

## **Remembering for the Future? Genocide Remembrance at the Kigali Memorial Center**

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### **Abstract**

Remembering the genocide in Rwanda remains very complex, despite the fast pace of development and relative peace of the last fifteen years. As the ICTR and gacaca slowly churn out justice, in many communities, perpetrators have returned to live uneasily next door to those they sought to destroy. The divisive ideology that instigated the 1994 genocide continues to bubble beneath the surface, threatening to erupt in Rwanda and devastating other parts of the region. Compounding the difficulty is the monumental effort by the government and people to put the past behind them in the name of peace, reconciliation, development, and building a better future. In this complex and tense atmosphere for remembrance, the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center attempts to negotiate the difficult memory of the genocide and use it to create a better future. Intended for local, national, and international audiences, the Kigali Center represents a new form of remembrance, the memorial museum, which seeks to not only remember, preserve, and document the past, but also to educate future generations to prevent genocide and human rights abuses and create a more democratic future. Through its permanent exhibition, as well as its other activities such as documentation and education programs, the Center seeks to use the difficult memory of the genocide as a tool for building a more peaceful and unified society in Rwanda and beyond. This paper examines the Kigali Memorial Center's work negotiating the complexities of Rwandan genocide memory fifteen years later.

In April 2004, the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center was dedicated to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Rwandan genocide. Perched on a hill overlooking the city of Kigali, the memorial center houses a museum with a permanent exhibition, a memorial garden, a library and documentation center, and mass graves holding the remains of over 250,000 genocide victims. In this country that is both deeply wounded by the devastation of the genocide, but also furiously trying to leave the past behind in a flurry of development, the Kigali Center seeks to be both a solemn and enduring site of commemoration for survivors as well as an active partner in Rwanda's development and future.

The Kigali Center was created under the leadership of a British anti-genocide organization, the Aegis Trust, at the behest of a Rwandan government that was deeply uncertain about how best to memorialize and come to terms with the genocide. Inspired by the UK Beth

Shalom Holocaust Center, which was inspired in turn by Yad Vashem (Smith 2008), the Kigali Center is one of the latest examples of what has become an international trend in commemorating genocide and atrocity: the memorial museum. More than just a museum or memorial, memorial museums like the Kigali Center, work to both commemorate and educate, as well as document and preserve the past, collect survivor testimony and details about victims, create vast databases of information, influence national and international policy to prevent future genocide and human rights abuses, and, ultimately, foster democratic culture.

Memorial museums have emerged out of a shift in the way that society relates to the past: from a celebration of past triumph, to a more reflexive effort to come to terms with the past and to learn its lessons (Olick 2007; Torpey 2003). In the worldwide movement toward democracy, facing the past is one of the elemental steps to being considered a legitimate democratic regime and memorial museums are increasingly important mechanisms for doing this. Unlike other genocide memorials in Rwanda, which are raw, unmediated and intended for a local audience as spaces of mourning, the Kigali Center actively works to educate in order to prevent future genocide and aspires ultimately to do this on a regional and international stage.

No matter how international the form, however, each locality has its own unique set of circumstances to take into consideration when memorializing the past. The Kigali Center attempts to negotiate the complexities of genocide remembrance in a country in which perpetrators continue to live next door to victims, justice has been agonizingly slow, and the divisive ideology that caused the genocide simmers beneath the surface. The complicated context of genocide remembrance in Rwanda in many ways compromises the center's goals of fostering reconciliation and working to prevent genocide. Further, the political context behind genocide remembrance is troubling; as a fledgling democracy, Rwanda is extremely vulnerable, and many

believe that the current Rwandan government does not deserve the international political legitimacy that a memorial museum can help to grant a regime (Reyntjens 2004).

