Africa 76 (2), 2006

REMEMBERING TO FORGET: CHOSEN AMNESIA AS A STRATEGY FOR LOCAL COEXISTENCE IN POST-GENOCIDE RWANDA

Susanne Buckley-Zistel

After a violent conflict, the experience of bloodshed and terror leaves deep scars amongst the parties to the conflict. In cases where violence was perpetrated in the intimate realm of a community, such as during the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, future cohabitation is profoundly affected by the experience. Coming to terms with the past is a major challenge.

The division of Rwanda has a long history. Central to the Hutu–Tutsi conflict lies the interplay between ethnic realities and their subjective reconstruction (or manipulation) by political entrepreneurs (Lemarchand 1994: 588). Over time, ethnic belonging has become meaningful for many Rwandans, even more so since a section of the population was exterminated because of its ethnic identity. In today's post-genocide environment it is therefore necessary to address these cleavages through changing the way the members of a community relate to each other. Failing this, violence and aggression may remain a mode of solving inter-community problems.

In this article I shall illustrate how processes of post-conflict social transformation, or the absence thereof, are reflected in the way the past is remembered. In Rwanda today, people who lived through the 1994 genocide of Tutsi and moderate Hutu, as well as the 1990–4 war between the Habyarimana government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front/Army (RPF/A) insurgents, have different recollections of the past, depending on their roles at the time and their situations today. Rwanda's society is highly diverse, reflecting various experiences of the genocide as victim or participant, bystander, absentee or saviour. In addition, in present memory, some aspects – most notably past tensions between Hutu and Tutsi – are eclipsed from the discourse. This form of *chosen amnesia*, I shall argue, although now perhaps essential for local coexistence, bears the danger of not challenging the social cleavages that rendered the genocide possible in the first place, and so obstructing their transformation in the future.

At first sight, what is remembered and what is silenced in post-genocide Rwanda seems paradoxical: while the event of the genocide was constantly evoked by my interviewees, the causes of the genocide and the decades of tension between Hutu and Tutsi were ignored. Despite earlier pogroms against Tutsi in 1959, 1962 and 1973, the past was portrayed as harmonious, and the 1994 genocide as a sudden

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https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2006.76.2.131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rupture that took everybody by surprise. In the course of fieldwork, however, it soon emerged that the absence of certain memory, this *chosen amnesia* about past divisions, is less a mental failure than a conscious strategy to cope with living in proximity to 'killers' or 'traitors'.

This article is part of a two-year research project on the potential for reconciliation in Rwanda.[1] It is based on substantial field research in 2003–4 in Nyamata district in Kigali Ngali province (in particular around Nyamata town and Ntarama) and in Gikongoro province (around the districts of Gikongoro Ville, Karaba and Nyaruguru); these locations were selected for their proximity to mass graves and genocide memorial sites.[2] Its qualitative approach draws on in-depth interviews with individuals as well as group discussions conducted mainly in Kinyarwanda with the assistance of one or two Rwandan interpreters.[3] The interviewees were selected on the basis of the proximity of their homes to the memorial sites. Moreover, we actively selected people with particular backgrounds, including relatives of people accused of participating in the genocide, individuals who had been released from prison, Tutsi returnees who were brought up in the diaspora, survivors working in survivor organizations or at genocide sites and individuals seeking to contribute to the reconciliation processes.

NARRATING THE PAST

In order to understand processes of post-conflict coexistence it is paramount to focus on how group identities are constituted in memory discourses. As argued by Pierre Nora, remembrance has a coercive force, for it creates identity and a sense of belonging (Nora 1993: 11). In this article I shall therefore focus on the stories people tell to refer to their past and ask whether they facilitate or obstruct group cohesion between the former parties to the conflict.

However, collective identity is not merely produced through remembering but also through forgetting. As Ernest Renan has famously pointed out with reference to the nation: 'the essential element of a nation is that all its individuals must have many things in common but it must also have forgotten many things' (Renan 1822). In a similar vein, Stanley Cohen suggests that whole societies may choose to forget uncomfortable knowledge and turn it into 'open secrets' which are known by all, and knowingly not known (Cohen 2001: 138). He introduces the term 'social amnesia', which refers to

[1] I am grateful to the Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung (German Foundation for Peace Research), which funded this project.

[2] The sites include Murambi, Karaba, Kibeho, Nyamata and Ntarama. Although there are substantial differences between the two regions they are not of immediate concern for the argument of this article.

[3] In order to avoid one-sided interpretation, whenever possible the interviews were recorded and transcribed by different research assistants. They were extended by conversations with Rwandans active in peace-building and reconciliation projects.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2006.76.2.131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

> a mode of forgetting by which a whole society separates itself from its discreditable past record. This might happen at an organized, official and conscious level – the deliberate cover-up, the rewriting of history – or through the type of cultural slippage that occurs when information disappears. (Cohen 1995: 13)

In Rwanda, the deliberate, public rewriting of history is part of the government's effort to unite the country (Buckley-Zistel, forthcoming). It is based on an idealized representation of the country's pre-colonial past as being harmonious, glossing over significant social complexities and intellectually justifying a system of Tutsi minority rule (Pottier 2002: 110–11). Hence, a more cynical view suggests that the government's playing down of ethnic differences serves to mask today's monopoly by Tutsi of military and political power (Reyntjens 2004: 187).

Nevertheless, although the official rewriting of history is relevant for Rwanda, it is the notion of 'cultural slippage' which is of interest to us in this article. At a local level, why are some things chosen to be remembered whilst others are subject to forgetting? What function does this selectivity serve?

