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# Memory and Victimhood in Post-Genocide Rwanda

## Legal, Political, and Social Realities

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Genocide survivors are bound together through a blood pact when the blood of genocide victims was mixed in the waters of the Nyabarongo River. But it is an accidental blood pact, a terrifying twist on the traditional blood pacts in Rwandan culture, pacts that indicated lasting friendship and the strongest of social ties. This pact binds genocide survivors together for the rest of history.

Jean Paul,<sup>1</sup> Bugesera, Rwanda (2018)

### 7.1 Introduction

Widespread and systematic violence targeting minority groups is not a new historical phenomena. However, with the rise of global interconnectedness throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, instances of war crimes, crimes against humanity, mass atrocities, and genocide have become increasingly visible in people's daily lives. Narratives portrayed in news and television reporting bring once distant images of the graphic realities of war and conflict into people's living rooms, shifting social awareness that seemingly distant conflicts had the potential to impact people's lives and futures. Social media documentation and advocacy campaigns have further revolutionized global citizen responses to atrocity situations. These changes raise new challenges regarding the ways global publics respond to post-atrocity situations, at times by engaging, and sometimes by retreating to protect the comfortable status quo. Furthermore, the plethora of narratives and perspectives promoted in real time on social media can be counterproductive to understanding

1 Name changed as interviews provide anonymity, as per IRB regulations.

important nuances in a post-atrocity setting, nuances that are essential to designing and promoting efforts for sustainable peace.

Post-genocide Rwanda is characterized by contradictions and competing “truths” about the genocide that coexist at the same time and place. These multiple truths are not always harmonious, even though they coexist and can be true for different people. These truths also shape group narratives (Ingelaere 2016). After mass atrocities and genocide, people have different needs and goals. National narratives will always be subject to contestation and desire for change. As such, national justice processes can never be wholly satisfying enterprises.

This chapter explores the dual reality that genocide memorialization in Rwanda is both a nation-building project and a way in which citizens, especially genocide survivors, seek justice based on their lived experiences of genocide. In particular, the ways in which states and societies frame a conflict affect who is defined as a victim. Political agendas, power dynamics, and past harms suffered also influence how victimhood is defined, and by whom. Definitions of victimhood affect the ways in which people express grief, mourn past losses, seek justice, and access limited resources. This chapter shows how definitions of victimhood at times foster collective narratives of reconciliation, and at other times exclude the experiences of some Rwandans whose victim identity does not fall within official recognized definitions. Interviews with Rwandans who lived through the genocide in 1994 further capture narrative complexity around diverse notions of victim identity.

Genocide memory is essential to Rwandan national identity. As such, the current Rwandan government has attempted to create national consciousness through the practice of genocide commemoration. However, when some individuals feel this national memory project does not represent or speak to them and their experiences, the problems of long-term social division might increase.

As Rwandan society grows and reflects on the past, including what went awry, having harmony regarding interests and expectations between the government and the Rwandan people will benefit the future of the country. Rwandans interviewed for this research identified serious consequences for not meeting essential needs for healing, meaning, justice, or peace after the genocide. Some fear further mistrust, social division, and a potential of future violence. In a post-genocidal state like Rwanda, the potential of new social divisions and violence reinforces negative cycles of poverty, human rights violations, exploitation, corruption, and militia recruitment. This chapter documents aspects of the dual

reality of genocide commemoration practices in Rwanda as engendering national unity and attempting to reflect and remember diverse victim experiences. One Rwandan interviewed captured an essential component of reconciling the above situation. He said, “Rwandans were in a terrible place in 1994. Sure, we have problems today. But no one wants to go back.”<sup>2</sup>

## 7.2 Meaning and Justice after Genocide

On April 7, 1994, genocide unfolded in nearly every prefecture and village in Rwanda. Some 800,000–1,000,000 civilians were massacred,<sup>3</sup> both Rwandans of Tutsi identity, and Hutu citizens who opposed extremist genocidal ideology and actions (Prunier 1995). Capitalizing on fear, chaos, and crisis, narratives were used as a tool to construct enemies and facilitate genocidal violence (Des Forges 1999).

