabilitation and Social Integration under the leadership of Jacques Bihozagara, an influential member of the RPF.

Rousseau’s biography can be traced back to the support of his testimony before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). Displaying an unconvincing naivety about his relationship with the Rwandan community in Belgium in the late 1980s, Rousseau took part in organizing cultural events that served as a front for raising funds for the RPF (Sehene 1999, Rusagara 2009). However, his Rwandan friendships were not the only reasons for his interest in the country and the tragedy it experienced starting in April 1994. His motives lay within his own family history, which was marked by memories of the extermination of Jews in Europe (Rousseau and ICTR 2003). Although the memory of the Holocaust is portrayed as his primary reason for going to Rwanda, the main focus of his initial projects was on helping orphans. It is this social dimension that prompted him to join the government ministry headed by Jacques Bihozagara. In fact, there are few references to the extermination of Jews in Europe in the conclusions of the investigations conducted by the Memorial Commission, as reflected in the final recommendations, in which the example of Israel is cited alongside those of Algeria and Cambodia (Memorial Commission 1996).

However, the ICTR sources, focused as they are on Rousseau, should not overlook the other commission members, who were all from the Tutsi diaspora but with different intellectual and professional profiles. Among these figures, Captain Firmin Gatera deserves a special mention. Rising from the ranks of the Rwandan Patriotic Army (Armée Patriotique Rwandaise—APR), his presence signals the army’s involvement in issues of memory from the start, a commitment that has not flagged since.

At the end of a six-week investigation, the Memorial Commission submitted its report in February 1996. The final document, consisting of over 250 pages, listed the following information for each municipality: major massacre sites, estimated number of victims based on a cursory review of mass graves, and dates and key organizers of the massacres. The document also mentioned “national heroes” who opposed the genocide. Commemorative ceremonies paying tribute to these heroes were specifically included in the recommendations. This reflected a desire voiced a year earlier by the Minister for Social Affairs,

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2 One exception is Scott Straus, who refers to the report for creating a timeline of the killings. See Straus (2006, 249).

3 One church per diocese, i.e., seven in total, was to be converted into a national memorial and managed jointly by the State and the Catholic Church.

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Pio Mugabo, when he honored the memory of the mayor of Mugina (Gitarama), who was murdered in April 1994 as he made desperate attempts to protect Tutsis who had taken refuge in his municipality. In addition to this specific recommendation, the report urged the government to set up communal memorials in a single location, namely the local cemetery, where bones would have been gathered. At the national level, the Rebero site attracted the attention of the Commission, which proposed to erect a national cemetery and national memorial at the site.

The consequences of this report are paradoxical. Despite recurring reference being made to it, it has remained largely unknown to researchers. Given that it was intended for use in the legal rather than the historical field, it has served as a source for numerous judicial institutions such as the Supreme Court (in identifying Category One criminals), the National Gacaca Court service, and the International Crime Tribunal for Rwanda. Increasingly, the organization of commemorations and the process for converting identified sites into memorials also hinged on the information provided in this report. The Joint Church-State Commission on the fate of religious buildings and parish premises that had become mass graves following the genocide was set up shortly after its publication (Chrétien and Ubaldo 2004).

Records on negotiations concerning the conversion of religious buildings into genocide memorials shed new light on the widely accepted vision of a relentless confrontation between representatives of the Rwandan government and the Catholic Church. Initially, contact appeared to be cordial from both sides. According to documents issued by the Conference of Catholic Bishops of Rwanda, the Minister for Higher Education, Joseph Nsengimana, even acknowledged the legitimacy of a project aimed at building a “memorial for all war victims” (Joint Church-State Commission) that would also pay tribute to victims of the RPF. For its part, the Rwandan clergy did not initially seem averse to the conversion of several buildings into memorials. Another sign of goodwill was that on May 19, 1996, the Bishop of Nyundo, Wenceslas Kalibushi, organized a “cleansing ceremony” for his cathedral, in which no worship had taken place since the April 1994 massacres. The decision to return to the building its religious function expressed the purpose of providing a decent place of worship for the commemoration of the dead.

However, negotiations became far less cordial after a stormy meeting between Minister Joseph Nsengimana and the Apostolic Nuncio, Bishop Julius Janusz in June 1996. During the meeting, Janusz uttered harsh words about the nature of the Rwandan government, calling it “communist” and accusing it of wanting to convert churches into political arenas. This tough stance by Rome’s diplomatic representative aggravated the negotiations. Local churches, which had earlier been open to compromise, sided with the Vatican, and the Government noted a sharp decline in negotiations. Eventually, the conflict was resolved in favor of the Catholic Church, with only the Nyamata Church being excluded from resuming worship while other buildings were accommodated on
a case-by-case basis. For example, the Church of Saint John in Kibuye, which had witnessed extensive massacres, was landscaped, with the main structure of the memorial consisting of mass graves and a chamber containing skulls.