Chosen amnesia

While conducting research in Rwanda it became apparent that, although memory about the genocide was considered to be very important, some aspects of the past were eclipsed from the discourse. Interviewees frequently made their omissions explicit, stating that, despite their public attitude and occasionally even their participation in reconciliation projects, in their hearts it looked different. Although I felt that it was important for my interviewees to communicate this reservation, how it 'really' looked in their hearts was never revealed.[4] Moreover, some of my interviewees, in particular those engaged in reconciliation efforts, cautioned me not to trust my impression of peaceful coexistence; they suggested that people hide their true feelings, especially from an outsider like myself.[5] This concealment resembles some form of amnesia, albeit selective, or what I shall call *chosen amnesia*, to differentiate it from Cohen's social amnesia.[6] The Greek word amnesia translates 'loss of memory' or the 'inability to remember'. While its current use refers

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[4] For a similar case of memories told or not told, see Fabian 2003.

[5] However, despite the limitations imposed by being an outsider and, more importantly, a foreign researcher, I often felt that up to a certain level many interviewees appreciated the opportunity to share their thoughts with me. Towards the end of a group discussion with survivors in Nyamata in late March 2004, for instance, my interviewees stressed that they appreciated the opportunity to discuss their anxieties with me and, more importantly, with each other, since the anniversary of the beginning of genocide was approaching (there is a national day of mourning each 7 April), yet they never talk about it.

[6] Importantly, my argument focuses solely on local, public discourses. This can be contrasted with the national, official discourse of memory and history, as well as the private, intimate conversations of people who trust each other, such as family members. While the first environment has been dealt with elsewhere (Buckley-Zistel, forthcoming), access to the second is restricted to external researchers such as the present author.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2006.76.2.131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

mainly to individual mental conditions, and hence psychology, in this article I shall employ the notion as an analogy to refer to the social, collective inability to remember. This inability, however, does not point to a new or different interpretation of the past or a fading of memory, but rather implies that the memory is still stored in the mind, even though the group does not (choose to) have access to it at present.

In Rwanda, the inability to remember seemed deliberate; my interviewees did not want to recall particular aspects of their past. Most strikingly, for instance, they frequently replied that they could not recollect what caused the genocide. This suggests an immediate benefit of not remembering: to choose amnesia serves a particular function deriving from particular needs of the present. In my fieldwork regions of Gikongoro and Nyamata, as illustrated further on in this article, these needs are that people have to live together in conditions of closest proximity. They depend on each other in their day-to-day life and hence require some form of cohesion. As a consequence, the past is distorted to establish group coherence. 'This', Maurice Halbwachs writes, 'is why society tends to erase from its memory all that might separate individuals, or that might distance groups from each other' (Halbwachs 1992: 183).

In this sense, my research in Rwanda demonstrates the reverse process of Vamik Volkan's notion of *chosen trauma*, which occurs when a group, after the experience of a traumatic event, feels helpless and victimized by another group; in response, the traumatized group draws the mental representations or emotional meanings of the traumatic event into its very identity in order to create group cohesion (Volkan 1991). Through *chosen trauma* a sense of closure and bounded identity is introduced in order to delineate clearly between friend and foe. In contrast, in my notion of *chosen amnesia* a traumatic event is deliberately excluded from the discourse in order to prevent a sense of closure and to undermine the drawing of fixed boundaries of who is inside and who is outside a particular we-group. *Amnesia* is hence *chosen* as opposed to coerced, since it signifies less a public denial than a coping mechanism to avoid antagonisms and to be able to live peacefully. Remembering to forget is thus essential for local coexistence.

In order to sustain my argument about *chosen amnesia* in the remainder of this article I shall illustrate the tensions between what is remembered and what is eclipsed in the local interpretation of Rwanda's disturbing past. This will then lead to a more detailed account of why *chosen amnesia* is a necessity for local coexistence today.

RWANDA'S BATTLE WITH HISTORY AND MEMORY

The impact of various interpretations of history and memory in Rwanda cannot be disputed, and has been the object of much analysis.[7] In the

[7] See, for instance, Pottier (2003), Eltringham (2004) and Newbury (2002).

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past, it has led to the politicization of the ethnic groups Hutu, Tutsi and Twa, culminating in the horrors of the 1994 genocide.

In pre-colonial Rwanda, socio-political cleavages and inequalities were established and maintained through an aristocratic system in which Tutsi monarchs governed a polis of Twa, Hutu and Tutsi through, mainly, feudal client/patron relationships (Newbury 1988). Today it remains contested to what extent these clientships were exploitative of Hutu only or whether the common Tutsi were subjected to the same degree of exploitation. In any event, regardless of the extent of pre-colonial ethnic identities, German and Belgian colonial rule altered the social landscape dramatically. On the basis of racial scholarship, contemporary European anthropologists 'discovered' three different groups of Rwandans, which supposedly represented major population groups: the Ethioped (Tutsi), Bantu (Hutu) and Pygmoid (Twa) (Mulinda 2002: 50–1). The Tutsi, with apparent physical resemblance to their European masters, were selected as the superior race and the colonial administration subordinated Hutu and Twa to the rule of Tutsi monarchs. The superiority of Tutsi was justified with reference to presumed racial features, as well as alleged economic and political skills (Lacger 1959: 51). References to the since-discredited 'Hamitic hypothesis', tracing back Tutsi origins to biblical narratives and Caucasian origins, were invoked to legitimate their authority. According to this migration myth, Tutsi nomads had travelled southwards through the Horn of Africa, making them immigrants to Rwanda.

