

Lieux de mémoire, commemorative initiatives and memorials to Burundi's conflicts: Invisible and permanent memories

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This Research Brief provides an overview of preliminary findings from research into memorialisation in Burundi, the full Research Report to be published separately. This research was undertaken on the basis of interviews, focus groups, as well as case studies of the following memory initiatives: (i) the cemetery and commemorations marking violence in Bugendana; (ii) the community of Kivyuka in Bubanza province; (iii) the national monument at Gitega; and (iv) the territory of Kizi hill in Gasorwe where no memory initiatives are present. The research, part of a wider Memorialisation Project undertaken by Impunity Watch (IW), sought to examine the role of memory initiatives in addressing the widespread impunity that exists in Burundi as a result of a culture of silence surrounding truth and justice for past crimes. IW promotes accountability for atrocities in countries emerging from a violent past, in the belief that dealing with mass crimes is an essential part of conflict resolution, democratisation, establishing the rule of law and protecting basic human rights.

Memories of violent conflict: Myth-making in Burundi

Diverse strategies exist for remembrance, for demanding justice and for acknowledging the facts about the past in Burundi. This diversity must be understood in the context of a long history of identity tensions since before independence leaving Burundians today struggling with their relationship with their own history and feeding the expression of fragmented memories. Accordingly, progressive fragmentation rooted in the pre-independence period of colonial authority and exacerbated by years of effective one-party rule and ethnic politics has led to reinterpretations, mistruths and the proliferation of simplified readings of the past -

readings that are sometimes conducive to violent reprisals. Memories of the past in Burundi, often cultivated and transmitted orally, have fabricated 'Hutu' and 'Tutsi' memories each characterised by claims to large numbers of fatalities that have not been officially verified, leading to myth-making that becomes the very source or justification for conflict. Well-known is how the memories – real or imagined – of genocidal violence in 1972 provided fuel to the fire of bloodshed in 1993, or how events across the border in Rwanda have stoked fears in Burundi. The absence of debate and public recognition of the truth about past events at the national as well as the local level contributes to the maintenance of divisions within the populace. Although such divisions no longer induce recourse to mass

slaughter they remain as obstacles to genuine transformation.

Places of memory: From amnesty to remembrance of the past

Following the 2000 Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement, the just recognition of past tragedies and the implementation of public debate on the Burundian conflict are now presented as a major social issue. Partly to remedy the conspicuous non-transmission of certain controversial events and the elimination of traces of past conflicts in Burundi's history, the Arusha Agreement declared the public utility of implementing memory initiatives, stipulating that the erection of a national monument, the installation of a national day of remembrance, the identification of mass graves and the re-writing of the entire Burundian history would each aid the country in dealing with its violent past. Under this guise, the Burundian government constructed a national monument dedicated to all victims of violence in 2010, though the monument now stands idle, a reminder that dealing with Burundi's past must directly involve affected communities and cannot be achieved through simplistic, politicised efforts. Yet, disproportionate to the number of massacres in Burundi, there are few monuments and commemorations of an institutional character. Some local memory initiatives are emerging, but are often hampered by the reluctance of the government to accept the creation of victims' associations or to consent to new commemorative events. At the same time, the Burundian landscape bears few visible traces of the conflict, meaning that places of memory such as mass grave sites constitute important elements of proof of a history that has yet to be written. These sites now bear the tangible dimension of the country's conflict narrative.

Whilst the government remains loath to expand on its erection of one monument to all victims in the central location of Gitega, the prospective Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) slated to be established before the end of 2012 and a consequent upsurge in attention to past conflict in Burundi that has gradually taken root may trigger more sustained demand on the part of victims for the installation of memorials, monuments and other initiatives throughout the country. Concurrent to such potential developments, there is

a risk that the already fragmented memories in Burundi may be further entrenched by competition for acknowledgement, reinforcing rather than alleviating the divisions that currently prevail across the country's *collines*.¹ Frictions may be similarly exacerbated by the examination of local histories of past violence, particularly those which attract contradictory interpretations. Memory initiatives in Burundi likewise suffer the tension between the various private, informal demands of victims on the one hand and the public or collective interest on the other. Such tensions may reveal that individual or local community interests for memorialisation and the truth may significantly differ from the truth at the more collective municipal or national level, a nuance that can be easily overlooked. Attempts to discover the truth and to contribute to reducing impunity will necessarily demand the search for documentation, the confrontation of sources, witnesses and actors, and the creation of places of memory, processes which are both vital but inescapably complex.

