

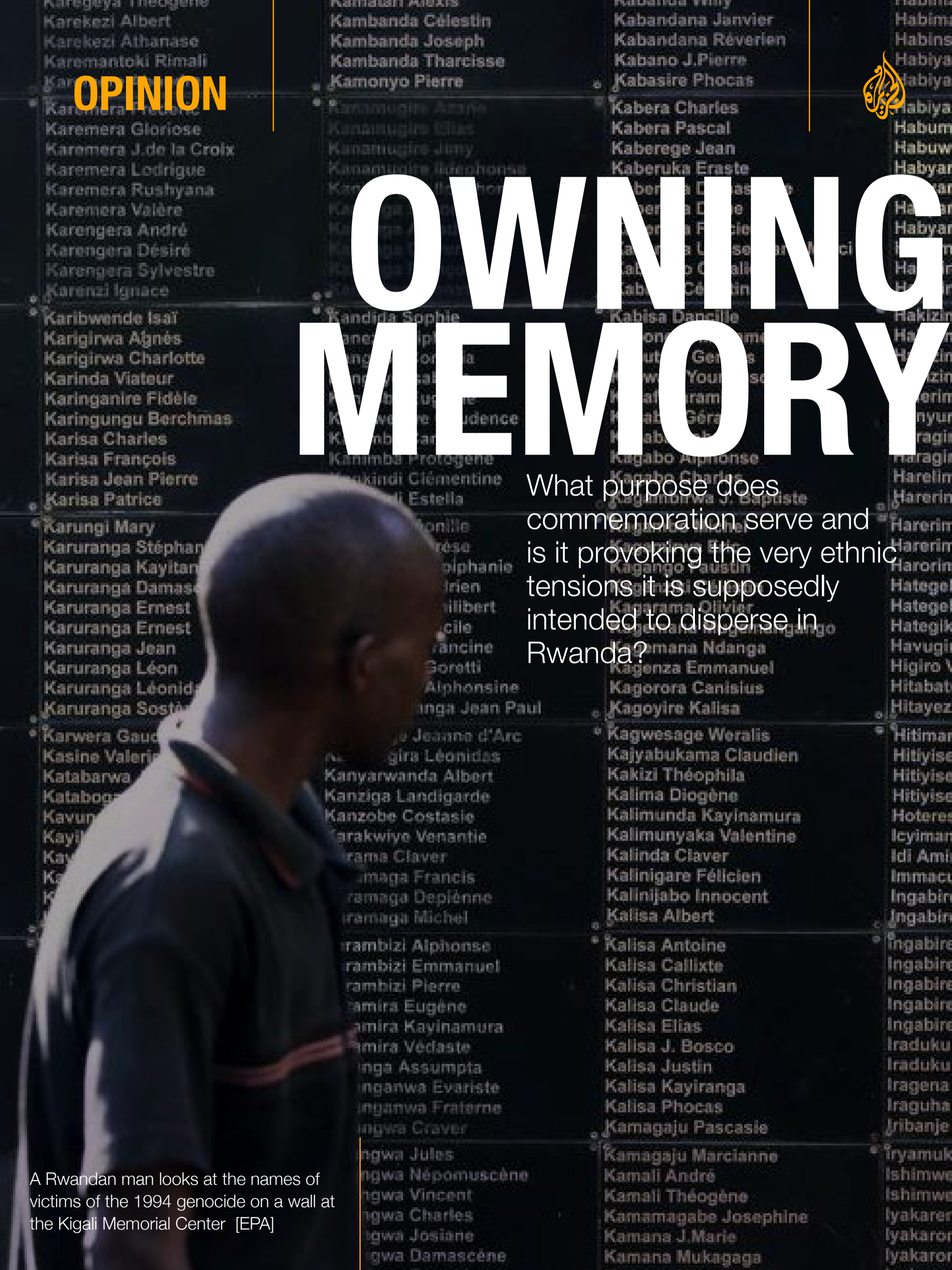
OPINION



OWNING MEMORY

What purpose does commemoration serve and is it provoking the very ethnic tensions it is supposedly intended to disperse in Rwanda?