In Rwanda today the genocide is everywhere, as a raw wound that will take generations to heal, but also hardly visible fifteen years later, especially in Kigali: as the government tries to move forward, the fast pace of development means that new buildings, roads, and government complexes hide the horror of what happened so recently. The official government position, which claims that there are no Hutus and Tutsis, only Rwandans, and tries to look toward the future under the guise of “national unity,” belies Rwanda’s precarious situation and masks what is often an authoritarian and fundamentally undemocratic Tutsi government (Reyntjens 2004; Gourevitch 2009). Increasingly anyone who disagrees with the government’s policies and questions their human rights record or the official version of the past is accused of genocide ideology and divisionism. Meanwhile, the “peaceful” coexistence of former perpetrators and survivors that one sees throughout the country is often borne out of sheer necessity; underneath this “national unity” lie the same divisions and fear that erupted in 1994. The gacaca and formal court systems, which are intended to serve justice to over 100,000 Rwandans accused of crimes related to genocide, are impossibly slow and unwieldy and, rather than fostering peace and reconciliation, instead often exacerbate ethnic tensions (Rettig 2008; Buckley-Zistel 2006; Gourevitch 2009). There is growing worry that Rwanda, in the words of Filip Reyntjens, “is experiencing not democracy and reconciliation but dictatorship and exclusion”; and that it is in fact strikingly similar politically, socially, and psychologically to pre-genocide Rwanda (2004: 177).

Within this post-genocide context, survivors and their families often feel forgotten and disenfranchised (Smith 2008). Many continue to live in fear of the other group, but have no

choice other than to return to their village and live among those who tried to kill them. Many lost everything in the genocide – not just family and neighbors, but their homes, farms, and livelihood – and the country’s rapid pace of development often leaves survivors behind (Smith 2008).

It is in this complex environment that the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center was conceived to give a voice and acknowledgement to the survivors, to educate future generations against the divisive ideology that sparked the genocide, to preserve the truth of what happened, and to foster reconciliation, forgiveness, and democratic ideals.

In 2000, the Mayor of Kigali, with a plot of land donated by the government and the support of the Ministry of Culture, looked to Israel, Europe and the US to determine what kind of national genocide memorial would be appropriate for Rwanda (Smith 2008). Deciding that Yad Vashem and the USHMM were too large and elaborate, he visited the UK Holocaust Centre and found there a better approximation of what he was looking for (Mutanguha 2008). And so James and Stephen Smith of the UK Holocaust Center and the Aegis Trust were invited to lead the development of Rwanda’s national genocide memorial. With a staff of Rwandans and limited support from the city of Kigali, the Smith brothers raised the funds and designed and built the museum, which was hastily constructed in time for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the genocide (Smith 2008).

The permanent exhibition, which is the heart of the Kigali Center, is well organized, sophisticated and informative. There are three components, each intended to give the visitor a different experience to contribute to their overall understanding of the Rwandan genocide. The first part of the permanent exhibit, “Wasted Lives,” examines genocides around the world, attempting to answer the question of what genocide is and working to draw parallels between the

major 20<sup>th</sup> century genocides, as well as to outline the background and history of each. Filled with historical documentation, heavy text, and numerous photographs, diagrams and artifacts, this part of the exhibit attempts to contextualize the Rwandan genocide in the history of an extraordinarily violent century.

“Genocide,” the second part, which is the most comprehensive and where visitors spend the most time, tells the story of the Rwandan genocide in three sections: Before, During, and After. “Before” depicts Rwanda before colonization as a harmonious land of one people peacefully co-existing. The language is that of unity: “We held elections...,” “We did not choose to be colonized...”; and the point is clearly made that – following today’s official government explanation of the genocide – ethnic division was imposed top down by the white colonists (Reyntjens 2004). “Before” goes on to describe Rwanda’s independence of 1959 and the building ethnic tensions, bringing the visitor to that April night when the president’s plane exploded over Kigali.

“During” attempts to convey the horror and devastation of the genocide. Terrifying testimony plays in the background and video screens vividly depict the violence and brutality: shots of bodies lying in the roads and waterways, machete wounds, burned villages, churches and schools. There are display cases filled with machetes, panels describing the horrors inflicted on women and children and the torture of victims, and a wall describing some of the most chilling massacres in the churches of Rwanda. However, despite these horrors, very little blame is ascribed. Naturally the exhibit tells of the Hutu militias that carried out the genocide, and it names some of the key individual perpetrators, but overall there is a noticeable lack of ascribing blame to the Hutus – even extremists – or anyone else of Rwanda. Rather, “During” depicts a collective victimization of a Rwandan people that was torn apart by colonial forces.

The exhibit concludes with a section describing “After the Genocide,” which tells of the upheaval immediately following, as millions of refugees fled out of and into the country. Touching on the lasting impacts and the pursuit of justice, this section ends with a few panels on the need to remember and confront the past, which read as a justification for the memorial center’s existence. It reminds the visitor that it is necessary to remember the victims as redemption and the events as a warning to the future and stresses the center’s priority on education as the way forward.

