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Erin Jessee

The “Genocide against the Tutsi” in Rwanda

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The micro-politics of remembering “the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi” in Rwanda

On the anonymous dead in Karongi district, western Rwanda

Erin Jessee

Introduction

On 16 January 2010, Victoire Ingabire Umuhiza – a Rwandan national of ethnic Hutu heritage who had spent her adult life in the Netherlands – returned to Rwanda with the goal of unifying Rwanda’s fledgling political opposition to challenge the ruling political party, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), led by President Paul Kagame. Upon arriving in Rwanda, Ingabire gave a speech at Rwanda’s most prominent commemorative site, the Kigali Genocide Memorial (KGM). This memorial was created in 2004 to commemorate the 1994 genocide, during which Hutu Power extremists and their supporters murdered an estimated 500,000 to one million Rwandans, most of whom were members of the nation’s minority Tutsi population.¹ As part of her speech, Ingabire stated:

If you look around you realise that there is no real political policy to help Rwandans achieve reconciliation. For example, if we look at this memorial, it only stops at people who died during the Tutsi genocide. It does not look at the other side – at the Hutus who died during the genocide. Hutus who lost their people are also sad and they think about their lost ones and wonder, “When will our dead ones be remembered?”

(Ingabire 2020)

As leader of the opposition party, *Forces démocratiques unifiées (FDU-Inkingi)*, Ingabire’s comments were interpreted by the predominantly Tutsi RPF as promoting “genocide ideology” and ethnic divisionism, and minimising the genocide.² Thus, Ingabire was arrested on 14 October 2010, prompting outcry from international human rights organisations who condemned the incident as part of a larger effort by the Rwandan government to undermine genuine political opposition and freedom of expression (see, e.g. Amnesty International 2013; Human Rights Watch 2012, 26).

Ingabire's subsequent trial, guilty verdict, and sentencing raised concerns about her right to the presumption of innocence, the hostility, anger, and disrespect that the judges displayed in their interactions with Ingabire during proceedings, and the court's alleged failure to properly investigate the circumstances under which confessions that were used by the prosecution to make their case against Ingabire had been obtained (Amnesty International 2010). Her sentence was eventually commuted on 14 September 2018 (BBC 2018). However, the question for observers unfamiliar with Rwanda remains: why did the government interpret Ingabire's seemingly innocuous comments as so inflammatory?

The qualitative fieldwork that I have conducted in Rwanda since 2007 suggests that the answer to this question in part lies in the broadly defined "cultural politics of the dead" (Posel and Gupta 2009, 299), and, more specifically, what anthropologists Cara Krmpotich, Joost Fontein, and John Harries (2010, 372) have termed the "emotive materiality and affective presence" of human remains, as applied to post-genocide Rwanda. After wresting control of the country and ending the genocide, the RPF-dominated Rwandan government invested in an ambitious and, in places, distinctly Rwandan transitional justice program that has included national trials, *gacaca* – a pre-colonial dispute resolution mechanism that was reinvented to address the nearly two million cases of genocide-related crimes committed by Rwandan civilians – and annual commemorations and related activities to promote accountability for the atrocities and tackle the unenviable task of reuniting Rwandans.³ Additionally, the government established eight major genocide memorials and provides support for nearly 250 smaller district-level genocide memorials that are maintained by local communities – a process that has at times required substantial and meaningful input from genocide survivors (Ibreck 2010).

However, the government has increasingly used the nation's state-funded genocide memorials to disseminate a politicised official narrative related to the "1994 genocide against the Tutsi", as it is referenced in official parlance.⁴ This gradual politicisation of the genocide memorials has been studied from multiple disciplinary perspectives over the years (see, e.g. Friedrich and Johnston 2013; Guyer 2009; Ibreck 2013; King 2010; Major 2015; Mwambari 2019; Mwambari 2021; Vidal 2004; and Viebach 2019). For example, transitional justice scholar Susanne Buckley-Zistel (2006, 131) argues that the memorials

and related commemorative practices have prompted many Rwandans to practice “chosen amnesia” – a survival mechanism that enables peaceful coexistence, but simultaneously fails to challenge “the social cleavages that rendered the genocide possible in the first place... obstructing their transformation in the future”. Anthropologist Jennie Burnet (2014, 111; 128) similarly maintains that the official narrative disseminated via these national commemorative sites and activities creates an over-simplified “shibboleth of genocide” that recognises only Tutsi victims, while condemning the Hutu majority as perpetrators. Their research speaks to two key themes in the literature on Rwandan genocide commemoration: the state-imposed official narrative of the genocide and the silences that it inevitably imposes on Rwandans whose experiences do not neatly align with the government’s preferred version of events; and scholars’ associated fears regarding whether this approach to commemoration – while by no means unique to Rwanda (see, e.g. Sodaro 2018) – can facilitate genuine social repair and long-term political stability in the region.

This chapter builds upon this scholarship by focusing on the comparatively understudied anonymous, physically traumatised bones and mass graves that are frequently central features of state-funded genocide memorials (see, e.g. Major 2015; Vidal 2004; and Viebach 2019). I begin with a brief description of the literature on “dead body politics”, which I argue provides a valuable framework for exploring the particular political context in post-genocide Rwanda. I then discuss my underlying methodological approach to working with Rwandans whom I interviewed in 2011 and 2012 as part of a broader project on civilians’ perceptions of Rwanda’s genocide memorials. Finally, I shift to the case study at the heart of this chapter: Karongi district in Western Rwanda. This is a comparatively understudied region of Rwanda in which people endured nearly three full months of genocidal violence and related atrocities in 1994, as well as heightened periods of violence and insecurity associated with the preceding 1990 to 1994 civil war, and followed by years of ongoing political instability associated with the Rwandan government’s efforts to secure Rwanda’s border with the neighbouring Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and eliminate perceived Hutu Power extremists in their midst. Most people I interviewed were critical of their local memorials, although I also discuss the case of one man who argued that his local memorial had been integral for

allowing his murdered loved ones to become “safely dead” (Fontein 2010, 441). This analysis is valuable for revealing the various forms of symbolic violence – specifically, forms of spiritual violence that undermine Rwandans’ sense of individual and social well-being – that Rwandans can associate with their local genocide memorials as a result of the anonymous dead interred at these sites. I argue that in Rwanda – and likely other authoritarian contexts where state interests are prioritised over discussion of the complex experiences of survivors and other conflict-affected cohorts – the anonymous dead have been imbued with a range of political and personal values that, while intended to promote national unity and reconciliation in the post-genocide period, may in some circumstances have the opposite effect.