July 1994 marked a significant transition in Rwanda. The country experienced two major societal upheavals during four short years, the genocide that targeted Tutsi people (April–July 1994), and a four-year civil war between the Rwandan Patriotic Front and Habyarimana government, led by the Mouvement Républicain National pour la Démocratie et le Développement (MRNDD) (October 1990–July 1994). To address crimes “so serious that [a] normal justice system [cannot] provide an adequate response,” (International Center for Transitional Justice n.d.), Rwanda engaged in unprecedented and ambitious state-building and transitional justice projects.<sup>4</sup> International justice scholars and practitioners commonly acknowledge that no perfect system exists to facilitate meaning and justice after genocide. Nothing can bring back the dead, or the futures they might have had. As restoring each individual victim to their pre-conflict status is clearly impossible, reparations can only be a good enough response to mass atrocities and genocide (De Greiff 2008; Hamber et al. 2010; Theidon 2009).

2 Key Informant Interview 002. Audio Recording. Kigali. December 5, 2018.

3 Different sources cite genocide in 1994 in the range of 500,000 to more than 1,000,000. For further discussion on genocide deaths, see: Guichaoua (2020); McDoom (2020); Meierhenrich (2020); Outreach Programme on the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda and the United Nations (2014), and Verpoorten (2005).

4 Examples include the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), national court proceedings, *Gacaca* courts, public apologies, mass arrests and individual prosecution, establishing and building memorial sites, reburials of victims in memorial sites, establishing official days of genocide commemoration, among others.

Facilitating meaning is one way in which victims move forward after atrocity crimes and genocide. Collectively, victim groups organize around shared histories of violence when seeking material and symbolic redress, which may include public apologies, financial assistance, and recognition. Individuals also create meaning, which they identify as essential aspects of restoring trust in neighbors and the new state to provide stability, safety, and resources necessary for a positive future (Park and Ai 2006).

Through in-depth interviews conducted with 106 Rwandan genocide survivors, former perpetrators, ordinary citizens, and key informants, this chapter explores the role of narratives in shaping victim identities in post-genocide Rwanda. When analyzing the interview data, I considered salient themes that expressed a collective of experiences. The case of Rwanda presents a particularly complicated and dynamic situation of victim identity and justice. Understanding the ways in which narratives influence the construction of victim identity in Rwanda helps practitioners and scholars support meaningful symbolic justice practices in post-atrocity contexts. Additionally, the defined boundaries of victimhood hinders reconciliation. In Rwanda, as in other post-atrocity contexts, when individuals feel disconnected, marginalized, or excluded from the national collective and accepted definition of victimhood with which it is accompanied, they dismiss or avoid it.

One central question frames this chapter: What is the role of narratives in the post-genocide construction of victim identity? Narratives are the stories people tell themselves about their group. Narratives shape group identity, by identifying the things that “we” believe, “we” value, “we” do or do not do. Similarly, common experiences and grievances are also diffused through a group via narrative recalling of the past (Barkan 2000; Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Mutua 2001). Post-atrocity narratives also include ideas of the other that are not sanctioned by the state. Narratives promoted after the genocide in Rwanda continuously shape various understandings of victimhood. For example, certain narratives are shared among survivor families, who were targeted because of their Tutsi identity, and grievance and grief around the genocidal violence shapes their group identity.

Similarly, state entities use narratives to shape accepted versions of history. Since 1994, the Rwandan state, led by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), has embraced the narrative of the RPF as pure heroes who stopped the genocide. In this rendition of the liberation story, RPA soldiers were benevolent saviors (Mutua 2001), and any past or present

crimes they might have committed fall outside of what can be questioned by international law and external actors. As such, this narrative solidifies official ideas of victimhood as linked to innocent Rwandans who were targeted during the genocide because of their Tutsi group identity.

These different uses of narrative are shared publicly, like during national genocide commemoration ceremonies, and privately, among the late-night whispers of family members within the gated confines of their personal *urupango* (Kinyarwanda term for a private home compound). Just as narratives shaped the violence that took place during the genocide, narratives also serve to shape significant issues in post-atrocity and post-genocide contexts.

### 7.3 Defining Victim Identity: Literature

In Rwanda, public genocide commemoration ceremonies, called *Kwibuka*, take place between April 7–13 every year, during the officially mandated period of genocide commemoration (Lakin 2016; Wolfe 2013). At the national level, genocide commemoration is organized in the capital of Kigali. Sector level community commemorations also take place throughout Rwanda, in addition to most Rwandan diaspora communities. Local and personal *Kwibuka* ceremonies continue after April 13, especially among communities of genocide survivors. Some public ceremonies commemorate massacres that took place in certain locations in Rwanda after April 13. Private ceremonies often mark specific days when family members were killed.