Eventually, the Tutsi elite adopted its ascribed nobility and collaborated with European historians to invent its past and so legitimate its superiority (HRW 1999: 36). As a result of the 'Hamitic hypothesis' Hutu and Twa increasingly regarded Tutsi not merely as immigrants but as foreign occupants and oppressors. The challenging of Tutsi presence in the country manifested itself dramatically in the pogrom of 1959, when many powerful Tutsi were assassinated or fled into exile. Importantly, today there is no agreement about the nature of the event: while most Tutsi refer to it as 'genocide' or 'massacres', for many Hutu it marked the emancipation from Tutsi oppression and hence a 'social revolution', which did indeed change the governing system from monarchy to republic.

As mentioned above, the role of the colonialists in either inventing ethnicity *per se* or polarizing existing dichotomies remains contested to this day. And yet, whatever their degree of responsibility, the social, economic and political cleavages still prevail, and are frequently invoked in order to determine one's group identity as Hutu or Tutsi. They were successfully polarized and politicized in various phases of Rwanda's post-colonial history, most notably under the presidency of Gregoire Kayibanda (1962–73) as well as in the run-up to the genocide. In pre-genocide history lessons Tutsi were portrayed as minorities, foreigners, authors of injustice and enemies of the Republic, while Hutu identity was defined as the indigenous majority and former victims of injustice who emancipated themselves against the Tutsi monarchy in 1959 (Rutembesa 2002: 83).

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Despite the polarization of ethnic identity, it is crucial not to confuse the genocide with a sudden rise of oppressed Hutu against potential occupation, but to remember that it had been carefully planned and instigated by Hutu elites (Lemarchand 2002: 309). Furthermore, although the impact of racist rhetoric was significant, it only started after the Tutsi-dominated RPF invasion of 1990 had made the Hutu masses receptive to such propaganda. Yet despite the top-down incentives to kill, it is still difficult to grasp the motivations of individual *génocidaires* (Lemarchand 2002: 308).

Today, there is a strong awareness of the detrimental impact of different interpretations of Rwanda's history and the division they caused, leading to a call for more 'scientific' analysis. But memory, too, is important for Rwanda today (Schreiber 1995: 169). In a society which had relied on oral tradition until the arrival of colonialism, and which, even today, does not have a strong infrastructure of knowledge transmission, including education about its history, individual and collective memory constitute the basis of reasoning.[8]

BETWEEN REMEMBRANCE AND AMNESIA

As mentioned above, many of my Rwandan interviewees find themselves caught between remembering some aspects of the past, most notably the shock and horror of the 1994 massacres, and eclipsing others, such as the social divisions at the heart of the genocide. The following gives an account of what calls for remembrance and what for forgetting, and how this responds to the present social milieu.

A word of caution is necessary at this point, though. Many of the following accounts cannot be anything but generalizations homogenizing the diverse experiences of war and genocide from the vantage point not simply of Hutu or Tutsi but of victim, perpetrator, bystander, et cetera. This reflects the highly sensitive nature of the research, due to which it was often not possible to clarify the exact role of the interviewees in the genocide. To directly probe into personal involvement would have immediately restricted, if not terminated, any conversation.[9]

Remembering the horror

More than a decade after the event, the horror of the 1994 genocide is omnipresent in Rwanda. It serves as a foundation for private arguments and public policies; the individual and collective *raison d'être* of the nation and its people is built around the genocide. Yet the presence of

[8] Exceptional here are *ingandos*, commonly translated as 'solidarity camps', which are organized for university students, local authorities and people released from prison, amongst others. The teaching in *ingandos* includes history, so that many learn the government's current version of Rwanda's past.

[9] A similar point is made by Malkki (1995: 51).

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the genocide reaches beyond what words can capture. Physical scars are visible, both on people and on the countryside. Disabilities, HIV/AIDS infections and orphanhood are as apparent as destroyed houses or severe poverty. The war and the genocide have destroyed the world of Rwandans; nothing remains as it was before. For '[w]ars unmake worlds, both real and conceptual' (Nordstrom 1995: 131).

Against the backdrop of this present milieu, remembering the genocide is significant for all Rwandans we interviewed, even though there remains some controversy over how and what should be recalled. On a general level, Rwandans emphasize the educating role and preventive function of memory, as well as the respect it pays to the dead who must not be forgotten. In the words of a young man from Nyamata:

> Yes, of course we have to remember in order to fight the ideology and to avoid that this happens again. And it's a lesson for Rwandan youth to be aware of what happened. So, for instance, when you touch on fire it hurts, and teaches you to avoid touching again. (Young, male returnee from Burundi, Mayange Sector, Nyamata)

And, according to an elderly survivor, also from Nyamata:

> To remember is very important. No one has to forget because it will give youth an idea of what happened in Rwanda. If we don't forget, the genocide can never happen again. (Elderly, male survivor, Nyamata)

The consensus about the importance of remembering the genocide might derive from the fact that everybody suffered a great deal from both war and genocide, and does so today. As mentioned above, it was an extraordinary rupture in people's lives – and everybody came out a loser. Similar views were expressed by the so-called 'old case-load' returnees – Tutsi who had fled Rwanda in 1959 and their descendants. In Nyamata they reported that the sites helped them to understand the horror and that they attend the commemorations. And yet, although the memory of the genocide is one of the few interpretations Rwandans share today, it is not a unifying factor, as disagreement prevails over the clear demarcation of victim and perpetrator. Even though none of the interviewees denied that the genocide was committed against the Tutsi, large parts of the Hutu population consider themselves to be victims of war, refugee camps or revenge killings post-genocide. As a young woman explained:

> To remember is good, but it should be inclusive. For instance, my parents have been killed during the genocide. But when they [the public] remember they remember only Tutsi, so I am frustrated because they don't remember my family. (Young, rural woman, Nyamata)

Her frustration resonates in the words of an elderly man:

> It is important not to forget the past so that we can prevent the future. But the bad was not only the genocide but also the Hutu who died in the

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> Democratic Republic of Congo of diseases, and also those who were killed in revenge when they came back. Nobody has won this war; everybody has lost at least one family member. (Elderly man, Ntamara, Nyamata)

Consequently, the Hutu interviewee insisted that he, too, should be called 'survivor', a term generally reserved for Tutsi who escaped slaughter, since he survived the war and a refugee camp.