The cultural politics of dead bodies in Rwanda

In recent years, dead body politics have experienced an explosion of interest among social scientists. Consensus suggests that examining micro-level understandings of human remains “as active materials encountered and viscerally engaged with and responded to” can teach us much about what sociologist Deborah Posel and anthropologist Pamila Gupta (2009, 372) have termed the “dualistic life of the corpse” and the historical, political, and cultural processes through which dead bodies are given meaning. This recent interest in the cultural politics of the dead is largely inspired by the work of anthropologist Katherine Verdery (1999, 22), whose study of post-socialist dead body politics explores Eastern European and former Soviet Union case studies in which political elites and civilians alike used famous corpses to negotiate “profound changes in their environments and their universes of meaning” to reshape public perceptions of their nations’ pasts. Verdery’s framework has become a common starting point from which to understand the local contexts underlying similar political and historical machinations elsewhere. She argues that dead bodies make effective political symbols amid social upheaval, noting that as material objects they “have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making past immediately present” (*Ibid.*, 27). This quality is enhanced by dead bodies’ ability to “evoke the awe, uncertainty, and fear associated with ‘cosmic’ concerns, such as the meaning of life and death” (*Ibid.*, 31). However, dead bodies also find political efficacy in their subjectiveness – “their ambiguity,

multivocality, or polysemy” and their ability to “lend themselves to analogy with other people’s résumés” (*Ibid.*, 28–29). This subjectiveness is at times obscured by the fact that a corpse, where associated with a specific name, “presents the illusion of having *only one* significance... though in fact they have no such single meaning” (*Ibid.*, 29). Indeed, subsequent scholarship – such as the work of anthropologist Joost Fontein (2010) – highlights how human remains can not only be imbued with political purpose by state agents, but be perceived by the living as provoking responses or make demands upon them. In doing so, these remains are understood as having multiple and, at times, competing agencies.

In applying this theoretical lens to post-genocide Rwanda – a highly politicised setting (see, e.g. Jessee 2011, 288; and Thomson 2010, 19) that is increasingly renowned for polarising foreigners and Rwandans alike – it is important to first consider the role of “amplified silences”. Burnet (2009, 100; and 2014, 111) introduced this term to encapsulate the “intense public silence surrounding RPF-perpetrated violence experienced by Rwandans of all ethnicities” in the 1990s, which can influence how, when, and why Rwandans speak about their experiences surrounding the genocide. In a setting wherein the government seeks, at times aggressively, to uphold a particular narrative of the genocide, there is a relative lack of public space within which Rwandans can discuss lived experiences of violence that deviate from the official account, and those discussions that do occur must be framed with particular political and legal sensitivity (Thomson 2010, 19). This is particularly true surrounding the period in which the main fieldwork underlying this article was conducted – between 2007 and 2012 – when I encountered consistent public dissatisfaction with the state-funded memorials.⁵

When I first travelled to Rwanda in 2007, the nation was on the verge of a dramatic shift in official discourse related to the genocide. This shift was documented by Rachel Ibreck (2012, 103), who recalled that

[i]n 2008 the discourse shifted and the emphasis on national unity diminished as parliament supported a legal amendment to reference to “Rwandan genocide”, renaming it the “Tutsi genocide” or “genocide against the Tutsis” in the constitution and in commemoration – 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.

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Through participant observation at commemorative sites and events and multiple life history and thematic interviews with over seventy Rwandans from a range of ethnic, regional, and political backgrounds, including survivors, ex-combatants, returnees, bystanders, and convicted *génocidaires*, among other parties to the conflict, I was able to document responses to this transformation.⁶ During subsequent trips to Rwanda in 2011 and 2012, I similarly documented what then appeared to be the diminishing public space within which Rwandans could critique this shift in national discourse (Jessee 2012). In my initial fieldwork in 2007 and 2008, I had encountered few problems approaching Rwandans to participate in conversations regarding the positive and negative outcomes of state-led efforts to promote nationalised commemoration and was often permitted to record interviews and take notes. However, following the 2010 elections and the attacks on civil liberties that accompanied it, such practices were no longer an option.⁷ Instead of lengthy on-the-record interviews and conversations with participants whom I visited on a regular basis, the tense political climate required a revised methodological approach comprised of informal conversations conducted in passing in public settings so as to attract minimal interest from the Rwandan authorities and better minimise harm for participants. People were also less likely to consent to having their voices recorded, even with the option of having their confidentiality maintained through use of a pseudonym and the withholding of personally identifying information, and in many cases I was only able to take anonymised notes based on our conversations. I eventually decided to put the project on hold until the political climate had relaxed enough to allow me to conduct safe and ethical research on transitional justice-related topics in Rwanda (see, e.g. Jessee 2013; Jessee 2017).

While Rwanda's genocide memorials and related commemorative practices have evolved in the post-genocide period, in 2008 most memorials exhibited traumatised human remains on open shelves or tables to serve as irrefutable evidence that the atrocities that overwhelmed Rwanda in 1994 were genocide. Memorial guides would often encourage visitors to examine them closely and even pick them up, as well as photograph the

remains, as part of their efforts to reinforce this message (Jessee 2017, 45–80). Political scientist Jessica Auchter (2018, 46) notes that the widespread practice of displaying traumatised remains emerged from:

the competing impetuses of providing a dignified resting place for nearly one millions sets of human remains, many of which were scattered and intermingled with one another, and providing visual evidence to guard against the spread of genocide ideology and inform the international visitor about Rwanda’s past.