Interview respondents overwhelmingly cited the importance of victim identity when creating meaning through genocide remembrance. Victimhood has a significant impact on most Rwandans' daily lives. Recognition as a "victim" is one salient factor that determines eligibility for social and financial assistance, psychological support, and medical care. Additionally, victimhood based on losses suffered because of the genocide impacts social and family networks to provide financial safety nets, family care for elderly and sick survivors, and opportunities for recommendations and professional networks when job seeking. These factors influence significant life considerations in post-genocide Rwanda. As such, recognizing who is considered a victim, when, and of which specific crimes (genocide, war crimes, etc.) has become essential to healing and meaning-making after the genocide. To best understand the nuances and texture of the memorialization landscape in the Rwandan context, this chapter focuses on complexities and

contradictions expressed by interview respondents around notions of victim identity, as many individuals consider themselves victims of multiple harms.

Thomson (2013) considers a “continuum of violence” in Rwanda, as the decade of 1990–2000 was one of turbulence, violence, and sorrow for most Rwandans. According to Thomson, “One’s existence, both during the genocide and now, is shaped by broader historical patterns that result in one’s continued sociopolitical marginality, or power” (Thomson, 2013: 78). These factors continue to influence people’s agency and ability to negotiate victim identity after the genocide (Burnet 2012; Thomson 2013).

Legal, political, and social realities externally shape and define who is recognized as a victim in post-genocide Rwanda. Additionally, many individuals interviewed for this research identified as a victim in ways that did not match external or state promoted definitions of victim. Interview respondents stressed the importance of meeting needs for validation, meaning, justice, and “effective truth” (Lederach 1995), whether through national processes or elsewhere. Some interviewees from a range of backgrounds included in this research (genocide survivors, former prisoners for crimes of genocide, ordinary citizens) expressed concern that if a range of individuals experiences are not validated, discussed, and shared, Rwandan society risks consequences, including heightened social mistrust and the potential of future violence.

Additionally, victim groups often need recognition to access limited resources (Staub 1989). In Rwanda, these include government and NGO funds for education, rebuilding houses, and medical care.

Victimhood in post-genocide Rwanda is complex, especially for individuals whose grievances or experiences of loss are not officially recognized. In this way, national genocide memory is less inclusive and meaningful when it only considers one main form of victimhood, which is tied to Tutsi group membership. Reframing victim identity to be multifaceted and pluralized provides a more accurate picture of victim identity and how it is used and understood in post-genocide societies, by both outsiders and by the victims themselves.

Existing literature on victimhood is both significant and extensive, spanning multiple academic disciplines. Research on victim identity has also been at the forefront of interdisciplinary inquiry. Significant work by Berry (2017), Bouka (2013), Butler (2016), Fujii (2009), Krystalli (2021), and Viebach (2019) recognizes that victim identity is fluid and can be defined differently depending on the perspective of who is defining it. In

Rwanda, victim identity is both a political and social construction. Victim identity becomes especially important during the genocide commemoration period each year. The strong government influence in Rwanda makes it particularly challenging to recognize and validate other instances of victimhood. By focusing on the case of Rwanda, my research parses out how accepted victim identities are formed and reinforced. This chapter also puts forth conclusions about opportunities and consequences when victims whose identity diverges from accepted notions of victimhood seek recognition.

Studies by Borer (2003), Fujii (2009), Jacoby (2015), McConnachie and McEvoy (2012), and Straus (2006) analyze the role of politics in the construction of victimhood, applicable to the case in Rwanda. According to McConnachie and McEvoy, “true” or “legitimate” victims are identified via their relationship with the perpetrator. The authors conclude that defining victimhood via a “victim–perpetrator” relationship can result in a hierarchy of victimhood based on the innocence of the victim group and the guilt of the perpetrator group.

In Rwanda, categories of perpetrators, bystanders, and victims are fluid, and are rarely homogenous (Borer 2003; Fujii 2009; Straus 2006). Grievance and trauma are common foundations for collective identity construction, where victimhood can result in collective and organized processes that help victims claim rights and recognition (Jacoby 2015). The innocent, “deserving victim” (Hearty 2019: 6) is worthy of being remembered.

In post-genocidal societies, “the victim” is not a pure category divorced from power and politics. Kevin Hearty further describes how political motivations in which state leaders desire to promote what they deem as acceptable interpretations of the past can reinforce victim–perpetrator binaries. He says, “More often than not, this [political motivation] involves attempts at constructing binary categories of victim and perpetrator that fail to reflect the complex reality of political violence” (Hearty 2019: 6).