The end of the debate on Catholic buildings concluded a period of intense activity for the Memorial Commission, which was subsequently left in limbo as a result of numerous ministerial revisions as a result of various political twists and turns in 2000. The intervention of other local and international actors thus became necessary.

**Internationalization of the genocide memory.** The Gisozi Memorial Site is probably one of the most visited memorials in Rwanda. A required place of meditation for all foreign visitors—from Heads of State to mere tourists⁴—it has been performing memorial, museum, and educational functions since 2004. However, since as far back as 1996, the Memorial Commission suggested that the Gisozi site become the genocide cemetery for Kigali City Prefecture.⁵

In 1999, the Prefect, Marc Kabandana, carried out investigations to identify massacre sites in the capital. Following these investigations, nearly 250,000 bodies were exhumed in various districts of Kigali and jointly buried in Gisozi, and a permanent memorial center built in 2000. The presence of the Belgian Prime Minister at the ceremony was enough to ensure its international standing from then on. Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt not only became the first representative of a Western government—more than that, the representative of the former colonial power—to attend a commemorative ceremony, but he also used this occasion to deliver a speech in which he offered a formal apology on behalf of Belgium for its role in the withdrawal of international United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) forces. In 2002, Aegis-Trust, a British NGO dedicated to genocide prevention, took over the construction of a museum and the landscaping of graves, and has since become a key player in the organization of national commemorations. The official inauguration of the museum took place in April 2004 during the tenth anniversary commemoration of the genocide.

The museum draws much inspiration from institutions dedicated to the Holocaust. For example, the room in which photographs of the victims are displayed is reminiscent of Yad Vashem. No doubt, this similarity reflects the past experience of the Aegis foundation as its two British founders, Stephen and James Smith, had in 1995 already built a memorial and documentation center in Britain dedicated to the memory of the Holocaust. Although the purpose of Gisozi is to become a historical research center, the focus is on its memorial

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⁴ References to the Gisozi site in foreign tour guides and brochures distributed by the Rwandan Office of Tourism and National Parks are substantial. Visitors to Gisozi have included, among others, French President Nicolas Sarkozy on February 26, 2010. Its museum tour and easy access to Kigali have made it popular among foreign visitors.

⁵ Prior to the administrative reform proposed in the new Constitution of 2003 and implemented between 2005 and 2006, Rwanda had twelve prefectures. The reform modified the administrative structure by dividing the country into five provinces and thirty districts.
dimension. The museum tour tracing the history of genocide is sketchy, and the lack of temporary exhibitions does little to increase the historical knowledge of the visitor. Moreover, the management of the center includes hardly any historians as it prefers professionals involved in promoting human rights. Often, this historiographical gap is filled by soothing reminders of past crimes and the invocation “never again!”

The survivors. The government and foreign institutions were not the only ones to express the desire to remember in special spaces. The Rwandan hills are home to other memorial spaces that have risen as a result of individual or family initiatives. These smaller-sized monuments are usually located at bends in the road, most often in the countryside. In fact, according to the land and administrative reorganization laws of 2005, people with family graves on their property—especially in Kigali—were forced to transfer the remains of victims to much larger memorials maintained by local administrative entities at the district or sector level. However, some memorials, mass graves, and memorial spaces still exist without receiving state support, funding, or regulation. At this stage, it is difficult to describe the part played by Ibuka, an NGO, in bringing together all the survivors’ associations. As far as can be ascertained, it seems that initiatives to develop mass graves came primarily from local communities of survivors, while Ibuka’s actions focused mainly on the social rehabilitation of survivors (Rudacogora 2005).

The architectural form of these spaces (whether graves or sculpture), the individuals behind their construction, the historic significance of these areas during the genocide, and the amount of development that has taken place since their creation all contributed to giving them a highly volatile scope and significance. A mere physical description fails to reflect the emotional, moral, and even financial investment of the social actors involved in the creation of these sites. The energy expended by survivors in searching for bodies and conducting dignified burials is a strong indicator of the difficulty of mourning in a context of extreme violence, marked by large-scale cruel death (Audoin-Rouzeau 2000).