Moreover, Rwanda's genocide memorials are a source of much controversy about memory, as expressed in the following quotes:

> According to what happened here in Rwanda we cannot forget, it is very important. But, you know, sometimes it creates conflicts among Rwandans. I think we should stop memorial sites because they are nonsense, they generate trauma and hate. Trauma is for all and not for survivors only. (Rural woman whose husband has recently been released from prison, Nyamata)

In the words of a woman whose husband is still in prison:

> First of all, we cannot identify the people they put into the memorial sites. They took all bones. And no particular ethnicity died, all Hutu and Tutsi died. The problem is when they remember, they remember only Tutsi, while during the war RPF killed many Hutu, so they should remember also our people who died during that period.
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> Second, when we are on the memorial sites, both Hutu and Tutsi, it creates conflicts. Survivors remember what happened and it makes them angry. So we think that they should give pardon to perpetrators and we live again in peace. (Young, rural woman with husband in prison, Nyamata)

The above quotations show a clear divide in what version of the past different groups of Rwandans consider appropriate: while some prefer exclusively to recall the genocide of the Tutsi, others insist that all suffering needs recognition. The disagreement is mainly along Hutu/Tutsi lines, and illustrates that ethnic group identity is still very significant in Rwanda.[10] The way the war and the genocide was experienced was intrinsic to one's ethnic identity, and today's repercussions, central to every moment of day-to-day life, continue to be informed by this division.

Thus, arguably, ethnic identity in Rwanda is more important today than it was before the mobilization for the genocide. The make-up of the society is highly diverse, reflecting a variety of different, competing group interests, some of which are directly related to the genocide. The survivors of the genocide, for example, form one constituency. As a direct consequence of the violence, they face a myriad of problems. Many have lost all family members and relatives and feel lonely and

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[10] This can, of course, only be a generalized statement. The Hutu/Tutsi dichotomy is far from being the only cleavage in Rwanda's society. Hutu and Tutsi groups are in themselves diverse, providing cause for many other conflicts. Moreover, boundaries along ethnic identities are not always clear-cut. For instance, I met a number of Hutu women, whose Tutsi husbands were killed, amongst Tutsi survivor groups.

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abandoned. In rural Rwanda, not having the assistance and support of family members often poses severe practical problems, such as being unable to cultivate land effectively or to collect water when sick. Moreover, having been targets and witnesses of the atrocities, they suffer from trauma and depression. Many rape victims have been infected with HIV/AIDS, and are today still slowly and quietly dying from the genocide.[11]

Not only lives were destroyed during the genocide; properties were targeted, too. For instance, ten years after the tragedy, many survivors still find themselves without adequate shelter. The genocide widows' association AVEGA estimates that, as a direct consequence of the genocide, 120,000 survivors remain without housing, while 300,000 live in abject poverty.[12] On the national level, despite the Fond Assistance pour les Rescapés du Genocide (FARG) – which dedicates 5 per cent of the national budget to healthcare for survivors and school fees for genocide orphans – survivors suffer from neglect and their often desperate situation is barely recognized.

But not only the survivors suffer as an immediate consequence of the genocide. The accused and their families, too, are struck by severe poverty and destitution. Many have lost loved ones during and after the genocide – at the hands of the RPA, in refugee camps or in prisons under poor conditions. Moreover, having a family member in prison is a very heavy burden for an impoverished Rwandan household to carry. The absence of (mainly male) labour is detrimental to agriculture, reducing productivity and hence food availability.[13] In addition, prisoners are partly fed by their relations, which constitutes an additional burden on families who, given the extreme poverty in rural areas such as Nyamata and Gikongoro, only have one meal per day, or every other day.

Consequently, despite the shared memory of the genocide as horror, the anger and resentment deriving from the post-violence circumstances affect personal and community relations, perpetuating the cleavages between Hutu and Tutsi. A lack of understanding and compassion for the other group prevails amongst survivors on one hand and accused and their families on the other, and discussions about hierarchies of suffering – debating which victim is more severely affected – are common.

Eclipsing past divisions

Against this backdrop it is surprising that, in interviews with mainly rural Rwandans in Nyamata and Gikongoro, we were generally told that 'all is well' and 'we are living together peacefully'. Although the memory

[11] Rape was used as a strategic weapon during the genocide and many rapists were aware that they were HIV/AIDS positive and used their infection as a way of killing. For further discussion see African Rights (2004) and AVEGA (1999).

[12] Comment made at the International Genocide Conference 'Rwanda 10' to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the genocide, Kigali, 5 April 2004.

[13] In the course of the fieldwork we visited areas where virtually all men were in prison.