Ibreck’s (2012) research on memorialization in Rwanda further shows the complicated realities of defining victim identity in post-genocide Rwanda and asserts that many victims do not fit into politically acceptable categories. One example is a Rwandan child who had a Hutu father and Tutsi mother. In her discourse analysis of Rwandan President Paul Kagame’s public speeches during commemoration periods in Rwanda, Ibreck states that Kagame tries to separate the civil war and genocide in all public discourse. Yet, for many ordinary Rwandans, their memories of

the war and the genocide, as distinct historical events with distinct patterns and intentions, were highly linked in their minds and memories.

Consistent with the examples given, Rwandan victim identity does not fit neatly into legal, social, and political boxes. King (2010) categorizes victimhood in Rwanda via the following typology: (1) recognized Tutsi memories; (2) somewhat recognized Hutu memories; (3) unrecognized Hutu memories; (4) unrecognized Tutsi memories; and (5) unrecognized memories of ethnically mixed Rwandans.

Several interview respondents similarly confirmed that national commemorations exclude entire categories of victims from recognition. Some interviewees who identified as genocide survivors noted that one of their main fears was the potential of revenge and future violence if non-Tutsis do not have any way to mourn their loved ones. Some felt that exclusion has created heightened tensions, which respondents described as a feeling of resentment, not publicly expressed, but festering beneath the surface. By legal definition and political positioning in Rwanda presently, genocide victimhood is based on the fact that Rwandans were targeted because of their Tutsi identity in 1994. As such, those who were not Tutsi (i.e., Hutu, Twa, or people with one Hutu and one Tutsi parent) might not have died as targets of genocide, but they did perish during the decade of violence.

#### 7.4 Defining Victim Identity: Interview Analysis

Many interviewees' perspectives on victimhood differed from official narratives. These interviewees did not see recognizing the deaths of non-Tutsi because of war, migration, or retaliation as a threat to the country's security. However, thus far, conversations between Rwandans who suffered different losses and the government regarding when, where, and how to create a space to recognize victims of other crimes have yet to occur. Many interview respondents also acknowledged that Rwandans have different perceptions of and ways of engaging in genocide memory. These varied relationships show how genocide remembrance practices can, at times, reinforce official definitions of victimhood, or can create opportunities for multiple meanings of "victim" to be articulated and expressed.

Some respondents expressed a desire for genocide memorials that represent a fuller picture of the history of the genocide. According to



Theo,<sup>5</sup> a young man from Kibeho who self-identified as a genocide survivor, “It is not only me who feels pain, we are many in this country. For example, during meetings and other activities of IBUKA,<sup>6</sup> I met many other survivors of genocide.”<sup>7</sup> Theo, among others, recognized that the genocide and the surrounding years influenced every Rwandan. Several respondents shared that more inclusive memorial sites and genocide commemoration events help them feel that justice had been accomplished. In expressing these desires, interview respondents identified remembrance as necessary to rebuilding social ties among Rwandans.

Lillie,<sup>8</sup> an older widow living in Kigali, shares her perspective of genocide memory. Lillie’s husband was a Hutu accused of sympathizing with Tutsi neighbors. He fled his home during the genocide, and Lillie has not heard from him since. She said,

There’s an impact of genocide in the life of every Rwandan. A Hutu is frustrated by what happened by his parents, brothers, and sisters. For a Tutsi, he is a victim of lost parents, brothers, and sisters. Each one in this country has symptoms of the genocide. So, memorials are there to show us the reality of the genocide, on both sides.<sup>9</sup>

Central to meaningful memory is the process of creating a common understanding among Rwandans about the significant scars that past crimes have left on every Rwandan.

In post-genocide Rwanda, citizens continuously navigate a complicated interplay between national forms of memorialization and local remembrance practices. Alongside national genocide commemorations, the emergence of local practices addresses needs and gaps in meaning-making that are not sufficiently met by national memorial processes. For example, some AERG and GAERG<sup>10</sup> families go on an overnight retreat during *Kwibuka*. Each person shares memories about those who died, recalls how they survived, and discusses their hopes for the future. One

5 Name changed to provide anonymity.

6 IBUKA is an umbrella organization representing fifteen genocide survivors’ groups in Rwanda.

7 Kigali Local 005. Audio Recording. Kigali, Rwanda. June 12, 2015.

8 Name changed to provide anonymity.

9 Kigali Local, Audio Recording, Kigali, Rwanda July 10, 2015.

10 *Association des Étudiants et Élèves Rescapés du Génocide*/Association of Genocide Survivor Students; *Groupe des Anciens Étudiants Rescapés du Génocide*/Group of Former Genocide Survivor Students, artificial families of genocide survivors, usually orphans.