A Rwandan man looks at the names of victims of the 1994 genocide on a wall at the Kigali Memorial Center [EPA]





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On January 7, 2014, Rwanda marked the official launch of **Kwibuka 20**, meaning “remembering for the 20th time”. The ceremony, held at the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center in Gisozi, culminated in the lighting of a remembrance torch that has since travelled throughout Rwanda’s 30 districts. With its arrival, Rwandans were expected to reflect on the violence that overwhelmed the small East African nation in 1994, and the remarkable progress it has made since.

Kwibuka 20 is the latest step in an ambitious programme designed by the government to help Rwandans come to terms with the 1994 genocide, during which an estimated 800,000 civilians, mostly members of the nation’s minority Tutsi population, were massacred.

Upon wresting control of the nation in July 1994, the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) – currently led by President Paul Kagame – recognised that the genocide warranted official recognition and commemoration. The first commemorative ceremony took place in April 1995, even as the RPF struggled to reconstruct the nation’s damaged infrastructure and to facilitate political stability, and recognised Hutu, Tutsi and Twa victims.



Clothing from victims of the 1994 genocide hangs in the Kigali Memorial Center [AFP]



The RPF simultaneously created a series of state-funded genocide memorials, established in collaboration with survivors from the surrounding communities. The purpose of these was to provide survivors with a safe place to remember their missing and murdered loved ones, to educate about the dangers of ethnic divisionism and bad governance, and to provide Rwandans and the international community with irrefutable evidence – most notably in the form of anonymous human remains and mass graves displayed at these sites – that the violence that had overwhelmed the country was indeed genocide.

In subsequent years, however, Rwanda's programme of commemoration has become increasingly politicised. Critics, including members of Rwanda's political opposition, prominent human rights activists, and foreign researchers, have challenged it for seeming to prioritise the RPF's political agenda over the needs of survivors.





Skulls of victims of the 1994 genocide are displayed in the Kigali Memorial Center [EPA]



The label “the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi”, as it is referenced in official discourse, is roundly criticised for only acknowledging Tutsi victims, while framing the Hutu majority as perpetrators. Hutu and Twa civilians who died during the 1994 genocide – whether as a result of their moderate political stance, their efforts to protect Tutsi civilians in their communities, or because they were mistakenly identified as Tutsi – are not formally recognised.

The resulting tensions become particularly visible around the subject of the human remains that are displayed at Rwanda’s memorials. Because these remains are rarely identified – indeed, in the context of post-genocide Rwanda it would be nearly impossible to do so – and are used as irrefutable evidence of “the 1994 genocide of the Tutsi,” many civilians are resentful of the likelihood that missing and murdered Hutu and Twa have been incorporated into the memorials as Tutsi victims.



Simultaneously, many survivors – a term that in post-genocide Rwanda is used in public settings only in reference to Tutsi – are fearful of the possibility that the remains of Hutu perpetrators who were killed by Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) troops may have been incorporated into the state-funded genocide memorials as well, meaning that the victims may be buried alongside their murderers.

Critics suggest Rwanda's approach to commemoration silences public discussion of mass atrocities perpetrated by RPA troops, beginning with the start of the civil war in 1990 and continuing in the post-genocide period, both in Rwanda and in the neighbouring Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). The RPF acknowledges that some RPA soldiers – allegedly new recruits who lacked discipline – murdered Hutu civilians they believed bore criminal responsibility for the 1994 genocide. However, the absence of transparency surrounding whether these soldiers have been held accountable has left many Rwandans with the impression that Rwanda is in the grips of “victor's justice,” with only Tutsi suffering being addressed via the state's programme of commemoration and transitional justice.