Visitors to Mugonero, in western Rwanda, will be struck by the curious war memorial that was erected there. It is curious because to our knowledge, no equivalent exists in Rwanda. At the entrance of the Adventist complex, which includes a church and a very large hospital, is a cement block on top of which sit a machete and a nail-studded club—which the killers referred to as nta mpon-gano y’umwanzi (“no mercy to the enemy”—flanking two fists breaking their chains. In addition to a sculpture displaying such instruments of violence, the frontispiece of the adjoining building, in which the bones of victims are preserved, bears an equally striking inscription: “Urwibutso rw’inzirakarengane z’Abatutsi bazize isembabwoko ryo muri mata 1994, bishwe bunyamaswa Leta y’abagome irebera tuzahora tubibuka” (“Memorial for the innocent Tutsis swept away by the April genocide, killed like animals under the eyes of a State
run by cruel and despicable men. We will remember you forever.

). Until 2009, this was the only memorial that made direct reference to the identity of the victims as Tutsis. Together, these two specific features make the visitor wonder about the identity and motives of the designer.

**Mugonero: A unique and symbolic sculpture of the genocide.** This realistic stele, which was built at the initiative of someone whose family was exterminated inside the Adventist hospital complex, triggered a backlash among the population as well as religious Adventist authorities. Such an explicit reminder of the massacres was criticized on the grounds of necessary reconciliation. However, the sculpture will remain where it is, no doubt thanks to the powerful political connections of its initiator.

Photo: Hélène Dumas, October 2006.

A region marked by the religious presence of Seventh-Day Adventists since 1931, Mugonero was the scene of mass killings on April 16 and 17, 1994. Thousands of Tutsi refugees—and occasionally some of their Hutu relatives—were murdered inside the hospital and church buildings on the Sabbath. Victims of the Mugonero genocide included the entire family of Paul Muvunyi (Muvunyi 2009), who left the country in 1987 and became a successful businessman in Kenya. In July 1994, this generous contributor to the war effort of the RPF spoke about his return to Mugonero: “I first thought of giving the people a dignified burial because when I returned around July 10, 1994,
dogs were feeding on the remains.” The bodies that were to be buried “with dignity” as per Muvunyi’s instructions were exhumed from three large mass graves.

Other human remains were also strewn around church grounds. The first grave was located perpendicularly to the office of the Adventist Association. The French soldiers of Operation Turquoise, who had arrived on the spot a few weeks earlier, were the first to discover it (Muyahimana 2009). The other two mass graves were found inside the hospital building. Paul Muvunyi dug them up and buried the victims in a single grave, while a large number of bones were packed into coffins covered with a purple cloth and stored in a building. Six years after the dignified burial, Muvunyi decided to build the monument at his own expense.

He now explains his choices behind the sculpture: “The weapons are the symbols of genocide. I didn’t want the machetes and clubs to be forgotten because the ideology is still there. [. . ] The chained hands represent discrimination against Tutsis.” The erection of the monument sparked open opposition from the Adventist Church as well as part of the population: “At the beginning, the Adventist Church took umbrage. It asked me to remove the machete as it obstructed prayer and reconciliation [. . ]. Hutus did not want to see it either. They wanted to destroy the monument.” No doubt, Muvunyi’s political and financial clout played a large part in silencing the local authorities, which never openly challenged the presence of the sculpture. The same determination is in evidence when he speaks about the inscription on the frontispiece: “There are some people who don’t want to name the crime for fear of incurring displeasure, but the truth should be pointed out [. . ]. Other memorials have crosses, as if people had died of heart attacks, but no, they died during the genocide.”

Ever since the memorial was constructed in the early 2000s, local commemorations of the genocide have taken place there every April 7 or 16 with Paul Muvunyi present. Successful businessman that he is, leading a comfortable life in the exclusive neighborhood of Nyarutarama in Kigali, the only bond he now shares with his native hillside is the memory of the genocide. Thus, the construction and preservation of family memorial spaces reveal the mechanisms of power relationships that are part of local historical, political, and social dynamics. Such spaces also enable us to take a closer look at the conflicts they created between survivors, local authorities, and families linked to those accused of having committed the genocide.