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of the genocide is very present in people's minds and frequently evoked in conversations, the causes of the genocide, or other pogroms against Tutsi, can often not be recalled. Instead, the past is remembered as harmonious and peaceful, with the genocide being a sudden rupture which took everybody by surprise, as reflected in the following responses by Hutu to my question 'What caused the genocide?' Significantly, the responses can be differentiated into people who do not recall the genocide at all and people who blame elites for the outbreak. Those who have no memory:

> You know, we did not know how it came. We were friends, the same people, sharing everything. We are innocent in this situation. (Elderly, male farmer, Nyamata)

> According to me, I cannot determine who is responsible for the genocide. We heard that people were being killed without knowing who planned it. (Young rural woman with husband in prison, Nyamata)

Those who indicate elite responsibility:

> We cannot know. It was because of the bad leadership, otherwise we were living in a good climate. (Elderly, male released prisoner, Nyamata rural)

> We saw genocide approaching. It was planned by intellectuals. We were innocent and surprised. (Elderly, male relative of released prisoner, Nyamata rural)

> The war was because of politicians. One day we were told to kill but never got an explanation why. (Elderly man, Ntamara, Nyamata)

> It was bad governance. Authorities create divisions among Rwandans, that Tutsi and Hutu are different. Also, it was because of selfishness. Before 1990 ethnicities were living together, sharing beers, and getting married to each other. The conflict came after 1990. At Gikongoro, before the war, Tutsi and Hutu had good relations. (Young Tutsi who had been released from prison, via *ingando* or 'solidarity camp', after confessing his participation in the genocide, Gikongoro, near the road to Cyangugu)

What is central to all responses is the insistence that Hutu and Tutsi had always lived together in harmony, with the genocide constituting a sudden rupture. Moreover, a common feature of both the 'no memory' and the 'elite responsibility' narratives is the absence of responsibility and guilt. External parties – the pre-genocide government and elites – are blamed for causing divisions and unleashing violence. This strategy of scapegoating works to render ordinary Rwandans collectively innocent. Consequently, for many of my local Hutu interviewees, all Rwandans were victims. While Tutsi and moderate Hutu were victims of violence and killings, the mainly Hutu perpetrators were victims of manipulation and misuse, if not also violence. This explanation is in line with the current government discourse, which locates the cause of the genocide in bad governance and top-down

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manipulation,[14] and seems to be accepted by both Hutu and Tutsi. According to some Tutsi interviewees, in the rare moments in which individuals of the two ethnic groups discuss the genocide, and Hutu perpetrators explain the manipulation or even coercion which forced them into participating in the killings, the survivors seem persuaded that their participation was not voluntary. Whether this statement is heartfelt or simply a concession made within the conversation is, of course, difficult to assess. Pottier (2002: 206–7) reports about the opposite case, where survivors in Nyamata insisted on collective Hutu guilt and the impossibility of forgiveness.

And yet, if one reads accounts of genocide killings, for instance the interviews with perpetrators collected by Jean Hatzfeld (Hatzfeld 2003), it becomes apparent that popular participation in the genocide was not always in response to force but also a matter of personal inclination. Furthermore, without wanting to underestimate the pervasive power of the genocide dynamics, individual cases suggest that at least some people were able to say 'no', or to buy themselves out of having to kill.[15]

CHOSEN AMNESIA AS A COPING MECHANISM

Given the earlier massacres against Tutsi in 1959, 1962 and 1973 it is at first surprising that past antagonisms cannot be remembered. Arguably, amongst many other causes, the Rwandan genocide was built on deeply entrenched images of ethnicity and cultural practices, dynamics of social exclusion and impunity (Uvin 2001: 97). But today, the Rwandans we interviewed do not want to remember the social and economic cleavages that marked their society, even though they are still present in popular culture. A rich person, for instance, is still occasionally referred to as 'a Tutsi', regardless of her or his ethnic identity, while 'I am not your Hutu' is used to fend off exploitation.

So while the genocide as a rupture, as well as its victims, are frequently recalled, according to most interviewees the events around the genocide are silenced in day-to-day life. In the words of an elderly man from rural Nyamata who in 2003 had been released from seven years' imprisonment on the presumption of being innocent:

> Just after the war there were many problems. People returned from exile, there were also revenge killings. People could not talk to each other. Everybody was afraid of everybody. Today, it is as if we have forgotten everything. At the moment it does not exist anymore. People never talk

[14] Interview with Fatuma Ndangiza, Executive Secretary of the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission, Kigali, 1 December 2003. For a detailed discussion of collective vs individual guilt, see Eltringham (2004), Chapter 4.

[15] See, for instance, African Rights (2002).

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about the past because it brings back bad memories and problems. We pretend it does not exist.

This resonates in the words of a young, female survivor from Ntarama, Nyamata:

> The genocide can never be a subject of discussion. If somebody comes out of prison we talk about issues around it, but never about the genocide. For instance, recently, a big genocidaire was released from prison. He had killed here at Ntamara church. The first time I met him again was at Sunday mass. We chatted about people we both know in prison, without mentioning the genocide a single time. (Survivor, Ntamara memorial, Nyamata)

Yet what features of the present milieu persuade my interviewees to eclipse the past? Given the constraints and compromises of rural life, peasants, in particular, often prefer not to address conflicts publicly in order not to destroy the social balance. In Rwanda, it might even take two or three generations before the situation permits speaking out (Ntampaka 2002: 17). Maintaining daily life has priority.

Features of everyday life include sharing beers in bars and helping neighbours with hospital transport or fetching water. Intermarriage is not unheard of and Rwandans are often quick to point out these signs of coexistence to demonstrate that, yes, they do get on, somehow. Nevertheless, without scratching too hard at the surface, it soon becomes apparent that most interviewees do not, themselves, have much confidence in these signs. Coexistence is explained as the outcome of government coercion, fear of the other group, pragmatism, or a combination of all three. I shall address each category in turn.