GAERG member shared, “It [the retreat] is exhausting and sad. Each person talks for a long time, and we listen. But it is also necessary to know what our brothers and sisters survived. We all support each other that way.”<sup>11</sup> Within the complexities of post-genocidal society, different symbolic remembrance practices allow Rwandans to make sense of what happened to them, to their communities, and to their nation in 1994.

### 7.5 Legal, Political, and Social Approaches to Victimhood

For the purpose of this research, I define legal identification of victim identity as what is codified in Rwandan and international law. Examples include the 1998 law establishing the National Fund for the Neediest Genocide Survivors (FARG),<sup>12</sup> the 2016 Rwandan National Law “Governing Ceremonies to Commemorate the Genocide against the Tutsi and Organisation and Management of Memorial Sites for the Genocide against the Tutsi,”<sup>13</sup> and the 2006 case at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), *Prosecutor v. Karemera, et al.*, where the ICTR judged that genocide was committed in Rwanda, and the court established this as a legal fact of common knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

Political definitions of victimhood rely on narratives through which the Rwandan government defines and promotes notions of “accepted” victimhood. This includes those who receive government services because of their past suffering during the genocide in 1994, including reparations from *Gacaca* proceedings<sup>15</sup> and payment for educational fees. Additionally, political definitions of victimhood impact which victims are permitted to speak during national ceremonies or in highly public spaces about their victimization during the genocide. Their stories

11 Key Informant 011. Audio Recording. Kigali, Rwanda. December 24, 2017.

12 *Fonds National pour l'Assistance aux Victimes les Plus Nécessiteuses du Génocide et des Massacres Perpétrés au Rwanda Entre le 1 Octobre 1990 et le 31 Decembre 1994.*

13 Loi No 15/2016 du 02/05/2016 (Régissant les Cérémonies de Commémoration du Génocide Perpétré Contre les Tutsis et Portant Organisation et Gestion des Sites Mémoires du Génocide Perpétré Contre les Tutsis). *Journal Officiel de la République Rwandaise* No. 22 (2016).

14 See Karemera, Case No. ICTR 98-44-I, 35.

15 In 2001, Organic Law N° 40/2000 of 26/01/2001 governing the creation of *Gacaca* Courts. According to Human Rights Watch, “Since 2005, just over 12,000 community-based *gacaca* courts – deriving their name from the Kinyarwanda word meaning ‘grass’ (the place where communities gather to resolve disputes) – have tried approximately 1.2 million cases. They leave behind a mixed legacy.” See Human Rights Watch (HRW) (2011).

and experiences align with the political view of what took place during the genocide. Referring to King's (2010) analysis, these would be mostly recognized Tutsi memories.

Socially, definitions of victim identity are the most diverse and capture the widest range of experiences. Neighbors define victimhood during the genocide based on innocence and guilt of the actions of fellow Rwandans, especially those who were targeted because of their Tutsi identity, those who participated willingly in crimes of genocide, and those whose actions fell somewhere in between. Additionally, many Rwandans socially recognize that others suffered loss before and after the genocide in 1994 and privately or personally recognize the significance of these experiences of victimhood, especially between neighbors who have known each other for a long time. Membership and acceptance in survivors' organizations, including IBUKA, GAERG, and AERG in secondary school and university also helps to socially define who is seen as a victim.

Some Rwandans interviewed identify themselves as victims of loss but realize that their self-definition does not match legal and political definitions of genocide victimhood. When asked whether he feels like a survivor, Claude,<sup>16</sup> a young man who had one Hutu and one Tutsi parent in 1994, said,

In my mind, yes, I do consider myself like a survivor, but the law does not allow it. That is what disturbs me, because to consider someone as a genocide survivor, [they] see if you fled, [or] if the father and mother are Tutsis . . . I never fled, and one of my parents is a Hutu and another a Tutsi. Those are the conditions to determine genocide survivors and I am not among [them].<sup>17</sup>

Personal accounts of victimhood operate and change within the official legal and political climate. For justice to be achieved via memorial efforts, it will be necessary for the memorials to represent a complete version of history, one with limited political influence.