To this day, twelve years after the Arusha Agreement, many of these goals remain elusive and the process of transmitting Burundi's history remains problematic. In many respects Impunity Watch's research was confronted with the challenge that it may be too early to assess the impact of memory initiatives in Burundi, particularly given the incipency of memorialisation in the country. Indeed after decades of violence the culture of (relative) silence and the culture of impunity concerning truth and justice are deeply engrained and only now beginning to be challenged.

Manifestations of memory

Memory as a political instrument

To the extent that it can be observed, Burundi's 'memory-scape' has in many respects been a politicised milieu. Monuments to past 'heroes' emulating the monuments to monarchs, generals and great explorers that can be found in many European cities as traces of past grandeur characterise a first phase of Burundian memorialisation of the past. This period was soon followed by the commemoration of other martyrs. During *la crise*,² the civil war that began with the assassination of the first democratically elected Hutu President in 1993,³ the limited number of memory initiatives that were created demonstrate

politicisation by either remembering political figures or representing the massacre of Tutsi by Hutu rebels. Moreover, after the first post-war elections in 2005, the new government similarly engaged with memory initiatives in a politicised manner. Successive governments have thus instrumentalised memory initiatives to consolidate popular support and to deliver implicit - and sometimes explicit - condemnations of opponents.

The emergence of memory initiatives for remembering victims

Aside from informal, personal, often hidden initiatives at the very local level, the late emergence of civil society in Burundi fated that the organisation of memory initiatives has been only a relatively recent phenomenon. Owing to the ethnicised nature of the violence, memory initiatives have often existed as places for reinforcing and representing ethnic identities and memories of the past, though sometimes unintentionally. Not only has this obstructed reconciliation within some communities, but it has also perpetuated feelings of division within society, in turn feeding ethnic politics and negative group identification. Memory and remembrance are often therefore structured in a manner that overtly and sometimes covertly encourages division, with the most recent commemorations also prone to politicisation. Those events that have been officially recognised become institutionalised narratives and receive disproportionate attention. Attempting to counteract these dynamics, there are increased efforts to encourage reflection, dialogue and understanding of the past through interactive memory initiatives at the local and civil society level. Here, access to and proximity with the local population across the ethnic divide is a key concern.

As armed conflict has only recently come to an end, but while the threat of instability and rebellion remains just beneath the surface, demands for recognition, reparations, justice, the construction of monuments and other activities for dealing with the past are treated with caution by the central authorities, regarded as sensitive and even viewed as premature. Reticence surrounding the TRC is equally testament to this reality. The myriad of massacres that characterise nearly fifty years of post-independence violent history means that the scale of the problem facing the country and the government itself is mammoth. For these reasons,

the government has chosen to control and restrict the proliferation of new memory initiatives, consequently attempting to regulate the truth and memories of violence.

Popular perceptions

Many among the Burundian population view memory initiatives as providing a platform for political actors. Examples were given of events that should have been intimate occasions for commemoration being infused with a public and political dimension due to the presence of political actors. Equally as damning, Burundians have highlighted that memory initiatives often become reminders of the tensions between populations living in close proximity to one another, rather than realising a reconciliatory or pedagogical potential. Initiatives may also become vehicles for instilling a sense of unequal treatment among populations from different areas of the country, since the official recognition of a massacre in one locality and the total absence of such recognition in another leads to feelings of lesser importance, which can be exacerbated by ethnic differences. It should also not be underestimated that after years of judicial inertia and the taking root of a culture of impunity, many Burundians express the quite legitimate concern that remembering the past will incite provocation, or open wounds that appeared to have been healed. Answers to the question of whether forgetting and healing denote analogous processes are not always forthcoming, especially as thoughts turn to the public revelation of truths at the proposed TRC.

What is required is an approach that advances the country towards recognition of the violence that took place, which in the first instance may involve the juxtaposition of ethnic memories against one another. There is a need to view memory not as a duty, or an imposition required to tick the box after violence, but as a process to establish the complexities of the past for (re)building a shared narrative and for allowing local communities to deal with what occurred in their localities.

Problems of memorialisation

Moral equivalence and self-interest

Referred to in the previous section, memory in Burundi often involves the balancing or counterbalancing of memories. Here, truth-seeking is often

grounded in the setting of one side against the other, meaning that genuine preparedness for reconciliation and identification with a shared history are still wanting. In such a context it is understandable that Burundians today struggle to identify with the national monument dedicated to all victims. Added to this a dominant concern among many within the population only with the past that directly concerns them may well be problematic. It leads to further fragmentation, whereby certain experiences of violence are prized to the detriment of shared histories and collective memories, possibly reinforcing a dynamic of denial or downplaying of the suffering of others.