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Over time, however, it became clear that the anonymous human remains that were being incorporated into the memorials as evidence of the “1994 genocide against the Tutsi” were important for revealing the political tensions that Rwandans were negotiating in their post-genocide lives. Throughout the nation’s known history, Rwandans have typically believed that the world of the living and the world of the dead are interconnected, with the ancestral spirits capable of impacting the lives of the living and vice versa.⁸ While specific beliefs surrounding the afterlife can vary according to a number of criteria – such as time period, region, and individual religious beliefs and political affiliations – generally speaking, Rwandans believe that it is important to treat the dead with great respect to ensure that their ancestors rest comfortably in the afterlife and have no reason to inflict suffering upon their descendants.⁹

Regarding modern Rwanda, psychologist Déogratias Bagilishya (2000, 345) has noted the great care that Rwandans typically bestow upon their dying loved ones and upon their remains once they have died. These practices ensure the deceased’s successful “rebirth” in the afterlife, at which point they become *umugurambere* (“ancestral protector”) to their living family. To assist this process, the preference among most Rwandans is to be with a dying loved one as they breathe their last breath (*Ibid.*, 344). They are given objects deemed necessary for their life among the ancestors, such as sorghum seeds and tools, and family and friends give farewell speeches to entice the deceased’s spirit, or *umuzimu* (*abazimu*, pl.), to visit them again in happiness and peace, and promise to receive the *umuzimu* with a warm welcome. After the person has died, the body is enclosed in a coffin or shroud and buried in an individual grave on ancestral land as part of a funeral

attended by extended family and friends. The grave is then marked: plants and trees are a more conventional choice, particularly among the rural poor, while grave caps made from cement or tile have become increasingly popular in recent years where surviving loved ones can afford them. Intimates of the deceased then spend eight days near the grave as part of an extended mourning period, while performing grieving and cleansing rituals aimed at preventing surviving loved ones from becoming “overwhelmed by strong aggressive urges” (Bagilishya 2000, 345). Long-term, family and friends work together to protect and maintain the gravesite to show ongoing respect for the deceased. Rwandans adhere to these general practices when burying loved ones who die during times of peace.

Where these rituals are impossible – as was often the case with people who were murdered or disappeared during the genocide – it typically causes their loved ones great psychological distress. Indeed, in discussing the murder of his son, Yves, by a fellow Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA, the military arm of the RPF) soldier in the genocide’s immediate aftermath, Bagilishya (2000, 338) recalled his paralysis as the “revelation of the death of my son transformed my inner world into an ocean of tears and sadness, buffeted by a storm of anger that laid the foundation for thoughts of bloody vengeance”. Bagilishya (2000, 339) continued:

I felt invaded by the profound sense of emptiness as I reminisced that since 1994, the bodies of many of the victims (including my son Yves) remain unburied and have not been laid to rest in the manner of their parents. Some of the skeletal remains of the victims of the 1994 tragedy have been put on display for visiting dignitaries, although the families of these victims would likely have wished otherwise.

The case of Karongi district

Bagilishya’s distress related to the displaying of the anonymous dead at Rwanda’s various genocide memorials was similar to the distress recounted by many of the Rwandans I interviewed in Karongi district when they spoke about their local memorials, though it could manifest in different ways. Karongi district – situated in northwestern Rwanda – experienced several key periods of political violence, in addition to the 1994 genocide. First, it was close to the front lines of the civil war that preceded the genocide, which was triggered when the RPA – composed primarily of Tutsi refugees who had fled

previous periods of ethnic violence – invaded from Uganda. As the civil war radicalised Hutu President Juvénal Habyarimana’s inner circle, a cohort of Hutu Power extremists implemented a media campaign against the RPF and their alleged Tutsi supporters, and began training Hutu youth to “defend” the nation against the RPF by joining youth militias.¹⁰ In Karongi district, historian Jean-Paul Kimonyo (2016, 271) notes that Habyarimana allowed pressures associated with overpopulation and a decrease in cultivable land to create a large percentage of landless and poorly educated youth who were vocal about the Habyarimana regime’s failures (*Ibid.*, 269). These tensions were exacerbated by persistent food shortages that prompted pro-Habyarimana extremists to begin massacring alleged *ibytso* (“accomplices of the enemy”, referring to alleged RPF spies among the civilian population).

Then, a second distinct phase of political violence overwhelmed Karongi district. Habyarimana was assassinated unexpectedly on 6 April 1994, at the height of international negotiations to implement a power-sharing agreement to end the civil war.¹¹ Many Tutsi civilians fled to local schools, churches, and related sites for refuge. Those who could, fled to Kibuye town to seek refuge in Gatwaro Regional Stadium and Kibuye Roman Catholic Church. From 11 April, district officials actively encouraged Tutsi to gather at these sites, while restricting food supplies and access to water in order to weaken them (Des Forges 1999, 211). Simultaneously, fearing betrayal by the authorities, thousands of Tutsi fled into the mountains near Bisesero, where they organised a rare episode of armed resistance against their attackers (Gasana 2019; see also Des Forges 1999, 216–220).

The genocide at Bisesero began on 13 April when the Hutu Power extremists, including local soldiers, prison guards, commune police, and army reservists, attacked the comparatively poorly armed Tutsi, who did their best to defend themselves (Kimonyo 2016, 334). The genocide in Kibuye town began on 16 April when Hutu Power extremists killed an estimated 344 unarmed civilians at the Catholic Church (Verwimp 2006, 20). The following day, the Hutu Power extremists and their supporters attacked Gatwaro Stadium, killing an estimated 3,477 Tutsi civilians (*Ibid.*). However, unlike other regions of Rwanda, which experienced extreme genocidal violence for two to four weeks until the RPF defeated the Hutu Power extremists and restored relative calm, the

genocidal violence in Karongi district continued for closer to three months. This was made possible by the presence of troops associated with the infamous French peacekeeping mission, *Opération Turquoise*. Launched on 23 June 1994, the mission established a “humanitarian protected zone” along Rwanda’s border with the DRC. However, historian Gérard Prunier (2017, 302) characterised the mission as a “public relations device with some political undertones”, as its critics claim France’s primary interest was to save the remnants of the pro-French and predominantly Francophone Habyarimana regime in its battle against the predominantly Anglophone RPF (see, e.g. Melvern 2000). *Opération Turquoise* stalled the RPA advance, and according to many survivors, bystanders, and *génocidaires* whom I interviewed from the region, in some instances actively aided the Hutu Power extremists in exterminating local Tutsi (France 24 2018; *Ibid.*, 303; and Jessee 2017, 67–70). Of additional significance, *Opération Turquoise* created a “safe corridor” that remnants of the Hutu Power interim government and its supporters, as well as hundreds of thousands of predominantly Hutu refugees who were attempting to escape the genocide and rumoured retaliation killings allegedly orchestrated by the RPF, used to escape to the DRC. In total, an estimated two million Rwandans fled Rwanda, with the DRC resettling the majority of these refugees in camps in the North and South Kivu Provinces along Rwanda’s western border, creating a new humanitarian crisis in the region (United Nations Office for the High Commissioner for Human Rights 1997; and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees 2000, 251).