Genocide memorials built on mass graves reflect the raw nature of mass death. At the same time, they also bear witness to the country’s relationship with the memory of the genocide since 1994. What concerns us therefore is not so much the origin, the form, and the content of these memorials, but rather, it is what they say about our attitude toward death, and how one should combine these reminders of violence with the national reconciliation policy.
Forms and Signs of Memory

The bodies. Vivid descriptions of the Murambi Memorial fired literary imaginations (Diop 2006) and triggered the notion of a Rwandan peculiarity concerning the exhibition of human remains. However, the case of Cambodia tempered this observation (Becker 2004, Hughes 2006). That said, the manner in which bodies were stored and displayed was severely criticized.

In addition to an attack on the political exploitation of the commemoration, a major argument broke out, denouncing this as “voyeurism of corpses” (Vidal 2004), a practice some saw as violating Rwandan tradition regarding death and thereby inflicting final symbolic pain upon the survivors. However, if the exhumation and exhibition of corpses for public testimony violate traditional attitudes toward death, it is only because the genocide itself embodies a radical subversion of all social and cultural norms, and criticism concerning the exhibition of bodies based on the tradition argument ignores this essential fact. Moreover, missionary and colonial documentation on funeral rites remains largely inadequate. As a result, there is little data to substantiate this so-called tradition that currently tends more to be an ethnographic practice.

Instead of adopting an indignant moral stance, we should analyze the speech and practices surrounding the exhibition of bodies. This desire to display bodies appeared alongside initial efforts to erect memorials, which—incidentally—do not preserve all of the mortal remains. To a large extent, the reasons for deciding to show the corpses to the public were based on the condition of the bodies when they were exhumed.

In 1994, the mass graves hastily dug around the technical training school in Murambi by the French soldiers of Operation Turquoise were often not deep enough. Most importantly, this hasty burial by the French Army was seen as the ultimate insult to the memory of the victims. The exhumation was therefore part of the rationale of memorializing (Rousseau and ICTR 2003). When members of the Memorial Commission went to Murambi in November 1995, many decomposed corpses were still strewn around the ground, while others were remarkably well preserved. The first exhumation was performed in January 1996 on four mass graves, where 20,157 corpses were exhumed (Memorial Commission 1996). A second operation took place just before the National Commemoration in April of the same year. Several hundred bodies unearthed there were covered with lime and laid out in the school’s classrooms. Once again, the decision reflected a desire to keep the memory alive since the bodies bore witness to the extermination.
Bodies and bones have, in fact, had testimonial value from the outset; the motive for collecting these bodies lies less in their cultural significance or any ritual use than in the fact that they constitute evidence, and they are consistently referred to as material evidence of the genocide in all legislative reports and documents. The reason why the Rwandan authorities place so much emphasis on the testimonial value of bodies is because of a fierce desire to guard against denial.\(^7\)

The problem depends on how these bodies are perceived and on the questions to which they give rise. Apart from the memorial and emotional value attributed to them by survivors, they may also contribute to a better understanding of the massacre. Additionally, for historians, this is also where the importance of forensic investigations lies. As long as we manage to overcome the horror of the first visual contact, a careful observation of the cuts on the bodies reveals how the massacre was carried out. An entire phenomenology of violence thus unfolds from the marks found on bodies and bones. In fact, historians should consider human remains—whether corpses or bones—to be sources. It is this unique value bestowed upon mortal remains that accounts for the care that goes into preserving them.

**Naming the genocide in order to standardize inscriptions.** Since 2008, the diversity of inscriptions on genocide memorials has gradually been standardized. This is indicative of two major developments in memorial policies. Firstly, this standardization of messages exemplifies the closure—albeit temporary—of the debate as to what to call the event. Secondly, it highlights the State’s takeover of memorial spaces and the loss of autonomy suffered by the local communities of survivors over such spaces.

Building on Antoine Prost’s work on memorials, the Rwandan researcher Augustin Rudacogora (2005) recalls the diversity of inscriptions and texts inscribed on memorials following the genocide. Messages from survivors include the names of loved ones, the date of the massacre, and, in general, an expression of remembrance. Meanwhile, political messages focus on addressing the national policy on unity and reconciliation. Lastly, the words used to refer to the massacres vary according to site. In fact, the difficulty in naming the event reveals a problem that is both semantic and political. There is no word in Kinyarwanda to express genocide. Moreover, explicitly naming the victims risks leading to the identity of the killers, thereby leaving the field wide open for a possible collectivization of crime against all Hutus (Kagabo 2004).