Ninety percent of the Tutsi residents of the city of Kibuye were killed during the Rwandan genocide

[Erin Jessee]

The public nature of commemoration in Rwanda means that those Rwandans who might choose to opt out of participating risk being identified as harbouring “genocide ideology” – a broadly defined legal prohibition that, in practice, has been used by the RPF to prosecute members of the political opposition who are accused of fomenting ethnic hatred among Rwandans.

For many genocide survivors, but also Rwandan civilians more generally, visiting the state-funded genocide memorials where many commemorative events take place can cause emotional distress and even retraumatisation, primarily because they involve close contact with human remains. Some Rwandans believe that when a person dies as a result of extraordinary violence, their angry spirit will then haunt those who come into contact with the remains, inflicting a range of mental and physical illnesses. This effect is allegedly amplified in instances where the deceased is not buried with respect. While the anonymous dead interred at the state-funded genocide memorials are provided with a respectful burial as part of the annual commemoration each year, the fact that this typically occurs as part of a mass funeral, and that some of these remains have been placed on display, goes against Rwandan funerary traditions in times of peace. As such, some Rwandans find the state-funded genocide memorials spiritually dangerous and do not want to have ongoing contact with these sites, but are simultaneously caught in a dilemma where their absence at commemorative events could result in negative attention from the district level authorities.



A visitor to the Kigali Memorial Center reacts to photographs of genocide victims displayed there [EPA]



While government officials argue that the current programme of commemoration is entirely appropriate given the nation's past and provides its best option for preventing future bloodshed, Rwandan civilians frequently complain that it is culturally inappropriate and actually provokes the very same ethnic and political tensions that it is allegedly designed to disperse. This realisation raises certain questions about the place of remembering and forgetting in the aftermath of mass atrocities. The case of Rwanda suggests that it is not enough to simply assert a singular understanding of events and then attempt to mobilise the population around it.

But what might an alternative programme of commemoration look like in post-genocide Rwanda?



Many critics have argued that the best, and indeed most ethical, option facing the RPF is to create safe public spaces in which people can discuss their lived experiences surrounding the genocide. However, the Rwandan government counters that facilitating open public discussion about it would only provide a forum for genocide denial and further divide the population along ethnic lines, rather than promote reconciliation.

Officials often point to previous periods in Rwanda's history, specifically the late 1950s and early 1990s, when the sudden emergence of multiple political parties allowed extremists to use their freedom of speech to enhance ethnic divisions, ultimately leading to violence. With this in mind, government officials sometimes argue that they simply need more time in order for the population to realise that their approach is the most effective way to prevent further bloodshed. Until then, they insist, freedom of speech related to the genocide, and Rwandan history more generally, is impossible.



An estimated 1,500 civilians were killed at the Nyarubuye Roman Catholic Church in Rwanda's Kibungo Province on April 15 and April 16, 1994 [Erin Jessee]



Perhaps in the context of post-genocide Rwanda, commemorating the 1994 genocide is inherently flawed, and a policy of forgetting should be encouraged. This option poses similar problems, however. Rwandan government officials and, to a lesser extent, genocide survivors are quick to recall that periods of anti-Tutsi violence that occurred between Rwandan independence in 1962 and the rise to power of past President Juvénal Habyarimana (1973-1994) were not commemorated, and that the failure to do so communicated to political elites at the time that anti-Tutsi violence would go unpunished. Under the circumstances, encouraging people to forget the 1994 genocide, even if it were possible on a mass scale, is unconscionable.



Thus, it is clear that some kind of commemoration of the 1994 genocide is necessary. The question that remains is whether the Rwandan people are ready, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the 1994 genocide, for open dialogue about the multi-faceted experiences of violence and the various negative ways that Rwandans, regardless of ethnicity, were impacted. To those critics who argue yes, the Rwandan government responds with a resounding no, or at best, a not yet. And regardless of whether you perceive the RPF as the saviour of the Rwandan people or a dangerous authoritarian regime, this decision is, at present, in the hands of the Rwandan government.

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