The French presence likely delayed the RPA declared a military victory until 18 July 1994, at which point the Rwandan genocide officially ended and the RPF established its new transitional government (Block 1994). However, Rwanda continued to be plagued by political instability. In western Rwanda, this political instability represented a third distinct form of political violence that was felt particularly keenly due to its proximity to the humanitarian crisis in the eastern DRC. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2000, 251) noted that the RPF was “critical” of the DRC refugee camps’ close proximity to Rwanda, due to valid concerns that the Hutu Power extremists were using these camps as recruitment and training bases from which to launch future attacks on Rwanda. These concerns were a significant motivation for Rwanda’s decision to wage war in the DRC from 1996 to 1997 and 1998 to 2003 (Autesserre 2010; Stearns

2012; and Tamm 2016). During this period, Hutu Power extremists orchestrated multiple incursions that resulted in significant loss of Rwandan lives.¹³ By September 1997, the scale and severity of these atrocities prompted Amnesty International to condemn what they characterised as “the undeclared war in the northwest”, in reference to ongoing hostilities between Rwanda’s new national army, the Rwandan Defence Forces (RDF) – and Hutu Power extremist groups now based in the DRC (Amnesty International 1994; Amnesty International 1997, 3–4).

A fourth form of political violence that simultaneously destabilised Karongi district came from the Rwandan government’s efforts to eliminate *génocidaires* and other perceived political subversives who had remained in or returned to Rwanda as part of broader international efforts to repatriate Rwandan refugees who had fled to the DRC.¹⁴ This was largely due to the RPF’s decision to conduct “cordon and search” operations aimed at revealing “infiltrators” among the returning refugees whom the international community was actively encouraging to repatriate to Rwanda to reduce the humanitarian crisis in the DRC (Amnesty International 1997, 5–6; see also, United States Department of State 1996).¹⁵ As a predominantly Tutsi political party that sought to rule a Hutu majority, the RPF’s early efforts to sow fear among the general population and eliminate perceived political subversives were essential for bringing the surviving civilian population in line with the transitional government’s vision for the “New Rwanda”.

Legacies of the anonymous dead in Karongi district

Taken together, the violence associated with the 1994 genocide and the surrounding violence resulted in tens of thousands of deceased human remains being interred in mass graves and disposed of in local lakes and rivers throughout Karongi district. In the genocide’s aftermath, survivors – with official support after 2007 from the National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide (Republic of Rwanda 2007) – typically worked in small teams to locate places where the *génocidaires* disposed of their deceased victims’ bodies and exhume, clean, and rebury with respect any remains that they recover – an important form of belated “care-taking” for their loved ones (Viebach 2019, 278). Anthropologist Laura Major (2015, 165) describes the exhumation process as follows:

The task of the teams is laborious and difficult. Fragments of bodies, or items believed to be fragments of bodies, are painstakingly sifted from masses of substrate removed from the graves. Soil is washed away from exhumed substances, and the human remains are unravelled, with personal possessions, clothes, identity cards, bones, flesh and other soft tissues separated from one another. If a skeletal structure is removed intact, it is disarticulated. Separate files of collected bones and amasses soft flesh are created. These exhumations therefore have a very particular outcome, regardless of their status when unearthed. Human remains that could bear the traces of individual identity are almost always rendered anonymous.

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Working closely alongside “survivor-exhumers”, Major identified a tension between the government, for whom these anonymised remains functioned as “a constantly circulating tool of political power” and the survivor-exhumers whom treated the remains they were cleaning and reintering as their missing loved ones and accepted the interment of their remains in state-funded genocide memorials as “an acceptable compromise in the absence of more traditional funerary rites and burial customs” (*Ibid.*, 168). Indeed, Major provides valuable insight on this intimate process of “untangling” deceased genocide remains from the “specific detail and texture of the life in which these bones were once embedded” (*Ibid.*, 171). However, her focus on survivor-exhumers allows only passing insights into how Rwandans who are not actively involved in these exhumations responded to this process.

Though it is impossible to know the precise numbers of deceased victims of the genocide in Karongi district, the 1999 report, “*Dictionnaire Nominative des Victimes de Génocide*”, by Ibuka – a Rwandan survivors’ umbrella organisation – estimated that Hutu Power extremists murdered at least 60,000 Tutsi civilians during the genocide, accounting for approximately 83% of Karongi district’s pre-genocide Tutsi population (cited in Verwimp 2006, 10–11). It is reasonable to conclude that Hutu Power extremists also murdered an unknown number of Hutu and Twa political moderates and civilians who attempted to resist the genocidal violence or rescue Tutsi during the genocide. It is also reasonable to conclude that unknown numbers of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa civilians may have been killed by Hutu Power extremists who conducted incursions into Rwanda immediately following the genocide. Finally, despite the persistence of amplified silences

around this subject, hundreds, if not thousands, of Rwandans of different ethnic backgrounds were likely also killed by the RPA and RDF (see, e.g. Amnesty International 1997). The process of untangling the anonymous dead outlined by Major has occurred surrounding the creation of most, if not all, of Karongi district's memorial sites, as has a politicisation of these remains by the Rwandan government for whom the resulting human remains serve as irrefutable evidence of the "1994 genocide against the Tutsi". To this end, all but one of the 24 Rwandans I formally interviewed, and the countless community leaders, aid workers, and government officials from Karongi district with whom I had more casual conversations, considered their local memorial sites to be a source of symbolic violence that they attributed to the anonymisation and mass interment of victims of the genocide and related mass atrocities in the 1990s.