Government coercion

The Rwandan government's national reconciliation discourse is based on the strategy that ethnicity in Rwanda was invented and politicized by colonial occupation. Ethnicity, therefore, never existed. Rather,

> [e]thnic groups, Hutu, Tutsi and Twa characterised wealth or poverty; they were not based on blood. One could shift from being a Twa or a Hutu and become a Tutsi if one got rich; if one became poor while one was a Tutsi one was called a Hutu or Twa. (NURC 2000: 19)

Consequently, in today's public discourse, all references to Hutu, Tutsi and Twa are suppressed (and occasionally accused of being divisive) and have been replaced by a nation-building discourse of an all-inclusive 'Rwandaness'. In public community meetings, radio broadcasts and events, which are frequently organized by the National Unity and Reconciliation Commission (NURC), Rwandans are urged to be reconciled with each other and to live together peacefully. In response to occasional aggression against survivors there are community meetings during which local authorities instruct the community to get on with each other, without initiating any problem-solving procedures.

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Consequently, when asked about coexistence, many Rwandans reply that they share drinks, but only because they must.

Moreover, a number of genocide survivors lamented that they are being told they *have to* forgive. And yet, even though they find it difficult, they are willing to obey government directives since they feel they have no choice. 'We are prepared to forgive,' they frequently explain, 'but it does not come from our heart.' Many interviewees emphasize that, despite their public performance, in their hearts pain still lingers.

Fear of the other group

In spite of the discourse on unity and reconciliation, or the daily working together in the fields, mistrust prevails in many places. Fear of the other group still exists, albeit hidden. On occasion, antagonism is vented under the influence of alcohol, including death threats. For survivors, this mainly revolves around their testifying against perpetrators, or the persistence in some places of the genocide ideology; for Hutu, antagonism may relate to being thrown into prison on charges of having, rightly or wrongly, participated in the killings.

Generally, insecurity is a more pressing problem for survivors. Many have moved to *imidugudu*, recently established villageization projects, to benefit from the safety of each other's company.[16] A small number of survivors, however, still live on their land, often surrounded by families involved in the murder of their own family members. This frequently causes tensions. For instance, a genocide widow from Mbazi, Gikongoro province, told us that her land borders on the land of the murderer of her family, who has been living in exile in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for fear she would denounce him. Today, his wife blames her for his absence and that he cannot support his family. Intimidation ('If I had the means, I would kill you') is frequently articulated.

Moreover, peaceful cohabitation seems to have declined after the first release of genocide prisoners in 2003, since most people who were freed had been presumed innocent.[17] Mistrust has been growing because, allegedly, the ex-prisoners occasionally incite their families against survivors or Tutsi in general, blighting the tender neighbourhood relations that have slowly developed over the past ten years. In particular, wives of prisoners and genocide widows, who had begun to help each other with family and farm, are again torn apart when husbands return from prison and keep their wives from mingling with Tutsi.

In addition, some survivors argued that released genocide perpetrators are confronted with their deeds when meeting a survivor, which, in some cases, provokes anger and aggression between them. In response, many

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[16] The reports on the safety aspect of *imidugudus* differ. Although the government's argument for moving people into these newly set-up villages was security, there have been instances of insecurity and numerous cases of rape and sexual violence. See, for instance, Amnesty International (2001) and HRW (2001).

[17] A wave of prisoners was released in May 2003, following a Presidential Decree in January that elderly, sick and confessing inmates should be released.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2006.76.2.131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

survivors have taken a pacifist approach towards perpetrators out of fear of losing control of the situation and becoming once more the targets of violence. This is most tellingly expressed in a remark by a survivor: 'Cohabitation is peaceful since we don't dare to attack each other.' Or, in the words of a representative of AVEGA, the widowed survivors' organization: 'We don't have any problems living together. But we also don't have a choice. If we don't live together the genocide will start again' (AVEGA representative, Nyamata).

The recently established local village tribunals, *gacaca*, are a further source of insecurity.[18] Testifying against a member of the community – whether as a survivor, a co-murderer or simple as a resident – is often accompanied by fear. This is particularly the case since the killing of two survivors in Kaduha, Gikongoro province, in late 2003. According to the survivors' organization IBUKA, the Kaduha killings were not an isolated or exceptional outbreak of violence, as has also been confirmed by our interviewees.

Given their personal insecurity, many survivors trust in the unity-and-reconciliation policy of the Rwandan government; despite criticism regarding its socio-political role, they consider the government to be the custodian of security. 'We do what they tell us, and hope that it works,' a survivor in rural Nyamata explained, while a group of survivors in Gikongoro Ville insisted that if the current government was no longer in office they would immediately leave the country, or else all be killed.

Pragmatism

More generally, many of my interviewees have an interest in living together, mainly because they have no choice. The country is very densely populated and rural dwellers, in particular, live in close proximity to and heavy dependency on each other. Much of agricultural and rural life requires collaboration, since fields have to be ploughed together. In cases of sickness or death, transport to hospital requires the collaboration of 4–6 men and daily convalescence requires good neighbourly relations. Some survivors even find themselves dependent on the murderers of their family to bring water to their sickbeds. Moreover, intermarriage, a frequently mentioned sign of reconciliation, often happens against the will of the larger family. Given the small number of Tutsi survivors, and the necessity of matrimony for rural life, Tutsi often have no alternative to marrying a Hutu. Hence survivors,

[18] The impact of the *gacaca* tribunals on Rwanda's reconciliation process remains to be seen. Although the first pilot tribunals have not yet reached their judgement phase, a number of obstacles are emerging: limited trust in truth being spoken during trials; debates over the limiting of *gacaca* jurisdiction to genocide crimes, with the exclusion of RPF war crimes; manipulation of outcomes by social and political power holders; partial or false confessions; corruption of *gacaca* judges and witnesses; intimidation and harassment of witnesses prior to testifying; verbal abuse of survivors giving testimony; and the reopening of partially healed wounds through enforced attendance at *gacaca* sessions. For more detailed assessments, see the work of Penal Reform International (<www.penalreform.org>) and Buckley-Zistel (2005).