The final element of the permanent exhibit is a memorial to the children killed in the genocide, which consists of several very large portraits of children, accompanied by plaques that list the child’s name and age and a few facts about the child: favorite food, favorite sport, best friend, last words and a short description of how the child was killed – “hacked to death by a machete,” for example. This is without a doubt the most powerful part of the exhibition and cannot help but elicit a deeply emotional response in the visitor; in this way it complements the historical and intellectual experience of the rest of the exhibit.

Besides the permanent exhibition, the grounds of the Kigali Center hold 14 mass graves, a memorial rose garden, and a wall of the victim names that the Kigali Center has managed to collect to date. Another building houses a nascent documentation center and small library, as well as the education team, which is working with local schools and the government to educate about the genocide (Mutanguha 2008).

The permanent exhibition’s appeal to both intellect and affect, as well as the plans for documentation and education in addition to commemoration are ambitious, reflecting the current global need to create memorials that do not just remember the past, but also work to shape the future. The Kigali Center follows a direct lineage from Holocaust museums and reflects what is

clearly an international trend in memorializing. But in the case of Rwanda, where the genocide is still a recent memory, justice and reconciliation are far off and – in many ways – the government deems the country too volatile for democracy, the Center’s goals and mission are often compromised.

In any memorial museum, there is both a danger and an inevitability that the museum will serve as an alternative to material reparation, justice, and real confrontation with the past. As James Young writes:

Once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember. In shouldering the memory-work, monuments may relieve viewers of their memory burden. (1993: 5)

In Rwanda, this could be even more apt. The government, in its effort to put the past behind it, simplifies any nuanced discussion of what caused the genocide; it has failed to adequately address even the most basic needs of the victims; it has neglected the memorial sites throughout the country which are sacred to those who live near them; and it has hardly acknowledged the voices of the victims in its pursuit of justice over reconciliation. In many ways the Kigali Center is a band-aid applied by the government to soothe the international community and its own people, legitimate its “democratic” standing, and avoid addressing the complexity of pre- and post-genocide Rwanda as well as ethnic conflict in the region. For there are extremely serious and lasting implications of the genocide playing out the region – most notably in Democratic Republic of Congo, where over five million people have been killed in the violence that has plagued the country in the 15 years since the Rwandan genocide – that are overlooked in both the Kigali Center and the government’s program. By packaging genocide remembrance in a compelling and sophisticated museum, the genocide itself becomes contained and discrete. Not only does the museum potentially bear the burden of memory of the genocide, it sets it aside as a

distinct event with a beginning, middle, and end. This takes the urgency and connection out of what is happening in the region and shatters the connection between past and future.

The danger in Rwanda, with a government that can border on dictatorial, is that genocide remembrance in official spaces like the Kigali Center can be wielded in a way that advances the government's political and militaristic goals rather than acknowledging the victims and trying to learn from the genocide. Claudine Vidal writes:

The [commemoration] ceremonies organized by the regime reveal an inevitable relation of power, first because they capture the silent words of the victims giving them a meaning determined by contemporary goals, and second because they take over the private mourning of the survivors and transform it into a collective mourning in the name of considerations that are not theirs. (qtd. in Reyntjens 2004)

On first glance, the Kigali Center is troubling because it was designed and conceived by a British organization, implying a sort of imperialistic memory project – the internationalization of memory gone wrong. However, there are strong local forces at play in the museum that are perhaps more troubling. While the Kigali Center does indeed provide necessary acknowledgement and recognition of the suffering of many Rwandans, rather than self-reflexively facing the past and trying to come to terms with it, in many ways the center simply reinforces the government's hegemonic narrative of the genocide – possibly at the expense of the victims that it is meant to be for. Rather than a fragmentation of memory and narratives, including those that examine the causes and effects of the genocide, the Kigali Center consolidates genocide memory into the single dominant version of the past that reinforces the goals and dogma of an increasingly authoritarian government. This consolidation threatens to usurp the memory of those who most need remembrance and acknowledgement – the survivors and families – for political purposes and potentially undermines the Kigali Center's vital goals of

learning from the past and preventing genocide and human rights abuses in the future as well as healing this country that is so deeply wounded.

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