Oral traditions

Memorialisation in Burundi is somewhat hampered by the oral tradition for the transmission of narratives, aided by the past destruction of archives and former officially-sanctioned efforts to stifle written histories and other memory initiatives.⁴ In the absence of systematic attempts to engage effectively with this tradition for the purpose of memorialisation and dealing with the past, the process is often prone to the subjectivities of memory and the inherent manipulation that burdens the oral transmission of events. Moreover, discrepancies frequently transpire when attempting to recall the precise dates or other facts about violent events, particularly in rural areas, often resulting from illiteracy or cultural traditions for dating events. What this may also reveal is a situation whereby claims made to commemorate certain dates are more a reflection of strategies copied from the authorities or claims for recognition, rather than correspondence to intimate remembrance among the populace.

Narratives vs. physical sites

Burundi's landscape is replete with traces of violence, but these traces are largely hidden beneath the surface. The *collines* thus bear few physical traces of the past that are easily observed. By contrast, the narratives of that same violence are innumerable, even as the cultivation of the fields that bear the underlying traces persists. More than simply acting to remember the violence of which there are few observable traces, narratives also become the rallying calls for demands to know the truth about a past that remains vague, for which mourning cannot yet fully be ended and for which dignified re-burials are sought. Paradoxically, whilst

these narratives are wholly personal and intimate, they are also public and collective, since they represent an almost universal suffering experienced in Burundi. Mass graves and other sites for the disposal of remains are thus present throughout the territory. They are the unmarked and often unknown memory initiatives of Burundi.

The refusal to exhume

The reluctance of the government to authorise and assist exhumations leads to the perpetual suspension of mourning. In addition, a sense of inequality is produced in the face of those reburials of former political leaders that *have* taken place. Whilst there have been attempts on the part of the government to organise collective processes to end mourning, the degree to which such events are internalised by victims, survivors and their families remains limited.

Concluding observations

The extent of reckoning with memories of violence and dealing with the past in Burundi is still embryonic. Where it can be claimed, reconciliation has largely taken the shape of communities being forced to live together again,⁵ forced by their situation and the necessity to move forward faced with the absence of truth, justice, reparations and guarantees of the non-recurrence of violence. Nevertheless the population unconsciously and sporadically manifests private and informal memory initiatives by calling upon a variety of memory activities. The government's refusal to undertake an objective remembrance process gives free rein to these personal forms, favourable to reinterpreting the past marked by identity tensions.

The possibility for the Burundian population to find serenity in their neighbourhood relations and regarding their personal experience is confronted with the difficulty of knowing the complete truth. Advancing towards a collective, shared history favourable to the breaking of the culture of silence and impunity that dominates Burundi is needed alongside other processes and mechanisms for dealing with the past. What should be explored is where memorialisation fits alongside other mechanisms, particularly in light of the proposed TRC and the Special Tribunal intended to follow thereafter. The involvement of younger generations will become essential, as will the need to find a way

to avoid purely symbolic initiatives since very practical needs for memory otherwise dominate much of the Burundian conscience. Finally, the government and outsiders engaging in the process -

and the process of dealing with the past more generally - should take care to avoid a disconnect between national level initiatives and local experience.

Endnotes

¹ Burundi is administratively divided into 17 Provinces, which are respectively divided into 117 Communes, sub-divided into 2,639 *collines*. The word 'colline' is French for 'hill.'

² *La crise* or 'the crisis' in English, is the term used colloquially in Burundi to refer to the civil war.

³ Melchior Ndadaye was assassinated during an attempted Tutsi-led military *coup d'état* after less than one-hundred days in office.

⁴ For example, the Tutsi-dominated UPRONA government in power up until the 1990s strictly prohibited Hutu communities from commemorating massacres widely regarded as genocide that took place in 1972. Successive governments that came to power after *coup d'états* also attempted to control memories of the past by deliberately destroying archives.

⁵ For a discussion of this fact, see Ingelaere, B. (2009) *Living Together Again. The Expectation of Transitional Justice in Burundi – A View from Below*, Working Paper 2009.06, Antwerpen, Institute of Development Policy and Management.

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Impunity Watch (IW) is a Netherlands-based, international non-profit organisation seeking to promote accountability for atrocities in countries emerging from a violent past. IW conducts systematic research into the root causes of impunity that includes the voices of affected communities to produce research-based policy advice on processes intended to enforce their rights to truth, justice, reparations and non-recurrence. IW works closely with civil society organisations to increase their influence on the creation and implementation of related policies. IW runs 'Country Programmes' in Guatemala and Burundi and a 'Perspectives Programme' involving comparative research in multiple post-conflict countries on specific thematic aspects of impunity. The present Research Brief is published as part of IW's Memorialisation Project, within the wider Perspectives Programme.

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