Official and accepted definitions of victimhood after the genocide have changed over time. According to scholarly literature that addresses the intersection between state-making and victimhood in Rwanda (Burnet 2012; Longman 2017; Thomson 2013; Waldorf 2006), the creation and imposition of a singular national narrative has served to bolster the Rwandan government's legitimacy without properly representing all

16 Name changed to provide anonymity.

17 Kibeho Local 009b. Audio Recording. Kibeho, Rwanda. July 20, 2018.

groups of victims of the genocide (Bekken 2011). Longman (2017) describes how states use past histories of violence to justify new changes in leadership, government, and institutions. States can also use history as a tool to cope with past traumatic events. Longman makes an important distinction, stating that even the most effective states can control history but cannot completely control collective memory. If a group uses symbols (monuments, memorials, museums, language) to establish memory, it becomes collective to a degree, though its members may hold diverse views. This collective recognition of symbols contributes to the formation of dominant memory. He concludes that this is especially the case when there are strong state-sponsored memory projects that aim to adopt elements of the history, align with, and promote meaning and values of the post-conflict state.

Several interview respondents discussed their complicated relationship to victim identity in a legal and social sense. Most respondents attributed these complexities to the fact that they had one Tutsi and one Hutu parent. Shyaka,<sup>18</sup> an interview respondent of mixed parents, shared that he did not feel comfortable sitting next to “pure Tutsi” victims at annual genocide commemorations. He felt that he was not perceived as enough of a victim through a political and social lens.

During the genocide, Shyaka fled to the *Zone Turquoise*<sup>19</sup> in Gikongoro with his Hutu father, who was then killed with other Hutu fleeing imminent RPF attacks in that region. Shyaka feels as if he is a victim of genocide, having lost his father because of war and his mother being considered as a genocide survivor. Yet he was defined as a perpetrator, imprisoned for committing crimes of genocide. After the genocide, Shyaka did not receive educational assistance from the National Fund for the Neediest Genocide Survivors (FARG) even though his mother died as a Tutsi victim of genocide. As compared to people who were granted victim status, he felt that he had very different opportunities. His thoughts are indicative of essential issues of psycho-social and material consequences of victimhood in post-genocidal contexts.

18 Name changed as interviews provide anonymity, as per IRB regulations.

19 Between June and August in 1994, France controlled a “humanitarian safe zone” (*Zone Turquoise*) in the southwest of Rwanda. In response to escalating genocidal violence in Rwanda in April 1994, France launched *Opération Turquoise* for ostensibly humanitarian purposes. However, much evidence has implicated this mission, and France, in the genocide and subsequent violence. For more information, see Wallis (2006).

## 7.6 Genocide Commemorations: Spaces of Reconciliation and Exclusion

The interviews further highlight one inherent challenge of post-genocide commemorative spaces, which is that they tend to honor some and exclude others. Additionally, state-led commemorations are not particularly restorative by nature. When national commemoration processes accept certain memories and narratives about the past and silence others, they reinforce a binary consideration of victimhood that does not fully reflect the diverse experiences and cross-cutting identities of many Rwandans. Genocide commemorations and ceremonies are only sometimes spaces of reconciliation. At other times, they are spaces of exclusion. Local constructions of victim identity are highly dependent on accepted legal and political narratives that define victimhood.

Engaging in genocide remembrance is one way that a post-genocidal country can build a cohesive national and collective conscience after a life-altering event like genocide. As shown through the interviews conducted, commemoration processes are essential to helping the state maintain stability, peace, and security, and to minimize threats to its power. However, when citizens perceive commemoration efforts as spaces of exclusion, disconnected from their needs and lived realities, rather than spaces of reconciliation, then the state risks creating the very situation it desires to avoid – further group division and threats to existing power. Accepting, recognizing, and expressing narrative complexity about victim identity can help create more inclusive genocide commemoration and other memory practices that more completely represent Rwandans' diverse lived experiences before, during, and after 1994.

Respondents like Theo<sup>20</sup> articulate narrative complexity when reflecting on their experiences with post-genocide victim identity. Theo describes his situation, saying, "My father was Hutu, and my mother was Tutsi, and they asked my father to kill my mother, he refused so they killed them both."<sup>21</sup> In contrast with other respondents who had one Hutu and one Tutsi parent, the National Fund for the Neediest Genocide Survivors (FARG) considered Theo as a victim of genocide and assisted in paying his school fees.