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in particular, cannot live by themselves; they need communities, as expressed in the following statement:

> We have to be courageous. Living in the community, we cannot live alone. A survivor cannot live alone. For example, we live with a family which killed our relatives. We have to relax and remain confident, and pretend that there is peace. (Woman of mixed parentage, married to a Tutsi, who lost all her and most of his family, Karaba *umudugudu*, Gikongoro)

According to my interviewees, the strategy of 'pretending peace' is a common, and widely accepted, practice in Rwanda. Many interviewees emphasized that they are not honest with each other but play 'hide and seek'. Mutual suspicion leads to a separated way of life, as much as possible, where each family stays in its own corner.

Our fieldwork experience resonates with the analysis of Charles Ntampaka, who seeks to situate the strategy in a historical context (Ntampaka 2003). According to his account, after the 1959 massacres people on the hills organized *l'umusangiro*, the sharing of drinks as a sign of reconciliation. Sharing drinks signified a pact and the putting to rest of mistrust. Some even formed a blood alliance through giving their children in marriage. He argues that these popular customs are also being exercised after the genocide since peasants are more preoccupied with restoring social harmony than with hanging on to memories. Without wanting to forget the victims of the genocide, they prefer to regain their normal life. Ntampaka argues that those who were in a position to take revenge did so, and that those who were seeking justice are pursuing it, while others have chosen pacific coexistence with their neighbours. He makes reference to a Rwandan proverb, *ubuze uko agira agwa neza,* which translates as 'if there is nothing you can do it is better to be nice'.

Yet Ntampaka's analysis may be too simple. First, the cycle of revenge has not yet come to a halt, even though it is very difficult to estimate the number of genocide-related killings – in particular since the perception of deaths by poisoning is high, yet impossible to certify. Second, not everyone who is seeking justice is in a position to pursue it. In particular during *gacaca* tribunals, justice is often a matter of social power, corruption, coercion or silencing.

In the third place, and most importantly, Ntampaka does not recognize the potential for danger in the 'being nice' attitude. According to a Rwandan peace activist, the 1994 genocide was the result, amongst other things, of emotions and resentment which were bottled up in people's hearts. This is why it was so easy for the authorities to manipulate and incite large parts of the population to kill: their propaganda fell on fertile ground. So far, the attitude between Hutu and Tutsi interviewed, the prejudices and antagonisms, have not changed and, given the experience of the past decade, the cleavages are even deeper than they were prior to the genocide.

Beyond their community relations, my interviewees listed a series of preconditions in order to come to terms with their past and which

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were again dependent on their experience of the genocide. For most Tutsi survivors it was paramount to have their pain and suffering acknowledged and their dignity reconstituted. However, a small number preferred to bury the past in silence. There was, moreover, a split between survivors who insisted on truth, justice and punishment and survivors who preferred to stay quiet. Compensation for personal and material loss, decent shelter to replace destroyed homes and proper medical care for injuries and infections acquired during the genocide also ranked high on the agenda.

Most of these demands, however, are cause for resentment amongst those Hutu interviewees who also lost family members through war and genocide and are not even allowed to lament the killings by the RPA, let alone ask for compensation. This is often perceived as an injustice and we were told that being able to voice this would be a first step in coming to terms with the past. The survivors' support fund FARG is a further cause for resentment since it is unclear to many interviewees why survivors are singled out as recipients when they, too, are living in abject poverty. To negotiate these competing demands is impossible on a community level, however.

The so-called 'old case-load' returnees – Tutsi who returned from exile after the genocide – often told us they find themselves caught in an uncomfortable situation. Although they empathize with the survivors and also lost relatives in the genocide, their return to Rwanda was guided by particular aspirations. Having suffered from discrimination in their host countries, Rwanda was seen as the 'promised land' where prosperity was possible. As a consequence, many of my interviewees stated that their main interest is to establish themselves properly and to 'get on with life'.

CONCLUSIONS

History and memory had a devastating impact on Rwandan politics in the past, and people are acutely aware of this. In order to escape the grip of the past, they eclipse it. This is not a denial of what happened, however, but a deliberate coping mechanism. Only through remembering what to forget, or *chosen amnesia*, are rural Rwandans able to cope with their present social milieu, their day-to-day life in the proximity of 'killers' who, truly or falsely, participated in the genocide, or 'traitors', who denounced the right or wrong people.

The question remains why the event of the genocide is remembered while the decades of tension between Hutu and Tutsi are subjected to *chosen amnesia*. As for the genocide, as argued in this article, the implications were so strong that each individual life in Rwanda is today defined with reference to the tragedy, be it for social or economic reasons.

Regarding the dynamics that led to the genocide, *chosen amnesia*, the deliberate forgetting of the circumstances, prevents my local interviewees from accepting the cleavages which mark Rwandan society.

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From an ontological perspective, the stories people choose, or eclipse, in reference to their past prevent a sense of closure and fixed boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. Through not referring to the underlying social cleavages, they seek to reduce their impact and subvert their dividing powers. This marks a deferral and deliberate leaving open of bounded, in this case Hutu or Tutsi, communities, which is essential for day-to-day survival and allows for peaceful coexistence.