Moreover, the desire to shun any reference to ethnicity in the years following the genocide also explains the adoption of identity-neutral phrases. As a result, a whole range of expressions adorns the frontispieces of memorials (Mugiraneza 2009). By contrast, the constitutional revision of August 13, 2008 included the new expression *jenoside yakorewe abatutsi* (“genocide perpetrated against the Tutsis”), which specified the identity of the victims from this point forward. Although the reasons for such a change are not clear, several theories
have been put forward. Firstly, the emergence of the issue of denial in public debate in Rwanda probably contributed to the semantic clarification. The revisionist discourse that promoted the expression “Rwandan genocide” in fact concealed a double genocide logic whereby Hutus and Tutsis were both equally victims and perpetrators. Next, the constitutional revision occurred when national reconciliation was well underway, which made it possible to refer to the ethnic identity of genocide victims. Finally, concern for the country’s demographic structure provided the final part of the answer. Since the majority of the Rwandan population is below the age of 15, it did not experience the genocide. Given the lack of teaching on genocide history, it is important to specify the exact nature of the crimes of which Tutsis were the victims. (New Times 2009).

The expression enshrined in the constitutional revision of 2008 is now inscribed on all memorials. Thus a new institution was born in the wake of the reform. The National Commission for the Fight against Genocide (Commission Nationale de Lutte contre le Génocide—CNLG) was created in 2008 and was responsible for all matters related to the history and memory of the genocide, including monitoring the implementation of the law on genocide memorials that aimed to define their content and their form. This was the first legislative intervention on the subject, marking the State’s tighter control on memorial spaces.

Monuments. The Bisesero National Resistance Memorial is the only example of an attempt to symbolize the genocide through a work of architecture (Ibreck 2009). The prospect of holding the official commemoration ceremonies in Bisesero in April 1998 was instrumental in promoting the construction of a memorial symbolizing resistance to the genocide. In 1997, the execution of the project was entrusted to an architecture firm in Kigali under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture, and it was inaugurated in April 1998 during the National Commemoration.

This memorial is not located on Muyira Hill, where the victims sought refuge, but on the hill facing it. It consists of an inverted triumphal arch that represents the horns of a cow. This is a sociocultural reference to the cattle-breeding activity of the Abasesero, who formed the Tutsi population living in the region. The nine spears and stones located beyond the triumphal arch represent both the weapons of resistance and the nine municipalities of Kibuye Prefecture. Visitors are next invited to climb a steep hill dotted with small concrete houses. The climb was designed in such a way as to replicate the physical ordeal suffered by the Abasesero. However, this stretch is also starkly reminiscent of the Christian Stations of the Cross. In fact, each step is marked as a “station” in maps of the memorial, indicating that the architect tried to give an account of the Bisesero ordeal (National Memorial Commission). At the top of the hill are huge tombs in which most of the remains have been buried. Lower down in the monument, thousands of human bones and skulls are on permanent display in a makeshift structure made of iron sheets.
The ambitious intentions of the initial plan are in contrast with the relative neglect that marks the site today. Some buildings have been eroded by the damp climate, while other structures adjoining the monument are in a reasonably good condition and tend to be used to host exhibitions on the specific history of the region. Development projects have been launched under the auspices of the CNLG, and annual commemoration ceremonies are held in Bisesero—with significant changes. Until 2010, the commemoration was always held on May 13, as this date corresponded to the major attack that signaled the end of resistance. Last year, however, Bisesero survivors from various associations decided to hold their memorial evening on the night of June 26 to 27, the date on which the French troops of Operation Turquoise arrived. This rescheduled celebration followed a visit by French President Sarkozy in February that same year, which hoped to mark the resumption of cordial relations between the two countries. By reliving the bad memories of the departure of French soldiers, survivors wanted to recall how the international community had abandoned them (Kayigema 2010).
Conclusion
A panoptic view of the policy of memory in Rwanda as expressed in space makes it possible to identify changes in direction as well as changing resonances in national reconciliation policies since 1994. The tentative administrative organization and the history of national and local memorials both provide possibilities for tracing the history of genocide memory in Rwanda, a history that obscures that of the spaces themselves. Yet few historical monographs have been produced from this perspective. History can be read implicitly in these sites, where the historical narrative boils down to some raw data, such as the number of victims or the date of the massacre. Currently, the completion of national and international legal processes, the creation of a single administrative entity to handle all issues relating to the history and memory of the genocide (the CNLG), and the dogged determination to confer the image of an economic “dragon” on the country are all potential signs of an official willingness to turn the page of mourning. However, this still leaves open the question of the survivors’ individual grief, which cannot be reduced to official decrees. A collective memory that blots out all reminders of violence and focuses solely on the need for national reconciliation is unlikely to accommodate such intimate loss and pain.
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