Two Rwandan women from Karongi district – Bernadine and Sandrine – stood out as particularly concerned about the negative legacies of the anonymous dead and the genocide memorials, more generally.¹⁶ They were exceptional in that they were much more direct about the negative spiritual legacies of the anonymous dead, a topic about which many Rwandan expressed discomfort due to its tendency to touch upon indigenous Rwandan spiritual beliefs that many felt were at odds with their Christian faith, even as they recognised its relevance for their present-day lives.¹⁷ When I met Bernardine, she was a support worker at a resource centre for genocide survivors. She agreed to be interviewed because she felt her personal experiences surrounding the genocide and her professional expertise left her particularly well-placed to speak to the various harms that continued to negatively impact survivors' lives in the post-genocide period. She began by speaking about the months immediately following the genocide, recalling:

In those days, I was not living in the world. I became very afraid. I went with some survivors who believed they knew where my family had been killed and buried. We found some remains. I saw a skull and felt I knew exactly who it belonged to. But later, it created a lot of sadness in my heart. I can never know for sure if those remains belonged to my family.¹⁸

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As a result of these experiences, Bernardine found it difficult to return to her family's ancestral home. The remains she had tentatively identified with the support of survivors

from her community were reinterred in the mass graves at her local genocide memorial. While she appreciated this memorial and had come to believe that “all the remains belonged to [her] dead family”, she subsequently found it impossible to visit the site. She claimed that she already knew that “many innocent people had died for nothing”, and did not need a memorial to help her remember this. Furthermore, the lack of definitive identifications of her murdered family members’ remains, followed by the anonymous remains’ reburial at the memorial, continued to weigh heavily on her. Because Bernardine did not know for sure that her missing loved ones were buried at the memorial, she felt she could not pay her respects to them there. In the years since, Bernardine admitted that she was often visited by the spirits of her missing family members. These encounters left her feeling unstable, depressed, and “unable to live life like a regular human being”.

Sandrine, a cloth merchant, had similar negative impressions of her local memorial. Her entire extended family had been murdered during the genocide, and as the sole survivor, she believed that she would never be able to recover psychologically from the harms of the genocide. However, the ongoing emotional and spiritual distress that she associated with having been unable to locate, identify, and bury with respect the remains of her murdered family members was of equal importance in her mind. Sandrine, like Bernardine, had attempted to identify murdered family members after the genocide, though she could not bring herself to participate in local survivors’ efforts to exhume and rebury the anonymous remains at the local memorial, even when they found remains that local génocidaires’ claimed belonged to her relatives. When I asked her how she felt about the memorial where these remains were reinterred, she responded “I have not buried any of my people. Do you think I can consider them buried among the ones who were exhumed? ... I cannot assume myself that they are buried”. As a result, Sandrine admitted that she was haunted by the knowledge that her family members’ spirits were not resting comfortably in the afterlife. While she did not discuss the specific ways that they were negatively impacting her life, toward the end of our interview she stated, “I have wealth, but I can never be okay at all. I can only pretend to live. The spirits of my family haunt me”. Hauntings, as experienced by Bernardine and Sandrine, among other Rwandans, thus become an opportunity through which people could express their

resistance to official forms of commemoration, as well as the associated official history – a phenomenon that Auchter (2014, 17; 46–88), drawing upon the work of philosopher Jacques Derrida, refers to as “hauntology”.

The narratives that Bernardine and Sandrine shared struck me as particularly powerful and important, as both women were arguably clear examples of the exceptional resilience that many survivors have demonstrated since the genocide. Both women were well-established in their chosen careers and had become respected figures in their communities. Likewise, they had married and had multiple children, and their work allowed their families to enjoy a high standard of living relative to their neighbours. In the images they projected to their communities, they seemed to have not only recovered physically and psychologically from the genocide, but had reconciled with those who had harmed them and their loved ones. Yet in interviews, both women stressed the impossibility of recovering from the genocide, in part due to their personal experiences of the atrocities, but more so because of their inability to positively identify and rebury according to their families’ traditions their missing and murdered loved ones.¹⁹ As a result, Bernardine and Sandrine refused to attend the annual *Kwibuka* (to remember) ceremonies in their communities or visit their local memorials. To do so, they maintained, would cause them great emotional and spiritual distress by reminding them of their failure to respectfully bury their loved ones and bringing them into contact with spiritually dangerous remains.

Interviews with Aloys, who had been a young man at the time of the genocide, suggested that for some survivors, the spiritual violence they associated with the genocide memorials came not from handling human remains, though this could be traumatising for some, but from the lack of identification prior to interment at the genocide memorials. Aloys stressed the importance of locating and reburying with respect the remains of murdered loved ones “in order to give them back their dignity and the value they deserve”. In the absence of having been able to identify and rebury with respect members of his extended family who died during the genocide, he noted that:

I am among those who have that kind of problem. If you didn’t bury your person, you can’t be sure that he or she is buried. You live with it in your

mind and it can't be healed as long as the problem is not resolved. That problem is resolved only when you bury your person with dignity.

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For Aloys, the consequences of being unable to know for sure whether his missing and murdered loved ones had been buried with respect included hauntings, during which he saw “the image of the dead person... clearly”. He found visiting his local memorial could exacerbate these hauntings because “we don't have memorial sites that reflect the reality of the genocide in any way”. However, Aloys was not overtly opposed to the idea of memorial sites: he argued against “keeping history for yourself” on the grounds that doing so meant that “people might not know that the genocide happened”. Instead he argued that this negative effect could be mitigated by allowing survivors to identify and name the murdered loved ones they exhumed, and inter their remains in memorials that were “very well built and reflected the reality of the genocide”.

Consolée had a similar perspective on the memorials. She supported exhumations and the interment of the deceased victims of the genocide at the memorials “as physical evidence of the genocide” so that the genocide would “be remembered by the younger generations of Rwandans and also by the entire world”. But she too felt that the displays and interment of anonymous human remains were a source of spiritual violence for the local community. She claimed to know many people who believed they were haunted by the angry spirits of family members who had been murdered during the genocide, which she summarised as follows:

The harms come when a survivor thinks that maybe his or her people have been eaten by wild dogs or have been buried in a disrespectful way... It happens to some people: you may hear someone speaking to her or her relative who died. Most of the cases are traumatised people. And also there are some people who dream while they are awake. When you talk to them, they say they were talking to their dead relatives. So it happens to some people... Yes, I remember when I was at boarding school. We used to have cases where students used to shout, saying that they had seen their father or mother or other family members [who had died during the genocide].