20 Name changed to provide anonymity.

21 Kigali Local 005. Audio Recording. Kigali, Rwanda. June 12, 2015.

Sarah,<sup>22</sup> an elderly genocide survivor from Muhanga, spoke of challenges, highlighting her victimhood and focusing on her losses during the genocide commemoration. She said, “You see, in my family I am the only one who survived. All members of my family were killed. So, when we go to *Kwibuka*, I remember that I am alone, I do not have any relatives, all that is hard for me.”<sup>23</sup> Fidèle, an older man from Muhanga, who did not identify as a genocide survivor, spoke further about existing challenges of *Kwibuka* and reconciliation. He said,

... *Kwibuka* every year does not favor reconciliation ... Because we talk about killings even though we want to be reconciled. For us to be reconciled, there are things that we need to put aside; the past is the past, you want the future. So, when you say for example, “last time you beat me,” if you want to reconcile, you try to forget what happened. But if you say, “even though we are friends and we live together, you have beaten me” and you say it often, it shows that there is something hidden. It hurts me because I thought that you had forgiven me. But you still remember it though we had to put it aside, because I apologized, and you forgave me. If you have forgiven me, you do not have to keep saying, “but you have beaten me.” It is contradictory.<sup>24</sup>

Fidèle and Sarah highlight an important paradox of reconciliation efforts via genocide commemorations. Challenges over who has the right to remember, and what aspects of the past are acceptable to talk about in public commemorative ceremonies have resulted in genocide memory processes as spaces of semi-reconciliation, and semi-marginalization and exclusion. This is especially the case for Rwandans whose memories are unrecognized (King 2010) by official legal and political entities.

In this research, I asked respondents if they self-identified as victims or survivors, and also if they felt others (the Rwanda government, the FARG fund, their *umudugudu*, or local community) consider them so. In many cases, the official notion of what a victim is shapes their opinion, and they adapt their perspective to the structures of victimhood communicated through official and formal channels. In other interviews, however, individuals stated that they were victims, but also noted when their self-identification as a victim did not match the official notions. This lack of coherence can cause cognitive dissonance and a sense of uncertainty of the individual’s position in the social and political construction

22 Name changed to provide anonymity.

23 Muhanga Local 002. Audio Recording. Muhanga, Rwanda. June 11, 2018.

24 Muhanga Local 001. Audio Recording. Muhanga, Rwanda. June 11, 2018.

of the post-genocide society, including the new order of social hierarchy in Rwanda.

According to those whom I interviewed, when Rwandans attend public commemorations, they find that others mostly accept the value of the commemoration as a symbolic public good. Although they might not agree with every speech or everything taught during the commemoration, or they may think about other things than the Tutsi victims during the commemoration, there is a common understanding that commemorating genocide is good for Rwandans.

Several Rwandans interviewed who self-identify as Tutsi victims expressed concern if other Rwandans, especially former Hutu, do not have opportunities to remember their lost loved ones. Citing buried feelings of resentment and lack of belonging, several respondents stressed that other Rwandans should be able to hold a church mass service in memory of those they lost during the “decade of violence” between 1990 and 2000 (Thomson 2013). The main concern from survivors was not that individuals should suppress these memories or not be allowed to mourn their losses. Rather, the main issue raised was about what would be an appropriate time of the year, place, and way to recognize these victims. Interview respondents did not feel that remembrance of non-genocide victims should take place during the genocide commemoration period from April to July each year; they felt that remembering another time would be more conducive to repairing trust in local communities toward lasting reconciliation, by creating shared identity of past losses.

### 7.7 Narrative Complexity and Restorative Commemorative Spaces

Given the paradox that genocide commemoration at times fosters reconciliation while at other times is a spaces of exclusion, what can be changed to make commemorative spaces more restorative?

First, acknowledging and representing narrative complexity during genocide commemoration ceremonies can create symbolic justice processes that are representative of the diverse identities and experiences of Rwandans in 1994 and since. Interviewees expressed numerous ways in which they personally and communally engage with memorial sites and processes. Some interview respondents expressed narrative complexity by depoliticizing victim identity, showing keen awareness and aspirations that different perspectives of the past can all be accepted and shared during genocide commemorations.

Second, integrating personal remembrance practices, including private prayers, family gatherings and meals, holding a mass at a church service in honor of victims, or going with neighbors and family to visit a memorial site where a loved one is buried, can bridge state-led remembrance ceremonies with meaningful and personal cultures of memory that often operate in parallel but do not intersect.

For example, many families find meaning by meeting during the *Kwibuka* period, inviting their neighbors and close friends to share a meal and listen to the testimonies of a surviving member of the family, or of someone who saved members of that family during the genocide. This is not a selfish act; rather, it is done so that the people close to the family can bear witness to the family's history, and so that the history is not forgotten. At the small gathering, those invited discuss the merits of those who passed, those who survived, and those who assisted the family in the hardest of times. What is discussed among the family often occurs inside a home where the windows and curtains are drawn closed, so the outside world cannot see. Personal secrets of sacrifice, fear, loss, sadness, grief, financial challenges, and other "unspeakable" things are discussed in this setting, and they include topics and memories that are not acceptable to discuss at public commemorations. Integrating these practices and broadening what is deemed acceptable to remember can make commemorative spaces more restorative.