Moreover, eclipsing past divisions protects bystanders and participants from acknowledging guilt and at least partial responsibility for the genocide. Through blaming agents external to the community for the genocide – the former politicians and elites – all community members are relieved of responsibility. The external scapegoat allows everybody to feel victimized and creates at least some sense of collective identity under the guise of victimhood.

Yet, the danger of *chosen amnesia* is that it leaves social antagonisms untouched. It prevents the transformation of the society into one that will render ethnicity-related killings impossible. Many Rwandans with whom I discussed the reconciliation process thought that this lack of change constitutes a time-bomb. If, for whatever reasons, the current government is replaced by a dictatorship that chooses, once more in the history of Rwanda, to incite ethnic hatred, the message will again fall on fertile ground.

This poses the difficult question of what such a transformation process would look like. According to some interviewees, survivors in particular, there is a need to mediate between the individuals and groups in a community. For instance, as a survivor explained:

> Now they are being released from prison because they have confessed, and live again in our neighbourhood. We see each other every day but we never talk. I wish there was a person of integrity in our community who could mediate between us. (Survivor, Nyamata)

In many cases, when an accused has confessed in prison, and subsequently been released, he or she does not repeat the confession back home. It is intended to deal with confessions in *gacaca*, but since the trials are rather lengthy processes, victims and offenders live next door to each other for a considerable time in severe distrust.

Victim–offender (often not so clearly defined) mediation happens in some isolated cases on a local, intimate level. It allows the participants to voice their feelings, share their experience and learn about the other's perspective. Mediation is a long process and it might take years for participants actually to talk to each other. For instance, in Gikongoro we met a Rwandan who has spent over three years with a group of women – survivors and wives of accused *génocidaires* currently in prison – eventually encouraging them to talk to each other.

This is only one example emerging from a very delicate and complex situation. Critical to any transformation process, however, is a focus on the people whose lives have been most affected by war and genocide in order to establish sociality and 'the trust necessary not just to tolerate

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but to cooperate in partnership that can survive even the threat of failure' (Last 2000: 379).[19]

The picture painted in this article might appear bleak, in contrast with many other accounts of the reconciliation process in Rwanda.[20] This might derive from the fact that, generally, most analysis is focused not on local research but on the macro level, on national reconciliation policies, or is in itself a political tool.[21] What I would like to emphasize here is that to focus on micro levels should be the first premise in planning wider national, as well as justice-related, reconciliation policies. Although reconciliation must always be an individual process, and Rwandans have admittedly not had much time to develop new personal ties, it is essential to link national structures with local needs and obstacles. This requires an honest and frank account of the *status quo*, such as this study has tried to provide, in order to assist, as much as possible, the social transformation process. Only through changing the way Rwandans relate to each other today can future ethnicity-related violence be prevented.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am very grateful to the Deutsche Stiftung Friedensforschung (German Foundation for Peace Research) for funding my research. I would also like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

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[19] The focus of many current projects is the structural level of governance institutions. For a critique see Buckley-Zistel (forthcoming 2005).

[20] For critical assessments of the political processes see Amnesty International (2004) and Reyntjens (2004).

[21] The NURC's grassroots consultations belong to the latter category.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2006.76.2.131 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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ABSTRACT

More than a decade after the genocide, Rwanda's local communities remain severely affected by the experience of the violence and horror. This is reflected in the way people remember their past, as well as in what they choose to forget. During fieldwork in Nyamata and Gikongoro it became apparent that even though the memory of the genocide as such, its pain and suffering, was essential for all interviewees, a clearer picture of the causes of the genocide had disappeared into oblivion. In this article I argue that this forgetting of pre-genocide social cleavages reflects less a mental failure than a conscious coping mechanism. What I shall refer to as *chosen amnesia*, the deliberate eclipsing of particular memories, allows people to avoid antagonism and enables a degree of community cohesion necessary for the intimacy of rural life in Rwanda. While this is presently essential for local coexistence, it prevents the emergence of a critical challenge to the social cleavages that allowed the genocide to occur in the first place and impedes the social transformation necessary to render ethnicity-based violence impossible.

RÉSUMÉ

Plus de dix ans après le génocide, les communautés locales du Rwanda restent profondément marquées par l'expérience de la violence et de l'horreur. On le voit dans la manière dont les Rwandais se remémorent leur passé, ainsi que dans ce qu'ils choisissent d'oublier. Dans le cadre de travaux de terrain menés à Nyamata et à Gikongoro, il s'est avéré que même si la mémoire du génocide en tant que tel, avec sa douleur et sa souffrance, était primordiale pour toutes les personnes interrogées, l'exposé précis des causes du génocide était tombé dans l'oubli. L'article affirme que l'oubli des clivages sociaux qui ont précédé le génocide est moins le reflet d'une déficience mentale que d'un mécanisme conscient de défense. Il décrit sous le terme d'*amnésie voulue* l'action délibérée d'occulter des souvenirs précis, qui selon lui permet d'éviter l'hostilité et rend possible un certain degré de cohésion communautaire nécessaire à l'intimité de la vie rurale au Rwanda. Bien qu'actuellement essentielle pour la coexistence locale, cette amnésie voulue empêche l'émergence d'une mise en question critique des clivages sociaux qui ont permis au génocide de se produire et gêne la transformation sociale nécessaire pour rendre impossible la violence ethnique.

https://doi.org/10.3366/afr.2006.76.2.131 Published online by Cambridge University Press