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Like Aloys, Consolée believed that if the memorials could be adapted to allow for individual identifications and more respectful reburials, this would mitigate the harm that survivors associated with the memorials. She noted, “Rwanda is a Christian country, and we are waiting for resurrection. We are waiting for Jesus to resurrect them. So we do not want our people to feel disappointed on resurrection day”.

Deeper concerns regarding the memorials emerged from the countless unrecorded casual conversations and related ethnographic encounters that I have had with Rwandans from different ethnic backgrounds in Karongi district since 2007. Given people’s fears regarding the potential for government backlash if they spoke negatively about the genocide memorials, when I turned off the recorder, I typically found people to be more forthcoming. A central theme within these conversations related to the possible negative impact that the displays of anonymous human remains could have on the lives of the people who came in contact with them. While over the years, most of these displays have been protected behind clear plastic or glass, in 2011 and 2012 it was still common for bones to be stacked on open shelves at the genocide memorials in Karongi district, and elsewhere in Rwanda, so visitors could pick them up and examine them as evidence of the genocide. In speaking with Rwandans about the annual Kwibuka ceremonies at their local memorials, several people admitted that they feared going to the memorials because they worried about the consequences of coming in contact with the remains of people whose blood had been shed in violence. I was frequently told that the spirits of people who had died violent deaths were particularly dangerous, because these angry spirits would lash out at anyone with whom they came in contact – including their own surviving family members – if they felt their remains had not been treated with respect. This belief seemed particularly prevalent among convicted génocidaires I interviewed from around Rwanda, who frequently referenced the belief that the blood of their victims was capable of “chasing them”. Three convicted génocidaires whom I interviewed in the prisons where they were serving sentences for genocide-related crimes spoke at length about the nightmares, unpredictable mood swings, and other psychological symptoms they endured, which they attributed to having come in direct contact with the blood of their victims (Jessee 2017, 168–169).

For this reason, I encountered many Rwandans who avoided going to their local memorials. As massacre sites where the victims' remains were displayed in violation of Rwandan burial customs in times of peace, they perceived these sites as spiritually dangerous. While I found such concerns to be widespread across Rwanda, they seem particularly common among the people who lived around Bisesero. There, I met several people who claimed to have seen or experienced first-hand the negative effects of living alongside the angry spirits of people who died in the resistance. In a rare instance where someone would speak on-the-record about such matters, Boniface, a Hutu man from Bisesero, recalled that many people were afraid to go to Muyira and Bisesero because "maybe the ghosts of dead people [referring to the victims of the genocide and related mass atrocities] would attack us". However, he also acknowledged that people sometimes feared these places because "after the genocide, we thought there were some killers [referring to Hutu Power extremists] who were still killing people inside the forest, and also survivors [referring to RPA combatants and genocide survivors] who wanted revenge against us". In speaking with other people from the community, however, concerns regarding angry spirits seemed more prominent than the risk of violence from Hutu Power extremists or vengeful survivors, perhaps because attacks by the latter had dissipated over the years. Conversely, the threat from angry spirits seemed ongoing, inflicting a range of mental and physical illnesses on those community members who had tried to farm in places where the victims' bodies had been left, as well as causing infertility among the cattle and goats they attempted to raise. It is important to note that some people had continued farming in the area due to necessity. However, it seemed they had negotiated a fragile peace with the angry spirits, whom they were quick to blame for any undue suffering that the community experienced.

However, these casual conversations revealed an important "amplified silence": namely, the prospect that due to the absence of definitive identifications of the anonymous human remains interred at the sites, genocide victims had likely been interred alongside the victims of surrounding mass atrocities in the region (see also Guichaoua 2020, 130–136; Straus 2019). Additionally, because of the manner in which Tutsi victimhood is privileged at the memorials, this practice simultaneously reinforces a hierarchy of victims that can foster resentment along ethnic and political lines – a concern referenced in

Ingabire's speech and by Burnet's criticism regarding the "shibboleth of genocide" that persists in Rwanda. Similar concerns were shared with me by Rwandans from a range of ethnic and political backgrounds in unrecorded conversations. Several survivors expressed overt horror at the idea their missing and murdered loved ones might be interred at the memorials alongside the same people who were responsible for their murder, and cited concerns that this might prevent the genocide's "real victims" from ever resting peacefully in the afterlife. In a couple of instances, survivors expressed anger at this practice, which they believed resulted from the RPF's efforts to provide evidence of the one million Tutsi whom official sources claim died during the genocide while obscuring evidence of the RPA atrocities that had occurred during and after the genocide. Interestingly, I found several bystanders and convicted génocidaires of Hutu heritage or mixed ethnicity who shared this belief, but with the added anguish and resentment that emerged from the realisation that their loved ones who died in the broader political violence that occurred in region in the 1990s would never receive the same recognition afforded to Tutsi victims of the genocide. Such sentiments were particularly prevalent among those Rwandans whose missing and murdered loved ones had not, to their knowledge, participated in the genocide, but who were nonetheless killed by the RPA as alleged génocidaires or political subversives. Unfortunately for Ingabire (2010), when she referenced the "Hutus who died during the genocide", she touched upon a powerful "amplified silence" that the Rwandan government regarded as overtly provocative and dangerous.

However, amid these critical reactions to the genocide memorials in Karongi district, I did encounter one Rwandan man who was overwhelmingly and, I believe, genuinely positive about the local genocide memorials, even with their displays of anonymous human remains. Fabrice was a child survivor of the massacre at Kibuye Roman Catholic Church and had witnessed the deaths of his family members during the attack. He had survived by hiding among their bodies, and fleeing once the killers returned home for the night. He subsequently decided to participate in local survivors' efforts to bury the people who had been killed at this site:

What we did is just to collect all the human remains, clean them, and bring them to the memorials. While collecting the bones, we didn't

identify who those people were. Everybody treated the bones as though they belonged to his or her family. It was participatory work, where even those who didn't know where their people were buried contributed.

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Fabrice was unique among the survivors I interviewed in Karongi district because he was able to positively identify the murdered members of his family, as their bodies – though badly decomposed – were still lying where he had last seen them. Other survivors helped him move their bodies to a nearby mass grave, where they were buried with a small service. The knowledge that his murdered loved ones had been buried with respect gave Fabrice enormous comfort in the post-genocide period, for while he still mourned their loss, he knew that their spirits were resting peacefully in the afterlife. He concluded that this experience was “really helpful spiritually and morally” and felt the local memorial was a good place for him to remember them, as they were “safe and well cared for”. As such, Fabrice represented a rare instance where someone’s murdered loved ones associated with the genocide had transitioned to safely dead, largely due to the fact that he had been able to positively identify their remains and bury them with respect.