Third, many Rwandans interviewed for this research, including those legally and politically recognized as victims (i.e., Tutsi who were in Rwanda during the genocide in 1994 and who survived targeted killing by perpetrators), said that crimes other than genocide should be recognized and those victims given a space to remember their lost loved ones. Many Rwandans whom I interviewed expressed their concern about unacknowledged grievances or future desires for revenge if those who did not formerly identify as Tutsi are not able to remember their loved ones lost during instances of war and counterinsurgency. If individual experiences of victimhood of war crimes and crimes of revenge remain unrecognized, then memory efforts in Rwanda will continue to marginalize citizens whose narratives do not currently fit.

## 7.8 Conclusions

Victim identity in post-genocide Rwanda is defined in diverse ways which influence whether it is recognized by legal, political, or social entities. This research found that victims with multiple and diverse



identities have constructed varied forms of memorialization that sometimes diverge from officially sanctioned practices.

Interviewees identified multiple notions of victimhood, creating opportunities to conceive of senses of victimhood that both align with and are contrary to official and accepted definitions. Hierarchies of victimhood are brought into being after conflict and extreme cases of human rights violations like the genocide in Rwanda. They are often counterproductive to the project of rebuilding and seeking justice, with profound consequences for individual people, especially those situated counter to the regime. At times, victims compete for reparations, resources, validation, and acknowledgment that they are the true victims of the crimes of the past. While “victimhood” might not be finite, and victims do not always compete, when resources are limited, when political decisions and compromises must be made in the post-genocide society, or when certain victims’ experiences are denied or threatened into extinction, victims claim their rights and status, oftentimes at the exclusion of other victims. Therefore, hierarchies of victimhood develop in a practical sense; and at times, some victims claim that their suffering is greater than others. These are some of the lasting questions about the constructions of victimhood and how memorial sites reinforce or break down rhetorical narratives of victimization.

Some members of victim and survivor communities whom I interviewed were careful to note that the genocide commemoration period did not feel like an appropriate or “right” time for others to mourn publicly. They explained that *Kwibuka* is a sacred time for them to focus on their losses and unique experience of being targeted for genocide, based solely on their group identity. *Kwibuka* is one of the only times that they can publicly express their sorrow, grief, trauma, and demands for recognition and redress.

Many of these respondents also stressed that other Rwandans should have a chance to remember their loved ones publicly, something they see as important for fellow Rwandans to make meaning of different past experiences of violence, a process that is viewed as necessary to creating sustainable trust in Rwandan communities.

The data presented relies on narrative complexity and variegated situations when considering legitimacy of the government among Rwandans in Rwanda. According to some interviewees, it is possible that the politicization of memorials and official commemoration practices at times undermines the legitimacy of the government, at least in the eyes of

a substantial portion of the population (non-Tutsi) and even including some genocide survivors.

Complexities around victim identity in post-genocide Rwanda impact meaning-making and the potential for justice, especially during national commemoration, where legal and political definitions of who is a victim are prioritized and accepted. At present, national remembrance practices do not fully account for the diverse experiences of Rwandans in 1994. Through the creation and promotion of an accepted narrative, stories of Tutsi victims of the genocide are most highlighted during public and state commemorations. However, many Rwandans felt victimized at different times during the decade of violence between 1990 and 2000. As such, hierarchies of victimhood have proven to limit the perceived effectiveness of salient symbolic justice and meaningful genocide memory processes in Rwanda, as they have in other post-atrocity settings like Northern Ireland and South Africa.

Memorialization and commemoration are not static processes. Rather, they reflect political, legal, and social realities at a particular moment in time, especially as government and community priorities shift. By identifying the diversity of experience and how Rwandans' relationships to these existential issues change over time, it becomes possible to comment on the ways in which Rwandans view and respond to the diverse memorialization landscape at different scales in their post-genocide society. The ways in which states and societies frame a conflict affects who is defined as a victim, further affecting who is allowed to remember and which memories are acceptable to speak about publicly. These dynamics play out in different forms during genocide commemoration ceremonies in Rwanda. Listening to the narrative complexity as described by those closest to the genocide yields salient patterns, themes, and recommendations of how Rwandans see themselves addressing the inherent challenge of commemorative spaces which honor some memories and exclude others. Understanding and applying their perspectives has the potential to positively transform genocide memorialization efforts to be more restorative and meaningful for Rwandans with diverse experiences and perceptions of victimhood.

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