Conclusion

Given the complexities of the people’s experiences of the genocide and related mass atrocities in Karongi district, it is unsurprising that some Rwandans criticise the local genocide memorials, and particularly the displays and interment of the anonymous dead, as a source of spiritual violence in the everyday lives of surrounding communities. The “cultural politics of the dead” in Karongi district – the duration and severity of the genocide, combined with the surrounding violence in the region during the 1990s – mean that many residents have a lingering desire to positively identify their missing and murdered loved ones, wherever possible, and rebury their dead in a manner with respect to avoid angering their spirits. To this end, exhumations by survivors and the care that is shown human remains in the process of cleaning and disarticulating them, while psychologically laborious work, is rarely a point of controversy for Rwandans, nor does it seem to result in hauntings. Conversely, the people with whom I spoke tended to experience spiritual violence as directly resulting from the anonymisation of most human

remains during various periods of political violence, which was then increasingly used to promote – at times aggressively due to the nation’s genocide ideology laws – an official narrative of the “1994 genocide against the Tutsi”, while silencing discussions of the broader political violence that the people of Karongi endured in the 1990s. As a result, it is not unusual for Rwandans from different backgrounds to the conflict to quietly shun these sites.

Perhaps in response to these trends, the Rwandan government has made some effort in recent years, in conversation with survivors’ organisations and local communities, to renovate and improve many of the genocide memorials in Rwanda, including many in Karongi district. One way that officials are attempting to placate criticisms of the memorials is by putting the displays of anonymous human remains behind clear plastic or glass, which has the additional benefit of helping to preserve them. Additionally, several of the larger memorials now have cement-covered mass graves or crypts full of coffins where people can remember their missing and murdered loved ones without having to see bones or other potentially distressing evidence associated with the genocide. These sites remain dedicated, however, to disseminating the official history of the “1994 genocide against the Tutsi” and do not yet take into account the broader political violence that occurred surrounding the genocide or the prospect that Hutu and Twa victims have been included among the memorials’ anonymous dead. The “dead ones” whom Ingabire referenced in her 2010 speech at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Centre are still not acknowledged in public commemorations. For these reasons, I have found that for many Rwandans, the “amplified silence” and associated tensions around deceased Hutu and Twa victims of the genocide and other forms of political violence in the 1990s persist in the present.

Within and beyond Rwanda, however, this chapter raises provocative questions about the potential for genuine social repair – a key intended outcome of transitional justice – to be realised when commemorative efforts do not pay adequate attention to people’s beliefs regarding the anonymous dead and the potential role of spirits in supporting or impeding such efforts (see, e.g. Baines 2010). The risks are likely particularly high in contexts where post-genocide commemorative efforts are driven by an authoritarian regime whose own atrocities in the region have gone largely uninvestigated and unpunished, and where

people who perpetrated violence against one another are subsequently required to live together as “intimate enemies” (Theidon 2006; see also Sodaro 2018). In the Rwandan context, there is great need to acknowledge the diverse meanings and experiences that people associate with the anonymous dead and the memorials more broadly, as they reveal the complexity of people’s experiences surrounding the genocide and related mass atrocities, and the challenges that continue to plague the Rwandan government as it seeks to reconcile the nation. Going forward, the government will likely need to engage in an admittedly messy and complicated reckoning with the particular dead body politics at play in Karongi district, and across Rwanda more broadly, if its efforts to ensure Rwanda’s long-term political stability are to be successful.

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¹ The number of deceased victims of the genocide is controversial, with conservative estimates – including the one cited by historian Alison Des Forges (1999, 15–16), which is adhered to in this instance – concluding that between 500,000 and 800,000 Rwandans, including Hutu and Twa civilians, died. Conversely, the Rwandan government and its supporters maintain that over one million Rwandan Tutsi were murdered during this period (see, e.g. National Commission for the Fight Against Genocide 2013). Most

recently, a *Journal of Genocide Research* forum concluded that the lower estimate provided by Des Forges is likely more accurate than the higher estimate provided by the Rwandan government and its supporters (Meierhenrich 2020, 81).

² Genocide ideology was then defined by Law No. 18/2008 as “an aggregate of thoughts characterised by conduct, speeches, documents and other acts aiming at exterminating or inciting others to exterminate people basing (sic) on ethnic group, origin, nationality, region, colour, physical appearance, sex, language, religion or political opinion, committed in normal periods or during war”. In the run-up to the 2010 elections, legitimate political dissent was conflated with “genocide ideology”, compromising the freedom of expression and association of opposition politicians, human rights defenders and journalists critical of the government” (Amnesty International 2010, 7; see also United States Department of State 2014).

³ Former Prosecutor General Gerald Gahima (2013) has written a comprehensive overview of Rwanda’s approach to transitional justice. These transitional justice initiatives, while well-intentioned, have generated controversy in terms of their effectiveness. In the post-genocide period, several studies have remarked on the ongoing salience of ethnicity as one of several markers according to which Rwandans still self-identify in private (e.g. Eltringham 2004; Eramian 2014; Guglielmo 2015, 147; and Wielenga 2014), as well as the tendency for the RPF’s national unity and reconciliation policies and related transitional justice initiatives to foment tensions among Rwandans along ethnic, political, regional, and economic lines (see, e.g. Ingelaere 2016; Jessee 2017; Longman 2017; Thomson 2013). In contrast, Phil Clark (2014, 304) argues that *gacaca* is allowing Rwandans to achieve what he terms “negotiated reconciliation” though long-term formal and informal negotiation between antagonistic parties.

⁴ Since 2007, the Rwandan government has engaged in a campaign to promote international recognition of the “1994 genocide against the Tutsi”. This campaign has met with significant success: most notably, the Canadian and Belgian governments have criminalised denial of the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi as a form of genocide denial. It has also raised significant criticisms, however: most notably, for silencing people’s experiences of the broader human rights violations that surrounded the genocide in the 1990s, including those that were perpetrated by the current government against Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa civilians, and spread into the surrounding Great Lakes region of Africa (see, e.g. Straus 2019). In my own research since 2007, I have found many Rwandans reluctant to use this label outside official discourse due to its silencing potential, though there seems to be growing support among Rwandan genocide survivors internationally in recent years (Jessee 2017, 51–52).

⁵ In addition to this fieldwork that focused explicitly on the politics of history and commemoration in post-genocide Rwanda, I have continued to conduct research in Rwanda on topics related to the nation’s history, more broadly, during which I have continued to visit selected state-funded genocide memorials. While I am not actively conducting research on these sites at present, I have kept careful fieldnotes on their condition and the numerous casual conversations I have had with memorial staff and others to maintain an up-to-date understanding of how people navigate these sites over time, and document changes in and improvements to these memorials.

⁶ The term “*génocidaires*” is distinctly Kinyarwandan and applies to people who committed crimes during the genocide. However, in popular usage it is often treated as

synonymous with not only convicted perpetrators of the genocide but the internally displaced and refugee Hutu civilians who had fled the RPF advance and settled in refugee camps, as well as the Hutu majority in Rwanda, more broadly.

⁷ This chapter and my broader work on Rwanda would not have been possible without the incredible support of Rwandan research assistants who provided simultaneous translation of conversations and interviews from Kinyarwanda to English, where necessary, and similarly helped me produce verbatim transcripts in English of recorded interviews and related data. The research assistants associated with my genocide-related fieldwork in Rwanda have chosen to remain anonymous in the outcomes I produce associated with these research projects.

⁸ One of the earliest written accounts of funerary rites in Rwanda was written by anthropologist Peter Schumacher (1958) and speaks of a range of practices – mostly involving some form of burial – depending on the location, status, and manner of death. These rites all involved close family members and other intimates who performed rituals to help the deceased loved one exist peacefully in the afterlife, and ensure the deceased had no reason to haunt the living. More recently, psychologist Déogratias Bagilishya (2000) has noted the great care that Rwandans typically bestow upon their dying loved ones and upon their remains once they have died. These practices ensure the deceased’s successful “rebirth” in the afterlife, at which point they become *umugurambere* (“ancestral protector”) to their living family. Where these rituals are impossible – as was often the case with people who were murdered or disappeared during the genocide – it causes their loved ones great distress.

⁹ As noted by Anna-Maria Brandstetter (2010, 11), prior to spread of Christianity in Rwanda, people did not adhere to a “cult of the corpse” in which burials, cemeteries, and other forms of demonstrating respect for the dead were prioritised. Conversely, during this period Rwandans preferred to remember their dead through storytelling and ancestor worship more so than specific sites. While these pre-colonial practices persist in modern Rwanda, most Rwandans now believe that the funerary rites introduced by various missionary communities since the late 1800s are the most appropriate way to demonstrate respect for the dead and minimise the chances that the deceased will decide to haunt the living.

¹⁰ Sociologist André Guichaoua (2015) – also a former expert witness on the Rwandan genocide for the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) – has produced a thorough overview of events during this period based on ICTR documents and testimonies.

¹¹ There is ongoing controversy over who was responsible for Habyarimana’s assassination. In 2010, the Rwandan government released the Mutsinzi Report (Republic of Rwanda 2010), which argues that Habyarimana’s military was responsible for his assassination. These findings were loosely confirmed by the preliminary Trévidic report (Trévidic and Poux 2012), though critics have noted that these reports failed to take into consideration the testimonies of former RPA combatants who claim Kagame was responsible for orchestrating Habyarimana’s assassination (see, e.g. Schofield 2012). Conversely, Guichaoua (2015, 144–145) has concluded based on evidence collected and verified by ICTR prosecutors that the RPF was most likely responsible, though the RPF continues to deny this allegation.

¹³ The most infamous of these incursions occurred on 18 March 1997, when Hutu Power militia from the DRC attacked Nyange Secondary Boarding School. The militia attempted to separate the children according to their ethnicity so that they could kill the Tutsi children; one of the students, a girl named Chantal, refused saying “All of us are Rwandans here”. The children refused to separate and so the militia opened fire, killing eight students and injuring 39 others (Gervais, Ubalijoro, and Nyirabega 2009, 20). Their sacrifice is commemorated in Rwanda annually via National Heroes’ Day on 1 February (National Commission for Children 2018).

¹⁴ See, for example, Des Forges’ summary of Robert Gersony’s 1994 report to the UNHCR, in which he estimated that the RPA had engaged in “clearly systematic murders and persecution of the Hutu population in certain parts of the country”, resulting in an estimated 25,000 to 45,000 deaths between April and August 1994 (Des Forges 1999, 554). Due to backlash from the Rwandan government, the Gersony report has never been released to the public. However, a summary of the report was leaked (see, e.g. UNHCR 1994).

¹⁵ In 2010, the UNHCHR Mapping Report (2010, 11–15) on the atrocities that had overwhelmed the DRC from 1993 to 2003 found that the RPF’s efforts to exterminate Hutu and other refugees likely constituted war crimes and crimes against humanity, and perhaps even genocide if key perpetrators of these attacks could be found to have acted with the requisite genocidal intent, though they noted the need for further investigation to confirm their findings.

¹⁶ As requested by the Rwandans I interviewed during this fieldwork, all names I use in reference to interviewees in this chapter are pseudonyms.

¹⁷ As a result of Rwanda’s colonisation by the Germans (1895–1916) and Belgians (1916–1962), Rwanda has become a predominantly Roman Catholic country, with other Christian denominations gaining popularity in the aftermath of the 1994 genocide due to the complicity of members of Rwanda’s Roman Catholic Church in the atrocities (Carney 2014; and Longman 2010).

¹⁸ I have previously written about some of the Rwandan perspectives I cite in this section in a discussion paper for the Canadian Centre for International Governance Innovation’s Africa Initiative (Jessee 2012).

¹⁹ Such sentiments continue to be widespread among survivors of the genocide and other forms of political violence in Rwanda’s recent history (see, e.g. Burnet 2014), and indeed are a significant part of the “social death” that often negatively impacts people’s sense of social well-being in the aftermath of genocides in various contexts internationally (Card 2005; for more on social death, see Patterson 2018).